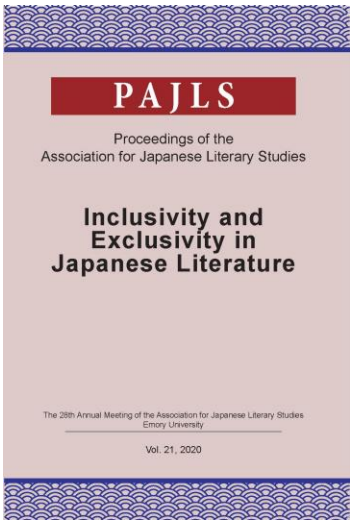
“The Gentle Inclusivity of Kawakami Hiromi’s ‘Summer Break’”

Kathryn Hemmann

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 21 (2020): 211–215.



PAJLS 21:
Inclusivity and Exclusivity in Japanese Literature.
Editor: Cheryl Crowley
Managing Editor: Matthew Fraleigh

THE GENTLE INCLUSIVITY OF KAWAKAMI HIROMI'S "SUMMER BREAK"

Kathryn Hemmann[1]
University of Pennsylvania

From the first publication of Kawakami Hiromi's award-winning story "The God of Bears" (*Kamisama*) in 1994 to the appearance of the short story collection of the same name in 1998, various public figures attempted to address the social malaise that characterized Japan's prolonged economic recession. Several highly influential intellectuals, including the clinical psychologists Saitō Tamaki and Kawai Hayao, viewed mental illness as a symptom of broader cultural forces. In her short story "Summer Break" (*Natsu yasumi*), however, Kawakami depicts the experience of mental illness as embodied and personal instead of abstract and societal. The fantasy elements of "Summer Break" portray neurodiversity as sympathetic and relatable, a type of gentle inclusivity enhanced by the story's use of magical creatures that externalize the narrator's psychological state.

Kawakami Hiromi was born in Tokyo in 1958. Translations of Kawakami's short stories, including the title story of *The God of Bears*, have appeared in several English-language anthologies of Japanese stories, including the *March Was Made of Yarn* collection published by Vintage International in 2012 in the wake of the March 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster.[2] Kawakami continues to be a popular and critically acclaimed author in Japan, and she is comfortably established as a star in the world of Japanese fiction in translation in East Asia, North America, and Europe.

At the age of 36, Kawakami submitted "The God of Bears" to the Pascal Short Story Literary Newcomers Prize competition sponsored by Asahi Net, one of Japan's largest internet service providers. "The God of Bears" was the winning entry, and it was posted online in 1994. "The God of Bears" was later published in print in 1998 in a short story collection of the same name, which won the Murasaki Shikibu Literary Prize and the Bunkamura Deux Magots Literary Prize. By this point Kawakami had

[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2408-8807

[2] Kawakami Hiromi, tr. Ted Goossen and Motoyuki Shibata, "God Bless You, 2011," in *March Was Made of Yarn: Reflections on the Japanese Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Meltdown*, ed. Elmer Luke and David Karashima (New York: Vintage, 2012), 37–53.

already enjoyed critical recognition as an author, having been awarded the Akutagawa Prize for her 1996 novella *A Snake Stepped On* (*Hebi o fumu*, published in translation in the collection *Record of a Night Too Brief*). She has continued to receive honors from numerous cultural organizations, including the Purple Ribbon Medal of Honor from the Japanese government in 2019. This ceremony coincided with the publication of a short story collection titled *Kono atari no hitotachi* (published in translation as *People From My Neighbourhood*), which commentators such as the environmental activist Yoshikawa Hideo have interpreted as a spiritual successor to *The God of Bears*.

"Summer Break" is the second story in *The God of Bears*, which contains nine short stories connected by an unnamed narrator who encounters a variety of curious people and creatures during the course of her everyday life in contemporary Japan. In the title story, the narrator is invited on a picnic by a bear who has moved into her apartment complex. The narrator's interactions with the bear over the course of a lazy afternoon illustrate both how familiar and alien he seems as he attempts to adjust to life in human society. Other stories involve similarly supernatural yet mundane creatures, as well as normal people who find themselves in extraordinary situations. The stories are filled with symbolism and subtext, with themes ranging from queer sexuality to social alienation. The narrator is an engaging presence whose moods range from gentle amusement to dry cynicism, and she leads the reader through a range of odd experiences with a down-to-earth perspective on the unusual events that befall her.

Many scholars writing about Kawakami, including those whose essays have been collected in the September 2003 special issue of the literary magazine *Eureka* titled *Kawakami Hiromi dokusho*, have commented on the religious and folkloric aspects of her writing, but "Summer Break" also serves as a sympathetic depiction of mental illness, specifically depression and anxiety.

A great deal of literary fiction and entertainment media created during the Lost Decade following the collapse of the real estate speculation bubble economy of the 1990s demonstrates themes relating to a loss of direction resulting from economic precarity and a broader cultural malaise. In addition, mental health professionals began speaking in mainstream forums about specific instances of mental illness that came to the attention of the news media during this decade. One of the most widely known figures of this cultural movement is Saitō Tamaki. Saitō is a cultural theorist best known internationally for his work on anime subcultures, but he is also a practicing psychiatrist who is famous in Japan for his advocacy on behalf of adult patients suffering from social withdrawal, or *shakaiteki*

hikikomori. Saitō's primary goal in this account is to humanize his patients without relying on stereotypes or forcing generalizations, and he argues that their symptoms stem from the failures of the Japanese healthcare and education systems, stating that "what we must deal with is *structural* ignorance—an ignorance that is born out of social indifference."[3]

Saitō's work was a part of a larger conversation about mental health in recessionary Japan. Kawai Hayao, a highly influential clinical psychologist who was one of the most visible public intellectuals commenting on this topic, worked closely with the Ministry of Education during the late 1990s to implement a series of reforms to help promote mental health. One of the most controversial of these reforms became known as *yutori kyōiku* (often translated as "relaxed education"), which shortened the school week from six to five days. As Andrea Gevurtz Arai discusses in *The Strange Child: Education and the Psychology of Patriotism in Recessionary Japan*, the requirements of high school and college entrance exams were unfortunately not altered to reflect changes in the curriculum, which influenced many panicked parents to enroll their children in extracurricular cram schools. In other words, the burden of academic success was transferred from the schools to the individual students.

Gevurtz Arai argues that this is one of the many manifestations of the rise of neoliberalism in recessionary Japan, in which individuals have been increasingly expected to be persistently productive in order to ensure their success within economic and political systems that do not benefit them but rather benefit *from* them. Japanese neoliberalism places a strong emphasis on "positivity" (*sekkyokuteki shisō*), according to which any psychological state that impedes productivity is viewed as a problem to be solved or eliminated. As a result, "learning how to turn their lives into projects of never-ending self-enhancement is what young adults of this recessionary generation in Japan face regularly in all aspects of their lives, from school to work and gender roles."[4] Any failure to achieve success is treated as the sole fault of the individual, who faces extraordinary pressure to be constantly productive.

The psychology-supported ideology of neoliberal capitalism is expressed in numerous ways outside of the realm of education, including the prevalence of what has become known as the corporate "psychology

---

[3] Saitō Tamaki, *Shakaiteki hikikomori*, translated by Jeffrey Angles as *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 17.
[4] Andrea Gevurtz Arai, *The Strange Child: Education and the Psychology of Patriotism in Recessionary Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 159.

of positivity" during the twenty-first century. Numerous feminist scholars and social critics have staged critiques of positive psychology, including political philosopher Ann Cvetkovich, who posits that critical depictions of the trauma of living in late-stage capitalism have immense cultural value, especially when described by precarious and marginalized voices. "Depression, for example, can take antisocial forms such as withdrawal or inertia, but it can also create new forms of sociality, whether in public cultures that give it expression or because, as has been suggested about melancholy, it serves as the foundation for new kinds of attachment or affiliation," Cvetkovich argues.[5] Art and literature, in their very "uselessness" within media economies that demand the rapid production and consumption of political opinions, are especially fertile grounds for resistance against the psychological pressures of neoliberalism.

What I have called the "gentle inclusivity" of "Summer Break" is a rejection of the aggressive positivity of the mindset that everyone must be ceaselessly productive. In this story, Kawakami suggests that needing a break is normal and natural, not a pathological aberration that can and should be cured by more work. The narrator of "Summer Break" says that she has recently begun experiencing a feeling of slipping (*zure*), as if her mind has become disconnected from her body. The narrator's description of this experience resembles the sort of dissociative episode experienced by people dealing with depression, anxiety, and chronic exhaustion, but she is never formally diagnosed or associated with any sort of medical condition. The narrator's choice not to use the pathologizing clinical language of mental illness does not occlude or marginalize neurodiversity but rather normalizes it. Within the context of the story, the narrator's mental state is portrayed as entirely natural, especially by means of its association with a trio of nature spirits who attach themselves to the narrator.

The narrator's anxiety and depression are externalized and expressed by the cute and fluffy pear spirits that inhabit the pear orchard where the narrator works as a seasonal day laborer after having left a white-collar job at an office. On the night after the final day at the pear season, she has an intense experience of "slipping" in which she accompanies the three pear spirits into the field of trees and bears witness to the end of their lives as they disappear with the end of summer. The smaller creature, who repeatedly expresses its concern with being seen as "useless" (*dame*), attempts to draw the narrator into oblivion. She considers joining it, but

[5] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 6.

both she and the creature finally come to terms with their anxiety for the future. The creature accepts that it must rejoin the wood of the tree it sprang from, and the narrator decides to return to her life in the city. This process is emotionally intense, but it is not portrayed as pathological. Instead, the story presents it as entirely natural that the narrator and her externalized anxiety in the form of the pear spirit both go through seasons of their lives. Mental illness is not a stigma, then; it is as natural as a pear spirit in a pear orchard—which is to say, it is somewhat strange and difficult to explain, but it is not unexpected or out of place. What "Summer Break" seems to be suggesting is that sometimes people need a "summer break" in which they're allowed to rest and recover without being productive, and this is, as the pear spirit learns to say of itself, "okay" (*ii*).

In a cultural environment in which the neoliberal ideologies of "productivity" and "positive psychology" are largely taken for granted, Kawakami's sensitive depictions of uselessness and difference can be read as powerful acts of subversive and radical fiction. When contrasted against the harshness of neoliberal conversations about mental illness as an abstract social problem to be solved by intellectuals, "Summer Break" and the other stories in *The God of Bears* are gentle and inclusive, thereby providing a more accessible and less politically divisive model for understanding diverse identities.