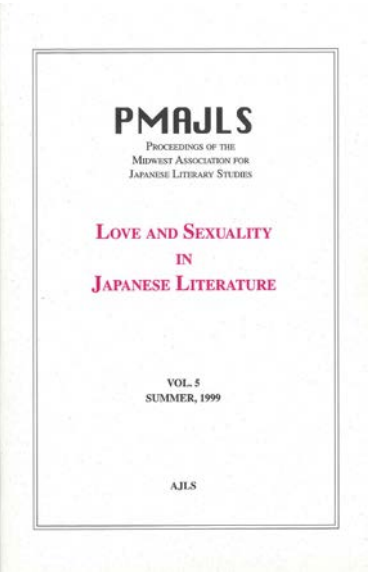
“Laborers of Love in *Snow Country*: The Fantasy of Capitalism”

Heather Bowen-Struyk

Proceedings of the Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies 5 (1999): 144–154.



PMAJLS 5:
Love and Sexuality in Japanese Literature.
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

LABORERS OF LOVE IN *SNOW COUNTRY*: THE FANTASY OF CAPITALISM

Heather Bowen-Struyk
University of Michigan

Today I will suggest that Shimamura and Komako indulge in an affair that serves to obscure the unthinkable reduction of human beings into wage laborers: utilitarian and interchangeable. Shimamura's flight to the snow country is not just a flight from Tokyo, family, empire, and war; it is also a flight from utility, mechanization, and the dehumanization of modern capitalism. Komako withholds a space for an affair within a love-labor industry, so that she might enjoy the product of her labor, this love, rather than relinquish it to the logic of capitalism. I will proceed in three sections: the first is Shimamura's esthetic of wasted effort; the second sections considers the role of the Chijimi linen as an extravagant labor of love; which will bring us to the third section in which we will consider the question of whether Komako's love is alien labor.

SHIMAMURA'S ESTHETIC OF WASTED EFFORT, TORŌ

Shimamura delights in the snow country because of its difference from reality, in this case Tokyo. He (perhaps like many of the male travelers serviced by mountain hot spring towns) goes there for a variety of reasons: peace and quiet, quaint charms, the healing benefits of the hot springs, skiing, to find his "honesty," and of course, for the company of hot spring geisha. As he travels away from Tokyo, he leaves behind more than the hustle and bustle of the big city; he also leaves behind politics, business, industry, and finance. Psychologically the journey to the snow country is a journey away from the noise and confusion of modernity, but Shimamura's journey back to the past is made possible by virtue of modern industry, a train.

From the moment that the train emerges from the tunnel into the snow country, we know we've entered another, an other, land through a looking glass darkly: Shimamura prefers to look at Yōko through the reflection in the window rather than directly. "For Shimamura there was none of the pain that the sight of something truly sad can bring. Rather it was as if he were watching a tableau in a dream—and that was no doubt the working of his strange mirror" (9).[1] The "strange mirror" (*fushigi na*

[1]Citations from *Snow Country* all refer to page numbers in Seidensticker's translation.

kagami) mediates between him and his experiences in the wonderland, the *fushigi na kuni*, of the snow country.

The beginning of the novel finds Shimamura returning to see the snow country and Komako. In a flashback, we see their first encounter a year earlier. The day after their first meeting, Komako visits on her way to the bath. Shimamura asks her to call him a geisha—ostensibly to preserve their friendship—and she answers him, that this is not that kind of a place. Shimamura decides that Komako is too much of an amateur for him, and that she might even make a nice companion for his wife. "And something like that evening mirror was no doubt at work here too. He disliked the thought of drawn-out complications from an affair with a woman whose position was so ambiguous; but beyond that he saw her as somehow unreal, like the woman's face in that evening mirror" (24). The narrative immediately segues tellingly into a discussion of his occupation: "His taste for the occidental dance had much the same air of unreality about it... The pleasure he found in his new hobby came in fact from his inability to see with his own eyes occidentals in occidental ballets. There was proof of this in his deliberate refusal to study the ballet as performed by Japanese" (24–25). The narrative continues: "He called his work research, but it was actually free, uncontrolled fantasy" (25). In case we don't get it yet, "he was treating the woman exactly as he treated the occidental dance" (25). Shimamura's visions of women (Yōko and Komako) and the snow country are mediated by a strange mirror, and just like his hobby of writing about Western dance, those visions are "actually free, uncontrolled fantasy."

What is Shimamura's condition for playing in the snow country? The answer is two-fold: one, he can support himself in his idling because he is independently wealthy; and two, he can indulge in an affair with a geisha because he has a family waiting for him at home (i.e. his status as a family man ironically frees him to flirt without much risk of becoming financially or emotionally responsible, that is, of being interpellated by the *ie seido*, family system).

As for being independently wealthy, Shimamura is an "idler who had inherited his money" (130). Marx tells us that "Labour is purposeful activity" (*Grundrisse*, 311). But Shimamura prides himself on wasted effort, *torō*. As we have already seen with the occidental ballet, Shimamura indulges in research which purposefully produces nothing useful. Shimamura produces nothing that will become a use-value for a capitalist, a commodity which will make money. Instead, he "wastes" his living labor on producing something useless, writing articles that no one will want to read, in an expensive publication he will produce himself that no one will

want to buy about things he has never seen. "Nothing could be more comfortable that writing about the ballet from books. A ballet he had never seen was an art in another world. It was an unrivaled armchair reverie, a lyric from some paradise" (25). Shimamura had been a rising academic, immersing himself in Kabuki since childhood, schmoozing "the heads of various dance schools," writing research papers and preparing himself for a career as a scholar. But then suddenly, he switched to the occidental dance, preferring to indulge in fantasy and laughing up his sleeve at anyone who would take him seriously (24–25).

Having narrowly avoided a career as a dance critic, he disengaged completely from producing anything useful, and held up "wasted effort" ("*torō*") as a model, not just to describe his research but all activities that he values: "Though he was an idler who might as well spend his time in the mountains as anywhere, he looked upon mountain climbing as almost a model of wasted effort. For that very reason it pulled at him with the attraction of the unreal" (112). Interestingly, from the attraction of the unreal, the narrative segues back to Komako, thus enforcing the link between Komako, fantasy and the unreal: "When he was far away, he thought incessantly of Komako; but now that he was near her, this sighing for the human skin took on a dreamy quality like the spell of the mountains" (112).

And when Shimamura comes to see Komako as most attractive, it is because she indulges him in thinking that she, too, performs wasted effort. Regarding summary book reviews that she writes, they have the following conversation:

> "But what good does it do?"
> "None at all"
> "A waste of effort."
> "A complete waste of effort," she answered brightly...
> A complete waste of effort.... He knew well enough that for her it was in fact no waste of effort, but somehow the final determination that it was had the effect of distilling and purifying the woman's existence (41–42).

He relates to her as a fellow esthete when she indulges him in his fantasy of wasted effort. And he continues to ponder her wasted effort: "There was something lonely, something sad in it, something that rather suggested a beggar who has lost all desire. It occurred to Shimamura that his own distant fantasy on the occidental ballet, built up from words and photographs in foreign books, was not in its way dissimilar" (42). Shi-

mamura equates his fantasy-research and Komako's book reviews despite the fact that, "He knew well enough that for her it was in fact no waste of effort." He misrecognizes her efforts as wasted in order to see her as "distill[ed]" and "purif[ied]." He wills away her activities by rendering them useless, but thereby enables her to escape the logic of production, at least in his fantasy of her.

Shimamura's esthetic of wasted effort makes sense in the context of his rejection of a useful profession: by preferring wasted effort, Shimamura refuses to participate in an economy of production. So this is where we sense that Shimamura's preference for wasted effort may be the luxury of the man of leisure, but it is implicated by its logic in the system of capitalism which it seeks to avoid. Marx tells us that laborers produce objects with value, commodities that will be exchanged for money. "Productive labourer he that directly augments capital" (footnote, *Grundrisse*, 306; paraphrasing Malthus).

Shimamura has the luxury of refusing to augment capital. Anything that he can view through the estheticizing lens of *torō* becomes something worth valuing. He cherishes the wasting of labor, and values things that to him seem to be a waste of labor. But by refusing to participate in the logic of the capitalist mode of production, he also forecloses the possibility of producing anything at all. And it is not clear that his sacrifice—a feeble resistance to capitalism in any case—really saves him from complicity. He may refuse to labor productively, but he does not refuse his position as a consumer in a tourist industry.

CHIJIMI LINEN: EXTRAVAGANT LABOR OF LOVE

Shimamura has a special desire for Chijimi linen and "he had a standing order that when a good piece of Chijimi came in he was to see it" (151). He prefers to dwell on the labor involved in the production of Chijimi cloth. When he reflects on the virtue of the cloth, we find that it is unambiguously connected to his fantasy of its production. In particular, he fantasizes about the "mountain maidens" who produce the linen: "In their desire to be numbered among the few outstanding weavers, they put their whole labor and love into this product of the long snowbound months..." (151).

Marx's accusation of commodity fetishizism would have us recognize that commodities embody living labor. But Shimamura's fetish does recognize precisely that: he fantasizes about the labor and laborers and their love. He prides himself on owning some of the linen because of its connection to its laborers: "There may have been among Shimamura's kimonos one or more woven by these mountain maidens toward the mid-

dle of the last century" (152). The logic of capitalism creates an ever increasingly mechanized production force; but in contrast to that, Shimamura envisions his mountain maidens performing labors of love on his linen.

And so it seems that unlike Marx, instead of unveiling the fetishization of commodities, Shimamura indulges in a fantasy of pre-capitalist production: "It was a great deal of trouble to return old kimonos . . . for rebleaching each year . . . but when he considered the labors of those mountain maidens, he wanted the bleaching to be done properly in the country where the maidens had lived" (152). He admits that "he had no way of knowing that the bleaching had really been done in the old manner" (152). When Shimamura sees Komako's book reviews as a waste of effort, the narrative simultaneously suggests that he knew fully well that wasn't the case. Here, Shimamura sends his Chijimi linen to be cleaned by mountain maidens though he seems to know that, too, is not really happening. He nevertheless continues to act as though he fully believes these things.

And in fact, Shimamura has to reconcile his romanticized vision of mountains maidens with the harsh landscape that has outlived them. When he sets out on a day trip to explore the site of the production of Chijimi linen, rather than the spectacular scenes he had imagined, "He saw that the weaver maidens, giving themselves up to their work here under the snow, had lived lives far from as bright and fresh as the Chijimi they made. With an allusion to a Chinese poem, Shimamura's old book had pointed out that in harsh economic terms the making of Chijimi was quite impractical, so great was the expenditure of effort that went into even one piece" (157). Here, we can speculate that the sense of extravagant effort would appeal to an esthetics of wasted effort.

Shimamura's fantasy of pre-capitalist production does not however escape the logic of commodity exchange. The narrator tells us that Shimamura is aware: "The nameless workers, so diligent while they lived, had presently died, and only the chijimi remained, the plaything of men like Shimamura, cool and fresh against the skin in the summer. The rather unremarkable thought struck him as most remarkable. The labor into which a heart has poured its whole love—where will it have its say, to excite and inspire, and when?" (157) Shimamura's fantasy of pure labor forgets the probable economic and gender subordination suffered by his mountain maidens. Dwelling on its romanticized production allows him to temporarily forget that it is now a commodity, "the plaything of men like Shimamura," no more nor less than anything else he might buy. Here, in the text, Shimamura's vision of pure fantasy is exposed by

the narrator with the introduction of irony in the line "plaything of men like Shimamura." The perspective gained by such an observation illuminates Shimamura's ideological stance, and also (simply because the narrator for the most part overlaps with Shimamura) suggests that Shimamura himself knows though in theory he prefers to forget that such is the case.

The Chijimi is described as "cool and fresh against the skin in the summer" and is immediately followed by a rush of pathos: "The labor into which a heart has poured its whole love!" Both the imagery of coolness, and the sense of pouring out one's heart link the Chijimi with Komako. Later, on page 154, he makes the analogy explicit. Again noting the cool property of Chijimi, the narrator reflects: "This Komako too, who had so fastened herself to him, seemed at center cool, and the remarkable, concentrated warmth was for that fact all the more touching. But this love would leave behind it nothing so definite as a piece of Chijimi" (154).

KOMAKO'S LOVE: ALIEN LABOR?

If we see in Komako's character, the desire (desire, as well as intentionality, will, etc., being the attributes of subjectivity) to specify an extra-economic site for her affair with Shimamura, then we can already begin to read the excess in the text, that is, the fragments of Komako's subjectivity that exceed Shimamura's fantasy of her. I agree with Karatani Kōjin's analysis of *Snow Country* that Shimamura has no real other in the text, because he always sees Komako, and then Yōko as reflections, reflections in a mirror and reflections of himself (see for example, Karatani, 36). But, even as Shimamura indulges in such a fantasy, and even as the narrator aligns himself almost completely with Shimamura; as I have argued, still we see moments of textual irony when Shimamura's consciousness or fantasy is displaced, and Komako's character exceeds his fantasy of her. It is this textual excess that leads me to agree that Shimamura fancies no other, but I would like to argue that *Snow Country*, as a text, can not or does not completely repress the subjectivity of the other; in this case I am talking about Komako.

In contrast to Shimamura, Komako does not have the luxury of resisting capitalism by refusing to participate. When Komako tells Shimamura about the first time that she went out as a geisha, she quickly segues to an undesirable marriage prospect, explaining that since the man was not pleased to have been rejected, he had promised to not let her marry anyone else either (63–64). With the prospect of marriage foreclosed, Komako had to enter the economy in some capacity. Women who

have been interpellated by the family system find their labor absorbed by the labor of maintaining the family. Komako, however, found that she had to support herself (and help support the pseudo-family of the music teacher and her son) by exchanging her labor for money.

When Shimamura first encounters Komako, he sees that she is an amateur (*shirōto*) who doesn't yet wear the long skirts of the geisha though she does help out at parties. It is during this first trip that Shimamura requests that she call him a geisha and she refuses, only to eventually comply. When the geisha arrives, Shimamura discovers that he had really only desired Komako after all. He excuses himself and goes for a walk in the mountains. There, he runs into Komako who had seen him leave, and they spend some time walking. That night, Komako visits him at his room, drunk. She explains that she had met some friends from skiing who had a party with geisha and had gotten her drunk. Importantly, she was at the party in the capacity of guest, not geisha. She excuses herself to return to the party, and an hour later she stumbles down the hall and cries out Shimamura's name: "It was, with no attempt at covering itself, the naked heart of a woman calling out to her man" (34). It is unclear whether the perspective originates from Shimamura or the narrator, but in either case it is clear that Shimamura sees Komako as a woman already in love with him. She spends the night with him, and he leaves the next day. It is essential to understanding both Shimamura's and Komako's different investment in the fantasy of their relationship for us to notice that their first encounter takes place outside the system of exchange. That is, for both of them, the affair begins outside the system of economic exchange. Komako has acted, not in the capacity of laborer, but as subject.

When Shimamura returns for his second trip, Komako has become a geisha. She lives with the music teacher, in the room where the silk worms used to be kept (53). Komako now bears a similar relation to the owner of the house as the silk worms who once lived in her room. The first time Shimamura had met Komako, she was an amateur; the second time he meets her, she is a professional working to help support a family that is not her own.

When Shimamura returns for the third time, both the sick man and the music teacher have died. Yōko is now working for the inn, though not yet serving parties. Komako has become a "real geisha" (101). Komako has sold her labor for four years or a set amount of money. She will not reap the benefits of her labor, because she sells it as an exchange value, while the owner of the contract buys her labor as a use-value. Marx explains: "capital buys [labour] as living labour, as the general

productive force of wealth; activity which increases wealth. It is clear, therefore, that the worker cannot become rich in this exchange, since, in exchange for his labour capacity as a fixed, available magnitude, he surrenders its creative capacity, like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage" (*Grundrisse*, 307).

From this we can see that by the third trip Komako has sold her living labor to a small-scale capitalist who intends to increase his store of capital through her living labor. In this equation, a laborer sells her labor as a commodity to a capitalist (or in this case, someone who stands in the relation of capitalist to the worker). But having sold it, she relinquishes her labor as her own. When she goes out as a geisha, she has exchanged her labor to the capitalist which he uses as a use-value to produce income. Since her labor is no longer her own, she feels increasingly alienated from the rewards of her labor.

The concentration of wealth in the form of capital (i.e. money that is invested to make money) in the *zaibatsu* by the 1930's, and the correlating industrialization of Tokyo signal a widespread capitalist mode of production. Travelers such as Shimamura go to hot spring towns to convalesce (doctor's recommendation) and/or relax. The geisha's labor helps to produce the relaxation, and we can say that it is integral to bringing the men and their money to the hot spring town. Would a lonely inn lure wealthy men from the city without the promise of a geisha's charms? The snow country seems to masquerade as a pre-capitalist site "protected" from capitalism ironically by the tourism that sustains it. But it is already thoroughly structured by the logic of capitalism which recreates within it pre-capitalist sites to be consumed by tourists.

Marx writes that as capitalism develops, the terms—industry (fixed capital) versus the worker—become congealed and unquestionable. It is the codification of the means of labor that objectifies labor and ultimately alienates the worker (see for example, *Grundrisse*, 699). As capitalism as a system develops, it threatens to subsume all living labor as objectified labor. As laborers become increasingly interpellated by fixed capital, they sell their labor as a commodity and risk being reduced to the status of interchangeable, objectified labor.

This is worth considering in the context of the snow country because it seems increasingly clear that Komako is in fact selling herself, her labor, as a commodity in a way that is not altogether different from the way that factory workers sell their labor: she sells her labor, not a product, for a fixed amount. By describing Komako in the terms of a laborer in the fixed relations of capitalism, I have opened up a space to consider her relation to her labor, and her treatment of it.

I argue that Komako acts as an alienated laborer. Having sold her living labor (in increasing degrees from her first encounter with Shimamura to her third), she seeks a labor of love outside the system of exchange in order to try to validate herself as a person outside of capitalism. She is up front with Shimamura about her work and wages. They consummate the affair in the first place outside the market (she's not working that night), and as the affair progresses, she doesn't charge him for her overnight stays.

The first time one reads *Snow Country*, Shimamura's consciousness is so overwhelming that Komako's investment in him appears to be indistinguishable from his fantasy of her. But if we look closely, we find that Shimamura is not Komako's only man. In fact, when Komako wonders out loud whether being with basically one man for a while isn't the same as being married, we may find ourselves surprised that she is not talking about Shimamura, but rather another man she has been seeing for five years (106). And in between Shimamura's first and second trips, Komako considers getting married, refusing not because of Shimamura, but because she didn't like the man who was much older than she. When we realize that Shimamura is not Komako's only love interest, we open up a space to ask what it is that she gets out of her relationship with Shimamura.

For Komako the affair offers her a venue of labor that is fully her own—as a paid laborer of love, she must relinquish it, but as an unpaid laborer of love, it is fully her love. She therefore attempts to redeem herself as a human being by indulging in an affair which can never be co-opted systemically—either by the family system or by capital—so long as she remains an unpaid geisha. The limits of this are also clear: she is still a paid laborer, and the labor of her love for Shimamura will never produce anything lasting, as he himself notices with respect to the Chijimi linen (already cited above). To make sure I'm being clear, I'm arguing that their affair is valuable to them precisely because it takes place outside the repressive, subjecting systematization of capitalism. However, that does not mean that their affair is successful in escaping systemic oppression.

For Shimamura, the stakes are different. Still appealing to the esthetic of wasted effort he refuses to see Komako as a laborer, preferring to see her primarily in terms of her warm passion and impulsiveness. For Shimamura, her love for him is solely the effect of an extra-economic force. That doesn't mean that he doesn't recognize that she is a paid geisha, because he does. But he sees even her labor as invested in the same extra-capitalist esthetic of wasted effort: "If Komako was the man's fian-

cée, and Yōko was his new lover, and the man was going to die—the expression 'wasted effort' again came in to Shimamura's mind. For Komako thus to guard her promise to the end, for her even to sell herself to pay doctors' bills—what was it if not wasted effort?" (61). By theorizing her position as laborer as such, "her existence seemed to have become purer and cleaner for this new bit of knowledge" (61–62). Shimamura participates in the economy of tourism, but he attempts to psychologically disengage himself from it by seeing the economic relations and labor in terms of his esthetic of wasted effort. He consumes Komako's labor, participating in the capitalist system as a paying consumer and indulging in his fantasy of an affair freed from that same system.

Why is *Snow Country* satisfying as a love story? From the first time that Komako staggers down the hall, drunkenly calling out Shimamura's name, and he hears the "the naked heart of a woman calling out to her man" Shimamura fancies that he is special to Komako. Komako, for her part, seems to reserve special favors for Shimamura. Shimamura finds in Komako a remedy, however temporary, for the compulsory productive logic of capitalism. Komako (barely visible through the mist of Shimamura's fantasies) is unable to indulge as Shimamura does in a fantastic flight from Das Capital, Tokyo and capitalism as a system. I've suggested that the text exceeds the extent to which Shimamura interprets her. As a paid laborer of love, she risks the objectification of her living labor, her love. Instead, she designates a site outside the limits of capital—though not outside the limits of capitalism, perhaps—in which she can reaffirm her living labor through her affair with Shimamura.

The questions that I would like to end with are, one, what do I gain, or what does this reading gain, by discovering Komako to be an alienated laborer? (we could also ask the question, what do we lose?); and two, am I in fact suggesting that Shimamura's preference for an estheticized world, the fantasy of the *Snow Country* as a distilled and purified realm of "unproductive labor" is in fact an allegory of esthetics under capitalism?

WORKS CITED:

Karatani, Kōjin. "Kindai nihon no hihyō: Shōwa zenki, I" ("Modern Japanese Criticism: Early Showa, I"). ed. Karatani Kōjin. *Kindai nihon no hihyō, Shōwahen (jo).* (*Modern Japanese Criticism, Showa Volume 1*). Fukutake Shoten, 1990.

Kawabata, Yasunari. *Snow Country*. tr. Seidensticker. Tuttle: Japan, 1st printing 1957; 42nd printing 1991.

___. *Yukiguni. Kawabata Yasunari Zenshū*, Shinchōsha, 1982.

Marx, Karl. *Capital.* Vol. 1. tr. Ben Fowkes. Reprint, Penguin Books: London, 1990. Pelican Books 1976.

___. *Grundrisse.* tr. Martin Nicolaus. Reprint, Penguin Books: London, 1993. Pelican Books 1973.