

Listening to Interstitial Identity in  
Contemporary Japanese Narrative

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## ABSTRACT

The contemporary era of the late 1980s bubble economy through the post-triple disaster moment of the 2010s in Japan is one that, due to an increased opening of borders and disintegrating of normalized structures, stimulated a turbulent reassessment of Japanese identity politics closely entangled with immigration, intercultural diversity, and marginalization. These issues do not only hold hegemonic systems of discrimination and inequality in direct contention, but also encourage a more complex and nuanced examination of “Japaneseness” against the homogeneous-presenting image that is often pushed to the forefront.

Taking a grassroots perspective, this dissertation asks, what does it mean to be at once Japanese and marginal in contemporary Japan? How do real and fictional actors actively negotiate this often invisible interstitiality against notions of homogeneity in contemporary Japanese narrative? And how can an understanding of race-like systems, often shaped solely by visibility, be expanded via habits of listening and social meanings of sound? To offer an answer, I utilize a framework informed by critical race theory and sound studies in which marginalized experiences are understood as working like systems of race that are based on a hierarchy of audible rather than visible racial awareness. Understanding the subaltern as able to speak but lacking a listener, I employ a method of listening to marginal sounds, music, and voice as a way to interrogate fixed dichotomies of categorical distinction upheld by cultural essentialism, such as Japanese and Other, pure and impure, margin and center.

I focus on multilingual author Tawada Yōko’s in-between language experiments, Watanabe Shin’ichirō’s hip-hop-based animated series *Samurai Champloo*, Kodama Yuki’s modern jazz manga series *Apollo on the Slope*, and the “silent” voices of the dead and survivors of the 3.11 triple disaster in Sakamoto Ryūichi’s “Tsunami Piano” and Itō Seikō’s *Imagination Radio*. In so doing, I analyze the ways in which these narratives negotiate marginalized audibility via language, music, and voice to address a new consciousness of Japanese identity embedded in transnationalism and the “liquidizing” of modern structures. The texts analyzed here are case studies which demonstrate a tendency bounded by a type of marginalized trauma and a globally-informed perspective that is negotiated through sound and provides a view of Japanese culture that is more finely tuned. Together, they portray imaginations of “Japaneseness” that are not passively monolithic or mainstream, but are rather intrinsically political, intersect multiple aspects of identity, and push against normative modes of Japanese nation and society.

## INTRODUCTION

In his 1968 novella *Nihongo ni tsuite (On the Japanese Language)*, Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992) takes African American author Ralph Ellison's 1952 notion of the "invisible man," which comments on dismal experiences of blackness in the United States, and reworks it into the "inaudible man" to speak about the *burakumin*, or "untouchable," experience in Japan.<sup>1</sup> At the end of Nakagami's story, the implicitly *burakumin* protagonist, Saitō, is interrogated by a Japanese police officer about the attempted suicide of his African American Vietnam soldier convoy, Ludolph. However, when the protagonist speaks, he is met with only deafened contempt:

The police officer sneered at me as if my hoarse, unclear words were not Japanese, but rather something along the lines of Thai or Burmese. As his sneer swallowed my words, I was suddenly overcome with a piercing fear that it would ultimately dissolve my entire body. My scarcely audible words repeated themselves as tiny fragments in the depths of my frame.<sup>2</sup>

In this excerpt, it is notably a representative of state power who hears the protagonist as "hoarse," "unclear," "not Japanese," and "scarcely audible." It is, therefore, allegorically the protagonist's own nation that does not hear or refuses to listen to his voice, marked as "different" and "Other." Especially if we understand language as traditionally connected to nation-building, the fact that Saitō's mark of marginality exists in his voice and his language, as indicated both by this excerpt and the novella's title, implies that he represents a dissonance in national structures of syntax and sonic or audible form. Following Japanese studies scholar Will Bridges, I understand the dissonance in this passage as a question that challenges the politics of and

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<sup>1</sup> While this dissertation does not explore Nakagami Kenji's politics in depth, a comprehensive analysis as well as re-centering of Nakagami and his *burakumin* voice within Japanese literature can be found in Will Bridges, *Playing in the Shadows: Fictions of Race and Blackness in Postwar Japanese Literature* (2020); Machiko Ichikawa, *Paradox and Representation: Silenced Voices in the Narratives of Nakagami Kenji* (2020); Anne McKnight, *Nakagami, Japan: Buraku and the Writing of Ethnicity* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Nakagami Kenji, *Nihongo ni tsuite (On the Japanese Language)*, in *Hatodomo no ie* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1975), 105. All Japanese to English translations are by the author of this dissertation unless otherwise noted.

ownership over “national” language while also significantly pushing the boundaries of the “national” to attempt to “construct transnational, transracial solidarity.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time, I believe it crucial to highlight that Nakagami does not only display solidarity with African American racial politics but also flips Ellison’s sensorial paradigm from the *unseen* to the *unheard*.

*Burakumin*, that is, a class- or hereditary-based group of butchers, leather tanners, undertakers, and executioners marked as “defiled” (*kegareta*) by the nature of their line of work, are more “invisible” than African Americans in the United States. In fact, they are often considered an “invisible race” due to a lack of stigma surrounding skin color that usually marks race and virtually any other visible differences that could set them apart from other Japanese people. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they are even at times no longer identifiable by their occupation, making their only mark of difference their socially constructed and imagined heredity of “defilement.” Therefore, while Nakagami relates *burakumin* experiences in Japan to African American experiences in the United States, his deliberate twist on the rhetoric through which these experiences are perceived seems to suggest that marginalizing structures in Japan are located less in invisibility and a refusal to “see” and more in inaudibility and a refusal to “listen.” In effect, he asks not, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s postcolonial terms, “Can the subaltern speak?,” but rather, “Can the subaltern be *heard*?”<sup>4</sup> Rather than stripping the subaltern, or marginalized, of their agency, this seems to argue that they are in complete possession of their agency and are speaking already. Shifting responsibility to the listener rather than the speaker, it

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<sup>3</sup> Will Bridges, *Playing in the Shadows: Fictions of Race and Blackness in Postwar Japanese Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 121.

<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 24-28. While Spivak’s essay is deeply entrenched in colonial rhetoric, I simply wish to draw connection here between similar focuses on negotiations of marginalized narratives through voice.

poses the question whether those in positions of power are taking the time to listen closely, in the sense of reflecting carefully on social structures in order to disrupt preconceived discourses on hierarchies and difference-intimating spaces.

Finding recourse in Nakagami's distinct perception of Japan's discriminatory systems, this dissertation emphasizes a need to further question the workings of race, or marginalizing systems that function like race, in contemporary Japan through dialogues of audibility—namely via sonic registers of voice and music in contemporary Japanese texts. That which is perceived on the sonic register is felt, yet remains conceptually obscure; it exists yet can often only be grasped through the felt and imagined. Therefore, it has the ability to upset systems that rely on the visible, the stable, and the known. For the purposes of this dissertation, I contend that it is then these alternative spaces of discourse enabled through sound—the inaudible, the instable, and the unknown—that have the ability to push against hegemonic registers of perception and, by extension, hegemonic theories of cultural exceptionalism propagated in Japan by various iterations of *Nihonjinron* and *Nantōron*.<sup>5</sup>

Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian suggest in their introduction to *Postmodernism and Japan* that appeals to *Nihonjinron* have been made in times of existential crisis as a defensive reaction to distinguish Japan from the rest of the world. “What this reflex produced,” they then argue, “was a conception of Japan as a signified, whose uniqueness was fixed in an irreducible essence that was unchanging and unaffected by history, rather than as a signifier capable of attaching itself to a plurality of possible meanings.”<sup>6</sup> This conceptualization of

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<sup>5</sup> *Nihonjinron* is a well-known genre that discusses Japanese national and cultural identity with the underlying assumption of the uniqueness of Japan, while *Nantōron* is a less-known genre that depicts the Ryūkyū archipelago as a treasure trove of unchanging religious beliefs and practices that preserve Japanese traditional culture.

<sup>6</sup> Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, “Introduction,” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, eds. Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1989), xvi.

Japan's existing hegemonic structures proves useful when considering the power dynamics between the notions of nation and (in)audibilities of race and race-like systems. If we understand contemporary Japan as currently trapped within these fixed definitions of nation that leave little to no space for a discourse on race, there is perhaps recourse in the elusive ephemerality of sound to shift these understandings to levels of plurality and possibilities alternate to the existing hegemonic reality. This dissertation is thus driven by the belief that sound, in its various configurations, is an urgently crucial tool to disrupt the Japanese epistemologies in which "race" remains inaudible.

More specifically, my research explores a diverse body of Japanese texts that chronologically trace frameworks for negotiating audibility of marginal figures within race-like systems in Japanese society from the late 1980s economic bubble to the 2011 immediate post-nuclear disaster. More specifically, I begin in 1987 with the beginning of author Tawada Yōko's writing career and end in 2011, which marked a new era known as post-disaster rather than post-war. The texts in this dissertation not only incorporate audibility in the form of perceptible vibrations, namely an animated series (Chapter 2) and a piano (Chapter 4), but I also highlight texts in which audibility is necessarily interpreted and imagined, namely short stories and novels (Chapter 1, 4) and manga (Chapter 3). This is done with intention, since I find that making space for these different types of audibility in tandem can reveal intriguing ways in which authors create and readers perceive sound, music, and voice essentially "without" the sonic component. Furthermore, I believe that this flexible idea of sound has the potential to expand the ways in which we understand audibility, much like the ways in which we understand race, and, by extension, facilitates a reconsideration of the meanings, natures, and signs of our own social experiences. In this same vein, this dissertation proposes that exploring ways in which audibility

and close *listening* to sound, music, and voice perform within various texts enables reconstructive readings of conventional conceptions of “silence,” conventionally understood as the absence of sound, that go beyond merely the absence of audibility. In other words, I encourage an investigation of how audibility is produced through various graphic codes and unpacked and perceived through the “mind’s ear,” rather than only the physical ear. Within this framework, I consider close listenings to negotiations of audibility apparent in my key texts as a way to destabilize traditionally stable notions, such as the functions of the senses, hegemonic structures, and “racial” identity.

#### **RACIAL DISCOURSE IN JAPAN AND JAPANESE NARRATIVE**

In one sense, my intent is to contribute to the development of scholarship that pushes against the dominant assumptions that Japan is a homogenous society with solid structures of state power by reconsidering a definition of and approach to “Japaneseness” and “race” in contemporary Japan. The term “race” here to signifies any and all constructed modes of thinking that attempt to categorize human difference and often initiate marginalizing and exclusionist practices in the form of inaccessibility to certain social spaces. I specifically utilize “race” instead of, perhaps, “marginalization” in order to fill a silent gap in East Asian scholarship that claims an Asian exception to racial inheritances of colonial order. In an introduction to the Spring 2003 issue of the journal *positions*, guest editors Andrew F. Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh note that, “With very few exceptions, the field has been characterized by a studied failure to consider the question of race in the constitution of colonial modernities in China, Japan, Korea,

and elsewhere throughout Asia.”<sup>7</sup> While this academic imbalance has certainly leveled out in recent years with increasing global scholarship on minority literature and Afro-Asian interactions, it remains crucial to highlight the fact that in Japanese social discourse, as its translated equivalent “*jinshu*,” race remains a silent concept that is rarely used to refer to Japanese society.

Sociologist Iesaka Kazuyuki was one of the few Japanese scholars of the twentieth century to directly challenge this problem, perhaps uncoincidentally during an era that essentialist *Nihonjinron* discourse was exceptionally strong. In his book *Nihonjin no jinshukan* (*Japanese Perspectives on Race*, 1986), he expresses a frustration that Japanese people understand race as a uniquely foreign crisis that does not need to be domestically problematized because of its “non-existence.” He then attributes this situation, which remains largely unchanged today, to an overall misunderstanding of race as a concept. He argues,

I believe that there is a lingering custom of equating race (*jinshu*) with skin color (*hifu no iro*). Unless this custom is reexamined, Japanese people will persistently find it difficult both to comprehend racial issues [in Japan] and to improve their understanding of international affairs.<sup>8</sup>

Iesaka appears to echo Nakagami in the notion that it is not that race does not exist in Japan but rather that it is unhelpful to define it through American cases that rely largely on visible cues, like the color of one’s skin. Furthermore, Iesaka seems to suggest that, while the realities of race and racism are undeniably a global issue, there is an urgent need to reexamine what race means and how it functions in local Japanese contexts in order to even begin to address it. By deliberately vocalizing the term “race” in this dissertation, I suggest that despite its silence in discourse and semi-invisibility in the current population, a type of race and race-like systems

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew F. Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh, “Guest Editors’ Introduction,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11, no. 1 (2003): 3.

<sup>8</sup> Iesaka Kazuyuki, *Nihonjin no jinshukan* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1986), 4.

distinct from American paradigms does in fact lurk beneath the surface of Japanese society and its existing sociopolitical structures.

On the rare occasion that race *is* used in Japanese discourse, it most often signifies either international populations or a black-white dichotomy borrowed from American sociopolitical constructions. That is not to say that this borrowing is strictly detrimental. Will Bridges, for example, argues that blackness has “constitutive power in the postwar Japanese racial and literary imagination,” as it provides “visions of the way in which postwar authors reimagine the ascription of race to bodies—be they bodies of literature, the body politic, or the human body itself.”<sup>9</sup> In Nakagami’s *On the Japanese Language*, the protagonist is never labeled as “*burakumin*,” per se, but his marginality is highly suggested by an African American rhetoric. At one point, the protagonist thinks to himself, “I believed I understood the insecure, trapped feeling that the black soldier [Ludolph] experienced. ‘Nobody knows my name!’ I thought I could substitute this title of a work by a black American author and shout, ‘I am the only one who knows who you are!’”<sup>10</sup> Here, it is as if the protagonist’s voice is mediated by the voice of James Baldwin, the “black American author” of the series of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961). In these essays, Baldwin, like Nakagami, struggles to achieve a certain level of social equilibrium of his identity. Born American and yet discriminated against by his own country as a homosexual black man, Baldwin ponders over as to why, as writer Henry James claims, “It is a complex fate to be an American.”<sup>11</sup> Like Baldwin, James was an American who expatriated himself to Europe. However, unlike Baldwin, James came from a rich white family. By quoting James in the introduction of his book, Baldwin is able to both comment on his own particular

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<sup>9</sup> Bridges, *Playing in the Shadows*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Nakagami, “Nihongo ni tsuite,” 86.

<sup>11</sup> James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More notes of a native son* (New York: The Dial Press, 1961), 1.

experiences as a homosexual black American and draw lines of solidarity that extend past the traditional boundaries of class and race. In a similar way, Nakagami's protagonist, claiming that he understands the black man's plight in Baldwin's essay, seems to translate his own struggles of understanding himself as a man simultaneously Japanese and discriminated against for his social caste through the experiences of a black man living in an American system of race. His use of inaudibility in place of Ellison's invisibility to articulate marginalized experiences seems to suggest that a racial system based on an American white-black paradigm and adapted to local modes of perception exists in Japan. In this way, Nakagami's work is representative of a new era of social consciousness in Japanese history that has extended and developed into the type of consciousness present in the texts analyzed here. Transnational solidarities and African American racial politics are utilized as both a metaphor and a perspective through which to understand and rearticulate marginalized identity in Japan in a more complex light.

Nakagami was well-known for both his literary and public confrontations of discriminatory systems of Japanese society that excluded *burakumin* and other minority groups from the hegemonic center. With constant echoes of "I am Other" (*watashi wa tasha de aru*) and one-sided queries of "Am I 'Japanese'?" ("Watashi wa 'Nihonjin' na no ka?"), he both questioned his uncanny positionality as an outcaste person writing Japanese literature and challenged the pervasive image of Japan as a homogenous nation lacking lived experiences of "difference."<sup>12</sup> Nakagami was, of course, not the first to speak out about *burakumin*

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<sup>12</sup> Nakagami quotes "I am Other" from Arthur Rimbaud's statement that commented on the ability to separate the self in two and view culture and language from an outsider's standpoint. See Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*, trans. Delmore Schwartz (Norfolk, Conn: New Directions, 1939). Interestingly, as Anne McKnight points out, while the original French utilized a grammatical pun ("*Je est un autre*," lit. "I is an Other") in order to signal something that can ironically only be spoken by someone else, in Japanese it can only be stated in the grammatically accurate declarative ("*watashi wa tasha de aru*") (McKnight, *Nakagami, Japan*, 14). Therefore, in Nakagami's statement, "I" retains the authority, directly postulating the self as an outsider of the situation in which he speaks. "Am I Japanese?" ("Watashi wa 'Nihonjin' na no ka?") was the title of a speech that Nakagami gave in 1990 at the

discrimination, nor was the late 1960s and early 70s the first instance in Japanese history in which denunciation tactics against discriminatory practices took place. However, the fact that Nakagami's movements in Japan resonated with synchronous African American Civil Rights movements in the United States represents a significant moment of an enhanced global consciousness of race and local awareness of "Japaneseness" that attempted to reassess conventionally "normative" workings of society.<sup>13</sup> In many ways, these reassessments in Japan were made possible via an exposure to global and, in Nakagami's case, African American perspectives, which provided an awareness of gaps of knowledge about one's own country and inspired a fresh outlook on the "home."

While Nakagami's alignment with African American narratives may seem unusual, it is highly reminiscent of a similar social translation Martin Luther King, Jr. experienced on a trip to India in 1959. During this trip, an Indian school principal introduced King as a "fellow untouchable" from the United States. Although shocked by the affiliation at first, upon considering the similar low rank, poverty, discrimination, and isolation of his fellow African Americans, King concluded a parallel system of segregation exists in both Indian and American societies. In a published essay on his trip, he remarks, "We call it race in America; they call it caste in India. In both places, it means that some are considered inferior, treated as though they deserve less."<sup>14</sup> Here, King seems to find similarities between the two respective modes of categorization in Indian and American societies, or, perhaps in an empathetic gesture, acknowledges that it is not the name of the category but rather the adverse sociopolitical

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Frankfurt Book Fair: Nakagami Kenji, "Watashi wa 'Nihonjin' na no ka?," in *Nakagami Kenji hatsugen shūsei*, ed. Karatani Kōjin and Suga Hidemi (Tokyo: Dai-san bunmeisha, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> I place quotation marks around the term "Japaneseness" to emphasize my understanding of Japanese not in connection to Japan as a nation-state, but rather as a subjective status negotiated through identity ascriptions and/or performance. With or without quotation marks, however, the contingency of the words "Japanese" and "Japaneseness" as I write about them should be assumed throughout this dissertation unless otherwise noted.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," *Ebony* (July 1959): 89.

disparities that they potentially trigger that deserves critical attention.

Considering this kind of transcultural interactions and experiences, African American journalist Isabel Wilkerson goes as far as to argue that it may be more accurate to describe the workings of American society as not “race” but “caste.” In her definition,

Race does the heavy lifting for a caste system that demands a means of human division. If we have been trained to see humans in the *language* of race, then caste is the underlying grammar that we encode as children, as when learning our mother tongue.<sup>15</sup>

By suggesting that race is like a language, Wilkerson seems to draw on Stuart Hall’s 1996 concept of race as a type of “floating signifier” in which an imagined fixed and biologically constituted reality is used to maintain operations of power.<sup>16</sup> Just as letters of the alphabet are empty signs until put into words and sentences that human beings interpret into an agreed upon meaning, race, too, attaches and reinforces meanings created by humankind. In other words, Hall highlights above all that race is fundamentally a *constructed* system of difference and must be talked about as such. Therefore, whether we label this system as “race,” like Hall, or “caste,” like Wilkerson; “invisible,” like Ellison, or “inaudible,” like Nakagami, the central issue is that it requires questioning not as to *what* it is but as to *how* it functions. As anthropologist Ian Condry suggests, once we acknowledge the fundamental constructedness of race, the main question then becomes, “how can we learn from different patterns of construction in different places serving different ends?”<sup>17</sup> Whereas Condry’s book *Hip-Hop Japan* aims to learn from patterns in 1990s to 2000s Japanese hip-hop practices, my dissertation aspires to learn from the patterns demonstrated by the contemporary (late 1980s to 2011) Japanese authors, directors, composers,

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<sup>15</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 18, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Hall, “Race, The Floating Signifier” (speech, Media Education Foundation, Northampton, MA, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Ian Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (Stanford: Duke University Press, 2006), 97.

and artists in this study who, through negotiations of sound and audibility, provide insight into understanding the workings of race in Japan and iterations of Japanese identity alternative to national practices, beliefs, and blood politics. For, it is only when concepts like race are accepted as artificial processes in flux that we can form new relationships with them, recognize them in diverse environments, and address them in varied circumstances.

This artificial constructedness, of course, does not signify that race and race-like systems are not felt, for they are indisputably experienced by members of societies all over the world via economic, political, social, and legal modes of inaccessibility. Sometimes, it can even rear its head as physical or mental violence. For this reason, I suggest that there is a dire need in the process of reconsidering race and race-like systems in Japan to turn our creative attentions to texts that highlight the multiplicities and ambiguities within identities existing in linguistically, culturally, and socially Japanese spaces. Especially if we consider “race” in its Japanese equivalent of “*jinshu*,” which literally means “people types,” I suggest that it can be understood as indicative of a much broader discourse of systems of classification that ultimately lead to categories of exclusion. To be perfectly clear, I recognize that the term “race,” especially for the American audiences for which I write, carries with it preexisting social structures and visions that have been ingrained concretely in our minds. However, by using it here to refer to Japanese populations, I feel that it has the potential to help us reimagine the ways in which we understand categorical systems of race at both a local and global level and provide us with more complex methods of perceiving homogenous-presenting populations, such as Japan. Previous studies on race in Japanese narrative have focused on how blackness, in terms of the representations of black characters and the influences of black rhetoric on language, has provided ways in which

Japanese authors reimagine race and body politics in Japan.<sup>18</sup> Other studies focus on reassessing Japanese society as multicultural rather than homogenous through a recentralizing of ethnic minorities and indigenous groups, such as Ainu, Okinawans, and *burakumin*.<sup>19</sup> This dissertation contributes to this line of work by analyzing texts that adopt narratives deeply connected to black music, specifically hip-hop and jazz, and actively vocal of minority experiences, especially Okinawan, Ainu, and mixed-race. At the same time, when focusing on the highly globally connected contemporary period (the late 1980s to today), I find it necessary to analyze the ways in which not only Japanese ethnic minorities and “blackness,” but more broadly *global* perceptions of race and marginalization have provided further alternative ways for Japanese authors to negotiate space for a more fluid idea of “Japaneseness” within the current solid constructs of Japanese society.

### **A HISTORY OF “JAPANESENESS”**

The period prior to the focal era of this dissertation, namely the late 1960s and 70s, was one of many political and indigenous movements in Japan. Marginalized ethnic groups, such as Okinawans, *burakumin*, and Ainu, attempted to reclaim rights over land, which in Okinawa’s case became inhabited by U.S. bases, and challenged Japanese policy that discriminated harshly against them. *Zainichi* Resident Koreans were also vocal when they were not allowed to vote despite paying taxes and they were told they should go back to Korea despite growing up in

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<sup>18</sup> For discussions on “blackness” in Japan, see, for example, John Russell, “Playing with Race/Authenticating Alterity: Authenticity, Mimesis, and Racial Performance in the Transcultural Diaspora,” (2012); Will Bridges and Nina Cornyetz, eds., *Traveling Texts and the Work of Afro-Japanese Cultural Production: Two Haiku and a Microphone* (2015); Will Bridges, *Playing in the Shadows* (2020).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Oguma Eiji, “*Nihonjin*” *no kyōkai: Okinawa, Ainu, Taiwan, Chōsen, shokuminchi shihai kara fukki undo made* (1998); Michael Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory* (1999); Yolanda Muñoz González, *La Literatura de Resistencia de las Mujeres Ainu* (2008).

Japan and only speaking Japanese. Furthermore, women's movements in Japan aimed to transform the discrimination they faced in the workplace on the basis of their gender and sex. By the early 1970s, they managed to convince the courts to forbid mandatory retirement based on pregnancy and childbirth and took the first crucial steps to transform exclusory hiring policies. Likely in response to these movements that attempted to disrupt the notion of a homogenous Japan and as a result of an increased global connection which led to international food and clothing trends that endangered Japanese "uniqueness," hegemonic circles strove to remind local and global spheres that Japan remained an exceptional culture. Consequently, debates on *Nihonjinron* identity politics peaked in the 1980s, emphasizing a focus on formulaic values that claimed a language and culture fundamentally impenetrable by outsiders, which was often validated via a biological connection imagined through the blood.

This "blood politics" was based on a genealogy of consciousness surrounding Japanese identity extending from the beginning of the modern era and into the early postwar years. In *Tan'itsu minzoku shinwa no kigen* (*Origin of the Myth of the Homogenous Nation*, 1995), sociologist Oguma Eiji suggests that there were initially two distinct theories of Japanese origins. The first was rooted in Edo period (1600-1868) nativist traditions and developed by late nineteenth century National Polity (*kokutai*) theorists, such as Hozumi Yatsuka and Inoue Tetsujirō, who adhered to a literal reading of ancient sun goddess mythology and were influenced by contemporaneous global rises in eugenic studies.<sup>20</sup> This strain of thinking was focused around the concept that the Japanese population was descendent from a single imperial line, or "family state" connected by the same biology and thus culture. Anthropologist Jennifer Robertson points out that desired "purity," in this vein, "referred metaphorically to a body—

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<sup>20</sup> Oguma Eiji, *Tan'itsu minzoku shinwa no kigen: "Nihonjin" no jigazō no keifu* (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 1995), 49.

including the national body—free from the symbolic pollution and disease-bearing pathogens as well as to the genealogical orthodoxy.”<sup>21</sup> Eugenicist, bureaucrat, and colonial administrator Tōgō Minoru, for example, asserted in a 1945 article that mixed marriages between Japanese and non-Japanese Asians would “dissolve the soul (*tamashii*) of the pure Japanese race and national body” and, therefore, impede the trajectory of Japanese imperial expansion.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the necessary distinctiveness of a Japanese history, culture, and social system was upheld through a familial politics in order to preserve a particular image of the Japanese nation. The second theory was led by anthropologists and historians who considered Japanese people as a fairly new mixture of races, especially relative to indigenous Ainu populations of Hokkaido.<sup>23</sup> While this alternative theory gave the notion of mixture a positive spin and recognized the presence of indigenous communities, it still either explicitly or implicitly held that the Japanese people were ultimately the result of a blood mixture (“*konketsu*”) that eventually became a homogenous, “natural”—and therefore biological—community. In the 1930s, for example, anthropologists Kiyono Kenji and Hasebe Kotondo used anthropological evidence to argue that contemporary Japanese people had evolved directly from Jōmon period (14,000-300 BCE) ancestors with minimal mixtures of blood from then on.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, in both strands of identity theory, “blood” symbolism was collapsed with concepts of sexuality, reproduction, and race to ultimately argue for the cultural and racial uniqueness of a singular lineage of people defined as “Japanese.” In this way, the indication of “Japaneseness” has often been defined via notions connected to blood. Based on this blood politics, despite the physical indistinguishability of *burakumin* from other

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<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Robertson, “Blood Talks: Eugenic Modernity and the Creation of New Japanese,” *History and Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (2002): 195.

<sup>22</sup> Tōgō Minoru, “Dai tōa kensetsu to zakkon mondai,” *Shin Jawa* 2, no. 1 (1945): 142-3.

<sup>23</sup> Oguma, *Tan'itsu minzoku*, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Oguma, *Tan'itsu minzoku*, 74.

Japanese people, they and similar groups of mixed, different, or “tainted” blood have faced harsh discrimination in terms of their restricted access to common spaces of society, such as education, occupation, housing, and marriage, in order to prevent physical mixtures of blood. Furthermore, Japanese women, deemed in charge of producing and nurturing familial bloodlines, served as the crux of this type of thinking.

This is also the type of thinking that both Stuart Hall’s ideology and Nakagami’s writing attempt to push against the fundamental constructedness of biology-based race that postulates that race exists even when, in the “blood politics” system, difference between Japanese people is impossible to be seen or proven. Both continuing and extending Nakagami’s and Stuart Hall’s respective movements, this dissertation also pushes against these blood politics that force certain people based on internal and, therefore, *imagined* ranked qualities or traces of defilement to the margins. I provide attention to currently categorized minorities, such as Ainu, Okinawans, and people of mixed race, that have been historically discriminated against, as well as recognition to all other alternate lived experiences of “Japaneseness” that subvert national rhetoric and myths of cultural homogenization. By “alternate lived experiences,” I propose a discourse that is sensitive to the presence of diversity both within existing minority categories and within the imagined “mainstream” Japanese community. If the mainstream Japanese population, as historian Isoda Michifumi suggests, was initially established by those who followed rules and were in constant search of guidance from a “father” (*otōsan*) or “familial leader” (*oyabun*), “alternate lived experiences” are those who *diverge* from “normative” rules and become their *own oyabun*, or masters of themselves.<sup>25</sup> The texts in this dissertation all include characters who follow this alternate path by forging lives that are separate from or in-between national linguistic constraints,

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<sup>25</sup> NewsPicks, “[Rekishi o Rethink se yo] Isoda Michifumi to Hatō Ryō ga Nihon no mirai o mitsumenaosu (zenpen),” YouTube Video, 24:50, Jan. 9, 2021, <https://youtu.be/c4pX8rxnm3s>.

subverting existing social orders by standing up for values that they believe in rather than what they are told, and/or providing empathetic perspective to connect with a more expansive sense of humanity.

Due to Japan's increasingly open borders and economic markets during the contemporary period in which I focus, an intensified awareness of cultural crossing and social mixing, perhaps inevitably paired with global surges in prejudice and exclusion, has largely informed imaginings of race found in Japanese contemporary narratives. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, drawing on Marx, describes this progression of connectedness and transnationalism as the process of becoming "liquidized."<sup>26</sup> In other words, the seemingly solid and permanent structures of family, nation, and community of the modern era (approximately 1868 to 1945 in Japan) begin melting into thin air. Categorical boundaries disintegrate and both social and individual lived experiences become globalized, despatialized, and ever-present. While this process may seem only positive and inclusive, in practice it proves to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the contemporary "disembeddedness" or "fluidity" of the world provides a productive opportunity for the dispersion of traditional oppressive structures and the reimagining of identity as fixed and intrinsically tied through blood and language to one nation. This, as sociologist Jock Young suggests, "creates great potentialities for human flexibility and reinvention" in order to conceptualize global societies anew, or beyond the constructs of exclusive and dichotomic concepts.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the very volatility of this disembeddedness can also spark a longing for a return to "simpler" times of existential certainty, spatial solidity, and essentialized identity offered by existing hegemonic structures. Yet, as exemplified by the title of Oguma Eiji's book, "*Nihonjin*" no kyōkai (*The Boundaries of "Japanese,"* 1998), perpetuating singular,

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<sup>26</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Jock Young, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 3.

essentialized ideas of what it means to be Japanese are what traps identities that do not fit inside this fixed mold invisibly and inaudibly balanced within the blurred boundary between “Japanese” and “Other.”<sup>28</sup> Through an analysis of texts that attempt to reimagine alternative relationships to “Japaneseness” through globally informed audible or inaudible experiences, I argue that these boundaries are not static spaces of helpless, perpetually exilic existence. Rather they potentially offer empowering frameworks that recentralize marginalized identities through a rhetoric that does not mark them as singularly “Japanese” or “Other” in the conventional sense but conceivably in-between and *both*. In this dissertation, I recognize a trend to mark this type of experience by negotiations of audibility via sound, voice, or music. The act of listening to these sounds, then, which I will explain in depth below, becomes a vital act of close measuring, or sounding, accessibility to these “racialized” spaces.

### THE POTENTIALS OF (IN)AUDIBILITY & LISTENING

As comparative literature scholars James Steintrager and Rey Chow point out in *Sound Objects*, “both historical and ongoing theoretical inquiry and media studies in anxious, celebratory, or critical mode has generally condensed around visuality, and much less studied has been the position and role of aurality.”<sup>29</sup> In order to recentralize sound in media and art studies, recent scholarship has focused on sound and its potentials to contest the established “normality” of categorical concepts and hegemonic structures. In *Sonic Agency*, for example, media scholar Brandon LaBelle conceives of sound as intrinsically political. He argues,

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<sup>28</sup> Oguma, “*Nihonjin*” no kyōkai: *Okinawa, Ainu, Taiwan, Chōsen, shokuminchi shihai kara fukki undo made* (Tokyo: Shin’yōsha, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> James Steintrager and Rey Chow, “Sound Objects: An Introduction,” in *Sound Objects*, eds. James Steintrager and Rey Chow (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2019), 3.

Sound works to unsettle and exceed arenas of visibility by relating us to the unseen, the non-represented or the not-yet-apparent. It exists alongside spaces of appearance and the legible visibilities often defining open discourse, the flow and force of particular tonalities and musics, silences and noises that may transgress uncounted and unheard. Sound may carry those that struggle by way of reverberant intensities. The vibrations as well as the echoes pass over or around structures of dominance to embolden the voices of the few, enabling strained articulations or actions to gather momentum and to take up residence within a multiplicity of territories and languages.<sup>30</sup>

Here, LaBelle maintains sound's ability to disrupt and reorient politics of the visible and other dominant strains of discourse. In his understanding, it is precisely sound's intangible configuration that allows it to breach between and beyond the strict boundaries and dichotomies that systems of classification strive so hard to police. In this way, sound is fluid rather than restricting, which permits a level of adaptability for it to inhabit spaces of alternate possibilities of how we understand reality.

Significantly, there have been recent movements among scholars in various global fields to level biases towards the visual and refocus our attention on the continuing importance of the oral, the audible, the inaudible, and the silent, especially in terms of understanding structures of power and formations of social archives.<sup>31</sup> In an effort to follow their guidance and contribute to the existing discourse, this dissertation utilizes "listening" to these various modes of sound both as a metaphor for displacing dominant paradigms and dichotomies that restrict the complexities of perception and as an invitation for action that inquires past superficial surfaces to provide alternate perspectives to how the world is and can be. In this way, recentering a discourse on racial identity politics in Japanese narrative through "listening" is not simply a thematic study of

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<sup>30</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018), 2-3.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, David Hendy's *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (2013), Brandon LaBelle's *Sonic Agency* (2018), Maeda Ai's *Text and the City* (2004), James Steintrager and Rey Chow's *Sound Objects* (2018), Jennifer Lynn Stoeber's *The Sonic Color Line* (2016), Salomé Voegelin's *Listening to Noise and Silence* (2010), *Sonic Possible Worlds* (2014), and *The Political Possibility of Sound* (2018), Watanabe Hiroshi's *Chōshū no tanjō* (2012), Kerim Yasar's *Electrified Voices* (2018).

sound, but also an immersive exploration of the complex mechanisms between textual representations of difference and dominant centers of power that sound is able to expose.

I garner inspiration for my definition of “listening” from a cacophony of recent studies in the emerging field of sound studies. I especially find recourse in Salomé Voegelin’s work on sound, which engages with listening as a socio-political framework that defines sonic practices and performances. In *Sonic Possible Worlds*, Voegelin contends,

Listening is an innovative and generative practice, a strategy of engagement that we employ deliberately to explore a different landscape other than the one framed by vision [. . . which] grants us access to another view on the world and on the subjects living in that world.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, by listening,

We take part in the production of invisible maps that generate a plurality of sonic timespace environments. [. . .] Sound invites us to walk and produce uncertain paths that build a contingent geography between the self and the world in which we live.<sup>33</sup>

In Voegelin’s work, listening—to the amalgam of sounds and silences that surrounds us—is presented as a dynamic lens through which to interrogate that which is often taken for granted, such as visible and “fixed” dichotomies, and to open space for various perspectives on the world. Rather than singular, pure truths designated by a central power, Voegelin asserts that the powers of sound and agencies of listening steer us towards *unstable* knowledge, *communal* experiences, and *discursive* possibilities that question our environments of time and space. She therefore understands these concepts in their negativity, as Dutch artist Mieke Bal encourages us to do when articulating goals and methods for sites of interrogation. In this vein, listening becomes “impure” and synesthetic, while sound becomes variable, located in-between spaces, and

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<sup>32</sup> Salomé Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 12.

<sup>33</sup> Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 24.

performed in “practices of power and resistance.”<sup>34</sup> Listening, therefore, offers a movement towards liberation against structures that presume a single subject and thread of knowledge. It is simultaneously a social, musical, intellectual, and political mode of access to the perception of strategies and ways of life that are not new but rather alternate to the existent mainstream.

While its elusive qualities make sound difficult to grasp and locate, it is arguably this very elusiveness that resonates with postmodern borderless conditions and concepts like “race,” while simultaneously functioning as a crucial part of sound’s significance as an analytical framework. “Sound is ephemeral,” Voegelin argues in an interview, “not in the sense of flimsy or insubstantial. Instead, it is ephemeral in the sense of a strong presence that remains invisible and therefore formless within a visual orientation.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, it is sound’s very “invisible formlessness” which gives it the capacity to upset and reorient politics based on visibility and categorical representation. By opening spaces alternative to those solely represented by vision, sound is able to establish new relationships with the unseen and un-represented.

In studying sound’s role in the makings of Japanese modernity, Kerim Yasar suggests that sound’s ephemerality also makes it particularly effective for pacing and shaping senses of lived time.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, he asserts, “Far from being a liability, this transience endows the voice with an auratic charge. Because the voice is always vanishing, because it cannot be stopped, fixed, or scrutinized, it always occupies a liminal, indeed ghostly, space of absent presence.”<sup>37</sup> Although Yasar focuses on audible voice here, sound, music, and silence are arguably much the same in their vanishing unfixedness and liminal presence. When this

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<sup>34</sup> Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 2003): 19.

<sup>35</sup> Leandro Pisano, “The Political Possibility of Sound. Interview with Salomé Voegelin,” *Digicult*, 2018, accessed Apr. 10, 2021, <https://digicult.it/articles/the-political-possibility-of-sound-interview-with-salome-voegelin/>.

<sup>36</sup> Kerim Yasar, *Electrified Voices: How the Telephone, Phonograph, and Radio Shaped Modern Japan: 1868-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>37</sup> Yasar, *Electrified Voices*, 5.

liminality is understood not as something lacking but as a trait that bestows sound, voices, music, and silence with the ability to interrogate the spaces unattainable by vision alone, it becomes a powerful asset with the potential to spark political transformation. In addition, it is also important to remember, as American ethnicity studies scholar Jennifer Stoever reminds us in her book *The Sonic Color Line*, that listening is a “socially constructed ideological system producing but also regulating cultural ideas about sound.”<sup>38</sup> That is to say, while there exist manifold ways to interpret sonic information, there are certain local, cultural, and human standards based on a central social construct that people tend to follow. It is, then, the actions of the artist, the author, the painter, or the musician that manipulates these standards of perception, thereby challenging their own as well as listeners’ positionality within social structures.

At the same time, it is important to reiterate that I diverge from these aforementioned sound studies in that I focus both on works with sound in the form of perceptible vibrations and on texts in which sound is necessarily imagined. For this reason, I extend my definition of listening to sound both perceived through vibrations and simulated through opportunities of synesthesia, or the experience of a sensation in one of the senses that triggers a sensation in another. Here, I do not speak of synesthesia in the clinical sense, but rather borrow writer and translator Lisa Wilcut’s definition in her analysis of haiku, which poses the phenomenon as a reflection of “heightened awareness” that facilitates the questioning or challenging of an existential moment.<sup>39</sup> In other words, I contend that listening is not required to be solely an experience through the ears, but can also be experienced through other modes of sensation, such as the eyes, or vicariously through movement or touch.

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<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>39</sup> Lisa Wilcut, “Synesthesia in Japanese Literature and Culture” (lecture, Yokohama IUC Alumni, May 23, 2017).

In doing so, I find recourse in drawing connections between this conceptualization of synesthesia and Cara Lynne Cardinale's theoretical device of "look-listening," which she uses to investigate moments that challenge the censoring of disabled or gendered bodies through hegemonic practices by inversely engaging them in active discourse. Cardinale argues that voicelessness is the "endemic trope of modernist literature," but this could be because of the current simplistically dichotomic ways in which we perceive voice.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, narratives of look-listening, or the language of "deafness," in the sense of both disability and the unwillingness to listen, function to alter understandings of language and perception. "The language of deafness," Cardinale reveals, "moves the receptive point of language from the ear to the eye and the expressive from the mouth to the hand."<sup>41</sup> By incorporating "look-listening" within my definition, listening becomes an experience that is further embedded within the (performed) body and functions as another layer to destabilize assumptions of how sound is produced and perceived. In other words, as through synesthesia, sound is again extended past the tongue and the ear to kinesthetic, visual, and tactile senses. In this way, listening is able to access "sound" and "voice" within silences often represented through dominant social models of gender, disability, and race. Crip theorist Michael Bérubé offers the following pithy observation on disability and its connection to other social hierarchies:

Disability (in its mutability, its potential invisibility, its potential relation to temporality and its sheer variety) is a particularly elusive element to introduce to any conjectural analysis, not because it is so distinct from sexuality, class, race, gender, and age, but because it is already so complexly intertwined with everything else.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Cara Lynne Cardinale, "'Through the Eyes': Reading Deafened Gestures of Look-Listening in Twentieth Century Narratives" (PhD diss., University of California-Riverside, 2010), eScholarship, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Cardinale, "'Through the Eyes,'" 15.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Bérubé, "Foreword: Another Word is Possible," in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, ed. Robert McRuer (New York: New York University, 2006), viii.

Race, as I understand it in Japan lacking a center around visible color, functions similarly to Bérubé's conceptualization of disability. In fact, as Bérubé puts it, the two are *intricately linked* within systems of hegemonic oppression that regulate access to space. Perhaps, then, it only makes sense that sound, in its similar mutability, invisibility, temporality, and variety, is key in the negotiations surrounding this access; while close listening, which encompasses transsensory, synesthetic, and look-listening engagements, is indispensable in locating political meaning in these various reiterations of "racialized" identity and sociocultural justice. Within this framework, I consider sound studies a way to incorporate multiple methods of close listening in order to destabilize traditional notions of the functions of the senses—which form an ablest system of power—and, more metaphorically, Japaneseness.

#### AUDIBILITY IN JAPANESE NARRATIVE

To state that this attention to listening to written texts is a new intervention would be to disavow a tradition that has existed for hundreds of years. In fact, C. Andrew Gerstle, who writes on kabuki culture and the production of Japanese texts from the early 1600s to the 1870s, holds that "orality," in the form of group activity and performance, has remained a central part of Japanese literary culture, including poetic, narrative, and theatrical genres, at the most highly literate levels.<sup>43</sup> While silent reading is now an accepted norm in contemporary Japan and many other global cultures, communal reading and oral literature were common practices up through the Tokugawa and early Meiji periods. Tokugawa author Tamenaga Shunsui (1790-1844), for example, not only included scenes in his stories where characters read aloud to each other, but

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<sup>43</sup> C. Andrew Gerstle, "The Culture of Play: Kabuki and the Production of Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 66, no. 3 (2003): 358.

also wrote in a “style designed to please the ear” (*chōkakuteki na sutairu*) in order for the practices he depicted to be carried out in reality.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, an 1889 review on Meiji author Ozaki Kōyō’s (1868-1903) pioneer work presumed that the language in modern prose narratives, or *shōsetsu*, must “please the reader when it is recited.”<sup>45</sup>

Of course, a recognition of the orality of written texts is not unique to Japan. In his essay “Yo ga hon’yaku no hyōjun” (“My Translation Standards,” 1906), Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909) argues, for example, that “European texts” convey a pleasure of reading aloud due to their intrinsic “melody (*onchō*)” and what he calls “musical (*myūjkaru*)” quality.<sup>46</sup> Canadian literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye, who concerned himself with interrogating the sonic features shared between poetry and music, suggests that the term “musical” in reference to the qualities of literature denotes a substantial analogy to and, in many cases, an actual influence from the art of music. At the same time, Frye emphasizes that this music does not simply mean something that “sounds nice” or is concerned with the beauty of sound itself. Rather, it refers to the beauty of the *organization* of sound, the ways in which the sounds of a variety of vowels are intentionally put together in order to “push the ear forward to the next beat.”<sup>47</sup> Futabatei’s conviction of “musicality” in literature may have been due to his experiences in Russian literature at the Foreign Language School he attended, where lessons were largely based not on silent, individual reading but on recitations and full-body reenactments of Russian prose. Maeda Ai suggests that after encountering this type of multisensory performance reading, the rise of solitary readership

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<sup>44</sup> Maeda Ai, *Text and the City: Essays on Japanese Modernity*, trans. James A. Fujii (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 227.

<sup>45</sup> Maeda, *Text and the City*, 236.

<sup>46</sup> Futabatei Shimei, “Yo ga hon’yaku no hyōjun,” in *Gendai Nihon bungaku taikai*, 1: *seiji shōsetsu*, Tsubouchi Shōyō, Futabatei Shimei shū (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1974), 373.

<sup>47</sup> Northrop Frye, “Introduction: Lexis and Melos,” in *Sound and Poetry: English Institute Essays, 1956*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), xi, xiii.

in Meiji Japan must have left Futabatei feeling bored and unsatisfied.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, Futabatei's description of the musicality of Russian texts functions as both a metaphor for the novel and aesthetic qualities of Russian language that attracted him to it and a reality of its audible rhythms that was imprinted through the *sound* of literature orally performed.

In addition to these modern contributions, it is also impossible to ignore the recent surges in literature and texts being read aloud. Audio books, podcasts, and public reading events featuring the voices of authors, actors, or other celebrities demonstrate a global rise in the popularity of audio culture and an expanding market for not only reading but also listening to the physical vibrations of literature. In 2012, for example, the Japanese publishing company Kaiosha Bunko republished a series of classic Meiji period books, including Natsume Sōseki's *Botchan* and *Wagahai wa neko de aru*. Clearly targeting a young adult, *otaku* fanbase with their reimagined manga-like covers and supplementary minidisk with a portion of the narratives read aloud by a famous voice actor, they provide an new perspective on classic texts through a contemporary audible experience. In addition, according to Edison Research and Triton Digital, in 2019, the United States experienced a record 192,000 new podcasts launched in the first ten months and a 19 million increase in podcast listeners from 2013.<sup>49</sup> While still low on the list of global audio site usage, Japan's users have also tripled over the past two years on audio services, such as audiobook.jp, which provides audio books, and Voicy, which hosts a variety of voice-related media.<sup>50</sup> Japan's National Diet Library even announced the addition of 1,000 new recordings to its already substantial historical sound recordings database, known as *Rekion*, at the

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<sup>48</sup> Maeda, *Text and the City*, 245.

<sup>49</sup> Brad Adgate, "Podcasting is Going Mainstream," *Forbes*, Nov. 18, 2019, accessed Jan. 3, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2019/11/18/podcasting-is-going-mainstream/#4ca886a01699>.

<sup>50</sup> Apuri māketingu kenkyūsho, "Sumaho de fueru 'ima shikō' to 'sentaku tsukare,' mimi no hima to onsei kontentsu, Insuta bae to TikTok bae, merukari no barabara shōhi nado, sumaho yūzā kokonatsu no torendo (2019)," *Note*, Jan. 6, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://note.com/marketing/n/n96a7468e3f96#dmJfz>.

end of 2019, reminding us that “not everything is visual.”<sup>51</sup> To hear texts and archives through the ears rather than only seeing them through the eyes has the potential to help audiences formulate alternate experiences of texts during which new elements, such as accent, rhythm, musicality, and time, can rise to the surface of their attention. When multilingual author Tawada Yōko reads her German poetry aloud, for example, she suggests that her accent “becomes an important part of the construction of rhythm” for the story she tells.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, Tawada upholds the notion that various facets of sound are connected to time, while appending that the qualities of voice may heighten the experience of listening to literature and emphasize the perception of the author’s message. By highlighting these types of examples, I attempt to emphasize the importance and audible presence of voice in text.

### **INTERSTITIAL IDENTITY, AUDIBILITY, AND LISTENING**

In this dissertation, I therefore emphasize the need to triangulate “racialized” interstitial identity, audibility, and listening. Doing so in a Japanese context, across this many varieties of Japanese texts, and with my particular definition of race may edge on unconventional. However, I believe that this intervention is a vital step to develop a broader, more comprehensive understanding of Japaneseness both for the sake of Japan’s increasingly global population and for students all over the world learning about Japanese language and culture. I choose to vocalize race here because it is impossible to solve a silent concept that many will not admit exists and because it has the potential, in its global similarities, to reveal what we hold in common as a

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<sup>51</sup> Paula, “Resource: Historical Sound Recordings from the National Diet Library,” *Shinpai Deshou*, May 13, 2020, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://shinpaideshou.com/2020/05/13/resource-historical-sound-recordings-from-the-national-diet-library/>.

<sup>52</sup> Tawada Yōko, *Ekusofonii: bōgo no soto e deru* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shōten, 2003), 90.

humanity rather than what separates us into categories of difference.

Through a close analysis of specific case texts, I focus in this dissertation not on how we may hear race and interstitial identity in Japan, per se, but rather how listening to negotiations of this type of identity by different authors and artists can reveal possibilities of alternate relationships to hegemonic centers of power or concepts that those centers of power represent. As delineated above, my work also aims to contribute to an interdisciplinary scholarship by existing in the nexus of Japan studies, sound studies, and critical race studies in a way that is simultaneously local and global in scope. While I am certainly not the first to write about the texts that appear in this dissertation, I may be the first to bring them together in one space. This act in itself puts in contention the ways in which sound can be understood and perceived, while also politicizing these works through my particular definitions of race, audibility, and listening. So doing, this study ultimately aims to highlight some of the overlooked sociocultural areas in Japanese society through literature and sound studies, thereby promoting a dialogue between authors and artists, margins and centers, the past and our contemporary moment.

My rationale for speaking about these seemingly random texts in tandem stems from the ways in which they fundamentally address forms of marginalized trauma through a sonic mode. The Greek etymology of the word “trauma” refers to a wound, which through psychological studies has come to mean not simply a physical wound but a wound of the mind, as well. Following this notion, comparative literature scholar Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma,

[. . .] is not just the unconscious act of the infliction of the injury and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition, but the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound* [. . . and] addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality that is not otherwise available.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1-2, emphasis in the original.

This conception of trauma as an expression intrinsically located in the voice points to the importance of a sonic process from within. At once an expression and negotiation of trauma, this sonic voice is notably not restricted to the confines of language but is a cry that appears to yearn for release and audibility. In its effort to describe “a reality that is not otherwise available,” the voice encourages listeners to think outside of and beyond our current understandings of reality and think alternatively in terms of other frameworks that can be used to face our current social structures and relations. A similar encouragement stems from the texts in this dissertation.

Trauma in these texts may be prevalent at various levels of severity, but it consistently appears as a result of marginalized, perhaps even “racialized,” experiences that mark a character, an author, and/or a population as “different” and therefore othered from the traditional Japanese mainstream. As such, it is notable that these texts’ choice of language, music, or voice resist the confines of linguistic rules, organized annotation, or singular categorization. Alternative identities are drawn according to principles of rhythmic repetition, the spontaneity of improvised performance, and collective collaboration that builds from the relationship between the self and other characters or reader-listeners. Lines of identification (i.e. “Japan” and “Japanese”) are certainly drawn, but porously, in order to encourage us to think of cultural and identity processes as we might musical processes, replete with repetitions, silences, noise, resonances, and rhythms. The texts in this dissertation, therefore, appear to recognize the potentials of sound and audibility to offer a framework applicable chronologically from the late 1980s to 2010s that dismantles concrete constructs and integrates the elasticity of sound into thought. These texts may be unique in the way that they articulate various forms of Japanese identity and have rarely, if ever, been analyzed as texts that explicitly address race and race-like systems. Yet, their employment of sound as a political framework that disrupts social order and recenters narratives of marginalized

perceptions of reality, I would like to reiterate, is not new, but requires further study.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

In chapter 1, I highlight the configuration of the strange in the familiar through the work of multilingual Japanese author Tawada Yōko. I pointedly focus here not only on the content of the short stories she tells, but *how* she tells them, finding significance not only in her word choice, but also in the *sounds* of those words at the level of the phoneme. Although Tawada writes in both Japanese and German, my overarching argument in this chapter is that her stories resist language as a form rooted in national rhetoric as it is traditionally conceptualized. Furthermore, I suggest that one central way that her messages of transculturalism and transnationalism are imparted is through her sonic manipulations of language, which shape the ways her words and worlds are heard.

I especially draw attention to Tawada's works in Japanese, focusing largely on an unanalyzed compilation of short stories entitled *Amerika: hidō no tairiku* (*America: The Unjust Continent*, 2006). It is within these texts that I find the sounds of her written language, which move between multiple languages and cultures, seem to challenge readers to listen for the unusual within the familiar in order to foster new understandings of possible global realities that exist somewhere between fixed borders and national languages. My analysis draws on a framework of displacement based on the German concept of *unheimlich*, which I define here as “unhomely,” or a quality that is at once eerily strange and refuses to pertain to any one geographical space. This particular word choice is made in order to address the strangeness that Tawada marks within the hesitation between the sounds of the languages she speaks as well as

the lack of belonging of her characters to a singular national space at the core of many of her stories. I then argue that listening—in both a literal and allegorical sense—to these “unhomely” spaces in Tawada’s works provides insight to Tawada’s perspectives on Japanese nationalism and existing hierarchical structures as well as negotiate the position of her own “strange” gendered, “racial,” and ethnic identity within and between these structures.

Drawing on Karen Kelsky’s anthropological research on the resonating transformations in Japanese gender relations during the 1980s and 90s, I further contend that it is fundamentally Tawada’s experiences as a Japanese woman beginning her writing career in 1980s economic bubble Japan that develops her reflective considerations on ideas of self, women, and home. Understanding this positionality as trauma, in terms of an exposure to “racial” and gendered power unbalances, can reveal a basis for Tawada’s particular perspective, which is incessantly “foreign” and marginalized in terms of both nationality and gender. Tawada’s interplay between seemingly phonemically fragmented language and unusual word combinations, therefore, can be comprehended as freeing language from the constraints of both spatial locality and social expectations, which allows the author and her characters to negotiate alternate relationships to a nationally prescribed “mother tongue” and gendered position.

In chapter 2, I consider the role of the samurai image—traditionally a symbol of Japanese identity, loyalty, and nationalism—in an age of peace, liquification of nation, and playful sensibilities. In tandem with a strain of discourse that attempted to romanticize past samurai ideals, the early 2000s experienced a resurgence of samurai in Japanese pop culture, much of which went against the traditional, often nationalistic trope. Instead of loyal retainers fighting to preserve their masters’ honor, this period produced images of masterless samurai fighting to music that anachronistically works to characterize contemporary perspectives on life and society.

The focal text of this chapter is director Watanabe Shin'ichirō's animated series *Samurai Champloo* (2004-2005), which explores a forward or present-looking past that invokes the term *chanpurū*, an Okinawan stir-fry dish used as a metaphor for cultural fusion. Situated in a historically ambiguous Edo period Japan (1600-1868), clumsy fifteen-year-old waitress Fuu convinces violent Ryūkyū-born vagrant Mugen and silent rōnin Jin to help her search for a samurai who smells like sunflowers. Their journey through Japan to Nagasaki is filled with the typical samurai show elements of clashing swords and floating world temptations blended with an unexpected, anachronistic hip-hop element that accentuates an underlying rhetoric of the belief in marginalized figures standing up against authority and a refashioning of time and space to reflect often inaudible perspectives. In this series, trauma is symbolized by the bitter *gōyā* melon that takes a central role in the *chanpurū* dish and represents the “racialized” experiences of disabled, foreign, female, Okinawan, and Ainu characters. This dual-faceted *chanpurū* and the sonic, cultural, playful, and temporal-defying elements of hip-hop are what I argue serve as a critical framework for traditional and national samurai images of this series' time. Mixing hip-hop with samurai, I contend, is not so much demonstrative of the typical East meets West trope, as it is indicative of an alternate Japaneseness—a “hip-hop samurai”—that pushes social, political, and cultural boundaries in a playful way.

In chapter 3, I return to the “sounds” of written text, analyzed this time in their interplay with the visual comic book page in the manga series, *Sakamichi no Aporon* (*Apollo on the Slope*, 2008-2012). Although there exists both an animated series televised in 2012 (dir. Watanabe Shin'ichirō) and a live-action film adaptation released in 2018, this chapter pointedly highlights the original manga series as its focal text. This is done in order to explore the ways in which the particular structures of the comic book medium portray sound through multiple senses and

modes as well as to focus on specific instances of race and race-like systems that do not appear in the animated series and film.

The story follows intelligent, introverted, and wealthy first-year high school student, Nishimi Kaoru, who finds it difficult to make lasting friendships due to his constant moving around as a result of his father's navy job. In the summer of 1966, he moves to Sasebo, Nagasaki, where he meets Kawabuchi Sentarō, a feared delinquent who teaches Kaoru to love jazz, and Mukae Ritsuko, a female classmate whose father owns the record shop where Sentarō practices jazz. The series involves an array of fascinating characters, including Katsuragi Jun'ichi, Sentarō's older brother figure who plays the trumpet and becomes involved in Tokyo's 60s student movements, Fukahori Yurika, Sentarō and Kaoru's wealthy schoolmate who falls in love with Jun'ichi and rejects her expected female responsibilities, and Matsuoka Seiji, another classmate who creates conflict between Sentarō and Kaoru by trying to involve Sentarō in the world of rock-and-roll. However, this chapter focuses mainly on the two leading characters Kaoru and Sentarō and how the imbedded racial politics of American jazz simultaneously marks them as "racial" figures and helps them negotiate their individual marginalized traumas. Sentarō's trauma involves his abandonment by his parents at a young age, his mixed race heritage, and his inability to feel as if he belongs in his adoptive family. Meanwhile, Kaoru's trauma involves his parents' divorce at a young age, his inability to fit socially or linguistically in his new Nagasaki community, and his estrangement by the relatives who have taken him in. I examine these traumas in tandem and how the improvisations of jazz help the two young men mediate their social positions and redefine their communities of belonging. I also analyze the metaphor of the slope (*sakamichi*) as a symbol of emotional struggle, simultaneously indicative of separation and connection, that serves an important role in the series. Whereas chapter 2

largely embodies the positive optimism of race, mixture, and hip-hop as seen in an animated series, chapter 3 listens to the darker and more emotional sides of race and black music through the workings of jazz in a manga medium.

Especially because I seek to analyze *Apollo on the Slope*'s manga medium in particular, synesthesia works as my ideological framework closely connected to “listening” in order to destabilize conventional understandings of manga, the senses, “race,” and identity in Japan. Synesthesia represents a concept once marked in neurology as a congenital disability that has come to be understood as a spatial extension of the senses with the potential to, like sound and listening, dwell in and perceive other dimensions of reality. This enables an exploration of uncharted ways in which space is both metaphorically and literally negotiated for marginalized identities on the manga page. My own notions of listening, as well, align with the synesthetic ability to contest hegemonic, visually-centered structures of space. Especially since race is usually understood as a system of oppression with a similar bias towards the visual, synesthetic listening provides a name to a mode that questions this bias with a simultaneously sensory, spatial, and “racial” negotiation. In other words, this chapter contends that synesthesia urges readers to consider “looking” and “vision” not as superior or singular, but rather as multimodal, tied closely in conjunction with other senses, and experienced through the entire body. If we understand marginalization often depicted as a disconnection from the senses and the body, a synesthetic analysis of jazz symbolizes a reconnection to these senses, the body, and identity.

Chapter 4 then centers on the triple disaster on March 11, 2011, commonly known in Japanese discourse as 3.11, which has exposed social and emotional gaps between people in Japan. As a result, disaster victims—both the dead and survivors left behind—have often become invisible and inaudible in both the real and imagined sense. Considering 3.11 as a historical

turning point, I find it crucial to analyze the new social awareness of discriminatory race-like systems and reassessments of Japanese identity that many post-3.11 texts embody. This final chapter particularly argues that a sonic component of sound and voice plays a crucial role in negotiating marginalized inaudible positionality and questioning the fixed separatist lines between dichotomies, such as life and death, nature and man-made, Tokyo and Tōhoku. The overarching question is, how does listening to the ambiguous “voice” of the dead and the earth negotiate space for marginalized areas and survivors? Focusing on two main texts, composer Sakamoto Ryūichi’s found object, the “Tsunami Piano,” and Itō Seikō’s 2013 novel *Sōzō rajio* (translated here as *Imagination Radio*), this chapter explores the way in which 3.11 sonic works form a connective archive that challenges the Japanese government’s archives, which largely boast a narrative of “fact,” “certainty,” and clear lines of separation. Through the imaginative possibilities of a type of sound and voice that is often inaudible, I argue that these two works push against a national rhetoric of deceptive unity symbolized in the government’s catchphrase “*ganbare nippon*” (“Keep at it, Japan”) to embrace an alternative community of personal and human experiences intertwined with a reconnection to lessons posed by the invisible and inaudible. The centrality of the imagined voice of the dead and those left behind posed by these texts opens up a critical space that blurs the boundaries between the dead and living, the natural and the man-made, and the “familiar” and the “foreign” in order to negotiate the traumatic realities of living in a society of ongoing ecological, national, and global crisis.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Intersectional Identity in Tawada Yōko Literature: An Analysis of “Unhomely” Sounds in the Mother Tongue**

There is a particular sense of discomfort permeating the works of author Tawada Yōko. Although on the surface her writing appears to be in the Japanese or German language or both, it in many ways resists language as a form rooted in essentialist national rhetoric. This chapter contends that it is specifically Tawada’s auditory manipulations of language that produce instances of *unheimlich*—defined here as both “uncanny” and “unhomely” in order to stress the ways that language is used in unexpected ways that push against the normative expectations of their place of origin or home. Furthermore, these transcribed yet sonically transmitted manipulations function as one of the key messages and tools of displacement in her work. Rather than existing strictly within the confines of a single national language or literature, these works perform within a transitional, translational space in-between languages, cultures, and listenings where distortion and transformation take place. I especially wish to draw attention to Tawada’s works in Japanese, where the resulting interplay between unstable spaces and phonemically fragmented language seems to allow the author to negotiate alternate relationships to her prescribed “mother tongue,” while also challenging her readers to listen for the unusual within the familiar as a condition of possibility for the emergence of new productions of global meaning. For, as performance studies scholar Deborah Kapchan claims, listening enables us to linger within “spaces of discomfort,” where “otherness is experienced empathetically as one’s ‘own’ and ownership itself is put into question,” for the benefit of exchange and dialogue.<sup>1</sup> I therefore argue that listening in Tawada’s literature functions as a means to negotiate these

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Kapchan, “Slow Ethnography, Slow Activism: Linger in Paradox & Listening in the Longue Durée,” keynote given for the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF), *Utopias, Realities, Heritages: Ethnographies for the 21st Century* (Zagreb, Croatia, 2015).

various allegiances to gendered, racial, and ethnic formations and the notions of belonging and “homelessness.” At the same time, it serves as both an allegorical and literal framework for interacting critically with existing hierarchical systems and imagining alternate, more transcultural possibilities for present-day societies and peoples.

Take, for instance, the following excerpt from Tawada’s short story “Chōkanzu” (“Bird’s Eye View”) in her novel *Amerika: hidō no tairiku* (*America: The Unjust Continent*, 2006), which chronicles a series of peculiar journeys across the United States. Here, the protagonist “you” (*anata*), is walking the streets of Chicago and comes upon an unusual advertisement:

A poster was pasted on a glass storefront. It depicted a slab of meat slathered in venomously red fluid and crammed between two pieces of brown, freckled steam bun-like (*manjūgata*) bread with thinly sliced pickles, protruding like taunting tongues (*akkanbē o shiteiru*). It looked more like a bizarre doll (*etai no shirenai ningyō*) than a type of food, but you decided to give it a try. Jutting out your chin, you zip-zipped (*zui zui*) into the store, lips first. Once at the counter, you filled your mouth with plenty of saliva and placed an order for the word, “Cheese-burger.”<sup>2</sup>

There is a subtle strangeness to this passage that is difficult to isolate. How and why does it fill the reader with such visceral disgust, perplexity, and surprise all in the span of a few sentences? The most obvious answer lies in the misalignment between the initial exotifying description of the object and the ultimate disclosure of it as something globally familiar to her audience. At first, the reader is prematurely persuaded to conclude that “a slab of meat slathered in venomously red fluid” could be anything but edible. Its “steam bun-like bread” forces upon the protagonist, who is eerily “you,” the reader, a persona of an Asian tourist who is presumably more familiar with the concept of a steam bun (*manjū*) than (“Western”) bread. Then, the description of the pickles “protrud[ing] like taunting tongues,” not only personifies the object described but also gives it agency—the ability to stick out its tongue, taunt “you,” and potentially

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<sup>2</sup> Tawada Yōko, *Amerika: hidō no tairiku* (Tokyo: Aoshisa, 2006), 27-8.

even speak. Listening, or paying close attention, to the colorful and rhythmic qualities of this description fills the reader's head with questions to what this unappealing object may be. Is it food? Is it foreign? Is it possibly even alive? As a result, it comes as an unexpected surprise when the strange object is revealed to be an commonplace cheeseburger. At the risk of stating the obvious, it is perhaps worth mentioning that while originating in the United States, the wide prevalence of cheeseburgers in the global economy today allows the target audience to immediately recognize it as a typical, everyday food. Yet, its uncanny description in this passage is clever enough to throw the most careful reader off guard. Even the articulation of the word "cheeseburger" on the protagonist's lips is exoticized in fully-spaced katakana text (chiizu-bāgā), while the effort to produce its sounds demands an entire mouth of saliva.

This technique that invites the reader to perceive oddity in the familiar is no stranger to Tawada's works. Christina Kraenzle, one of the first scholars of Tawada's German-language works, has suggested that this alienating act demonstrates a resistance to ethnographic expectations that so often edge on exoticizing the foreign via "the text's power to construct rather than to simply represent."<sup>3</sup> In other words, Tawada uses her presupposed "Japanese gaze" as an artificial and ironic device to prove that the unique Japanese point of view which marks everything outside of Japan as new and foreign is largely fictitious. Petra Fachinger points out that mainstream publishers, readers, and critics in both Germany and Japan often seek a voyeuristic view into the allegedly exotic lives of marginalized writers, since exotification goes hand-in-hand with attempts to reinforce homogenization.<sup>4</sup> Tawada, therefore, intentionally exploits her status as a perpetual "foreigner" within the "foreign" spaces of her narratives in

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<sup>3</sup> Christina Kraenzle, *Mobility, Space, and Subjectivity: Yoko Tawada and German-language Transnational Literature* (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2004), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Petra Fachinger, *Rewriting Germany from the Margins: "Other" German Literature of the 1980s and 1990s* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen UP, 2001), 113.

order to appear to be feeding literary markets in Germany and Japan while in reality disrupting these expectations with sudden twists that ensnare her readers in the philosophical conundrum of their lack of fundamental knowledge of basic definitions or reasons behind customs that have always appeared straightforward and taken for granted. By not naming, or renaming, a familiar object, Tawada creates a lack of recognition, thereby challenging linguistic assumptions that are intricately tied to social and cultural expectations and revealing that strangeness can lie within the familiar and that “foreign” can be closer to “home” than expected.

Furthermore, it is salient to point out that the onomatopoeia in the passage above, “*zui zui*” (translated here as “zip-zipped”), used to describe the protagonist’s movement into the cheeseburger restaurant is not a typically recognized word. It is, however, found in the traditional children’s song “Zui Zui Zukkorobashi,” which is commonly said to be based on the teapot carrying procession held in Uji during the Edo period.<sup>5</sup> If the word does indeed derive from this song, the invocations of the invented word “*zui zui*” in this passage can be understood to be twofold. First, it mockingly invokes the image of self-important officials crossing the land only to be carrying an ordinary pot of tea. The protagonist’s quick movement into the store is, then, portrayed similarly full of duty to ironically fulfill the inane task of ordering a cheeseburger. Although the song is now sung under less controversial circumstances, the phrase *zui zui* still carries hints of a subversive attitude mocking authoritative actions that have little consequence for regular people. In other words, the song itself serves partially as a jab at figures with power that take themselves too seriously. Second, while meaningless in definition, “*zui zui*” within the children’s song is often believed by scholars and native speakers alike to function as a tool to

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<sup>5</sup> “Zui Zui Zukkorobashi,” hosted by Naomi and Peter, *JapanesePod101*, Oct. 10, 2010, accessed Jan. 15, 2020, <https://www.japanesepod101.com/lesson/japanese-songs-9-zui-zui-zukkorobashi/>.

give the song rhythm.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it could be understood to serve the same role in Tawada's passage—suspending the communicative function of the word while creating a type of nonsensical, somewhat mocking musicality to push the narrative forward through sound and rhythm. Rearranging sounds in this way to create different meanings seems to symbolize a demolition of traditional paradigms, a movement towards reinvention, and a propounding step of social action, albeit in a somewhat playful way. To experiment with the structure of the “mother tongue,” especially as a woman and potential mother like Tawada, is to send violent tremors through the very foundation of the national ideologies which she is expected to sustain, while holding in contention the very organicity of her blood, kin, and “exterior skin.”<sup>7</sup>

I additionally argue, therefore, that the act of breaking language into sounds as a meaning-making process represents a framework in which the departure from restrictions of national rules and gender roles poignantly re-emphasizes the necessity for observant behavior, or close listening, in order to glean a better understanding of society and the world as a whole. By accessing the very building blocks of language—the sonic components that bring it all together—and experimenting with diverse combinations and meanings, Tawada works to challenge language both in regard to its social, often gendered, functions and as a symbolic pinnacle of nation. Therefore, analyzing the ways in which she experiments with sound in Japanese with an ear to her multilinguistic experiences has the potential to expand on existing studies to uncover new meanings in the asynchronistic aspects of her work and reveal alternate ways to think about larger social and political issues involving national and racial identity. It is at the level of the *sounds* of words and *rhythms* of sentences, that Tawada's linguistic

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<sup>6</sup> “Zui Zui Zukkorobashi.”

<sup>7</sup> In her essay “Überseesungen” (“Overseas-Tongues”), Tawada likens being born into Japanese language as being thrown into a sack, thereby making Japanese her “exterior skin.” “The German language, on the other hand,” she writes, “I swallowed whole and it has been sitting in my stomach ever since” (103).

experimentation in her mother tongue directly addresses her relationship with Japanese national rhetoric and her gendered position. Listening to these sounds on the part of the reader then serves as a method of engagement framed by the ear, employed to explore Tawada's distinctive transcultural landscapes and meticulously conveyed through the prevailing atmosphere of the *unheimlich*—"unhomely"—within the home itself.

**THE "UNHOMELY" MOTHER TONGUE:  
THE CASE OF "FROM THE MOTHER TONGUE TO LINGUISTIC MOTHER"**

My use of the term "unhomely" here harkens back to Jentsch's original description of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) in his 1906 essay "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen" ("On the Psychology of the Uncanny"). He describes the uncanny as the inability to confidently categorize an object or subject or differentiate between the animate and the inanimate, the human and the machine. Notably, his example of this phenomenon is rooted in an instance from literature, specifically E.T.A. Hoffman's story "Der Sandmann" ("The Sandman," 1816). Whereas Freud focuses more on the uncanniness of the Sandman figure, a mythical being who gorges children's eyes and the source of the protagonist Nathanael's main traumatic experience, Jentsch is specifically concerned with Nathanael's enrapturement with the automata, Olimpia, unable to realize she is not human until he sees her glass eyes lying on the ground. Jentsch indicates how facile artificial representations of reality and human form can produce uneasiness, noting that it is human inclination "in a kind of naïve analogy with his own animatedness, to assume that things in the natural world are also animate, or perhaps more correctly, are animate in the same way."<sup>8</sup> This understanding of the term is significant for Tawada's case because, the origins are

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<sup>8</sup> Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2, no. 1 (1995): 13.

literary. Bringing it back into the literary realm signifies the presence of psychology in literature is, perhaps, even a literary trope. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the discomfort caused by the blurred line between the human and automata can be seen most clearly in Tawada's description of the typewriter in her short prose piece "Von der Muttersprach zur Sprachmutter" ("From Mother Tongue to Linguistic Mother," 1996). While this story is in German rather than Japanese, I wish to highlight because it records experiences of Tawada's first year in Germany and her reactions to German language in comparison with Japanese.

In this piece, difference is notable both within German and Japanese language in comparison with the Other, which then leads to deeper observations that comment on larger social topics. For example, Tawada recalls that a pencil in German becomes masculine when a woman complains about it, since words are gendered. "In Japanese," the narrator explains, "words have no gender. [ . . . ] Grammatically speaking, a man is not even masculine in Japanese."<sup>9</sup> The fact that Japanese is not a gendered language is a detail that goes unnoticed without exposure to a language that is. This is, therefore, an observation intrinsic upon Tawada's diverse linguistic and cultural experiences that is then spun into a tongue-in-cheek social critique. She then proceeds to describe a feminine-marked object in her office as a large, broad body tattooed with letters. This object is her typewriter (*die Schreibmaschine*), which in an anthropomorphized way seems to offer Tawada the German language. She explains,

[The typewriter's] offer did nothing to alter the fact that German was not my mother tongue (*Muttersprach*), but now I had a mother inside the German language. I called this female machine, which gave me the gift of its language, Linguistic Mother (*Sprachmutter*). All I could do was write the characters that she already bore; in other words, writing had no meaning for me other than repeating these symbols. Still this meant that I could be adopted by the new language.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Tawada Yōko, "From Mother Tongue to Linguistic Mother," trans. Rachel McNichol, *Manoa* 18, no. 1 (2006): 141.

<sup>10</sup> Tawada, "From Mother Tongue," 142.

This explicit reversal of the German word for “mother tongue” into “linguistic mother” demonstrates a recognition of the strangeness of a social order that positions the female body as the source of language and thereby implies an organic relationship between language and its national populus. Utilizing this new term to then address an inanimate object candidly shatters the underlying natural, motherly presuppositions engendered by the literal connotations of the term. For this reason, the description of the typewriter, much like the cheeseburger example in “Bird’s Eye View,” edges on “uncanny” in the sense of Freud’s renowned term inspired by Ernst Jentsch, which is used to describe an experience that was uncertain or undecidable, especially in relation to automata.<sup>11</sup> Here, there is a machine that, through the narrator’s plays with words, has become a second “mother” and, therefore, comes to occupy an unfixed status between living and nonliving, inert and with agency. This machine then “offers” Tawada—the adopted child—a language that, in a way, *becomes* a type of “mother tongue,” especially if this term is understood as a language bestowed upon one by the figure of the mother. In this way, placing the typewriter in a position of motherhood challenges the concept perpetuated by iterations upheld by national rhetoric, such as *Nihonjinron*, that 1) language is transmitted by a biological mother and 2) a mother must be organically connected to her children, namely by blood.

However, Tawada’s sense of uncanny does not begin with the object, *per se*, but at the level of words used to redefine the object. In “From Mother Tongue to Linguistic Mother,” this is the deliberate reversal of the term *muttersprache* (lit. “mother language”) into *sprachemutter* (lit. “language mother”) to create an uncannily motherly figure out of a mechanical typewriter. Significantly, Tawada even explicitly uses the German term *unheimlich* in her short story “Portrait of a Tongue.” Toward the end, Tawada writes,

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<sup>11</sup> Yildiz provides an in-depth analysis on this point both in her book cited here and in her essay “Tawada’s Multilingual Moves: Toward a Transnational Imaginary” (2007).

The word *haben* [“to have”] comforts us with a capitalist, enlightened gesture, as though you can have feelings in the same way you can have a house (*heim*) and furniture. *Hegen* [“to harbor”], on the other hand, implies an uncanny (*unheimlich*) relationship between people and their feelings.<sup>12</sup>

The first instinct may be to focus on the meaning within each sentence in this passage, as reading a story is usually done. In this case, the reader might be tempted to contemplate Tawada’s larger reasons for speaking of capitalism and whether or not she mentions the word “uncanny” in relation to Freud’s conceptualization of the term. While I do not doubt that there is meaning in this type of reading, I suggest that a postmonolingual mode of reading, or “a mode of reading that is attentive to multilingual practices,” may provide the reader with alternate, yet equally meaningful, significance.<sup>13</sup> In other words, since Tawada’s polyglot experiences grant her the ability to notice connections between languages and words that are not usually drawn, keeping an ear out for these connections at the level of the phoneme and sound of words can provide insight into different ways to understand her work. Read in this way, rather than a straightforward narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, the story can be understood more as an abstract semantic portrait, or a linguistic experiment, pushed forward not by plot but by a word association game in which each concept builds off the one before it. It is then impossible to ignore the fact that the word *unheimlich* in the passage above is preceded by *heim*. Given the order of the words, *unheimlich* “spawns” from the *heim* that proceeds it, incongruously suggesting, as is a common theme in her works, the potential existence of uncanny emotions stemming from the home.

Although Tawada’s influence from Jentsch or Freud is not clear, I find it significant that Jentsch pointedly mentions the linguistic roots of the German word *unheimlich* in his essay as

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<sup>12</sup> Tawada Yōko, *Portrait of a Tongue: An Experimental Translation*, trans. Chantal Wright (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2013), 54.

<sup>13</sup> Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 20.

literally signifying a feeling of “un-homeliness,” or a feeling of not quite being “at home” in a certain situation. Therefore, the fact that *heimlich* (home) exists within the term *unheimlich* (uncanny/unhomely) suggests that “home” is an uncomfortable non-place of existence. In this reading of the term, Tawada’s typewriter, for example, is *unheimlich* in that it lacks a stable sense of being and place to call home. Not only is it uneasily balanced between states of being (biological and machine), but it also is simultaneously linguistically bestowed with qualities of the familiar “mother” and the foreign body within the space of Tawada’s apartment home. Yet, Tawada seems to embrace this uncanniness or unhomeliness as an alternative relationship to language, “mother,” and, ultimately, nation. Therefore, I find it appropriate and necessary to apply this idea of the uncanny and, more precisely the “unhomely,” in a broader sense to Tawada’s work. In other words, I find it crucial to view familiar-strange objects like the cheese-burger and the typewriter as metaphors for the interstitial tension present within the author’s own identity and the “unhomely” nature of existing within multiple languages at once.

An interesting aspect of “From Mother Tongue to Linguistic Mother” is that Tawada uncharacteristically portrays her “true” mother tongue of Japanese as restricting, especially in the face of the foreign. Here, Japanese is posited as a language that, unlike a foreign one, is incapable of providing the pleasure of linguistic experimentation. She writes,

In your mother tongue, words are attached to your person, so you rarely experience a playful, pleasurable sense of language. In your mother tongue, thoughts cling so closely to words that neither can take flight independently. In a foreign language, however, you have something like a staple remover (*Hefiklammerentferner*): it removes what makes things cling to one another.<sup>14</sup>

This statement resonates with the sentiments of many Japanese women who began travelling abroad in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and found an imagined utopic freedom in life abroad. Yet, it also

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<sup>14</sup> Tawada, “From Mother Tongue,” 143.

seems to contradict countless other of Tawada's works in which she does in fact play with her mother tongue in later works with themes, words, and rhythms. I, therefore, understand this discrepancy as one phase of many in her complex and transforming relationship with language. It is one in which, upon initial contact with the foreign, she idealizes the new possibilities and linguistic freedoms that foreign language provides, a symbolic distance especially for Japanese women from the constricting ties to the metaphorical and actual mother and nation. But it is also one which is essential, in the encountering process with an Other, to recognizing Tawada's own ability to transform and deconstruct her mother tongue.

Yildiz understands this passage in terms of a step beyond the mother tongue as a singular, organic language entrenched in physicality and emotion. She contends that this insightful reimagining of the origin of a "mother tongue" in an inanimate, infertile object whose very name is reversed is Tawada's way of rewriting traditional linguistic, gender, and kinship bonds into a state of detachment. This, she suggests, insinuates the potential of a multilingual paradigm where it is possible to overcome the bindings of the mother tongue and write in nonnative languages or multiple languages at the same time.<sup>15</sup> This argument importantly legitimizes the author's position in what Yildiz calls "postmonolingual" literature, which seems to constantly reinvent and question the meaning of language and identity, while also insisting that the very imagined authority of the term "mother tongue" disavows the possibility of multilingual writing in general. Yet, there is something missing from Yildiz's claim—namely, a narrative that not only examines Tawada's metaphorical shedding of the mother tongue in the singular form, but also digs deeper into Tawada Yōko's relationship to her "intrinsically-given" Japanese mother tongue. It is arguably in this area so close in proximity to the author that potential for social action and

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<sup>15</sup> Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 13.

identity formation often goes overlooked.

While many studies highlight Tawada's interesting uses of German, mixed with multicultural references and translinguistic puns, there is not much work that takes a step back to revisit the effects of her multilingual experiences on her Japanese "mother tongue," especially not at the level of the rhythm of the paragraph and the sound of each syllable and word. This is perhaps due to Tawada's contradictive statements, such as those in "From Mother Tongue to Linguistic Mother," or the simple dismissal that her language in general, because she is multilingual, is strange. However, rather than conclude with the foreign as a utopic space as many Japanese women of her generation did, Tawada continues in an intracultural and interlinguistic way to critique underlying assumptions about both Japan and abroad. These observations then become critiques on assumptions about language, which connect to larger social statements about society and culture, which help readers notice in the most visceral way possible that the everyday can seem strange and the strange can seem natural. In this way, Tawada seems to create a playground in which language seems to announce itself as its own category and an extended metaphor that, by raising uncertainties of the typewriter's state of being and maternal capabilities to the surface, challenges strict societal, racial, and gender rules specific to the nation that holds claim over her tongue.

#### **"UNHOMELY" MANIPULATIONS OF WORDS: THE CASE OF "DRIVING WITHOUT LIGHTS"**

The "unhomely" blurred line between human and automata so clearly apparent in "From Mother Tongue" can also be seen in a more abstract sense in the layered multilingual strangeness of another of Tawada's *America* short stories, "Mutō unten" ("Driving Without Lights"). In this

story, a mysterious woman who appears at the hotel room door places the protagonist (again, “you”) naked in the driver’s seat of a car. When told to drive, “you” suddenly remembers something important:

“To tell you the truth, I’m just a ‘paper driver (*pēpā doraibā*).”  
 As soon as you said this, your body transformed into a folded paper crane.  
*Oh, I get it, you thought. Since “paper driver” isn’t an English word, [the woman] took me literally and turned me into paper.*<sup>16</sup>

Here, the human body of the protagonist “you” uncannily exists between human and doll-like as it is manipulated by words that are ironically doll-like themselves. Unquestionably edging on magical realism, it is significant to recognize that the impetus for the protagonist’s transformation lies fundamentally in the sounds of her words and the strange slippage between languages. “You” uses the phrase “paper driver,” a pseudo-loanword in Japanese to mean “only a driver on paper,” or a driver with a driver’s license but little to no road experience. Words like these, while based on English words, do not retain the same meaning when spoken in English and therefore are not always easily understood by an English speaker. The manner in which the protagonist transforms into the literal meaning of the pseudo-loanword she utters seems to point to the strangeness of its untranslatability into the very language from which it derives.

On one hand, this passage highlights the bizarre linguistic slippage of pseudo-loanwords, like “paper driver,” which are phonemical misfits existing between the sounds of two languages and tangible examples of the arbitrariness of meaning. Put differently, they are a result of an awkward cultural exchange that causes them to become jumbled between linguistic spaces so that they now possess a significance in Japanese that is virtually incomprehensible to English soundboards. This passage, therefore, is one of many instances in Tawada’s work that seem to break down the sounds of words between languages in order to question their often uncontended

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<sup>16</sup> Tawada, *Amerika*, 181.

meaning. Tawada scholar Tanaka Jun valuably conceptualizes this tactic in an article as “doll words” (*ningyō moji*) or “dolls called words” (*moji to iu ningyō*). According to Tanaka, words in Tawada’s work, like dolls, have the potential to either break into pieces or potentially transform through different combinations of bodily limbs. “However,” he argues, “while the doll may be smashed to pieces, this does not mean that it disappears. Instead, each of its fragmented segments becomes a brand new doll.”<sup>17</sup> This metaphor of the doll, an uncanny imitation of the human body, is especially appropriate in the “paper driver” instance since, in the imagination of Tawada’s story, pseudo-loanwords transmute into literal and tangible parts manifested onto the protagonist’s bare figure.

It is further significant that the pseudo-loanword in this passage is spoken. Like the traditional Japanese belief in *kotodama*, which presumes a power in sounds to magically effect the body, mind, and soul, the protagonist’s words function as the sonic trigger to their corporeal transformation. Importantly, the words in the passage above are not simply uttered into the air but require the mysterious woman’s listening ear to produce a particular meaning. Salomé Voegelin suggests that the act of listening “grants us access to another view of the world and on the subjects living in that world,” effecting and creating meaning by its own agency.<sup>18</sup> In “Driving Without Lights,” the mysterious woman’s understanding of the protagonist’s words likewise grants the protagonist perspective that the word “paper driver,” while in English, does not contain the same meaning in English as it does in Japanese. Due to the protagonist’s full-body transformation, this realization then becomes a deep corporeal experience. It, in effect, demonstrates that listening contains a type of agency as well as the means not only to observe

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<sup>17</sup> Tanaka Jun, “Ningyō moji/Moji to iu ningyō: ‘Gottoharudo Tetsudō’ o chūshin ni,” *Yuriika* 36, no. 14 (2004): 169.

<sup>18</sup> Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 12.

but to generate new possibilities that subvert one's fundamental existing knowledge. In both a metaphorical and physical sense, the act of speaking and listening, at least from the protagonist's point of view, displaces the known and the dominant concept with the unknown and marginal. Especially since the protagonist is "you" (*anata*), the text seems to explicitly open up a space in a fictional world that transforms perspectives on the real for the reader to rethink the singularity and uniqueness of language and, moreover, culture at an individual level. In a personal essay, Tawada recognizes herself that "even if we all listen closely, we will not perceive sounds in the same way."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, while perhaps not uniform, exposure to new patterns of language potentially encourages a collective, empathetic experience where all readers become the protagonist's body, malleable by the sounds of words.

In addition, it is arguably no coincidence that the "paper driver" protagonist does not simply transform into paper, but specifically into a paper crane, a discernable symbol of Japan. This symbol may then be understood as reflecting the Japaneseness of the protagonist's words that, although English, have themselves become a part of the Japanese language. This transformation, therefore, may illustrate a case in which "linguistic competence," an audible kind of communication, exposes stereotypical identity and ultimately difference in a visual capacity, specifically on the body.<sup>20</sup> Even though details about the protagonist are never named, the reader, and perhaps even the mysterious woman, are able to hear and then see glimmers of race that mark the protagonist's identity. In *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure explains that a "linguistic sign" is not a thing and a name but rather a concept and a sound-image. "The latter," he contends, "is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of

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<sup>19</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 127.

<sup>20</sup> Ayako Takamori, "'Henna Nihongo' (Strange Japanese): On the Linguistic Baggage of Racial Strangeness," *Japanese Language and Literature* 49, no. 2 (2015): 485.

the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses.”<sup>21</sup> Clearly, the protagonist’s audibility in “Driving Without Lights” manifests itself into a visible reality as a sound-image dialectic. In this vein, the protagonist’s unspecified body becomes, perhaps through the imprint of the sound of the protagonist’s words, a reflection of the mysterious woman’s imagination. Put in Tanaka Jun’s terms, the strangeness within the “doll words” manifests physically as a bizarre transformation of the body of the nameless protagonist, or the “doll” itself. While the events in “Driving Without Lights” can be dismissed as a ridiculous, even innocuous allegory, Tawada’s “strange” objects elaborated by “strange” language, like Novalis’s original concept of the strange in the familiar, potentially correspond to a much greater social meaning. In fact, as I will explain further in the next section, they appear to be the very momentum that unsettles the presupposed stereotypes entangled around Tawada’s identity as a Japanese woman.

#### **EPISTEMIC PERSPECTIVE IN AN AGE WHEN “EVEN WOMEN CAN STUDY GERMAN”**

Perhaps in order to put her on an equal playing field with other (male) Japanese writers, Tawada’s position as a Japanese woman who began to write in the early 1990s is an aspect of her identity that is effectively overlooked or misconstrued whenever she is discussed. This occurs most obviously when she is compared with Meiji author Mori Ōgai, under the superficial pretense that both are Japanese authors who reflect their personal experiences in Germany in their literature.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, Tawada expresses admiration of Ōgai’s early ability to similarly notice strangeness within the norm and portray it in an ironic manner in his semi-autobiographical text “Dai hakken” (“Big Discovery,” 1909). In this story, the narrator, upon his

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<sup>21</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 66.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Reiko Tachibana, “Tawada Yōko’s Quest for Exophony: Japan and Germany” (2007).

arrival in Berlin, is told that Japanese people are considered unhygienic because they walk with “straw between their toes” and “pick their noses” in public. Somewhat offended and convinced that Europeans must pick their noses as well, the narrator makes it his mission throughout the narrative to prove his point. In fact, his “big discovery” occurs when he finds an instance of nose-picking in German literature. Following his discovery, he reveals in a letter to the Minister of Imperial Japan in Berlin, “Your Excellency, I humbly report: Europeans also pick their noses!”<sup>23</sup> In this moment, Tawada concedes, Ōgai reveals an observant mind and awareness of falsely perceived cultural difference, much like her own pseudo-ethnographies, that insightfully and ironically demonstrates the fallacy of West-East and European-Japanese dichotomies.

Yet, I find it significant that Tawada displays a clear conviction that this is where the similarities between her and Ōgai end. While it can prove insightful to challenge an author’s opinions on a subject, it is perhaps more telling in this case what Tawada’s perspective reveals about herself and her stance towards literature. In her book of essays, *Ekusofonii: bōgo no soto e deru tabi* (*Exophony: A Journey of Leaving the Mother Tongue*, 2003), she explicitly addresses the similarities drawn between herself and Meiji writers, like Ōgai, by listing three core differences: 1) She learned German as a *language*, rather than as an integral part of learning political and/or medical sciences, 2) she learned German *by choice* rather than by government requirement, and 3) she is a *woman*, rather than an elite man groomed for national work. She continues somewhat sympathetically toward the past and gratefully toward the present moment,

[Meiji writers] simply swallowed what they were given and resolved to make a future of it. I cannot help but sense tragic heroism in this, and I salute their enthusiasm. At the same time, I am grateful to have been born in an age in which “the West” can be viewed relatively and even women can study German.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mori Ōgai, “Dai hakken,” in *Ōgai zenshū vol. 2* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1936), 172-3.

<sup>24</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 17.

Studying German as a personal choice may seem a relatively insignificant point, and the fact that Tawada is a woman may not always be explicitly considered for the sake of equality in the literary field in which she has made a name for herself. However, anthropologist Karen Kelsky argues based on her fieldwork on Japanese female narratives between lifestyles in Japan and abroad that, “‘Personal choice’ [for women] is one of the hallmarks of modernity, which has valorized it over the roles and expectations associated with national ‘tradition.’”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, personal choice also reveals “the emergence of a discourse of value and morals that [. . .] stands to impose the ruptures of a disenchanted modernity in the intimate gendered spaces of the Japanese home and company.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, it is not only the act of studying a foreign language but also the decision in and of itself as a Japanese woman that demonstrates a break with the seemingly natural bonds that tie Tawada to the Japanese “home” and the societal roles, traditional paradigms, and national language that it carries with it. Therefore, I find Tawada’s choice as a woman to study German and her experiences in Germany as a woman fundamentally indispensable to the process of forming her “racial” identity and fashioning her particular style of observational literature.

In order to understand Tawada’s stance in a holistic manner, it is important to recognize the social environment in which she was raised, the geographical space often understood as her point of origin or “original home,” so to speak, Japan. Statements made in Tawada’s formative years in Japan, such as those by former Diet member and interpreter Kunihiro Masao, who uncontestedly claimed in the early 1970s that “what makes a Japanese person more than anything else is blood,” reveal that at least some aspect of societal politics and “race-thinking” in Japan

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<sup>25</sup> Karen Kelsky, *Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), 225.

<sup>26</sup> Kelsky, *Woman on the Verge*, 225.

has been conceptualized around sexuality and biological traits.<sup>27</sup> Within this logic, the Japanese people are imagined to naturally exist as a distinct, homogeneous, single-bloodline “family” living in the Japanese nation that, by association, becomes imagined as the “home.” Scholars, such as Anne Allison and Jennifer Robertson, indicate that it then becomes the burden of Japanese women, understood as embodying both actual and metaphorical “mothers,” to uphold nostalgic patriarchal imaginings of the traditional “family” and “home.”<sup>28</sup> Namely, Allison indicates, in an economy as intrinsically dependent on children’s academic performance Japan’s, “it is women, as mothers, who not only oversee the educational regimens of their children but also, and more importantly perhaps, fuse these closely with practices of maternal nurturance, indulgence, and love.”<sup>29</sup> Yet, ironically, they are shut out from the very labor force for which they are held responsible to procreate and nurture. When women’s predominant role in the economic productivity of their country becomes mothering in this way, their value then becomes grounded in the currency of their reproductive bodies. It, therefore, is unsurprising that Sharon Kinsella claims that the very sexuality and reproductive activity of young Japanese women’s bodies is positioned at “the center of the national racial defense” in order to maintain the cultural and racial purity of the bloodline (*kettō*) of the Japanese nation.<sup>30</sup> Especially when the nation is represented by a narrative of a family tied deeply by bonds of blood, this paradigm goes beyond the status of a metaphor and becomes a felt reality of population imagined as extending from a single origin and identity propagated by political propaganda and media. It is under these exploitative circumstances that Japanese women in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were expected to exist.

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<sup>27</sup> Kunihiro Masao, *Kokusai eigo no susume* (Tokyo: Jitsugyō no Nihonsha, 1972), 32.

<sup>28</sup> Anne Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) and Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual, Political, and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires*, 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> Sharon Kinsella, “Black Faces, Witches, and Racism Against Girls,” in *Bad Girls of Japan*, eds. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 152.

Within the familial narrative in which the nation is the “home,” the female is perpetually the “mother” held responsible for raising a homogenous population notably via language, particularly the “unique” Japanese language. Uncoincidentally, this language is imagined organically as part of the mother’s body bestowed upon her children as their “mother tongue.”

Yasemin Yildiz delves into the gendered history of the term “mother tongue” in the context of Germany, where it is known as “Muttersprache” (lit. mother language). She notes that it was first an emotional term in the context of global social and political transformations of imaginations of the interconnectivity of family, kinship, motherhood, language, nation, and state occurring in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> Theorist Johann Gottfried Herder was one of the key figures in these transformations who argued for the necessity of distinct national languages in order to prevent the loss of national authenticity and rootedness.<sup>32</sup> In his study on cultural nationalism in contemporary Japan, sociologist Kosaku Yoshino indicates that language and communication are similarly discussed in various iterations of *Nihonjinron* as aspects to perpetuate Japanese cultural uniqueness.<sup>33</sup> National movements from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, such as *genbun itchi* (the unification of written and spoken language) and the proliferation of a standard language (*hyōjungo*), attempted to unify and effectively homogenize the nation through a single language in both written and spoken jurisdictions. In Japanese, the equivalent term for “mother tongue,” *bokokugo*, does not only refer to language (*go*) as associated with the mother (*bo*), like its German and English equivalents, but also overtly affixes the “mother’s language” to the nation (*koku*).<sup>34</sup> Therefore, it comes as no surprise that both Germany and Japan have utilized the

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<sup>31</sup> Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 10-11.

<sup>32</sup> Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Kosaku Yoshino, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan: A Sociological Enquiry* (London: Routledge, 1992), 12.

<sup>34</sup> More on the use of *bokokugo* and a recent call for alternative terms, such as “parent language (*oyago*)” or “heritage language (*keishōgo*),” can be found in So Kyon Shik, “Bogo to bokokugo no sōkoku: zainichi Chōsenjin no gengo keiken” (2008) and Nakajima Kazuko, “*JHL no wakugumi to kadai: JSL/JFL to dō chigau ka*” (2012).

notions national language and “mother tongue” as political devices that imagine language as an intrinsically organic trait embedded in the human body at birth via the mother. This tactic in effect functions as a nationalistic expedient that labels citizens as belonging to the imaginative boundaries of the homogeneous nation-state.

Much like the term “race,” “mother tongue” similarly evokes the constructed concept of a singular inherent origin and identity connected to biological bonds which, in this case, center around female gender roles. However, this tireless deployment of Japanese women as symbols of Japanese tradition throughout Japan’s modernization process to maintain the sanctity of the family, especially in the absence of militant or overworked men, has its consequences. The most striking of these repercussions may be their inherent marginalization and even “foreignization” of women in relation to the general society. As Karen Kelsky reveals,

Precisely because women under traditional patrilocal marriage are forced to develop inner resources, they are inherently marginal [. . .] [and] imagined in Japan as already “partially foreign” [. . .] compared to men and to the structures of the Japanese family and economy.<sup>35</sup>

In this same vein, many have contended that the analogy between race and gender is a point of argumentation. While it may not be fair to conflate “race” and gender as identical, they are certainly comparable in terms of the legal and social discrimination that often entail based on so-called “biological” characteristics that are believed to affect their ability to function in society. It is arguably this perpetual minority and “foreign” status as a woman that Kelsky indicates in Japanese society which fosters within Tawada a particular framework of knowledge based on a sense of dissonance with the norm and lack of belonging to a singular nation or physical space. Feminist philosopher Terri Elliott ironically calls this “epistemic privilege,” or a privileged point of view from which historically oppressed, exploited, and dominated groups are able to perceive

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<sup>35</sup> Kelsky, *Women on the Verge*, 9-10.

the strangeness in the social relations in which they find themselves.<sup>36</sup> While Tawada does not dare equate her experiences to those of political refugees and exiles, especially since her leaving Japan was a choice, it is a mistake to suggest that she does not bear similar “burdens of representation.”<sup>37</sup>

For one, the difference between travelling for choice and travelling for necessity has become largely blurred in an era of late capitalism where flexibility and mobility has accelerated, making travel motives so closely intertwined. As Kelsky suggests, for some transnational actors, “pleasures may accompany exile.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Tawada’s act of living in-between cultures and languages, which many would call “transnationalism,” works to challenge the “nation” as both a space and concept. As Pier Paolo Frassinelli, et. al. points out, “Transnational narratives enable reflection upon the natural world in which national boundaries are no longer assumed as natural [ . . . ] nam[ing] a point at which we decide between and negotiate different ways of being within the world.”<sup>39</sup> However, this transnationalism is only one part of Tawada’s identity. Several other contemporary Japanese authors, such as Murakami Haruki and Ōe Kenzaburo, are also transnational, providing them with a particular perspective prevalent in their work. What seems to set Tawada apart from authors like these is that she is the epitome of what African American lawyer and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw has called “intersectionality.” This term extends from Crenshaw’s experience in the American legal system in which discrimination functions on a single-axis framework of racial *or* gender marginalization, rarely an interaction of both. She argues that,

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<sup>36</sup> Terri Elliott, “Making Strange What Had Appeared Familiar,” *The Monist* 77, no. 7 (1994): 425.

<sup>37</sup> Tom Cheesman, “Juggling Burdens of Representation: Black, Red, Gold and Turquoise,” *German Life and Letters* 59, no. 4 (2006): 471.

<sup>38</sup> Kelsky, *Woman on the Verge*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Pier Paolo Frassinelli, et al, eds., *Traversing Transnationalism: The Horizons of Literary and Cultural Studies* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi B.V., 2011), 7.

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet, often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, Crenshaw claims that the interactions of various aspects of identity—here, specifically race and sex—creates a unique brand of marginality that is not simply a sum of its parts but an experience that exists explicitly at the intersection. Although this theory began in legal courts, it has gained widespread attention in feminist circles to justify many transcultural women's experiences of layered oppression and/or marginality. It seems to show that existing in the space *between* traditionally prescribed national, racial, and gendered spaces holds what has long been considered “natural” in contention and can itself, in a way, be considered as “strange” from the dominant standpoint. It is precisely this experience of intersectionality that I feel strongly contributes to Tawada's unique epistemically “privileged” perspective in her lived and narrative worlds.

### **INTERSECTIONS OF THE “FORKED-TONGUE” AND “LISTENING EAR”**

For Tawada, her intersectionality reveals itself most prominently through language, which is closely tied to the body and the tongue. Therefore, in a sense, writing in two languages makes her “two-tongued.” Yet, she points out in an essay that the Japanese phrase “two-tongued” (*nimai shita*) has negative connotations, highlighting that, “When you have more than one

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<sup>40</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1 (1989): 149.

tongue, you are thought to be a liar.”<sup>41</sup> She goes on to criticize questions she is often posed by audiences, such as, “Even though you can speak German, do you feel your soul is Japanese?” or “Is your true self German or Japanese?”<sup>42</sup> The frustration that Tawada expresses in relation to these oversimplistic questions appears to stem from the adamant necessity of her audiences to place her into a single category although her identity is not one, but rather, both. The language she speaks and writes is a reflection of this mixed identity. It is, therefore, no surprise that she expresses special favor for free movement of the tongue—the organ connected to the production of language—in many of her stories and essays. In one essay, she describes that the act of speaking a foreign language as a “tongue dance art”:

The tongue moves flexibly, in all directions, bending backward, expanding and contracting, slapping, and breathing. Unable to create meaning but searching for freedom, the tongue dances like crazy. That is the type of tongue I admire.<sup>43</sup>

Just as the protagonist in “Bird’s Eye View” has to fill their entire mouth with saliva to produce a single word, the movement of the mouth and tongue are inextricable from the freeing process of producing language in the way that one wants. Significantly, this method of production of language in Tawada’s imagination does not need to be connected to specific semantic meaning. Rather, it is the movement and the act of speaking itself, even if it is in “code,” that marks the meaning-creating process. At the same time, in her short story “Storytellers without Souls,” she suggests that the ear also plays an important role in the this tongue dancing act, for it is the act of listening both to oneself and to others that gives rise to stories. Therefore, she postulates, “to cut off a person from the world, you must first destroy not

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<sup>41</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 44.

<sup>42</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 44.

<sup>43</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 53-4.

his mouth but his ear.”<sup>44</sup> To insist that Tawada’s tongue and listening ear must choose a singular mode of being when they occupy a multiple middle ground, in essence, suggests that her tongue, ear, and thereby identity is illegitimate.

Her refusal to accept this illegitimacy echoes closely with Gloria Anzaldúa, a multilingual writer of Spanish, English, Chicano, and Spanglish in the United States, who similarly argues that linguistic identity is an indispensable part of ethnic identity. As Chicano anthropologist Renato Rosaldo explains,

In making herself into a complex persona, Analdúa incorporates Mexican, Indian, and Anglo elements at the same time that she discards the homophobia and patriarchy of Chicano culture. In rejecting the classic “authenticity” of cultural purity, she seeks out the many-stranded possibilities of the borderlands.<sup>45</sup>

Anzaldúa’s perspective is helpful in understanding Tawada’s literature because it similarly attempts to cross multiple borders—gendered, sexual, and national—through literature. This is closely related to post-colonial and postmodern discourse that suggests a phenomenon in which fixed boundaries of the past are now being transgressed and subverted. Furthermore, like Tawada, Anzaldúa also uses the tongue as a metaphor for linguistic freedom, her own a wild one that refuses to be tamed by the hierarchical structures of language and societal rules that force her to speak and write in one language or the other but not both. At the end of her essay “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” she vows,

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.<sup>46</sup>

Clearly, Anzaldúa imagines the tongue and voice as intrinsically connected. Not only do they

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<sup>44</sup> Tawada Yōko, “Storytellers without Souls,” in *Where Europe Begins*, trans. Susan Bernofsky and Yumi Selden (New York: New Directions, 2002: 101-114), 112.

<sup>45</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth* (London: Routledge, 1989), 216.

<sup>46</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 81.

represent her interwoven ethnic identities (Indian, Spanish, white) but also distinctively contain her female, sexual, and literary self. For, it is all of these pieces combined that are forced to struggle against a “tradition of silence” of the underrepresented, voiceless, and unheard. Whereas Anzaldúa’s context and various intersecting identities may differ from those of Tawada, the latter author’s experiences ultimately consist of a similar struggle fundamentally located in the realm of language while closely connected to her “racial” identity. As a woman and “foreigner” in both Germany and Japan who resists categorization, Tawada is inevitably faced with barriers from hegemonic strains of discourse. Her work, therefore, like Anzaldúa’s, seems to reclaim a voice for the marginalized identities that she represents—not only those that are persecuted and discriminated against but also the ones in-between that go unnoticed, unknown, and unheard. At the same time, it attempts to encourage readers to listen to the possibility that mixture between cultures and languages is a vein of existence that has much to contribute to today’s societies that thirst for those who are able to understand and empathize with more than one perspective, vision, and soundscape of life. It is within this context that the strange and “unhomely” is both able to identify gaps in knowledge and profoundly catch the reader’s attention. Although there have been global signs of progress and change that celebrate diversity of identity as demonstrated in part by the awards she and other authors like her have won for their work and the diverse conventions in which she has taken part, no society has completely moved beyond the desire for a singular categorization of its people, and it is important to recognize that Tawada’s literary world remains predominantly male. In other words, there remains a lack of diverse perspectives and possibilities to which to listen.

Therefore, while aspects of the social order may not be completely unusable to those who may have the economic privilege to choose exile, like Tawada, they still, as Elliott puts it, “need

oiling.”<sup>47</sup> After all, economic privilege by no means translates into racial and gender privilege. Perhaps male Japanese authors like Ōgai and even Murakami Haruki, are not entirely lacking of this epistemic privilege due to their experiences abroad. However, their experiences with language and culture can be understood as markedly privileged in a way that is catered to their gender. Ōgai, for example, as Tawada points out, would never have studied German and been sponsored to go to Germany if he were not male. Kelsky further highlights that it may be true that the new “internationalized male” is increasingly portrayed as a “dynamic freethinker” who challenges the conventions of typical Japanese working life. However, “in almost no case,” she argues, “is the idea of the global career linked, for men, to the questioning of gender, marital, or family conventions.”<sup>48</sup> Japanese women, on the other hand, are faced with a conspicuously gendered politics of space both in Japan and abroad. As a diasporic woman who chooses to exist between several cultures at once without belonging wholeheartedly to one or the other, Tawada resists the traditional politics of these societal roles, classification, and belonging. Stuart Hall remarks that the diasporic are always “producing themselves anew and differently [. . .] the products of several interlocking histories and cultures, belonging at the same time to several ‘homes’—and thus not one particular home.”<sup>49</sup> Put differently, unable to fit into the restrictive structures of a singular identity, the diasporic resist the traditional concept of “home” and the responsibilities that it entails. Therefore, Tawada’s ambiguous negotiations of the multifarious facets of her identities that unavoidably fluctuate between challenging and accommodating the norm in order to survive in the current society resemble the “unhomely”—a solution without a solution, a home without a home. Therefore, it is important to recognize that Tawada’s

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<sup>47</sup> Elliott, “Making Strange,” 429.

<sup>48</sup> Kelsky, *Women on the Verge*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Stuart Hall, “Culture, Community, Nation,” *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (1993): 362.

experiences inevitably contain alienating occurrences specific to her gendered experiences that incite a “privileged perspective” to see and hear the strangeness of the social relationships in which she predictably finds herself.

Kinsella reminds us that Japan only represents a racially homogenous society if race is defined as “some collectivity that can be distinguished on the basis of a set of objectively physical traits.”<sup>50</sup> While not always visual or racial in the conventional sense, there may in fact be other social factors that inhibit access to certain spaces for various categories of marginalization, such as gender, class, and, perhaps, language, that speak to “alternate lived experiences” within the imagined “mainstream” Japanese community and establish nearly imperceptible racial relations. In an essay on displaced refugees, Tawada argues that while many think that it is those with time on their hands who play with words, “wordplay is, in truth, the expressive possibility only grasped by those driven to the wall and persecuted.”<sup>51</sup> This could be because living and struggling under unjust structures of social order reveals the “strange” unusability of spaces and relations out of their reach. These indications of oppression may then be manifested as “strange” dissidences in language, but, at the same time, for the persecuted, they represent a felt reality that they dare to challenge as aspects of society in need of repair. To put this into language or remixed sounds of language indicates a dire necessity to communicate this need for repair in order to begin weaving meaning out of the strangeness of society experienced first-hand by the persecuted and minoritized. Brandon LaBelle calls sound non-dualistic in the sense that it is at once “an itinerant movement,” “a meeting point” that immediately brings two together, yet it also incorporates the dynamics of interference, noise, and

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<sup>50</sup> Kinsella, “Black Faces,” 143.

<sup>51</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 81.

transgression.<sup>52</sup> In other words, sound is capable of simultaneously encouraging empathy and divergence or empathy from divergence. Although language and sound cannot always be conflated, in Tawada Yōko’s work, they are incessantly intertwined. Therefore, it is essential to take this perspective into account when examining Tawada’s transnational and translingual movements vis-à-vis both oppressive national spaces and deterritorialized spaces of meaning.

Notably, Kelsky notes that the 1980s and 1990s—the period during which Tawada first studied abroad in Germany and began writing—saw many profound and far-reaching transformations in Japanese gender relations. It was during this time that Japan’s birthrate first began to decline, reaching an record low of 1.57 births per woman in 1989, and young Japanese women, supported by the high yen and overvalued economy, increasingly began traveling abroad.<sup>53</sup> Kelsky argues that “by turning away from (what they label) ‘traditional lifestyles, resisting the expectations of (what they label) ‘traditional’ Japanese men, refraining from having children, and traveling, studying, and working abroad, more and more Japanese women are exploiting their position on the margins of corporate and family systems to engage in a form of ‘defection’ from expected life courses.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, Tawada was likely one of many Japanese women to take a “foreign turn” as a way to resist suffocating gendered and ultimately national expectations forced upon them by society. For it is only within the space of the foreign, away from the national space, that they find distance from the burden of societal expectations and therefore freedom to live as their “true” selves.

This concept is also poignantly echoed in the independent film *Kamome shokudō* (*Seagull Diner*, 2006) by female director Oigami Naoko based on Mura Yōko’s novel by the

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<sup>52</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010), xvi-xvii.

<sup>53</sup> Kelsky, *Women on the Verge*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Kelsky, *Women on the Verge*, 2.

same title. Echoing the lives of many Japanese women in the late twentieth to early twenty-first century, the three characters Sachie, Midori, and Masako are independent, middle-aged Japanese women desperately trying to get away from “something” (*nanika*). While that “something” mostly goes unspoken, it is clear that, in a way, they are all voluntarily exiles leaving Japan for the foreign space of Finland in order to change some part of themselves. The character with the most explicit motives for leaving Japan is perhaps Masako, who spends twenty years caring for her sickly elderly parents and finally feels free after they pass away. After being the traditionally faithful daughter and essentially sacrificing her youth and life for her parents, she finds freedom in Finland precisely because it is a space unburdened by the traditional responsibilities that women in Japan are expected to fulfill as daughters. Going to Finland for Sachie also falls into her motto of not necessarily by doing what she wants, but avoiding what she does not want to do. Living in Japan, for Sachie, as well, appears to be an astringent experience from which she attempts to escape. All three female characters seem to have particular negative experiences, arguably unique to their status as unmarried, middle-aged women in Japan, that are alleviated by travelling abroad, meeting new kinds of people, and escaping the pressures enforced upon them by the Japanese nation.

However, like Tawada, this does not mean that they renounce the culture with which they were raised or their “mother tongue.” In fact, Sachie is determined to create a diner that serves mainly Japanese style-food and greets her customers with the customary Japanese restaurant greeting “*irasshai*.” At one point in the film, Midori gives a list of facts about Moomin characters to which Sachie replies, “Just when you think you know the world, there are so many things you realize you don’t know.”<sup>55</sup> While seemingly ridiculous banter, this quote seems to

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<sup>55</sup> Oigami Naoko, dir., *Kamome Shokudō* (Tokyo: Nippon Television Network Co., 2006), DVD.

resonate with Tawada's comment in an essay in which she writes, "This world resounds with so many types of sounds, you can only imagine what kinds of music you will be able to hear if you leave the echoes of your mother tongue that you are entangled in just a little bit."<sup>56</sup> Like Tawada, Sachie, Midori, and Masako reflect a realization that taking a step away from the "mother tongue" for women in Japan, both figuratively and literally relieves them from responsibilities often coded as female and provides new opportunities for them to grow as individuals. While this does not necessarily indicate abandoning their "mother" language and country, it is clearly the foreign space for all four women (Tawada included) that affords new perspectives about their own lives and the workings of the world.

In her ethnography, Kelsky similarly finds that many young Japanese women who "defected" from life in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s found the space of the foreign as a site of "professional opportunity, personal liberation, and romantic or erotic self-expression," as well as a "means to radically challenge persistent gender ideologies that make authentic Japanese womanhood and the stability of the Japanese nation contingent on women's continued subordination to Japanese men and traditional gender roles."<sup>57</sup> In this way, a dichotomy initially forms between the "home" nation and the realm of the foreign in which the foreign becomes an idealized space that represents a liberation from everything "backward" and "oppressive" epitomized by the Japanese nation. In Tawada's literature, the dichotomy then becomes a tension between the mother tongue, representing an "organic" relationship to female roles within the family—which is also by proxy the nation—and foreign language, an untethered outlet for new types of expression. Therefore, playing with Japanese, or experimenting with the kinetic and sonic limits of the "mother tongue," becomes a form of social action and identity politics.

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<sup>56</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 7.

<sup>57</sup> Kelsky, *Women on the Verge*, 2-3.

Perhaps since onomatopoeia is a prevalent and sonic form of expression in Japanese, it is only natural that it is often a mode that Tawada attempts to manipulate.

#### “UNHOMELY” SOUNDS IN LITERATURE: EXPERIMENTS IN ONOMATOPOEIA

“Although there is music in words,” Tawada argues in an *Exophony* essay, “it is usually not readily noticed. When reading a novel, your attention is captivated by narrative points, such as the plot and character personality, while other details are not readily perceived.”<sup>58</sup> This explicit commentary suggests that Tawada is constantly trying to elevate her readers’ tools of perception, specifically through the sounds of her words and phrases. Of course, there exists the conundrum mentioned in my introduction that literature is not always read aloud and is often considered a “silent” text. To suggest otherwise may, therefore, seem strange and “unhomely.” Yet, Tawada specifically mentions in *Ekusofonii* that her process of creating sentences involves a conscious search for rhythms that she finds audibly pleasing. Therefore, it is impossible to disregard the indispensability of audible elements to her work. At the same time, perhaps as a result, she is often told that while her sentences are easy to listen to, there is something about them that is not quite “normal.”<sup>59</sup> This “abnormal” quality, however, contains an important part of her message. In departing from the norm, Tawada seems to challenge readers to listen beyond the plot and character and search for meaning within the strange combinations of sounds within what is traditionally conceived as a “silent” text.

In this vein, it may be pertinent to consider here Cara Lynne Cardinale’s theoretical device of “look-listening” mentioned in my introduction, which functions to alter understandings

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<sup>58</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 127.

<sup>59</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 90.

of language and perception and destabilize the dichotomic ways that voice is observed.<sup>60</sup> Considering this perspective allows for a space where sound is not simply limited to vibrations through the air but can be perceived in various ways, such as through a written text, thereby connecting to other senses to provide a full-body, transsensory experience. The “paper driver” protagonist in “Driving Without Lights” may be an extreme representation of this phenomenon, in which the sounds of words combined the process of listening manifests itself physically onto the body. In examples like these, the normative hierarchical structure of human desire working to control the environment of the text is flipped so that the textual environment itself takes control through a full-body experience. In other words, unusual combinations of sounds and listenings work to displace the reader and the known as the center of the text’s geography and forces us inhabit an “unhomely” location of uncertain time and space. Placing rhythms and sounds of words together in particular ways, therefore, forces the reader to listen to them with a multiplicity of perceptions in order to glean the passage’s full meaning.

In short, sound in literature for Tawada appears to represent an exploration of the possibilities of language that go against the dominant norm, the familiar, and the already known. She seems to express that language, as a chaotic structure, and sound, as the audible, deconstructed pieces of that structure, are not always the same thing, but are intricately connected. In her essay “The Art of Being Nonsynchronous,” she writes,

Language can produce an image from a sound or juxtapose several images. It can clumsily imitate various sounds and invent new words precisely because of its clumsiness. Language can link a sound to a color, or think up an adjective to go along with it while at the same time questioning its legitimacy. Language can compare what we hear with other things. Then the images invoked only by way of comparison begin to assert their independence.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Cardinale, “Through the Eyes,” 1.

<sup>61</sup> Tawada Yōko, “The Art of Being Nonsynchronous,” trans. Susan Bernofsky, in *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, eds. Craig Douglas Dworkin and Marjorie Perloff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 193.

Here, Tawada clearly emphasizes that the sonic aspect of language can connect to other aspects of the world that are not readily seen or understood. The constant linking of sounds in words produces new meaning that, for Tawada, translates as a type of verbal independence where words take on a life of their own. After all, language, she argues in a different essay, has “a living body, which cannot simply be reduced to semantic content.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, Tawada seems less interested in recognition than the process of perception and less invested in what is already known about words than how a listener experiences their sounds. It is, therefore, important, not only to consider the meaning of words or the concept that a word represents, but also their echoes or resonances—their *hibiki*—which contain crucial meaning of their own. Likewise, perceiving the dormant qualities in the latent possibilities of languages provides new perspective on the familiar and a flexible approach to the world that is open to the reimagining of hegemonic structures of society which are symbolized within linguistic structures.

Again, I argue that this approach is influenced by Tawada’s perpetual marginal, exilic experiences as a woman writing in Japan and a Japanese woman writing German in Europe, for they are experiences that allow her to notice strangeness and points of inaccessibility and disparity within language itself. It is this central part of her identity that she expresses in her literature. Highlighting the ways that her interstitial identity influences the reconstruction of the traditional and conventional in Tawada’s works, therefore, could be an invaluable contribution to understanding her “unhomely” worlds and spaces.

In “The Art of Being NonSynchronous,” Tawada ponders over whether onomatopoeic expression can function as a method to naturally add sound to text. The main conundrum that she encounters with this is that, as literary critic Craig La Drière defines, onomatopoeia is “a

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<sup>62</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 197.

coincidence of two meanings or strands of meaning, [. . . a mere] *suggestion* of sound with its conventional reference.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, onomatopoeia is a representative of sound but not sound itself. As someone who lives within and between various languages, Tawada’s challenge then becomes that, precisely because onomatopoeia only *represents* sound, it is also culturally encoded. “When I write *shitoshito* in Japanese,” she explains, “only Japanese speakers can hear the sound of gentle rain.”<sup>64</sup> It is, she finds, perhaps impossible to represent sound itself in a text without having it be intrinsically connected to a certain culture, producer, or metaphorical significance. Tawada’s solution, therefore, is not to find a solution, but rather “to enter the crevice between sound and language and make countless little notes,” for this dark crevice, she argues, is “a treasure trove of possibilities for what language can be.”<sup>65</sup>

This argument directly confronts national linguistic movements, like *genbun itchi*, that attempt to unify language as a stable structure under unifying government policies. By questioning the traditional stability, singularity, and hierarchy of language, Tawada’s “non-solution” provides a perspective, perhaps unique to her experiences as a Japanese woman immersed in several languages and cultures, that expands the dominant “normative” worldview. Like LaBelle and Voegelin, who position listening to the pluralities of sound as a method to perceive and create new formations of social becoming, Tawada situates language as an unstable structure with the potential to become new and unexpected things.<sup>66</sup> Thereby, listening to this type of language becomes a political framework to shift the singular truths and dichotomic concepts that currently make up society into concepts that encompass multiple possibilities and

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<sup>63</sup> Craig La Drière, “Structure, Sound, and Meaning,” in *Sound and Poetry: English Institute Essays, 1956*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 103.

<sup>64</sup> Tawada, “NonSynchronous,” 192.

<sup>65</sup> Tawada, “NonSynchronous,” 192.

<sup>66</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 161.

identities. Rather than stray from onomatopoeia entirely, however, there appear to be several ways in which Tawada manipulates onomatopoetic expressions to at least in part detach themselves from the stringent borders of cultural and linguistic rules.

One example occurs in the first passage of this chapter with the inclusion of “*zui zui*” to portray an absurd scene while simultaneously challenging the reader to search for meaning within the unusual and incomprehensible. Although this perhaps in part relies on cultural knowledge to perceive the mocking tone, it is first and foremost situated in the musicality of the combination of sounds and rhythm that pushes the narrative forward in unexpected ways. As Alan Tansman points out,

Rhythm transfigures and transforms, arousing the body and heightening the emotions, creating a shared sentiment among its participants and listeners so that they can be communally aroused and brought simultaneously to the same height of emotion.<sup>67</sup>

It can therefore be understood that it is partially through sonic rhythm that Tawada is able to manipulate her text while simultaneously transforming the object in question as well as the reader’s experience of that object. Rhythm further functions as a tool to entrench the protagonist and the reader in a full-bodied multisensory and uncanny experience. In other words, the significance and viscerally emotional trigger within Tawada’s texts lies not in their semantic structure but in their seemingly nonsensical rhythms. Rather than a semantic reading, what seems to take place is more of what Voegelin calls “semantic inhabiting.” In Voegelin’s definition, “semantic reading” occurs at a distance that neither implicates nor reciprocates the reader, while “semantic inhabiting” suggests an invested participation, thereby confirming an at least temporal connection between the reader and the world of the text.<sup>68</sup> This concept ties in well with

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<sup>67</sup> Alan Tansman, *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 38.

<sup>68</sup> Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 36.

Tawada's apparent value of creating affective texts where the reader is completely engaged in an uncomfortable way through the process of listening to unusual combinations of sounds. In effect, the reader, through the affective inhabiting of the text, is forced to confront not only the uncanniness of the almost life-like cheeseburger, but also the uncanniness of the unfamiliar sounds of words within a familiar language, which is perhaps even the "mother tongue."

Another example of interesting onomatopoeia occurs in the beginning of "Driving Without Lights," where the protagonist "you" finds herself laying on the bed of a dark hotel room. This darkness is absolutely crucial to the environment of the narrative's introduction, because it obscures the protagonist's, and vicariously the reader's, vision. As a result, sound and listening is pushed to the forefront as the only way to map the narrative space while simultaneously revealing the uncertain anxiety that exists within invisibility. The narrator begins immediately by describing the protagonist as deeply immersed and sensitive to the sounds of the hotel environment:

You heard the sound of someone cutting their nails in the distance. It echoed carefully and at intervals—clip, clip (*pachin pachin*). The intervals grew longer when the person most likely moved from finger to finger, toe to toe. Even after all ten fingers and toes were finished, the sound continued. How many digits did this person have? The clipping gradually grew rounder and more mellow (*marukunatte*), turning into a tap, tap (*kotsu kotsu*). Someone was knocking at the door.<sup>69</sup>

What is noteworthy about this passage is that, although the onomatopoetic words (*pachin pachin* and *kotsu kotsu*) are recognizably Japanese, they are simultaneously read as sounds and shapes on the page. In fact, their shape in part *supplements* the perception of their sound. The sound *pachin pachin* (clip, clip) is heard at a high pitch, representing the metallic sound of clippers. The *chin* (ちん) portion of this word's characters, in particular, form a somewhat

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<sup>69</sup> Tawada, *Amerika*, 176.

visually hard combination that ends with an “n”—a character that from which initiating a new word is an impossibility. The narration then remarks that the sound gradually grows “more mellow,” or more literally “rounder,” as it transforms into the *kotsu kotsu* (tap, tap) of someone knocking at the door. This *kotsu kotsu* signals to the Japanese literate reader that the sound has become deeper and, perhaps, raspier. The material reverberating the sound is, therefore, something grainier than the metal of the clippers, such as wood. If we then observe the shape of the characters for *kotsu kotsu* (こつこつ), it is clear that it is not just the sound, but the shape of the word that has grown “rounder.” In essence, the sound of nail clipping transforms—both physically on the page and audibly within the sonic imagination—into the sound of knocking at the door. This fluidity of the sounds, rhythms, and shapes of words that start off as one thing and easily become something else marks a central concern in the entire story that suggests an indiscernibility between exterior sounds and the ways in which they are internally perceived. One onomatopoeic word (*pachin pachin*) that linguistically has nothing to do with the other (*kotsu kotsu*) nevertheless transforms into this other word through its newfound ability to change physical shape. This reveals that the act of listening to the sounds of words has the potential to discover, or perhaps rediscover, new meaning within them that is not related to usual structures of language prescribed by hegemonic organizations but opens up a space of alternate understanding of sound, words, and audibility in literature. While the textual medium may appear to be an inhibition to the use of sound, Tawada uses it to her advantage by expressing the sound of the onomatopoeia in this passage at two levels of perception: the visible and the auditory. Since the visible is indispensable to the written text, she utilizes it to augment the audibility of her words.

In this example, the two levels of perception are not entirely separate dichotomies, but

rather play off each other in a sense, interweaving in a way that blurs the very boundary that is believed to exist between them. This occurs because the sonicity of the word as well as its shape on the page mimic the sensations that emerge when listening to sound, or what Voegelin calls the “sensate sense” of a phenomenological experience.<sup>70</sup> In other words, in the darkness of the hotel room, the protagonist is unable to visually and physically control her environment, which challenges the normative physicality of maps and print in the modern era. Transposing this with invisibility of sound then gives the anxiety-producing illusion of distances becoming simultaneity and constantly changing their position and shape. This may seem contradictory, since, as Walter Ong indicates in “The Shifting Sensorium,” “writing transposes language to a spatial medium [. . .] shift[ing] the balance of the sense away from the aural to the visual.”<sup>71</sup> However, Tawada’s passage in effect flips this balance in a way that does not completely turn to the aural, but rather mixes and therefore complicates the “sensorium” by experimenting directly with the spatiality of her medium in which language has been transposed. In this framework, the words on the page are simultaneously ephemeral when perceived as atmospheric sound and concrete in its written medium. Listening then does not replace but rather *extends* vision as a way of engaging with the world of Tawada’s narrative in ways that contradict the usual norm. Again, the reader is faced with the “unhomeliness” of the author’s manipulation of “doll words” that produce this mixed sensorium and alternate method of perceiving sound. In doing so, we are provided an opportunity to read language in different ways and to rediscover significance in the exposed strangeness of words.

This technique is not in any way new. In fact, it is highly present in Japanese comics

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<sup>70</sup> Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 42.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Ong, “The Shifting Sensorium,” in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 26, 30.

where the shape of sound effects often contributes to the “texture” and “volume” of a particular sound. The louder the sound is to be perceived, the larger the text appears on the page. Softer sounds appear with rounder font, while harsher sounds appear in a sharper style. In addition, Tawada points out herself that mixing sound in literature was also a significant part of the 1960s Fluxus movement, which aimed to disrupt the barriers between art and life and collaborate across various media.<sup>72</sup> Not only do the transsensory and transnational ideals of the Fluxus movement resonate with Tawada’s works, but their ultimately political messages suggest that Tawada’s work, too, has a social dimension. American author and art history scholar Hannah Higgins indicates that the way in which many Fluxus artists reconfigured comparatively traditional mediums, such as painting and literature, in order to work across media and cultures indicates not only a perception of structural continuities between the arts, but also reflects a desire to deconstruct the hegemonic structures of society.<sup>73</sup> She especially cites American Fluxus artist Dick Higgins’ belief in intermedia as a “historic necessity” to challenge outdated hegemonic structures. He contended,

The concept of a separation of media arose in the Renaissance. The idea that a painting could be made of paint on canvas or that a sculpture should not be painted seems characteristic of social thought—categorizing and dividing society [. . .] which we call the feudal conception of the Great Chain of being. However the social problems that categorize our time, as opposed to the political ones, no longer allow a compartmentalized approach [. . .] since continuity rather than categorization is the hallmark of our new mentality.<sup>74</sup>

In other words, what is significant is not the innovation of the project but how and why it is executed in a particular way. Tawada’s deliberate mixing and blurring of the senses in “Driving

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<sup>72</sup> Tawada, *Ekusofonii*, 83.

<sup>73</sup> Hannah Higgins, “Border Crossings: Three Transnationalisms of Fluxus,” in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, eds. James M. Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 280.

<sup>74</sup> In Higgins, “Border Crossings,” 280.

Without Lights” can similarly be understood as a way to hold the authoritarian act of strict compartmentalization in direct contention. Compartmentalization, here, includes both that of the medium and sensorium immediately in question within the space of the text while referring metaphorically to larger social categories of racial and gender identity. By reconnecting the audible back into the literary text in ways that are impossible to ignore, Tawada appears to be acutely reminding the reader of the interconnectivity and fluidity of the senses and languages. This not only resonates in the space of the page but also more broadly within the reality of her own transcultural life and present society.

Again, it is in part the darkness of the hotel room that opens this space for close listening, or at least makes it more apparent. This becomes especially clear in the prior passage where the music from another room makes the protagonist unconsciously begin moving to the beat:

You unconsciously bobbed (*gokkuri gokkuri*) your chin up and down. It made a *clunk* (*kotsun*) whenever it dropped as far as it could go and sounded like bone thumping against wood. What in the world was your chin hitting? Since your chin did not hurt, you started to wonder whether it was even your own. You tried to stroke it but failed to find your own hand to stroke it with.<sup>75</sup>

Here, the lack of certain vision and newfound reliance on the ambiguity of sound makes the protagonist virtually invisible and unable to find their own body. As was a goal in the Fluxus movement, the subject, through transsensory, transmedia, and transnational movements, becomes positioned in an unmappable state that “is everywhere and therefore nowhere to be found.”<sup>76</sup> The invisibility of the subject allows it to become a product of the imagination, configured not by vision but by the possibilities formed by the types of sounds and rhythms of the dark room. In other words, the sound enables a type of engagement with the text that alters the reader’s perspective on what is real, compelling a reconsideration of the singularity of the already known.

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<sup>75</sup> Tawada, *Amerika*, 175-6.

<sup>76</sup> Higgins, “Border Crossings,” 272.

As Voegelin puts it, “What are we made of and what could we have been and be instead?”<sup>77</sup> The darkness provides a device that obscures the visible—the known—and incites close listening and “look-listening” as a way to expose alternate possibilities of the known that have not been previously considered. In the darkness, the protagonist is even forced to rethink the borders of their own body as they become entwined with the heard. On one hand, this “unhomely” experience can incite a fear of uncertainty concerning where the body and self has gone and whether it even still exists. On the other hand, the escape from the body and home can instill an exciting sense of freedom that enables the protagonist to escape the burden of labels that the body carries and recreate themselves from their own imagination.

At the same time, the uncertainty of the darkness allows for a lack of conclusions. The protagonist’s chin seems to be making the sounds *gokkuri*, *gokkuri* as it bobbles and *kotsun* as it drops to the chest. Yet, there is a gap of logic between the kind of sound it makes (an impact against wood), what it should actually be hitting (the chest), and the lack of injury of the chin. This ambiguous gap is never filled but is, in fact, widened throughout the story as the protagonist’s body is revealed as an object manipulatable by the sounds of words, literally becoming a “paper driver.” However, it is this lack of given conclusions paired only with strategies for engagement that allows the reader space to draw conclusions for themselves. For better or for worse, this is all part of the vulnerable experience of listening.

## **CONCLUSION: POSITIONING IN-BETWEEN IDENTITY**

Ultimately, Tawada’s approach to onomatopoeia reveals that, while she claims that her

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<sup>77</sup> Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 59.

solution is to resist solutions and concrete conclusions, what she appears to be harkening to is the “unhomely” in-between. This is an interstitial position in which Tawada and her work relate to society with an aim to create space for social reconfiguration and change. To identify Tawada and her texts as solely German or solely Japanese is to, in essence, only read one dimension of reality. Tawada’s texts therefore seem to urge the reader to listen closely in order to notice the existence of alternate dimensions. What readers are ultimately seeing and hearing is not purely German or Japanese language on the page but rather a closely trans-referential language. Here, sound is not sound in a pure sense but is rather a transsensory experience created through a clever fusion of onomatopoeia and look-listening techniques. As Brian Massumi contends in his book *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, “Sensation is never simple; it is always doubled by the feeling of having a feeling. In other words, it is self-referential [. . .] a resonance, or interference pattern.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Tawada’s racial, linguistic, and gender identity also resists simplicity, resonating not off concrete borders, but in the volatile darkness of sonic spaces in-between cultures, languages, and listenings.

In many ways, Tawada’s literature is one that acutely reflects the polyglot and migrant experience, complete in its simultaneous discomfort, confusion, and freedom. It is these very experiences which novelist Salman Rushdie considers responsible for creating “radically new types of human beings” beginning in the late twentieth century.<sup>79</sup> These kinds of people are, he claims,

[. . .] people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves—because they are so defined by others—by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several

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<sup>78</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 13-4.

<sup>79</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 124-5.

ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.<sup>80</sup>

In other words, it is the kinds of people—the geographical and linguistic migrants, like Tawada—who both physically and metaphorically cross the frontier of their “mother tongue” and are inevitably caught in a mixture of racial, linguistic, and cultural influences. Tawada’s case also makes it also apparent that it is important to consider the mixture that occurs and becomes *within*. In all of the examples cited here, Tawada’s contact with the Other does not exist in isolation but rather intersects and blends with her preexisting experiences of being marginal both in her gender and in her race. She is, therefore, perpetually, defined by “otherness” and her in-between existence. Homi Bhabha also writes of in-between as spaces that carry “the burden of the meaning of culture” and that provide “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity.”<sup>81</sup> In doing so, he suggests that it is precisely this in-betweenness, or “Third Space,” that offers a powerful definition for those like the migrant, who thereby represents a hybrid identity that upholds a manifold perspective on reality and directly challenges the traditionally stable boundaries of the nation-state. For Bhabha, this interstitial migrant, personified by Tawada and her protagonists, is the core metaphor for the increasingly hybrid cultural space of our current society. Ultimately, both Bhabha and Rushdie seem to suggest that, in the postmodern world, many identities remain rootless, transcendent of essentialist values, and in constant flux. While this may pose an uncertain and alienating position, it also divulges an opportunity for emancipation from the fixed modernist state and for individual self-fulfillment.

Tawada Yōko clearly relishes in this precious opportunity. Through her literature, her experiences of “in-betweenness” and “intersectionality” manifest themselves as a global

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<sup>80</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 124-5.

<sup>81</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

epistemic perspective that sees and hears things through alternate, intermediary lenses, encouraging readers to do the same, or at least giving them the tools necessary to notice the strange in the familiar and the familiar in the strange. In a broader theoretical context, this interstitial stance that resists a single home or cultural identity appears to seek to re-define the way that we understand society and the mixed individuals that inhabit it, albeit in sometimes audible rather than visible ways. Neither a celebration nor lament, Tawada's "unhomely" literature understood through a framework of listening and uncomfortable tension offers alternate perspectives to normative ways of reading literature that compel a reconsideration, remapping, and reexperiencing of in-between identities and their ability to, by mobilizing critical cultural self-reflexivity, contest aspects long taken for granted within local cultural structures.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Hip-Hop Samurai in *Samurai Champloo*: Remixing Culture, Minority History, and Playful Politics**

More than a century has passed since the samurai as a warrior and social class disappeared, yet their image remains a resiliently reinvented cultural symbol of Japan and the so-called quintessential Japanese values of loyalty, strength, and resilience. In many contemporary cases, the samurai has become an idealized metaphor for the heart-soul—the *kokoro*—of the Japanese nation and, more concretely, the modern (primarily male) Japanese citizen. Many cite Nitobe Inazō's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1899, trans. in Japanese as *Bushidō*, 1908) and Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946, trans. in Japanese as *Kiku to katana*, 1971) as an impetus for setting this tone. In an attempt to answer how Japan could become an ethical society without a Christian belief system, Nitobe's work sought to teach the ways in which ideal societal morals could be upheld through a largely imagined notion of samurai conduct. In many ways, it therefore served as way to bridge the “West” and Japan, influenced more by Nitobe's own Christian identity than a genuine expertise of the culture on which he wrote. Meanwhile, Benedict's method of framing Japanese behavior through a lens of a samurai-based cultural psychology similarly established an essentialized idea of what it means to be Japanese. Both texts manage to construct an outsider's perspective of Japanese identity based on cultural ideals stemming from samurai behavior that have perpetuated as “truth” both abroad and within Japan.

It is due to texts like these, historian Tetsuo Najita argues, that “culture” has come to assume a “resource for firm unshakable self-knowledge” and a “seemingly unproblematic role”

in postwar Japan.<sup>1</sup> In Najita's understanding, "culture" is often positioned fundamentally as a means to define "Japan" and "Japaneseness" in fixed, positivist, and knowable ways, which inevitably edges on cultural essentialism and uniqueness. To be fair, Najita wrote this argument during Japan's economic bubble, which was a very different time both economically and culturally than, for example, the early 2000s. However, the fact that Nitobe's *Bushidō* once again took a prominent position in national discourse at the beginning of the new millennium reveals that texts like these still hold a level of "truth" precedence in Japan. Najita's statements on culture, therefore, may still shine light on reasons why and how samurai culture and *bushidō*, the way of the samurai, persistently spark fervent dialogues on their usefulness to address the state of the Japanese nation and its people.

The beginning of the twenty-first century experienced a particular influx of these dialogues during what some scholars called a "*bushidō* boom."<sup>2</sup> One of the central reasons for this boom lies in the arrival of a new Japanese translation of Nitobe's *Bushido*, which celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of its initial publication. This was then followed by several new samurai-influenced texts, including one of the year 2000s bestsellers, Aoki Teruo's *Ima naze bushidō ka (Why Bushidō Now?)*, which revisits the teachings of Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure* (1716, modern edition 1900, trans. in English as *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai* 1979). *Hagakure* famously describes samurai moralities of an idealized era before the author's time that were then appropriated for a nationalistic ethic that guided Japanese militia behavior during World War II and highly influenced nationalistic author Mishima Yukio (1925-1970),

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<sup>1</sup> Tetsuo Najita, "On Culture and Technology in Postmodern Japan," in *Postmodernism and Japan*, eds. Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1989), 5, 13.

<sup>2</sup> This term appears, for example, in Takeuchi Rio's article, "'Hankechi' to 'bushidō' būmu: <gi-fuhen> shugiteki shutaika no mekanizumu" (2009) and Michele Mason's chapter, "Empowering the Would-be Warrior: Bushidō and the Gendered Bodies of the Japanese Nation" (2011).

who famously killed himself by publicly slitting his stomach. In other words, this text had often previously been interpreted as exemplifying the honorable “way of death,” especially for the sake of one’s own country. Aoki, then, works to refocus on the positive recourse of *Hagakure* as a text that can illustrate an exemplary “way of *living*” through various aspects of contemporary endeavors, such as legislative decision-making, childcare, and work-related activities. Yet, while Aoki’s book provides a critical reassessment of nationalistic suicide, it notably sustains a belief in the healing and fortifying properties of an idealized samurai ethic for a society that purportedly displays symptoms of social malaise and national decline.

Japanese literary scholar Tomiko Yoda is one of many who has written about how the notorious crash of Japan’s bubble economy in 1989 generated a widespread negative psychology and pessimistic outlook on the nation’s economic future. This was compounded by an ominous series of incidents occurring during the so-called “lost decade” of the 1990s, including the Hanshin earthquake (1995), the religious Aum Shin-rikyō cult’s sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system (1995), and a string of violent crimes by Youth A (*Shōnen A*) and other male adolescents (1997).<sup>3</sup> Many of these events clearly demonstrated a pervasive disillusionment with and psychological trauma from the very sociopolitical systems that were critical of this contemporary state of society. Yet, underlying early second millennium discourse were questions that indicated a failure to listen. Not only did the pursuit of solutions via lessons of the *past* intimate a closed ear to *contemporary* needs, but also, the attempt to tap into “Japanese”-coded strengths ironically represented the very type of authoritative government that had seemed to, at least in part, incite the current spread of social cynicism.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, within this system of

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<sup>3</sup> Tomiko Yoda, “A Roadmap to Millennial Japan,” in *Japan After Japan*, eds. Tomiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006), 20-1.

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, whenever the term “contemporary” appears in this chapter, it refers to the early 2000s, not the 2020s during which this dissertation was filed, unless otherwise noted.

thought, both the diagnosis and the remedy for symptoms of social malaise emanated from a top-bottom approach that, to borrow Japanese literature scholar Michele Mason's eloquent wording, assumed "a symbiotic relationship between individual and national bodies."<sup>5</sup> This can prove problematic for a number of reasons—one being that both the measurement and solution for "social malaise" extends from hegemonic structures and methods that often lack sensitivity for those who diverge from constellations of normativity. Another being that the act of mobilizing symbols of the past symbolizes a sentiment of returning to an old order where a closed hierarchy of ancestors and isolationist politics reigned supreme. It is for these reasons that simultaneously appearing *alternative* narratives of "samurai," guided not by an essentialized ethic of the past but rather a diversified and playful ideal of the present, prove intriguing bottom-up counterpoints to early 2000s national discourse.

This chapter, therefore, focuses specifically on director Watanabe Shin'ichirō's animated series *Samurai Champurū* (*Samurai Champloo*, 2004-2005), which mixes typical *chambara*, or samurai show, elements with a hip-hop aesthetic and a transnational soundtrack. Watanabe, who gained global recognition in both animation and music communities with his debut series *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), has long been renowned for his adept technique to blend genres, cultures, peoples, and musics. In *Samurai Champloo*, he conspicuously pushes this idea of mixture to the forefront by including the term "*chanpurū*" in the title. *Chanpurū* is a traditional stir fry dish of Japan's southern Okinawan islands that can be any combination of local or international ingredients ranging from a plate of noodles fried with green onions and Spam to a tofu dish crumbled with vegetables and thinly sliced pork. Regardless of how it is made, its key guiding

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<sup>5</sup> Michele M. Mason, "Empowering the Would-be Warrior: Bushidō and the Gendered Bodies of the Japanese Nation," in *Recreating Japanese Men*, eds. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 68.

principle is the deliciousness of mixture.

In her book on Otherness in Japanese cinema, Mika Ko discusses a contemporary trend to describe racial mixture in Okinawan culture as *chanpurū* based on the concept of this dish. She argues that the concept behind “*chanpurū bunka*” (champloo culture) is an attempt to redefine identity in Okinawa in terms of positive hybridity, transforming the stigma of the enduring foreign occupation of American bases and the “impurity” of the pervading racial mixture among Okinawa’s population into a source of cultural creativity and positive dynamism.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, to utilize the term *chanpurū* is to embrace the positive aspects of globalization and cultural mixture and to challenge the concept of a single homogenous nation and global community. In *Samurai Champloo*, Watanabe’s familiarity with and inclusion of various musical traditions enables him create a well-integrated remix of musical traditions from hip-hop to Okinawan and Ainu folk music that provides not only a background but a framework through which to understand his marginalized characters and underlying contrapuntal message. The series’ overall sound then becomes an invitation to the ear to listen to a global dialogue in which seemingly disparate cultures, genres, and temporalities somehow manage to flow seamlessly together—an epitome of *chanpurū*.

At the same time, I argue that it is important to recognize that a key ingredient to a good *chanpurū* stir fry is local Okinawan *gōyā* melon, a gourd-like vegetable that infuses the dish with bites of bitterness. This melon is both coded Okinawan, therefore marginalized in the context of “Japan,” and hints at the virulent past that lies beneath Okinawa’s colorfully tropical surface. Albeit a different kind of Okinawan gourd, *gōyā* melon is evocative of Okinawan author Medoruma Shun’s (1960-) “Droplets” (*Suiteki*, 1997), in which protagonist Tokushō’s leg swells

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<sup>6</sup> Mika Ko, *Japanese Cinema and Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2010), 72.

into a large pale green gourd, referred to as *subui* in Northern Okinawan dialect.<sup>7</sup> In this story, the green gourd serves as a materialization of the painful war memories that haunt the protagonist and his family from their experiences during the Battle of Okinawa, World War II's bloodiest battle on Japanese shores in which thousands of Okinawan lives were sacrificed for the sake of a nation that did not treat them as equals. While I do not suggest that the *gōyā* melon intimates the exact same discourse of war memory, I similarly understand it as an implicit suggestion of the prevailing complexities of Okinawan politics. Therefore, to reference *chanpurū* with both its mixture and bitter gourds also suggests a movement to bring the convoluted and sensitive subject of marginalized voices within Japanese discourse to the forefront.

Considering this stir-fry's fluctuating implications, which exist between political subversiveness and performative fun, I understand *chanpurū* in Watanabe's series as a method that, through listening, can be read as a way to conceptualize alternative imaginings of Japanese identity via playful nonconformity against hegemonic systems. Essentially, it is a bottom-up approach to the samurai narrative that makes space for individuals and minorities who do not fit in to "normative" populations and expectations. Despite the term "samurai" in the series' title, the "samurai" image does not refer to the central figures of the series, but rather seems to signify a government that is depicted as authoritative, corrupt, and following an ethic that is behind the times. Meanwhile, the leading characters' lives are portrayed through a "hip-hop ethic" that may represent samurai ideals of strength and resilience, but do so by taking the perspective of a marginalized youth community and a lens that is more contemporary and globally aware. In this way, *Samurai Champloo* appears to be echoing *freetier*, or perpetual part-time or unemployed worker, activism of the time. In his book on youth movements in Japan, sociologist Carl

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<sup>7</sup> Medoruma Shun, "Droplets," in *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, trans. and ed. Michael Molasky (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 255.

Cassegård characterizes freeter activism as “egalitarian and individualistic forms of organization” that make use of music, dancing, and performative fun to mobilize participants and make political statements.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, throughout the animated series, there persists a theme of utilizing a hip-hop-based soundtrack to push against the grain and react to contemporary sociopolitics without leaning too far into the realm of seriousness and accuracy. Where there is history, there is also anachronism; where there is activism, there is also playfulness; and where there are traumatic marginal narratives, there is also upbeat hip-hop. This chapter examines how the dynamic mixing and remixing of these atypically paired elements within the series provides alternate ways to configure “samurai.” Focusing specifically on how constellations of narrative and musical frameworks as well as racial and playful politics come together within *Samurai Champloo*, I seek to provide insight through this particular case study’s soundscape not into practical solutions to racial and race-like systems in Japan per se, but rather into playful interrogations of the ways in which racial and race-like systems are configured and can be reimagined within a realm of Japanese pop culture.

## HIP-HOP SAMURAI

Watanabe’s *Samurai Champloo* follows the movement of three misfit characters: Mugen, a womanizing fighter born as an outcast on the islands of Ryūkyū, or present-day Okinawa; Jin, a masterless samurai of few words; and Fuu, a clumsy fifteen-year-old waitress searching for a samurai who “smells of sunflowers.” When Fuu saves the two male vagrants from execution after a violent swordfight, she convinces them to help her find her mysterious samurai based on a

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<sup>8</sup> Carl Cassegård, *Youth Movements, Trauma and Alternative Space in Contemporary Japan* (Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2013), 5.

flip of a coin, and the three begin a transformative journey across a historically ambiguous Edo period (1600-1868) Japan. This journey is filled with the typical samurai show elements: clashing swords, “floating world” temptations, unusual encounters, and...hip-hop beats?

Although the combination of samurai and hip-hop may seem unusual, it is arguably the key component to the series’ message. Many film and music scholars have recognized the crucial capabilities of music in film and television to appeal to affective, intellectual, and sensuous perceptions and, in so doing, even create its own type of politics. Josh Kun, for example, speaks to the concept of “audiotopia,” in which music functions as a possible utopia for the listener:

Music is experienced not only as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our bones but as a space that we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from. [ . . . ] Music can offer maps in this way; not only to the song’s cultural and historical genesis but the map of my own life, positioning me within the larger social world.<sup>9</sup>

Kun importantly postulates music not only as type of sound experienced through the ears, but also as an intangible configuration of spaces that facilitates understandings of how culture, history, and society function as well as how listeners fit or do not fit within it. Despite the transience of music and therefore its “audio-utopic” perception of the world, Kun seems to suggest that music carries with it a temporal politics, an indefinable yet dwelling presence that is only experienced if it is heard, or, I would suggest, listened to. For, due to the nature of this politics that only offers guidelines, not solutions, it is particularly through close and active listening that we are not only positioned within the society, as Kun argues, but we are able to gain the skills necessary to become masters of our own societies through selective mixing of our audible worlds. This is especially true in regard to hip-hop, which is more often than not embedded with a political stance and social message that attempts to vocalize marginalized

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<sup>9</sup> Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

experiences.

Watanabe has reiterated in several interviews that *Samurai Champloo* portrays its “samurai” characters and environment as a type of “hip-hop ideal,” an audiotopia like the one explicated by Kun. In this series, the samurai is not equivalent to the preservation of traditional values that imply a single Japaneseness, but rather is informed by the hip-hop components of remixing, innovation, and individual expression. As a result, the series seems to offer a social critique through an idealized possible world in which Japaneseness is connected to something other than traditional principles maintained by an outdated symbol. In this way, it is simultaneously disconnected from reality as it is conventionally conceived and positioned within an actual broader social discourse. In *Samurai Champloo*, hip-hop not only provides an audible background soundtrack but also seems to create the very guidelines of the environment within the series. In many ways, the world of the series is not only an ambiguous Edo period Japan; it is also concurrently a hip-hop world. In a 2004 interview promoting the Blu-ray release of the series, Watanabe comments,

I always want to create anime that is like music (*ongaku no yō na sakuhin*). For instance, when you buy a music CD, you’ll listen to it over and over, right? On the other hand, no one will watch a film or an anime DVD nearly as many times. With music, even if you’ve heard a song before, you’ll want to hear it again because it feels good. In the same way, I really want to create anime that, even if you’re familiar with the storyline, you’ll want to watch it again and again for the accumulation of rhythms, sounds, and images that it contains.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Watanabe seems to suggest that one of his highest ambitions for *Samurai Champloo* is not only for it to incorporate music but to have it *function* like music. The fact also that the soundtrack was created *before* the story further emphasizes the central role and guiding principle of music within the series. In essence, Watanabe seeks to explore what happens when an

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<sup>10</sup> Suzuki Takashi, “Watanabe Shin’ichirō kantoku x Sasaki Hiroshi intabyū (Director Watanabe Shin’ichirō x Sasaki Hiroshi Interview)” (Tokyo: Flying Dog, 2004).

animated series goes beyond “including” music to “becoming” music. In order to understand the possible implications of what this entails, it is important to consider that hip-hop, largely due to its origins in marginalized African American communities, is potentially both political *and* playful, a music *and* a culture, that has come to contain coinciding global *and* local threads of meaning. Therefore, for an animated series to “become” hip-hop suggests that a hip-hop influence and presence would inform every element of the series from audible to visual cues and from narrative to animetic aesthetic choices to establish a social message.

From its very inception, hip-hop has represented a social movement from the margins aimed to establish critical positions towards hegemonic world views and destabilize conventional values and meanings. Within it has always existed both a strong ideal of pointedly marginalized community and authentic individuality. Media commentator and scholar Todd Boyd, for example, suggests that there is a direct link between black power movements and hip-hop culture. He argues,

Hip hop is concerned [. . .] with being ‘real,’ honoring the truth of one’s own convictions, while refusing to bend over to accommodate the dictates of the masses. Unlike the previous generation of people who often compromised or made do, in search of compromise as false, fake, and bogus.<sup>11</sup>

It is perhaps these qualities that make hip-hop so appealing to younger generations who have become disillusioned with the rule-driven, group mentality of Japanese mainstream society. This may also be why hip-hop in Japan tends to focus strongly on youth identity, commenting on generational challenges, individual empowerment, and anti-establishment attitudes.

In his lyrics, Tokyo-based rapper Zebra claims that Japanese society is “crushing the dreams of its children.”<sup>12</sup> This points to the constant pressure that parents, teachers, principals,

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<sup>11</sup> Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>12</sup> See Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 97.

and employers are continually placing upon Japanese youth to study hard and work tirelessly in order to “succeed.” In her study of Japan’s “lost generation,” the population to come of age during the deep economic recession of the 1990s, sociologist Mary Brinton discovers that “success” in public high schools, for example, is often defined as finding a “safe and secure (*anshin*)” social organization, not “in terms of helping students find the type of work to which they were best suited.”<sup>13</sup> Especially due to the mounting difficulty to find stable jobs during the early 2000s as a result of increases in Japan’s public-sector debt, this definition of success was not only arduous to procure, but also ultimately led to what a 2009 *Economist* article called a “curse of defeatism” among Japanese youth.<sup>14</sup> In other words, rather than speaking up against their situation, many Japanese youth simply accepted the existing system or ignored it, adopting the lifestyle of *hikkikomori* or recluse, and dissatisfaction only grew. Hip-hop in Japan, therefore, functions as an intervention to this inability or refusal to speak up and challenges Japanese youth to consider ways to improve the society and culture in which they live instead of accepting it for what it currently is.

This social trend is reflected in *Samurai Champloo* episode twelve when Jin struggles with the seeming contradiction that the concept of “freedom” poses on the conventional duties of the samurai (*bushi no honbun*). Unlike Mugen who is a rogue fighter, Jin had once trained to become a samurai before becoming disillusioned with the corruption of the government which he was expected to serve, not unlike many Japanese youth of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Yet, once he begins living as a *rōnin*, or masterless samurai, he finds it difficult to grasp his role and purpose in society. His feelings, therefore, seem to both echo contemporary youth sentiments and

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Brinton, *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>14</sup> “The Curse of Defeatism: Deflation in Japan,” *The Economist* (Nov 28, 2009).

challenge the idea that a traditional samurai ethic that ties one to a master, or in more contemporary terms, a *kaisha* or company, can lead to a free, fulfilling life. A monk he encounters in the same episode attempts to answer his plight:

Freedom is neither won through painful struggle, nor can it be forced into existence. What's more, freedom has absolutely nothing to do with one's social status or profession. To simply accept yourself as you are and live as you see fit. This is freedom.<sup>15</sup>

By stating that freedom and fulfillment in life can exist despite social status, the monk suggests that it is equally attainable and available to all, as long as one has reached a level of comfort in their surroundings and their own skin. At the same time, this seems to imply that those who are not living as they truly desire are not on the track to fulfillment and freedom. This conversation between Jin and the monk in many ways highlights contemporary plights of Japan's youth and a contemporary identity politics embedded in Japanese hip-hop that seek to encourage the agency necessary to strive towards a desired lifestyle rather than that which is prescribed.

This is even more explicitly expressed in episode three when Mugen encounters yakuza bodyguard, Ishimatsu, who claims that he used to share Mugen's strong belief in his own skills. However, along the way, Ishimatsu realizes that the world is not empathetic to those who believe in themselves, and there are times when he is forced to agree with others or follow orders even though his conscience tells him otherwise. He, therefore, has resigned himself to work for a yakuza group and live under his boss' mantra that the only types of people in this world are "those who rule and those who are ruled."<sup>16</sup> Ishimatsu's approach reflects the same sense of

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<sup>15</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 12, "Onkochoshin (Learning from the Past)/Disorder Diaries," dir. Watanabe Shin'ichirō, written by Endō Hiroataka, featuring Nakai Kazuya, Satō Ginpei, Kawasumi Ayako, et al., aired Aug 11, 2004 (Flower Mound, TX: Funimation, 2005), DVD. All episode titles appear with both a Japanese and English name that are not necessarily translations of each other. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes of the animated series come from the official DVD English subtitle of the original Japanese audio track released by Funimation.

<sup>16</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 3, "Ishindenshin sono ichi (Tacit Understanding 1)/Hellhounds for Hire (Part 1)," dir. Inokawa Shintarō, written by Obara Shinji, aired Jun 10, 2004.

“defeatism” that many Japanese youth populations experienced in the early second millennium. However, Mugen is not only explicitly against ruling or being ruled; he is also highly critical of Ishimatsu’s defeatism, retorting harshly: “Don’t spend your life making excuses to yourself. You’re the one who decides how to live your life.”<sup>17</sup> Due to the relative lack of voices in Japanese society that are openly critical, Mugen’s statement seems radical. However, his voice is highly reminiscent of the strong statements made by underground hip-hop artists in Japan.

Two of the most prominent Japanese hip-hop artists in the 1990s to early 2000s, DJ Oasis and Zebra, provide an extreme glimpse into these kind of statements in their collaboration song, “*Maji uzakunē?* (“Ain’t it messed up?,” 2005). The harsh slang of the title alone expresses an anger and frustration that they do not bother to hide. The lyrics further raise societal issues that focus on increasingly visible cases of physical and mental violence on Japanese society by those in a position of power, such as government officials and even parents, and express a frustration that hip-hop artists are the only ones saying anything about it. On one hand, DJ Oasis (1972-) and Zebra (1971-) are highly critical of the Japanese government and those in power, with the stanza: “Ain’t it messed up? [Our] country, irresponsibly/ looking down on us, smugly; starvation surges, rapidly” (*Maji uzakunē? Kuni wa musekinin / Miteru futeki ni fueru ueji ni*).<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, like Mugen, some of their lyrics are also a call to action for those oppressed by these hegemonic systems to take their lives into their own hands and *do* something about it: “You do the pedaling / You take the wheel / You take control of your own success (*Temē de kogi na / temē de kajitori na / temē hitori de seikō kachitori na*).<sup>19</sup> Mugen and Jin in *Samurai Champloo*, therefore, appear to be echoes of this contemporary hip-hop sentiment that

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<sup>17</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 3.

<sup>18</sup> DJ Oasis feat. Zebra, “Maji uzakunē? (Ain’t It Messed Up?),” track 11 on *Water World*, Sony Music Entertainment Japan, 2005, compact disc.

<sup>19</sup> DJ Oasis feat. Zebra, “Maji uzakunē?”

encourages agency among Japanese youth populations. In this sense, despite the narrative framework of the Edo period in which they exist, the characters' messages feel highly contemporary. Taking this fact into account, the Edo period seems simply to be a constructed backdrop, a "sampled" element, if you will, in which to discuss contemporary strains of discourse.

### **PLAYING WITH NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: FRACTURED CHRONOTOPES & ANACHRONISM**

Sampling is a core technique in hip-hop through which an artist effectively references or repeats verbal or sonic phrases of another artist or popular culture figure. In a way, it reflects a dialogue with past music and statements while claiming a new message through the way in which the audio sample is remixed into alternate contexts. For example, African American studies interdisciplinary scholar Imani Perry asserts, "When Dr. Dre lays lyrics of gangster destruction over mellow soul, his composition signifies on that earlier music's interpretation of the black experience and yet uses it as a vernacular for creating the contemporary meaning he articulates."<sup>20</sup> In other words, sampling in hip-hop is fundamental in shaping the implications of a track's message, a point that must be kept in mind when considering the creative mix of elements, histories, times, and spaces in *Samurai Champloo*.

Philosopher Thorsten Botz-Bornstein points particularly to "sampling" as a way that the music refutes linearities of time and space.<sup>21</sup> Here, we are reminded of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "chronotope," which literally means "time-space." In *The Dialogical Imagination*,

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<sup>20</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics of Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 63.

<sup>21</sup> Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The Cool-Kawaii: Afro-Japanese Aesthetics and New World Modernity* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2010), 34.

Bakhtin defines chronotope as the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships within artistic representation,” where time “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible,” and space becomes “responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, in his particular analysis of the Western novel where time and space were traditionally understood as separate, Bakhtin postulates that chronotopes constitute a formal category that draws attention to the ways in which temporal and spatial elements are inseparable and work together to form the entirety of the novelistic narrative. Since Bakhtin, critics have expounded this chronotopic category in order to create space for further types of narrative structures as well as variants in which temporal and spatial elements relate to each other within these narratives. For example, in *Keywords in Subversive Film/Media Aesthetics*, film scholar Robert Stam suggests that orthodox chronotopes operating at the level of traditional structural storytelling schema have been relativized by both new digital media and alternative international art film aesthetics. In order to account for these new innovations, he offers “fractured chronotopes” as a variant, less restrictive form of Bakhtin’s category that defies “the diegetic continuum of the orthodox chronotope by mingling contradictory spatiotemporalities,” a corollary of which is the aesthetic of anachronism.<sup>23</sup> I propose that *Samurai Champloo*’s narrative structure leans towards this type of categorization—a type that fractures categorization as well as normative conceptualizations of time and space—precisely in order to emphasize its critical societal message and connect to current dialogues on race, society, and youth cultures.

If we are to understand *Samurai Champloo* as a series that strives not only to include but also to further *become* hip-hop, it can be said that representing time and space is both visibly and

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<sup>22</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 247.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Stam, et al., *Keywords in Subversive Film/Media Aesthetics* (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 234.

audibly informed by hip-hop aesthetics. The first episode even disclaims, “This story is a work of fiction. Parts of it differ from actual history, but... Just shut up and enjoy the show!”<sup>24</sup> Less than a minute into the series, Watanabe sets a tone that threatens to break linear expectations from the very beginning and establishes that this series is anything but a standard period drama. What the audience experiences, instead, is effectively a “sampling” technique that manifests itself in both narrative and audible ways.

In understanding the workings of “sampling” in *Samurai Champloo*, it is imperative to consider that Japan’s Edo period was a paradoxical era in which a strict hegemonic Tokugawa government co-existed with highly creative cultural scenes. Furthermore, because it was a time of peace that no longer necessitated soldiers to fight in war, the idealized image of the samurai by the late eighteenth century had shifted from a single-minded devotee to the martial arts to a diversely talented individual. *Samurai Champloo* seems only to utilize these historical elements in a way that benefits its own narrative. In a 2004 interview, Watanabe emphasizes his desire to create characters who break the mold and rules of their time (“*Sono jidai no kimarigoto ni torawarenai, katayaburi na yatsura ni shitakatta*”).<sup>25</sup> The rigidity of the Edo period’s hegemonic structures, therefore, seems to function as a way to position the series’ characters’ rebellious personalities in relief while perhaps drawing similarities between past and contemporary governments. Meanwhile, the period’s high levels of creativity and talent justifies the series’ own creative mixture and resonates with the innovation of hip-hop aesthetics. In every other way, the series flips history on its head by not only disregarding historical accuracy, but also reinventing its own history consisting of a mixture of the creators’ reimaginings and popular

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<sup>24</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 1, “Shippū dotō (Storm and Stress)/Tempestuous Temperaments,” dir. Shin’ichirō Watanabe, written by Obara Shinji, aired May 20, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Suzuki, “Watanabe Shin’ichirō kantoku x Sasaki Hiroshi intabyū.”

culture references. The legitimacy of these reinventions is then justified by an invisible narrator, who claims that they are simply “one more page missing from the history books.”<sup>26</sup> In this way, history is a tool to be manipulated not to speak about the past, per se, but to reimagine an influx of transcultural and egalitarian exchanges that both reflect and defiantly complicate contemporary society. It is this alternative, seemingly mismatched narrative framework that is then utilized to contribute towards the fracturing of early millennium samurai narratives and concurrent constellations of mainstream systems.

One clear demonstration of this occurs in the type of language that characters in the series use. While typical period dramas tend to incorporate a traditional samurai vernacular that involves words, such as *gozaru* (highly polite “to be”) and *mairu* (highly polite “to go”), *Samurai Champloo* characters frequently speak in contemporary slang. For example, when Kinugusa, a top policing official, catches the leading characters using fake identification cards to try to get past a security checkpoint, he threatens them with a tough, formal linguistic façade reminiscent of typical samurai speech. Yet, when an assistant points out that he has made a mistake, he slips amusingly into heavy slang: “Huh? Seriously? You gotta be kidding me [. . .] Now what? I’m in deep shit!” (“*E, maji de? Arienakunē? [. . .] Dō sunda yo? Maji yabai tte!*”)<sup>27</sup> This slipping in and out of these different linguistic styles not only supplements the series’ playful side, but also plays with systems of time in a way that gives the impression that the Edo period is simply a performative environment in which its characters are actually contemporary actors. This technique is not completely new but appears to be informed by director Nakano Hiroyuki’s 1998 comedic samurai live action film, *SF Samurai Fiction*. In this film, samurai

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<sup>26</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 5, “Bajitōfu (Utter Indifference)/Artistic Anarchy,” dir. Yamamoto Sayo, written by Satō Dai, aired Jun 24, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 9, “Chimimōryō (Evil Spirits of Mountain and Stream)/Beatbox Bandits,” dir. Endo Hirotaka, written by Satō Dai, aired Jul 22, 2004, my translation.

figures also utilize contemporary vernacular as well as a pointedly rock-and-roll soundtrack to establish a rebellious tone that resonates with *Samurai Champloo*'s hip-hop beats. Another suggestion of *Samurai Fiction*'s influence occurs in *Samurai Champloo*'s episode twenty-three. When protagonist Jin's glasses are knocked off in battle, the screen flashes red in the same way that *Samurai Fiction* utilizes color to create a dramatic effect (Figure 1). The innovative mixing of historically accurate Edo period elements and pop culture references creates a world that is related to yet separate from the real, mediated through contrapuntal histories and contradictory spatio-temporalities that juxtapose past and contemporary strands of "samurai" discourse.

*Samurai Champloo* therefore appears to offer an aesthetic of anachronism, or chronological and cultural inconsistency, to raise provocative questions and connections to its contemporary era. While the series' central characters may interact with Edo period culture, for instance, they are arguably all anachronistic to their time. Jin's metal-framed glasses, Mugen's break-dance moves that he uses for combat, the baggy hip-hop style clothing, and beatboxing characters are perhaps some of the most recognizable anachronisms that both break with historical accuracies. Notably, it is mainly the characters that represent marginalized identities that exhibit these anachronistic tendencies. Therefore, by harmoniously mixing contradictory temporalities and cultural spaces, the series seems to promote an egalitarian, transnational environment that heightens a sense of social possibility.



Figure 1. A flash of red. "Cool Samurai" Rannosuke Kazamatsuri fends off enemies in *Samurai Fiction* (left) and Jin and Kariya fight to the death in *Samurai Champloo*, ep. 23 (right).

In a radio interview with Pedro Mendes, Watanabe explains that throughout *Samurai Champloo*, he strives to emphasize a spirit of “everything old is new again.”<sup>28</sup> Instead of understanding this comment as simply an echo of nationalistic samurai discourse that reach to Japan’s past for answers to the present, I understand it as a call to resuscitate new or contemporary concepts *within* an old or past environment. In other words, Watanabe’s use of anachronism seems to encode several layers of time and space that can be conceptualized as more of a spiral than a linear construct. The elements clearly understood as anachronisms not only interact with the narrative space of Edo period Japan but also span a wide temporal space of samurai discourse in both intellectual and pop cultural spheres. This creative manipulation of temporal and spatial elements seems to harken to a well-established artistic convention extending from the Edo period, called *shukō*. Japanese culture scholar Haruko Iwasaki defines *shukō* roughly as an “organizing device” often used in kabuki and puppet theater to amplify “the dimension of contemporary elements by connecting them in some way with the old.”<sup>29</sup> Through this device, a given element from the past is traditionally *exploited* for the sake of narrative purposes rather than used in completely historically accurate ways. In this way, *shukō* in *Samurai Champloo* can be understood as a form of “counter-space” in which characters can fully embody fractures in normative aspects of society. Within this structure, the Edo period, then, simply serves as a type of narrative world in which the historically accurate characteristics of creativity and restrictive policies are manipulated in an imagined fashion to address current issues and tastes. Just as this seemingly disjunctive method somehow seems to work seamlessly for the animated series, Iwasaki notes that “total lack of plausibility presented no problem to an Edo

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<sup>28</sup> Pedro Mendes, “Interview with Shinichiro Watanabe,” *Q with Jian Ghomeshi*, CBC Radio One, Oct. 25, 2005, accessed Apr. 15, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Haruko Iwasaki, “The Literature of Wit and Humor in Late-Eighteenth Century Edo,” in *The Floating World Revisited*, ed. Donald Jenkins (Honolulu: Portland Art Museum and the University of Hawai’i Press, 1993), 51-2.

audience who willingly accepted this expedient convention.”<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Edo-period scholar Tadashi Kobayashi focuses on a common form of *shukō* that appears often in *haikai* or linked haiku verse, called *mitate*, which can especially understood as resonating with *Samurai Champloo* aesthetics. *Mitate*, Kobayashi explains, specifically emphasizes the startling and dramatic effects of transfiguring classical aesthetics of artwork or poetry into a “contemporary vogue” style “flavored with gentle humor.”<sup>31</sup> While Kobayashi focuses on transfigured classical artwork, it can arguably also involve transfigurations of sound, especially considering the *mitate*’s direct connection to *haikai*, in which sound and rhythm plays a significant role. *Samurai Champloo*’s use of anachronism in particular similarly may be read as a way to remix “classical” portrayals of samurai through a lineage of both historical and cultural elements with a humorous twist. As with *mitate*, this technique involves an intricate weaving together of temporal and spatial elements that caters to a high level of both contemporary and past cultural literacy. This surely proves complex because, while it may produce startling effects, it must also retain a certain level of acceptability that resonates with its audience.

One interesting example of this in *Champloo* occurs with character Sakonshougen Nagamitsu, a man who is set on “making it big.” Not only is his hair in an anachronistic *riizento*, or delinquent-style, but he also has a group of followers who start to beatbox whenever he makes a speech. These elements visibly and audibly mark him as rebellious both through his anachronistic existence within Edo society and via a common Japanese hip-hop ethic that aims to individually *medatsu*, or stand out and be noticed by others. This desire to *medatsu* directly conflicts with dominant Japanese values of group harmony over the individual, illustrated in the

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<sup>30</sup> Iwasaki, “Literature of Wit and Humor,” 52.

<sup>31</sup> Tadashi Kobayashi, “*Mitate-e* in the Art of the *Ukiyo-e* Artist Suzuki Harunobu,” in *The Floating World Revisited*, ed. Donald Jenkins (Honolulu: Portland Art Museum and the University of Hawai’i Press, 1993), 85.

common expression, “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down (*deru kuji wa utarareru*).” Anthropologist Ian Condry, who studies hip-hop in Japan, therefore suggests that due to this social context, the hip-hop ideal of *medatsu* is, “in some limited sense, revolutionary.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in one of Nagamitsu’s speeches, he claims that he has defeated a “rogue (*abarenbō*) on his horse on a sandy beach.”<sup>33</sup> Paired with the image of Nagamitsu defeating a samurai on a horseback, this scene depicts a visual and audible allusion to the live action series *Abarenbō Shōgun* airing on Japanese television from 1978 to 2003 that showcased the fictitious life of the eighth Tokugawa leader, Yoshimune, often pictured on a horse (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Abarenbō Shōgun* 2000 soundtrack cover (left) and Nagamitsu defeats “rogue” in *Samurai Champloo*, ep. 8 (right).

Like the references to the film *Samurai Fiction*, this reference in episode eight demonstrates a continuous dialogue both with samurai discourse of the early millennium as well and samurai popular culture. These references not only appear as stylistic choices, but also as tangible characters within the series. The fact that fictional characters belonging to a pop culture-based history are mixed with historical figures and rebellious Japanese hairstyles are mixed with global beatbox beats creates a highly chaotic hodgepodge of time and space. Yet, strangely, nothing

<sup>32</sup> Ian Condry, “Japanese Hip-Hop and the Globalization of Popular Culture,” in *Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of the City*, eds. George Gmelch and Walter Zenner (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2001), 384.

<sup>33</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 8, “Yuigadokuson (Self-Conceit)/The Art of Altercation,” dir. Sasajima Keiichi, written by Satō Dai, aired Jul 15, 2004.

seems out of place. In effect, *Samurai Champloo* appears to be fracturing the orthodox concept of chronotope in order highlight that samurai discourse has never been and will never be purely historical. As British author Jonathan Clements similarly indicates in his book on the history on the samurai, “Fictions of the samurai play an important part in the way we understand them and often in the way that they understood themselves.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, the series seems to use anachronism as an extension of its rebellious tone that refuses to maintain a normative stance towards history and the present as well as a means to connect the series to contemporary dialogues that situate it within its serialized time. These contemporary dialogues, of course, involve contemporary samurai discourse, but also, fundamentally, harken to Japan’s early 2000s hip-hop scene.

### ***CHAMPLOO’S SOUNDTRACK: SAMURAI SPIRIT AND “ACOUSMATIC BLACKNESS”***

*Samurai Champloo’s* soundtrack represents a diverse range of hip-hop artists from Tokyo-born Tsutchie to Cincinnati-raised Fat Jon, and Nujabes and Shing02, who are highly respected in both American and Japanese hip-hop scenes. Most of the tracks, consisting more of instrumentation and beats than vocals, are used to bring animated movements to life through what Japanese animation music specialist Kenta Motomura describes as the “synchronism of image and sound,” an important technique in a media form where time is an indispensable element of expression.<sup>35</sup> The use of quick and rhythmic hip-hop beats effectively makes the battles smooth and action lively, exploring a different temporal angle of samurai fighting.

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<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Clements, *The Samurai: The Way of Japan’s Elite Warriors* (London: Muramasa Industries, 2010), xxv.

<sup>35</sup> Kenta Motomura, “Media Literacy Education in Art: Motion Expression and the New Vision of Art Education,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 37, no. 4 (2003): 59.

Moreover, the few tracks that do include vocal rapping are done in a way that mixes and remixes words and languages.

According to Ian Condry, when hip-hop first appeared in Japan, many doubted that it would last very long due to the preconception that “the Japanese language doesn’t work with rap.”<sup>36</sup> After all, a focal technique in African-American rap is rhyming, which does not exist in traditional Japanese lyricism and poetry. However, instead of allowing this deficiency to restrict their expression, Japanese rappers have created a unique style of rhyme and vocabulary that essentially fractures the strict standards of phrasebooks, humbling indirect expressions, and polite nuances that divide people by age and social status. What is apparent in DJ Oasis and Zebra’s previously mentioned rap is also apparent in the ending song for episode twenty three of the series called “Fly” by Azuma Riki and Small Circle of Friends. Here, Azuma Riki constantly rhymes by ending the word at the end of each line with an “i” (pronounced “ee”) ending. Not only does this produce an acceptable rhyme that differs from English standards, but it is also reminiscent of the sound of birds, which play an important motif throughout the song to represent a sense of freedom. In the first stanza, he raps: “*Aru asa no kawa no hotori/ kusamura midori no naka nekorobi/ hanasaki kusuguru chōcho odori* (One morning on the river bank,/ I’m sprawled out on a patch of green grass/ Dancing, a butterfly tickles the tip of my nose).” Despite their slightly different spellings, “*hotori*,” “*nekorobi*,” and “*odori*” are made to rhyme via the ending sound of “i.” There is also a similar internal rhyme with the terms “*midori*” and “*hanasaki*.” However, to facilitate this rhyme, the order of the sentences must step out of usual structures of Japanese standard language. In this way, Japanese rap indirectly challenges the nationalistic foundations of Japanese society.

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<sup>36</sup> Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 134.

At the same time, rapping in Japan is not only in Japanese, but also in English and sometimes both, which represents the fact that hip-hop has become a global music and culture. In the first stanza of *Samurai Champloo*'s opening song, "Battlecry," which is in English, multicultural artist Shing02 (1975-) raps, "The elements compose the magnum opus/ my modus operandi is amalgam."<sup>37</sup> Music-wise, the background beats in this song contain a noticeably uneven meter, characteristic of traditional Japanese music and juxtaposed with a simple piano tune. Through its music and lyrics, it essentially expresses the series' foundation, which is a combination of many diverse components. In the hook, Shing02 raps, "Some fight, some bleed/ sun up to sun down/ the sons of a battlecry."<sup>38</sup> At first glance, this pun on the words "sun" and "son" seems to emphasize Japanese national identity with the imagery of "the land of the rising sun." However, it can also be understood as more complexly representing early Japanese hip-hop artists' negotiations of their own identity in relation to the music's African American origins. Condry notes how the image of "hip-hop samurai" and use of traditional instruments, such as koto floor harp and *taiko* drums, reflects an attempt to legitimize Japanese artists' styles by emphasizing their "Japaneseness."<sup>39</sup> However, this "Japaneseness" is arguably separate from national rhetoric and instead refers to a feeling of authenticity within artists' individual identity. Music scholar Taylor Atkins recognizes a similar trend in Japanese jazz in the 1970s. In response to critics claiming that "Jazz sounds exactly the same in London and Tokyo," Japanese jazz performers had to rethink the ways in which they played jazz in order to survive in an increasingly expansive and competitive global jazz market.<sup>40</sup> Jazz musician Muraoka Minoru, for

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<sup>37</sup> Nujabes feat. Shing02, "Battlecry," track 1 on *Samurai Champloo Music Record: Departure*, Miya Records, 2004, compact disc.

<sup>38</sup> Nujabes feat. Shing02, "Battlecry."

<sup>39</sup> Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 50.

<sup>40</sup> E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), 212.

example, created what he called “*shakuhachi* jazz,” which consisted of a mellowly jazzy bass and drum beat juxtaposed with a *shakuhachi* flute to purposefully give it a “made in Japan” feel. *Samurai Champloo* reflects a similar trend musically by including a beatboxed tune of the common koto tune, “Sakura, Sakura,” and by inserting rap songs like “*Hiji zuru* STYLE (Sly Sunrise STYLE)” that emphasize the symbolic “battling” hip-hop samurai.

This concept of “battling hip-hop samurai” is important in the Japanese hip-hop scene because, as Condry asserts, it “suggests a way of conceptualizing the somewhat paradoxical features of deepening connectedness and widening plurality [of hip-hop].”<sup>41</sup> As such, samurai do not represent a singular national identity but rather provide alternate ways to connect to cultural identity through a hip-hop ethic and its battles of graffiti, break dancing, and words. Perhaps for this very reason, Mugen and Jin in *Samurai Champloo* are not “true” samurai in the sense that serve an authoritative government and try to prove themselves worthy of their lord through gifts and services. Rather, they are both wandering fighters who personify Japanese hip-hop artists, or “hip-hop samurai,” who uphold the ideals of freedom and standing up for what they believe in. In this way, the image and sound of this updated version of “samurai” is used represent an “alternative Japaneseness” that provides different ways of existing in Japanese society for those who do not fit into the mainstream. Japanese hip-hop artist Crazy-A, for example, in an interview with Ian Condry, talks about how breakdancing has been a way to keep him away from violence on the streets. He explains,

Hip-hop after all is battle. So, instead of fighting, I quit the violence and started doing hip-hop. You can fight and get stronger, but—how can I put it—in the end, nothing of substance remains (*katachi ga nokoranai*). [. . .] But with dance, there are competitions and a sense of form stays with you. You can say, I’m number one, and appeal to an audience. That gives you something that lasts.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> In Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 63.

For both Japanese artists and *Champoo*'s characters, hip-hop clearly serves as a performative and sonic space to establish who they are in a way that gives them something concrete to hold onto. In this way, they are able through not a global vs. local construct, but rather through a mixture of the two enabled through the remixed systems of hip-hop to negotiate alternative imaginings of empowerment and social identity.

At the same time, many scholars have argued that, despite the globality of music like hip-hop and jazz, there lies an inseparable implicit "blackness" within them that informs the way in which they function and are understood. President of Urban Think Tank, Yvonne Bynoe, for example, argues, "Hip Hop culture is indeed based on improvisation and adaptation [leading international artists to reconfigure them to fit their own histories and experiences], but these creations are based in turn on a Black American perspective and understanding the world."<sup>43</sup> For this reason, hip-hop, in Bynoe's view, must be understood not only as a form of entertainment but as a reflection of racial and socioeconomic realities in the United States. This is clearly a critique of hip-hop artists and fans like those in Japan who shallowly adopt African American styles by darkening their skin and braiding their hair in cornrows, which is certainly symptomatic of disrespectful appropriation. However, other scholars pose a caveat to suggest that the racial "blackness" heard in hip-hop is, like visually driven racial epistemologies, largely socially constructed.

For example, African American literature and sound studies scholar Jennifer Stoeber in her book *The Sonic Color Line* describes how certain racially coded sonic phenomena, such as vocal timbre, accents, and musical tones, have worked to police racial difference through the ear. For Stoeber, the "listening ear," informed by Judith Butler's definitions of "gaze," is not a

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<sup>43</sup> Yvonne Bynoe, "Getting Real About Global Hip-Hop," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2002): 78.

helpful tool to disrupt preconceived discourses of race and race-like systems as I have proposed throughout this dissertation. Rather, it represents “a socially constructed ideological system producing but also regulating cultural ideas about sound” in order to “give a name to listening’s epistemological function as a modality of racial discernment.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, it is a type of constructed aurality that extends the difference-intimating functions of the eye by essentializing the ways in which we hear certain sounds and attribute them to certain types of people. As a result, scholars, such as media studies scholar Mendi Obadike in her discussion of hip-hop in film soundtracks, shine light on the fact that sound can summon a *presence* of blackness even without black bodies, which Obadike calls “acousmatic blackness.”<sup>45</sup> The term “acousmatic” here is derived from the concept of *musique acousmatique*, coined by Pierre Schaeffer to describe an ancient Greek legend in which the disciples of philosopher Pythagoras listen to him through a curtain. Via this parable, Schaeffer defines acousmatic as an adjective referring to “a sound that one hears without seeing the causes behind it.”<sup>46</sup> “Acousmatic blackness,” therefore, contains an assumption that “blackness” perceived both through visibility and audibility is a stable and knowable identity that can be identified by a listener. However, the reality that sound, as I have mentioned in the introduction, is *not* located in stability and *cannot* be unilaterally identified suggests that to subscribe to the idea of “acousmatic blackness” signifies a level of constructed essentialism of black sound, that operates similarly to the constructed essentialism of “Japaneseness.” Of course, this constructedness in both cases of “blackness” and “Japaneseness” does not necessarily detract from the fact of its widespread perpetuation. What I propose is

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<sup>44</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Mendi Obadike, “Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound” (PhD diss, Duke University, 2005), 135.

<sup>46</sup> Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des Objets Musicaux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 91. An in-depth discussion on Schaeffer and the acousmatic can be found in Brian Kane’s “*L’Objet Sonore Maintenant: Pierre Schaeffer, Sound Objects and the Phenomenological Reduction*” (2007). Schaeffer is also mentioned briefly in Nina Sun Eidsheim’s *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (2019).

important here is not a counterintuitive inquiry of whether or not “acousmatic blackness” in hip-hop is a reality, but rather an exploration of the questions that it poses when repackaged in or as a Japanese narrative, like *Samurai Champloo*.

In order to detach themselves from political and racial narratives, Condry notes that there are Japanese hip-hop artists who “deemphasize blackness in favor of aligning themselves with Japan’s traditionally lighthearted and inoffensive pop music realm.”<sup>47</sup> However, this is not the course of action that *Samurai Champloo* seems to take. To reiterate, hip-hop in *Champloo* is not simply a backdrop system of sound on which Japanese cultural nationalism plays out. As popular music scholar Shuhei Hosokawa has demonstrated with jazz, a precursor to hip-hop, rather than blackness itself, “blackness” in music often signifies a “color of resistance” which “makes Japanese performers more conscious of their racial status.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, hip-hop’s “acousmatic blackness” in *Samurai Champloo* does not point to black characters and experiences, but rather informs the series’ messages of challenging youth populations to think about ways in which to improve their situations and of highlighting racial issues in Japan.

In fact, the series’ lead scriptwriter, Satō Dai suggests that racial issues lie at the core of *Champloo*’s narrative. In a 2007 interview at Dallas, Texas convention *AnimeFest*, he comments,

People [in the U.S.] asked me why we portrayed a “black” culture rather than samurai [in *Samurai Champloo*], and I said that it is a story about a minority culture. Hip-hop is minority culture and the members of *Champloo* were a counter- or minority culture in the perspective of [their] time, as well. So connecting them created some cultural meaning.<sup>49</sup>

First of all, the fact that American audiences understand characters and culture in the series as “black,” reflects the assumptions of “acousmatic blackness” occurring simultaneously due to the

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<sup>47</sup> Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 30.

<sup>48</sup> Shūhei Hosokawa, “Blacking Japanese: Experiencing Otherness from Afar,” in *Popular Music Studies*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 227.

<sup>49</sup> Deborah Scally, et. al., “Interview with Murase Shūkō and Satō Dai,” *Mechademia* 4 (2009): 333.

anime medium through both visually- and audibly- driven epistemologies. In *Samurai Champloo*, some characters like the yakuza boss bodyguard Ishimatsu are portrayed with darker skin, wide noses, and thick lips (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Ishimatsu and “black”-coded features, (*Samurai Champloo*, ep. 3).

While Ishimatsu facial features may be coded as “black,” there are no contextual clues that suggest that he is anything other than Japanese. Furthermore, Mugen may have afro-like hair, wear baggy clothes reminiscent of hip-hop street fashion, and perform a fighting style based on break-dancing, or b-boying, a key component in hip-hop culture. However, in the very first episode, he pointedly flaunts his Ryūkyū island upbringing as both a point of pride and the reason why he lacks a familiarity with mainland Japanese customs and norms. In Mugen’s case, as well, his “black”-coded appearance and lifestyle do not signify racial “blackness,” but rather a rearticulated form of marginalized resistance through “black” style.

Japanese popular culture scholar Nina Cornyetz contends that young Japanese populations representing themselves in black styles signifies a “potential transnational identity” that expresses a resistance against hegemonic societal structures.<sup>50</sup> This argument is especially

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<sup>50</sup> Nina Cornyetz, “Fetishized Blackness: Hip Hop and Racial Desire in Contemporary Japan,” *Social Text*, no. 41 (1994): 116.

helpful in analyzing *Samurai Champloo*, because it does not understand “blackness” as simply a reproduction of American racial stereotypes but rather reveals a shifting racial and erotic paradigm bounded by interactions of global configurations and local Japanese formations of race. Therefore, following Cornyetz’s example, both Ishimatsu’s and Mugen’s appearance should not be understood as a representation of African American racial paradigms per se. Rather, they are a reflection of *Samurai Champloo*’s transnational narrative components that not shallowly but *empathetically* attempt to embody “black resistance” and give a voice to experiences of marginalization in a Japanese context.

#### **A STORY OF MINORITY CULTURE: IZSAAC, MUGEN, AND OKURU**

In her book *Black Noise*, sociologist and pioneer hip-hop scholar Trisha Rose postulates that rap and hip-hop originated in black communities as an attempt to “negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppressions within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community.”<sup>51</sup> This then explains Satō Dai’s comment and Watanabe’s rationale for utilizing hip-hop to portray minority culture. *Samurai Champloo* includes a variety of characters that are representative of a population neglected by Japan’s mainstream society, such as Oniwakamaru, a deformed man treated as a beast; Izsaac Titsingh, a homosexual foreigner from Holland; Sara, a *goze* or blind female shamisen player; Okuru, a man of implicit Ainu origins criminalized for taking revenge against the government officials who burn his village; and, of course, Mugen, an outcast of the Ryūkyū islands. This expansive representation of marginalized experiences ranging from ethnic

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<sup>51</sup> Trisha Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 21.

minority and sexual orientation to disability and deformity actively asserts the existence of variation within the “marginal” category. In fact, it may even epitomize an expanded concept of what racial politics looked like in Japan at the beginning of the second millenium. This representation alone, therefore, displays a form of activism that pushes against a large portion of Japanese identity politics discourse, delineated in my introduction, that tends to edge on totalization and exceptionalism. It is also important to add that all of *Champoo*’s characters are multi-dimensional. They are marginalized by a mainstream society for more than one reason and often find themselves in ultimately tragic situations due to the hegemonic constructs of their society. Placing their narratives at the forefront of the series facilitates a type of empowerment that makes space for the visibility and voice that they usually lack, although it is unfortunately often short-lived. The way in which Watanabe dedicates one or two entire episodes to each of these characters’ stories implicitly recognizes that, within marginalized populations, there are sub-categories of difference, which although may share a victimized experience, must simultaneously be understood and handled in personalized ways.

For example, the Dutch character Izaak Titsingh interestingly reinserts a “non-Japanese” experience in Japan that is not often present in traditional samurai narratives. His episode begins with the following text on the screen marked by a clanging shamisen and a large image of Mount Fuji in the background: “This year marks the Tokugawa Shogunate’s 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary...but this episode has nothing to do with that (*Edo bakufu yonhyaku nen...mukankei sakuhin*).”<sup>52</sup> Or does it? Considering the strict isolationist policies of the Tokugawa shogunate that largely prohibited foreigners from entering Japan, explicitly mentioning the shogunate’s anniversary at the opening of an episode featuring a foreign character seems significant. Paired with the realistic

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<sup>52</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 6, “Akage Ijin (Redheaded Foreigner)/Stranger Searching,” dir. Yoshimura Akira, written by Obara Shinji, aired Jul 1, 2004, my translation.

background illustration of Mount Fuji, an iconic image of Japan, this statement in daunting *kanji* text appears to use irony in order to be subtly subversive. While the image of Mount Fuji initially appears to play into national politics, a proceeding shamisen clang announces the irrelevance of this national statement to what viewers are about to watch. At the same time, inserting a foreigner's narrative in the face of this historical event suggests a critique of the past isolationist government that contemporary national discourse surrounding "samurai" imagery represents. This is just one example of Watanabe's playful politics that utilizes the ambiguous historicity of his animated series to tread a thin line between past and present politics with a mix of subversion and humorous irony.

As for the character Izaak himself, when treated as a deviant for his homosexuality in his own country of Holland, he notably finds solace in *Great Mirror of Male Love (Nanshoku Ōkagami, 1687)*, an actual literary work by Japanese haikai master and author Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693). In the original work, Saikaku focuses mainly on the world of the samurai, which had a long tradition of male love extending from feudal times. In fact, it was purportedly based on the life of the fifth shogun, Tokugawa Tsuneyoshi, who had a fondness for beautiful boys with a talent for *nō* theater performance.<sup>53</sup> In an anthology of early modern Japanese literature, Japanese literature scholar Haruo Shirane even describes *Great Mirror* as a "new exploration of the world of samurai" in which Saikaku romanticized devotion to "the way of loving youths" and dramatized the tension between strict warrior codes of duty/obligation (*giri*) and human emotion/desire (*ninjō*).<sup>54</sup> This work demonstrates an aspect of samurai culture that is often disregarded or left out of a national discourse that holds samurai morals to heteronormative or

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<sup>53</sup> Haruo Shirane, ed., *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology 1600-1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 44.

<sup>54</sup> Shirane, ed., *Japanese Literature*, 121-122.

even non-sexualized standards. By reinserting Saikaku's work into a samurai narrative like *Samurai Champloo*, Watanabe seems to mockingly remind those like Aoki Teruo, who suggest that *bushidō* is a necessary solvent for contemporary social malaise, that in order to holistically discuss honorable samurai philosophies, "inaudible" or "invisible" aspects such as male love must be included. Midway through this episode, a narrative voice accompanied by traditional woodblock print-like images and a repetitive, slightly warped hip-hop beat comments,

The path of sexuality is not something that causes chaotic, carnal desires to gush forth. Just as with calligraphy, tea ceremony, and flower arrangement, it is a means by which a moment of one's life may be transformed into an aesthetic extraordinary time and space. It is in no way a vulgar thing. On the contrary, it is a relationship built on rectitude and respect, which are also to be found in *bushidō*, but is even more profound.<sup>55</sup>

By associating male love with traditional Japanese arts both visually and audibly, that which is often considered deviant behavior by heteronormative standards is marked as both aesthetically virtuous and fundamentally Japanese. Furthermore, the narrator suggests that male love may even lie on a plane of morality even higher of *bushidō*. Of course, this narration reflects a tongue and cheek commentary and a highly exaggerated version of Saikaku's work, which itself was a deviant of its time. However, centralized within the narrative in this episode, it serves as a reminder of a reality of samurai narratives that is left out of contemporary discourse.

At the same time, Izsaac unfortunately does not find the ideal sanctuary that he is searching for in Japan for either his homosexual or "foreign" identity. Threatening to kill Izsaac if he does not return to his country, a samurai police officer claims, "Here, in the land of the rising sun, even if dogs, cats, or even worms are allowed to live, there is no law saying that foreigners are allowed to do the same!"<sup>56</sup> This statement likely refers to the incredibly strict laws

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<sup>55</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 6, my translation.

of shogun Tokugawa Tsuneyoshi's governing policy from 1687 onwards that threatened punishment of death for any kind of animal cruelty. The officer ironically and disturbingly points out that foreigners are not included in the list of animals protected under Tsuneyoshi's "laws of compassion." Especially the fact that it is a representative of the government, a samurai official, making this threat conspicuously marks the samurai as a symbol of authoritative—and, perhaps, ridiculous—national government. At the end of the episode, Izsaac is reinstated into his marginalized place and is rejected space to be himself in Japan. Yet, he remains hopeful. At the end of the episode, he prophesizes future acceptance for foreigners and homosexuality—a future that perhaps has only partially come true today—in a lighthearted way: "Eventually, the day will come when this country will accept people like me. [ . . . ] I am sure this country will open its butthole to me one day."<sup>57</sup>

Conversely, Okuru and Mugen pose a somewhat different type of minority than Izsaac in the sense that instead of a sexual minority, they both represent Japanese ethnic minorities—Ainu, Indigenous peoples of northern Japan, and Okinawan, respectively. Their stories, depicting years of historical colonial violence are, therefore, much darker, symbolic of the *gōya* melon in *chanpurū*. Their narratives are also notably not only told through hip-hop music, but also through traditional folk songs reflective of a historically indigenous vernacular. To reiterate, Mugen is a temperamental, rude, and violent antihero of a protagonist who is quick to fight in a style reminiscent of breakdancing with its quick footwork and floor spins. Similar to rappers and breakdancers, he upholds an individualistic, anti-authority, and competitive conviction that relies only on his own skill and strength. The reasons behind his disdain for authority lie in his upbringing on the southern Ryūkyū islands, which by the Edo period had forcibly become a

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<sup>57</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 6.

Japanese province and a space to house convicts and exiles. Therefore, Mugen's rebellious attitude towards authority extends from the years of control that the Tokugawa government imposes on his native land, making his life and the lives of his companions on the islands what he calls a living hell. Similarly, Okuru, an initially kind man from the northern territories of present-day Hokkaido, develops a hatred for the authoritative Matsumae clan after they massacre his family and burn his village. The Matsumae clan in the series represents an actual Japanese clan that unifier of Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, placed in charge of defending the northern provinces in 1590 from Ainu "barbarians." While Okuru never states his heritage as explicitly as Mugen, his indigenous-style clothing, Chinese-style crossbow weapon, and distinct musical instrument all point to Ainu roots.

Both the northern territories originally known as Ainu Mosir (the land of the Ainu, or literally, the land of humans) and the southern Ryūkyū islands historically experienced a complex Japanese colonization process that took place over several centuries. It began with asymmetrical trade relations and intensified particularly with the Meiji government (1868), which stripped the land and suppressed indigenous traditions, customs, and language by assimilationist policies that aimed to create linguistic homogeneity throughout Japan. Japanese hegemonic legislation has long been a powerful force in the erasing of indigenous histories and silencing indigenous voices in order to preserve the myth of a unified, homogenized Japan. The early 2000s marked a series of high school textbook reforms by conservative scholars that downplayed the Japanese Imperial Army's military aggression against Okinawans and other marginalized groups during World War II. For example, previous sections that originally read, "There were some people [in Okinawa] who were forced to commit suicide by the Japanese

Army” were revised to “There were some people who were driven to mass suicide.”<sup>58</sup> It was also not until June 6, 2008 that the Japanese Diet recognized Ainu as “Indigenous peoples of the northern regions of the Japanese archipelago, especially being the original inhabitants Hokkaido, with their own language, religion, and culture.”<sup>59</sup> And it was not until 2019 that the national government agreed to protect Ainu human rights and culture through the Ainu Culture Promotion Act. Homi Bhabha notes in his studies on colonization that there exists a comfortable symmetry between the oppressor and oppressed, the other and them, the power and the powerless, the hegemonic culture and the minor culture.<sup>60</sup> In order to preserve this symmetry, the oppressor-oppressed relationships between the national government and Ainu and Okinawan indigenous peoples have been buttressed by racial narratives that preserve cultural “otherness,” albeit one that is largely constructed sometimes by visual, sometimes by audible codes of difference. While Ainu and Okinawan peoples differ in many ways, I choose to speak about Mugen and Okuru in tandem here because of the visual-sonic nexus which they occupy in Watanabe’s animated series.

Mugen and Okuru are similarly coded as different via their indigenous-like clothing. Okuru’s headband and long, blue printed robe are reminiscent of Ainu traditional wear, while Mugen’s ankle and wrist tattoos and sword scabbard design are reminiscent of Okinawan indigenous patterns. These physical markers of difference are what enable characters on mainland Japan to take one look at them and judge that they are “not from around here.” In reality, Okinawans do not always appear physically different from mainland Japanese people.

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<sup>58</sup> Norimitsu Onishi, “Japan’s Textbooks Reflect Revised History,” *The New York Times* (April 1, 2007).

<sup>59</sup> “Ainu minzoku o senjūminzoku to suru koto o mitomeru ketsugian (dai ichirokuyū kai kokkai, ketsugi dai ichi gō) (Acknowledging the Ainu as Indigenous Peoples Decision (169<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly, Decision 1)),” *Shūgiin The House of Representatives, Japan* (June 2008), accessed Feb. 7, 2021, [http://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb\\_gian.nsf/html/gian/honbun/ketsugian/g16913001.htm](http://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_gian.nsf/html/gian/honbun/ketsugian/g16913001.htm).

<sup>60</sup> Bhabha, *Location*, 116.

Okinawan dramatist Chinen Seishin's 1978 play "Jinruikan" ("The Human Pavilion") shines light on this fact with an ironic tone. The narrative takes place in a museum where a man called "Trainer" is giving a tour of an exhibit in which Okinawan man and woman are on display with a stereotypical rudimentary hut and indigenous clothing. Standing next to the Okinawan woman, Trainer emphasizes that although she appears "normal" at first glance, a careful inspection beneath her clothes will surely reveal that her body is "as hairy as a hedgehog's" and reeks of sweet potato, a common Okinawan agricultural product.<sup>61</sup> This darkly humorous example exposes empty claims that fail to be supported by a visible reality and yet are readily believed by the Trainer's audience. These claims are representative of a national Japanese rhetoric that forcibly attempts to formulate "otherness" that is only "perceived" due to a preconceived notion that difference exists between the mainstream "us" and the marginalized "them."

Arguably, Okuru's and Mugen's visible differences function to set them apart from mainland Japan characters in an empowering rather than degenerating way. For these two characters, their differences seem to signify codes of visibility, which is especially crucial because the ethnic groups that they represent are often considered a "hidden," "silenced," or "dying" race. The fact that they stand out in the series is given a positive spin, supported by the previously mentioned Japanese hip-hop artist ideal of *medatsu*—to stand out—that functions as a framework through which to create an individual style through songs, appearance, and social messages. Their distinct characteristics work as a way to make visual "noise" that disrupts the normative symmetries of noise and audibility—namely, "who gets to makes noise and who doesn't, who gets their voices heard and who doesn't."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Chinen Seishin, "The Human Pavilion," trans. by Robert Tierney, in *Islands of Protest*, eds. Davinder L. Bhowmik and Steve Rabson (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 235.

<sup>62</sup> David Hendy, *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (London: Profile Books, 2013), xiii.

Noise, in hip-hop scholar Trisha Rose's definition that she postulates in her book *Black Noise*, is equivalent to "unintelligible yet aggressive sound" that disrupts "familiar domain[s]" and "sonic territory" in a way that is both highly individual and potentially draws "the community to war."<sup>63</sup> In other words, noise provides a challenge to normative structures and acts of turning deaf ears to underlying problems. It is also a means to mobilize marginalized communities towards a shared cause. The fact that Mugen's and Okuru's soundtracks do not only include hip-hop tracks but also indigenous songs that highlight Ainu and Okinawan language, artists, and instrumentation makes space for audible indigenous "noise." Even if the listener does not understand the words, the strength of the vocals and rhythms provides a powerful backdrop that highlights Okinawan and Ainu experiences of violence as if to reinsert these narratives into the history textbooks.

Mugen's and Okuru's insert songs, "Obokuri-Eeumi" ("Obtaining Our Bearings") by Asazaki Ikue and "Pekambe Uk" ("Wheat Harvesting Song") by Andō Umeko, respectively, signal an abrupt sonic change of tone from the series' usual hip-hop tracks. Not only are they clearly not hip-hop beats, but they are also in a language that most American and Japanese audiences cannot understand. "Obokuri-Eeumi" is a traditional song sung by a female folk singer from the Amami Islands, which is part of the Ryūkyū Arc, a chain of islands extending from the south of the Japanese archipelago to Taiwan. This song serves as the soundscape during a scene in which Mugen is flung from an exploding ship to his eminent death. As Mugen is pictured sinking deeper into the ocean, Asazaki's powerful yet melancholic voice with gentle piano accompaniment signals a flashback into Mugen's past. The forlorn soundscape of the song is closely connected to the red-tinted landscape, together symbolizing a motif of death, blood, and

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<sup>63</sup> Rose, *Black Noise*, 62-3.

violence that has ransacked both Mugen's life and environment. A flashback during the sequence reveals an image of a blood-stained Mugen standing in a forest of trees speckled with yellow butterflies. This scene is highly reminiscent of Okinawan author Medoruma Shun's short story "Gunchō no ki" ("The Tree of Butterflies," 2000), which tells the story of Yoshiaki, a young man who returns to his hometown in rural Okinawa and meets an old woman, Gozei, who was a comfort woman during World War II. As Gozei relives the days she spent with her lover in the past, she sees a *yuna* or yellow hibiscus tree, the flowers of which appear to her from a distance to be large clusters of yellow butterflies. The narration in this story that drifts seamlessly into Gozei's perspective, describes the trees, like those in Mugen's flashback, in a way that describes them as important symbols of Okinawan landscape and transient figments of the mind:

Bathed in moonlight, the clusters of yellow butterflies on the hibiscus (*yuna*) tree seemed on the verge of taking flight. [. . .] At last, a spirit emerges from my mouth as from a hollow tree, and, taking a butterfly shape, it flutters in the room, then escapes through the glass window, dancing toward the moonlit sky.<sup>64</sup>

Mugen's flashback scene seems to be informed by this imagery in which yellow butterflies are closely connected with the transience of human mortality. As Mugen lingers on the brink of death, the butterflies could very well similarly symbolize his spirit about to leave the land of the living. This forged link between Mugen's body and Okinawan natural landscapes through visual and sonic cues demonstrates a powerful space for vocalization of both Mugen's tragic life in particular and a broader extension of ongoing Okinawan residual tragedy and politics.

In a similar way, Okuru's flashback in episode seventeen, narrated by an Ainu folk song, is riddled with fire-ravaged landscapes and the graves of his fellow villagers who he was forced to bury with his own hands. The music of this scene interestingly begins and ends as diegetic

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<sup>64</sup> In Davinder L. Bhowmik, "Fractious Memories in Medoruma Shun's Tales of War," in *Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film*, eds. David Stahl and Mark Williams (Boston: BRILL, 2010), 225.

sound, or “actual sound” that originates from a source within the series’ world. In other words, Okuru is physically playing the instrumental part of the song with a large stringed *tonkori*, a native Ainu instrument. The music then serves as a trigger for his memories during which vocalization begins as non-diegetic sound, perhaps suggesting that it is a sound attached to his memories of his home and people. Towards the end of the song, Mugen stumbles upon Okuru playing his instrument and strikes up a conversation:

Mugen: That song sounds a lot like something I heard as a kid.

Okuru: Where are you from?

Mugen: Ryūkyū, in the far south.

Okuru: I’m from the far north.

Mugen: Ain’t it strange? We’re from such distant places, yet we’ve both heard the same thing.<sup>65</sup>

Mugen’s comment does not seem to signify a “unified Japan,” but rather indicates a unified marginalized experience. Mugen and Okuru endure similar ostracization and acts of violence from a country that does not yet recognize them as full people. Therefore, perhaps, their songs similarly mourn their experiences, just like blues in African American communities. In fact, Taylor Atkins notes in *Blue Nippon* that some jazz musicians have attempted to draw on indigenous folk music to mimic the historical vocabularies of indigenous cultures that parallel the blues.<sup>66</sup> Especially if we consider that jazz is conceptualized as a diverse group of artists and styles rather than a single type of music, this association makes sense. Following this vein of thought, the fact that hip-hop is similarly a mix of different kinds of sampled music and snippets of culture, it can perhaps be understood as contemporary youth culture’s version of jazz. Then, *Samurai Champloo*, embodying a hip-hop spirit, can be understood as providing a similar space for a mixture of peoples, or what historian Vijay Prashad calls “polyculturalism,” which he

<sup>65</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 17, “Suiseimushi futa yume (Idling Life Away, Second Dream)/Lullabies of the Lost (Verse 2),” dir. Endo Hiroataka, written by Sugi Ryōta, aired Sept 23, 2004.

<sup>66</sup> Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 253.

argues can in itself provide a tool to combat social forces of racism against the contradictions of the visual.<sup>67</sup> Izsac, Okuru, and Mugen's examples demonstrate how *Champoo*'s characters form not a national community, but an *alternative* community of marginalized figures through a shared soundscape. Ultimately, they do not fit nor are they accepted into Japanese society. In fact, some even lose their life along the way. Without offering solutions, the series simply provides an empathetic space that makes marginalized narratives visible and audible so that marginalized figures, perhaps as an example for real people in Japanese society, can create and negotiate their own bonds among and between people like themselves instead of trying to fit in to a mainstream population.

The marginalized narratives in *Champoo* certainly symbolize a political fracturing of ideas of Japan as a homogenous nation and an incorporation of a transnational hip-hop ideals in order to articulate alternative forms of Japanese identity. Yet, Condry suggests that it would be misleading to suggest that all hip-hop is an active vehicle for progressive change.<sup>68</sup> Especially considering the fact that *Samurai Champloo* is an animated series, its medium alone implies the presence of limitations to its political potential. In American hip-hop, the concept of "keeping it real" encompasses questions of authenticity in the sense of whether or not artists' music reflects their true-to-life experiences. However, MC Boo of the Dassen Trio, who use comedy and Kansai dialect in their raps, argues in a 1995 interview that "keeping it real" for him and his group means "good things should be fun."<sup>69</sup> In the same way, even if *Samurai Champloo* is understood as activism, it is ultimately the playful kind that resonates with contemporary strands of "freeter activism" in Japan. If we are to comprehend *Champoo* holistically in its global

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<sup>67</sup> Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), xi-xii.

<sup>68</sup> Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 30.

<sup>69</sup> Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan*, 72.

moment, I find it crucial in this final section to situate it, its creators, and even its characters in the context of early second millennium Japan, approximately from 2000 to 2006.

### **“PLAY” IN POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

After the social decline during the so-called “lost decade” of the 1990s in Japan, the Japanese social environment was especially unforgiving to youth populations. The government blamed them for social maladies, such as drastic drops in employment and widespread increases of social withdrawal (*hikkikomori*), and criticized them for not trying to be “successful.” However, this version of “successful” was, again, not in the interests of the individuals but in the interests of the hegemonic structures of society. Freeter activism beginning in the early 2000s was one of the responses to this criticism. Freeters, or marginalized individuals without stable professions, pioneered new ways of reaching out to and empowering those who socially withdrew and other groups seen as lacking public voice by staging government resistance through lighthearted plays and sound-demos. Instead of questioning whether something is correct or not like earlier postwar forms of activism, sociologist Mōri Yoshitaka suggests that what matters most in these movements is “whether it is fun or not.”<sup>70</sup>

Watanabe’s work, with its samplings of history, hip-hop beats mixed with samurai elements, and marginalized stories mixed with frequent humor, seems to fit right into this type of activism. While politically vocal in many ways, *Samurai Champloo* does not appear to have concrete political goals. Its type of “activism” is, therefore, highly reminiscent of the types of “*sawagi*,” or playful “commotion” reflected in the movements of Matsumoto Hajime, founder of

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<sup>70</sup> In Cassegård, *Youth Movements*, 5.

*Shirōto no ran* (Amateur Riot), a group of young people that run recycle shops and cafés near Kōenji Station part-time. By holding jobs that are not considered “stable,” “profitable,” or even “successful” by mainstream standards, these young people are considered part of the freeter population that the Japanese government so resents. Their acts of protest, which most often include inviting passers-by to cook hotpots in public spaces, is atypical of common ideas of activism, which usually entail some kind of empowering conflict. However, Matsumoto argues that there is also power to be gained by this type of “play.” He claims that playful demonstrating is a way of “keeping up the pressure” in order to accumulate the necessary experience needed to gain the confidence needed to stand up to authorities.<sup>71</sup> In short, Matsumoto’s activism is a type of invitation to join a more fun world in which authorities and regular citizens work towards a more balanced playing field. While his actions are not confrontational per se, they strongly echo the ethic of Japanese hip-hop artists and Watanabe’s hip-hop samurai.

In *Samurai Champloo* episode eighteen, for example, Jin finds that his former master’s twin sons, Tatsunoshin and Kazunosuke, have abandoned their samurai lineage and swords by picking up the brush and defacing buildings with their graffiti. Following a hip-hop ethic *over* a samurai one, the twins claim that graffiti, or tagging, “replaces the sword (*ken ni kawaru mono*)” and helps them feel alive.<sup>72</sup> The controversial space that graffiti holds between art and vandalism seems to classify it as a playfully political statement. In a battle between the two brothers to tag the most dangerous places with their words, they finally end up at Hiroshima castle—the ultimate symbol of the shogunal government’s authority that pushed their father to commit suicide. The final scene is an almost radically updated version of the forty-seven rōnin-type act

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<sup>71</sup> Cassegård, *Youth Movements*, 213.

<sup>72</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 18, “Bunburyōdo (The Pen and the Sword)/War of the Words,” dir. Yamamoto Sayo, written by Satō Dai, aired Jan 22, 2005.

of revenge. However, instead of murdering someone and killing themselves to atone for the crime of murder, the brothers utilize hip-hop culture to make a political statement on the face of a government building. Through the power of words rather than violence, they uphold hip-hop ideals of personal statement and rebellion instead of overromanticized samurai ideals of sacrifice and duty. Similar to Matsumoto's activities, the brothers' graffiti on Hiroshima castle represents an act of reclaiming space in the public arena and making themselves visible and audible to society. Especially if we believe philosopher Jacques Rancière's understanding of the political as the reconfiguration of space through an "intervention in the visible and the sayable," both Matsumoto's and Watanabe's work can be considered political, even though it is via a means classified as "*sawagi*" and "play."<sup>73</sup>

In his analysis of freeter movements, Carl Cassegård agrees with Matsumoto in that "play" in these movements is closely intertwined with empowerment. Informed by the freeter movement case studies that he studies, his rationale is that empowerment "arises when the feeling of powerlessness is overcome" and "a sensation of pleasurable lightness and freedom from the burdens of everyday life is created through a bracketing of social reality."<sup>74</sup> An example in *Samurai Champloo* that illustrates this "empowerment" and "lightness" occurs in episode nine, when an aged Hakone checkpoint guard recalls the only day that the checkpoint was breached by the series' focal characters, Mugen, Jin, and Fuu. After a sonic disk scratch and visible film reel, the old man begins narrating his memories in past tense with the screen in a sepia color. About a minute into the scene, the narration then changes to a younger voice and present tense narration. When Mugen, Jin, and Fuu are arrested for trying to sneak through the

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<sup>73</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum International, 2010), 37.

<sup>74</sup> Cassegård, *Youth Movements*, 213, 189.

checkpoint with forged identification, Mugen is sent to track down a group of warrior priests who have been making trouble in order to save the group from execution. According to the narrator, the warrior priests Mugen is after represent remnants of the past who, like samurai, are no longer needed during a time of peace. In a seemingly strong political statement, one priest shouts to his followers,

The ones who run this country now are stupid samurai who indulge in indolence and are interested in nothing but maintaining their power! [. . .] We will take back this country (*kono yō*) from those people who are good for nothing but waving their swords around and killing people!<sup>75</sup>

The criticism in the priest's voice sounds not only aimed at the samurai of the Edo period, but, given the series' confluences and mixtures of time, also seems relevant to the contemporary 2000s Japanese government. Resonating with concurrent hip-hop and freeter activism narratives, it is difficult not to understand this statement as political. However, the series, of course, includes a twist. The warrior priests' solution to the corrupt government is not overtly political action, but rather growing fields of "grass"—which is clearly marijuana—in order to "erase all hatred." When Mugen inadvertently sets the field on fire, the aroma throws everyone, including those at the Hakone checkpoint, into an intoxicated state, which is cleverly illustrated animetically through extremely warped and colorful images of Mugen and the priests. The Hakone checkpoint guard addresses Mugen sentimentally at the end of the episode:

On that night, everyone loved each other. The gates of the checkpoint were thrown open, and government officials, thieves, and animals all became equals. Yes, a revolution happened there, all right. [. . .] Proud stray dog, do you still remember that summer of love when you ran, danced, and fought in the purple haze?<sup>76</sup>

Here, it is "play" (specifically through recreational drugs) that accomplishes the political goal of equality of peoples. Furthermore, like the freeter movements, the checkpoint guard

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<sup>75</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 9.

<sup>76</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 9.

acknowledges this ridiculous mishap as a type of “revolution.” At the end of the episode, the image on the screen suddenly transforms into a grainy film strip that has come loose from its reel. The screen fades to black and the old guard adds a final phrase: “Just kidding (*nantsutte*).”

How much of what the audience has just seen and heard is serious and how much was not? The checkpoint guard’s last comment suggests that none of that matters, since it is all simply “play.” However, there is certainly a feeling of lightness and freedom that the characters experience that is characteristic of the “playful revolution” enacted by Matsumoto and other marginalized figures in Japanese society participating in freeter movements. In line with the rules that this type of revolution entails, *Samurai Champloo* similarly centralizes marginalized narratives, giving them a place to be seen, albeit in an animated form, and heard through the language of hip-hop beats, indigenous music, and, in the case of Okuru, the instrument he plays. The series, therefore, seems to resonate with the type of politics performed by freeter activism as well as with the notion of hip-hop samurai in the shared ideal of the use of visibility and audibility to empower the individual. Working together in the style of *chanpurū*, these elements form an alternative image of the samurai, and therefore “Japaneseness,” that seems to provide a role model for contemporary youth generations who do not fit into a “normative” mold.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of the final episode, after the three leading characters find the samurai who smells like sunflowers and experiencing a lifetime’s worth of adventures that almost costs them their lives, Fuu admits that the coin that she tossed at the beginning of their journey to convince Mugen and Jin to help her was a false call. Jin and Mugen are shocked that they have essentially

been tricked into participating in a fiasco that makes up the narrative of *Samurai Champloo*. As with episode 9, Watanabe mischievously makes the audience question what they just watched even at the very end of the series. What was it all for? Did anyone even gain anything from this experience? Yet Jin and Mugen, although shocked by Fuu's confession, part ways with a smile. After several episodes of wanting to kill each other, Jin tells Mugen, "I feel like I know now what I have been searching for. Although I have always been alone, I have made friends (*nakama*) for the first time."<sup>77</sup> A desire, therefore, seems to exist at the core of *Champloo*'s narrative to, through creative and playful mixture and politics, create space for an alternative sense of community for youth culture that confronts Japan's norms and restrictions, builds courage to stand up to authority, and establishes visibility and audibility within their environment. In doing so, Watanabe does not utilize a typical Japanese samurai that represents traditional values of duty, sacrifice, and servitude to a higher power. In fact, as I have thus shown, that type of samurai in *Champloo* is considered constraining and "outdated" (*furui*). Rather, *Champloo*'s characters come together as a community of transcultural hip-hop samurai that attempt to balance societal and historical hierarchies with anachronism, marginalized music and narratives, and playful revolution. While this may not be a politics that makes a "real" impact, it is still a public politics that asserts legitimacy for a certain type of lifestyle that differs from the mainstream. By encouraging his audiences to *actively* listen to his series that strives to *become* the music and culture of hip-hop, Watanabe invites the like-minded to join this alternate community that is strengthened by the individualization of identity, untethered by the freedom of play, and seasoned by the dialogue of mixture whenever they get the urge to play the series, watch its visuals, and listen to its rhythms.

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<sup>77</sup> *Samurai Champloo*, episode 26, "Shōji ruten sono san (Circle of Transmigration 3)/Evanescent Encounter (Part 3)," dir. Watanabe Shin'ichirō and Yamamoto Sayo, written by Watanabe Shin'ichirō, aired Mar 19, 2005.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Resonances of “Moanin” in *Apollo on the Slope*: Navigating Racial Systems through Synesthesia and Jazz

At the beginning of artist Kodama Yuki’s manga series *Sakamichi no Aporon* (*Apollo on the Slope*, 2008-2012), the year is 1966. Nishimi Kaoru, a sixteen-year-old adolescent in the spitting image of American jazz pianist Bill Evans, transfers from a city near Tokyo to a high school in Sasebo, a small port town in Nagasaki, Japan. There, his whole world is turned around when his standard Japanese suddenly becomes the minor language, and an encounter with the school delinquent, Kawabuchi Sentarō, accompanied by an introduction to the song “Moanin” by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, converts the amateur classical pianist into a jazz fanatic.

*Bashān!* The onomatopoetic clang of a drum cymbal literally pierces Kaoru’s ears in the form of rigid katakana as he experiences Sentarō’s first jazz performance (Figure 4.1). As Sentarō continues to play, the “sounds” of his performance are characterized by hard onomatopoetic sounds (*doshan*, *daka-daka*, *dotata*) and emphasized by sharply formed textual sound effects and piercing vertical lines (Figure 4.2). However, in the next instant, the onomatopoeia disappears. Although Sentarō is still performing, the depiction of sound shifts to his body, his expression, and particles bursting through the air like light, wind, and water. At this point, readers are presented with a “silent” spread of panels, but this is not to suggest that there is no “sound,” at least in the imagined sense. In fact, these panels are rather “loud” and dynamic.



Figure 4.1. The sound of the drum symbol literally pierces Kaoru’s ears. (*Apollo*, vol. 1, p. 94).



Figure 4.2. *Sentarō's first performance—sharp onomatopoeic sounds shift to the body.* (Apollo, vol. 1, pp. 94-6).

By “silent” I, instead, refer to a moment’s absence of directing text that forefronts the visual and leaves much to the readers’ independent imagination. In an article on silence in comics, John Lamothe contends that silent panels are an “exclamation point (irony intended)” for the visual.<sup>1</sup> In other words, they serve as a cue for readers to pause, take notice of the image, and consider its implied meanings within the context of the narrative.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Lamothe suggests that the fact that readers tend to spend more time on these textless panels is significant for the flow and overall experience of the narrative. “When the panel is not bound by time [dictated by text or speech],” he argues, “this lingering can have an immersive effect on readers.”<sup>3</sup> While readers surely may skip ahead with only a glance at these panels, what is important is that there is a freeing *opportunity*, perhaps characteristic of the comic book medium,

<sup>1</sup> John Lamothe, “Speaking Silently: Comics’ Silent Narratives as Immersive Experiences,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 81.

<sup>2</sup> Lamothe, “Speaking Silently,” 81.

<sup>3</sup> Lamothe, “Speaking Silently,” 81.

to linger on the page, analyze, and imagine. Unlike a film, for example, where the director dictates the amount of time dedicated to each scene, readers are given complete control over these moments of “silence” to pause and immerse themselves in the experience of the image and, in this case, in the vicarious experience of the main character’s mindset. Notably, within the “silent” panels of Sentarō’s drumming scene, it is not Sentarō’s playing that has changed but rather Kaoru’s perception of the sound, indicated by his softened facial expression and inner thoughts. On the following page, he narrates,

“[Sentarō’s] whole body is *saying* how fun the sound is. He’s stolen my whole attention. I can’t take my *eyes* or *ears* off him. My body *feels* hot...”<sup>4</sup>

Kaoru’s statement suggests that Sentarō’s drums invite a full bodied experience observed not only through the ears but also simultaneously multiple perceptions at once. Furthermore, the shifting *visual* representation of sound encourages readers to pause and perceive the performance as Kaoru perceives it—from loud and grating to mesmeric and liberating.

Drawing on Charles Forceville’s definition, I use the term “visual” here to refer to a variety of non-verbal information in the form of static images, including but not exclusive to layout, typography, and patterns that indicate motion and emotion.<sup>5</sup> Early semiotic studies of graphic language systems in comics, has long highlighted the comic strip medium as complex and encoded, while it was Scott McCloud’s 1993 theoretical work as a practicing comics artist that incited a significant global surge in comics academic scholarship in the United States. Yet, it has only been within the last decade that the visual in visual culture has come to be challenged as a singular hegemonic category, and comics and manga have come to be analyzed as a subtype of communication that can be understood through multiple senses and modes.

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<sup>4</sup> Kodama Yuki, *Apollo on the Slope* (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2008-2012) vol. 1, 96-7, emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Forceville, *Visual and Multimodal Communication: Applying the Relevance Principle* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2020), 1.

## “LISTENING” IN MANGA

In *Comics and the Senses*, comics scholar Ian Hague argues that not only sight but a particular mode of “seeing,” facilitated through multiple organs of sensation, is necessary to analyze the visual narrative of comics.<sup>6</sup> The ability to activating this particular mode, he suggests, indicates that comics are not simply static objects, but rather “change and are changed over time, modifying the space they occupy as they are being read,” much like a performance, or even jazz.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Hague chooses mainly to focus on the comic as an object, drawing a firm line between audibly perceived sound (through physical contact with the comic book) and imagined sound (within the text of the narrative). Comics scholar Catherine Khordoc, however, places significance on the meaning created from this “illusion” or “effect” of sound through visual devices, which she claims is a characteristic unique to comics.<sup>8</sup> In other words, while sound in terms of physical vibrations through the air may be difficult to reproduce in comics, artists incorporate various techniques that create alternative forms of sound that invite readers to “hear” in different ways. It is, therefore, following this train of discourse that I understand perceived and imagined sounds as synonymous in the sense that they are similar structures of sensation closely intertwined with perhaps an even more expansive sensory system that includes but also moves beyond the five Aristotelian senses.

More specifically, in this chapter I analyze the use of sound in *Apollo on the Slope*, a

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Hague, *Comics and the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Hague, *Comics*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Khordoc, “The Comic Book’s Soundtrack: Visual Sound Effects in *Asterix*,” in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, eds. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 158.

manga series that incorporates jazz into a visual medium and racialized structures into a historical fiction-based Japanese society. My analysis focuses particularly on the two leading characters Kaoru and Sentarō, who are two marginalized figures for whom jazz functions in often racialized ways informed through American racial politics as a mode through which to free the senses of perception. In a 2018 interview, the author Kodama Yuki expressed that some of her inspiration for this series came from manga artist Atsushi Kamijō's 1980s series TO-Y, which, in portraying an underground punk rock band's attempt to reach stardom, defied contemporary conventions of portraying sound in manga.<sup>9</sup> "However, rather than simply represent sound itself," Kodama reveals, "I wanted [in *Apollo*] to draw the ways in which music connects people."<sup>10</sup> In order to analyze Kodama's methods that do not only attempt to depict music in a "silent" medium but also attempt to utilize music in order to explore the core of human relationships, I suggest that a reevaluated approach to reading visuals and text is necessary within her comics. This approach should incorporate Hague's notion of "seeing" as well as "listening" in the entirety of its meanings as I have so far suggested (close reflection, a disruption of preconceived discourses of race, and a critical tool to measure and actively negotiate accessibility to difference-intimating spaces) to imagine alternate ways to understand the workings of *Apollo on the Slope* in particular and the manga medium in general.

In order to do this, I offer synesthesia, a term which literally means to perceive (*esthesia*) together (*syn*), as a useful ideological framework. As Dutch author and scientific researcher Cretien Van Campen reveals in *The Hidden Sense: Synesthesia in Art and Science*, synesthesia represents a concept once marked in neurology as a congenital disability that has come to be

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<sup>9</sup> Asano, "Sakamichi no Aporon, Kaoru wa motto bishōnen ni naru yotei datta!?: Kodama Yuki intabyū," Hon no hikidashi, March 9, 2018, <https://hon-hikidashi.jp/enjoy/47080/>.

<sup>10</sup> Asano, "Kodama Yuki intabyū," 2018, my emphasis.

understood as a spatial extension of the senses with the potential to—like Salomé Voegelin’s notion of “listening”—perceive other dimensions of reality.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it expands “listening” in a way that releases it from the limitations of being an experience through the ears, thereby contesting conventional ranges of perception and hegemonically visual structures of space. Especially with race, which is often recognized as a system of oppression with a bias towards the visual, synesthetic listening provides a name to a mode of simultaneously sensory, spatial, and racial negotiation. Within manga, especially, synesthesia urges us to consider “looking” and “vision” not as superior or singular, but rather as multimodal, tied closely in conjunction with other senses and experienced through the entire body. As in clinical synesthesia where regions of the brain that do not normally communicate show signs of “crosstalk,” comics are able to move readers to perceive motion, emotion, and sound where there is “none” in the physical perceptible sense. It is perhaps useful, therefore, to consider writer and translator Lisa Wilcut’s use of synesthesia in her analysis of haiku, where she describes it as a “heightened awareness” of the stimulation of several senses at once.<sup>12</sup> While both haiku and comics may not be able to incite the senses at a physically perceptible level (i.e. soundwaves), it is readers’ heightened awareness of their own complex response to the visuals on the page that enables an exploration of an existential moment.

Moreover, I contend that the concept of synesthesia in *Apollo* can be pushed further to serve as a metaphorical framework in which to perceive the invisibility, mutability, and temporality of race. As Les Back and Michael Bull point out in their introduction to *The Auditory Culture Reader*,

Racism is a discourse of power that largely thinks with its eyes. The idea of race, itself a product of history rather than nature, is a categorical mode of thinking that

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<sup>11</sup> Cretien Van Campen, *The Hidden Sense: Synesthesia in Art and Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Wilcut, “Synesthesia in Japanese Literature and Culture.”

anchors human difference in *the visible*.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, synesthesia, with its access to multiple senses at once, has the ability to challenge race in its conventional rootedness in the visual. At the same time, it is able to aid in the reimagining of other ways to understand alternative lived experiences of “Japaneseness” through connections to or separations from the various senses. In this chapter, I utilize synesthesia within *Apollo on the Slope* as an ideological framework closely connected to “listening” in order to destabilize conventional understandings of manga, the senses, race, and identity in Japan in order to explore uncharted ways in which space is both metaphorically and literally negotiated for marginalized identities on the manga page. After all, as Bill Richardson suggests in *Spatiality and Symbolic Expression*, a particular focus on space in literary texts has the ability to facilitate an understanding of how spatiality and related concepts of identity, location, and (social) movement play a major role in the constitution of the self.<sup>14</sup> In this light, it is crucial to consider how representations of “sound” and “rhythm” across the page help provide visual complexity and spatial configurations that work together to perform their own imaginings of acoustic, temporal, and spatial properties of visualized sound.

The above understandings of acoustics in manga are fundamental for an analysis of *Apollo on the Slope*, which invites a particular type of “listening” that is able to access “sound” within the silences of the manga page and dominant models of social constructs through themes of jazz music and racial systems. A genre of music and culture that from its conceptions has embodied innovation, embraced improvisation, and expressed complexities of the black

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<sup>13</sup> Les Back and Michael Bull, “Introduction,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, eds. Les Back and Michael Bull (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 16.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Richardson, “Symbol, Situatedness, and the Individuality of Literary Space,” in *Spatiality and Symbolic Expression: On the Links between Place and Culture*, ed. Bill Richardson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 41.

experience, I read the synesthetic and intentional use of jazz as a tool for negotiating identity and creating space, in both a metaphorical and literal sense, for the voices of the series' marginalized characters. It is especially the destabilizing quality of synesthesia and intrinsic racial aspect of jazz that I understand as working through poignant questions surrounding the false notions that principally torment the two young men's lives within their social positions regarding difference, dichotomy, and purity of identity. It, therefore, proves crucial to explore *how* in fact this tool functions to reconfigure the "silent" but meaningfully ordered spaces of comics and reconsider established centers and margins in order to allow for affective spaces in which communicable, communal identities are possible.

### **SENSORY OBSTRUCTION AS METAPHOR FOR MARGIN**

In her early work *Writing Margins*, Terry Kawashima significantly defines "margin" *not* as an unimportant category, but rather as "an unstable and negotiable result" of third party attempts to promote certain ideas at the expense of marginalized targets.<sup>15</sup> Finding that labels, such as "undesirable" or "unwanted," tend to inscribe certain "central" biases, she pushes for a reconsideration of marginality in order to understand it in diverse and relational terms. "Studying the phenomenon of marginalization," she argues, "is not an investigation of an obscure and independent unit of society called the margin but an exploration of the very workings of the relationship between textual representation and claims to power."<sup>16</sup> In other words, focusing on marginality has the ability to hold the very category of "margin" in contention by problematizing

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<sup>15</sup> Terry Kawashima, *Writing Margins: The Textual Constructions of Gender in Heian and Kamakura Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Kawashima, *Writing Margins*, 3.

its supposed uniformity, negotiability, and access to power. Although Kawashima's work focuses on margins and marginality as conceptualized in pre- and early modern Japanese literature and society, her arguments provide an insightful reconsideration of the relationship between margin and center that can be applied to *Apollo on the Slope*.

Both Kaoru and Sentarō, while from very different economic backgrounds, are similarly “invisible” and “inaudible” characters, not unlike those in Nakagami Kenji's works, in the sense that they are often ignored and treated with disdain within their respective environments. Interestingly, their positions of marginality and difference manifest within the narrative as constraints on the access to the senses imposed upon them by representatives of hegemonic communities. In a word, the senses are presented as a privileged space guarded by systems of oppression, albeit at micro levels of society, such as family and school. Obstructions to these sensory spaces, then, appear as an extended metaphor for marking margins and systems that act like race.

Although Kaoru is raised in a life of economic privilege, he hungers for the love of his mother, who disappeared when he was a child, and his father, who is too busy with work to care for him. Even his aunt, who provides him a home in Nagasaki, treats him with disdain. She forbids him, for instance, from touching the family piano without permission. When he hesitantly attempts to play one morning, she shames him for lacking a mother to teach him any manners or sense. At this moment, the space in the panel around him turns pitch black, as if visually indicating Kaoru's forced detachment from his ability to touch, hear, and speak through the piano. As a quiet young man who finds it easiest to communicate emotionally through an instrument, his aunt's sensory inhibition marks an act by oppressive social structures to push Kaoru to the margins and silence his voice.

In an even more telling instance during his aunt's Christmas party, the image of a cage surrounds Kaoru as he is forced to play the piano as entertainment for the guests (Figure 5).

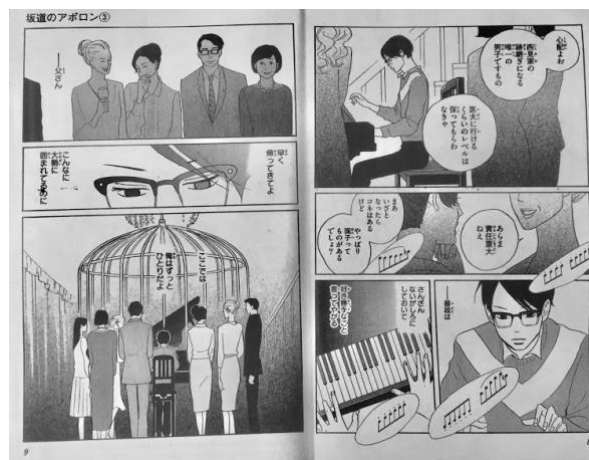


Figure 5. Kaoru feels caged at his aunt's Christmas party. (*Apollo*, vol. 3, pp. 8-9).

While Kaoru is given permission to touch the piano here, he remains hindered from playing what he wants and how he wants. Therefore, in a way, his inner voice is still being forcibly obstructed. While the cage imagery on page 9 most blatantly reveals his constricted emotional state, the musical notes that he plays on page 8 are also, in a way, visually “caged.” Each note is both affixed to a bar and punctuated with a dot, which seemingly denotes the strict precision and stiffness of Kaoru’s playing and is further emphasized by the look of melancholy on his face. This visual representation of music is conspicuously different from moments in which Kaoru plays jazz, where musical notes, when they appear, are depicted as independent and free from any restrictive bars or punctuating dots. In other words, there is simultaneously a visible and multisensory difference between Kaoru’s felt moments of marginalization and centralization. When Kaoru interacts with jazz music, musical notes dance independently within oblong speech balloons, sound appears in the form of dynamic sparks of light and particles in the white space of the panels, and joy is illustrated on Kaoru’s face and body. These moments indicate a pure

release of emotion as both Kaoru and the reader is given free reign of the senses and the manga page, thereby symbolizing centralization and empowerment in the self and environment.

Conversely, moments of marginalization are marked by the obstructive voices of others and manifest themselves in the form of restrictions to the senses and constrictive visual cues.

Although Kaoru himself is visually no different from his society and the marginalizing treatment that he receives is felt more than seen, the manga medium is able to visualize these feelings as silence, rigid sounds, and claustrophobic experiences within his spaces of expression.

In Sentarō's case, he grows up not even knowing his parents, who were said to have been a Japanese woman and an American GI who abandoned him at a church as an infant. Especially during the 1960s, during which the effects of World War II and American occupation still lingered especially in port cities like Sasebo, Nagasaki, Sentarō's mixed identity—referred to at the time as “mixed blood” (*konketsu*)—is infused with fear of an enemy, metaphorical and literal rape, and stigmas of defeat.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Kaoru, Sentarō's marginality extends specifically from a historical discourse, which Jonathan Crewe suggests can be understood as “one response to widespread political violence done during the sixties and early seventies.”<sup>18</sup> In Japan, this political violence was largely a result of foreign occupation. In his book *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa*, Michael Molasky posits that immediate post-war Japan was largely overtaken by an “economy of desire,” characterized heavily by often forced prostitution of Japanese women to American soldiers.<sup>19</sup> Molasky further contends that it was the “biproducts,” or the children, of this economy of desire to which Japanese “purity” remained an

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<sup>17</sup> The term “*konketsu*” appears exactly once in *Apollo* itself. Looking at an old photo album, Kaoru finds a young picture of Sentarō. Not knowing it is Sentarō, he thinks to himself, “I wonder if this kid is mixed (*konketsu kana*)” (Kodama, *Apollo*, vol. 3, 35).

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Crewe, “Defining Marginality?,” *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 121.

<sup>19</sup> Michael S. Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 65.

unattainable ideal and “racial impurity” became an impeding stigma.<sup>20</sup> This was not only the fate of geographical extremities, like Okinawa, but also especially of port cities, like Sasebo, where American soldiers were often stationed. In *Apollo*, the constant appearance of American marines in the background is a persistent reminder of the afterbirth of occupation (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Panels of American presence. (*Apollo*, vol. 1, p. 86/ vol. 2, p. 169/ vol. 2, p. 139).

Within this particular configuration, the postmodern celebration of cultural mixture via “*chanpurū bunka*” discussed in the previous chapter becomes irrelevant, as identities like Sentarō’s bring to the forefront darker nuances of hybridity in relation to biological standards. If *chanpurū* refers to mixture in the creative, enriching, and overall positive sense, words like *konketsu*, denoting the somewhat eugenic essence of the term “hybrid” or *haiburiddo* in Japanese, is the exact undesired “impurity” that *chanpurū* attempts to reassess. In linguistic terms, *chanpurū* is a more familiar word from Okinawan dialect that refers to a well-loved dish, while *haiburiddo* is an English loan word developed from biological and botanical origins. Thus, while *chanpurū* embraces mixed cultural origins, *konketsu* and *haiburiddo* are estranging terms that highlight the constructed biological connotations of race with the violence of occupation and war. While Sentarō is never directly called *konketsu* in the narrative, he is labeled “*Amerika*”

<sup>20</sup> Molasky, *American Occupation*, 65.



As if to strike a final blow, after his adoptive grandmother has forbade the young Sentarō to touch his infant stepbrother, she picks up the infant and deliberately murmurs within earshot, “Children with black hair are truly the most adorable.”<sup>23</sup> Unlike Kaoru, Sentarō’s difference is marked visibly by his curly, light brown hair that sets him apart both from the mainstream society and serves as an indication of a lack of belonging within his adoptive family. Yet, his marginality, while perhaps to a different degree, is similarly manifested as hegemonic obstructions to the senses. The narrative, therefore, seems to draw a parallel between Kaoru’s and Sentarō’s experiences of marginality. This is not a homogenizing comparison, but rather one that finds valuable common ground between two aforementioned experiences of race that I wish to consider within the space of this dissertation—historically marginalized groups and alternate lived experiences. It is these kinds of narratives, I argue, that can help reevaluate existing discourses of race and marginalizing systems that work like race in Japan as well as reimagine alternate communities in which marginalized figures can locate a sense of belonging.

Both Kaoru’s and Sentarō’s experiences of abandonment and lack of stable emotional roots are manifested and punctured by their foster families’ active obstructions to the access of modes of perception and expression. It is through these obstructions that the narrative’s two focal characters are differenced within their own families and are prohibited the freedom to be who they truly are. In this way, Kaoru and Sentarō are marginalized not only by their society, but also within even their most intimate social circles. This is further emphasized by their most prominent markers of difference: respectively, their language and their appearance.

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<sup>23</sup> Kodama, *Apollo*, vol. 3, 41.

### SENSED DIFFERENCE THROUGH LANGUAGE AND “LOOK”

Thus far, I have positioned Kaoru’s and Sentarō’s marginality more or less on the same level. However, the following section asserts that it is also important to consider the ways in which their marginality functions at different registers and how this can contribute to how different strands of race in Japanese society are articulated, at least on the manga page.

For Kaoru, his difference manifests itself not in his appearance, as race is often assumed. In fact, his black hair and simple appearance allows him to easily melt into a crowd. His mark of difference, therefore, exists in his voice and perception of those around him. On the manga page, this voice, expressed in standard Japanese, is heard by other characters and seen as both spoken and narrative written text. Kaoru’s position as the main narrator may be in part for practical reasons, since standard Japanese is more widely understood in Japan. However, his deliberate placement in an environment where a Japanese dialect is spoken by the majority intriguingly works to flip the usual linguistic hierarchy that, as linguist Neriko Musha Doerr indicates, “positions the educated class in Tokyo above others.”<sup>24</sup> Musha Doerr further stresses in her article “Standardization and Paradoxical Highlighting of Linguistic Diversity in Japan” that a standard language was established by the Meiji government (1868-1912) in order to create a unified—or, essentially, homogenized—community, and this initial imagined ideology continues to link linguistic proficiency and race to this day.<sup>25</sup> Within this discourse, dialects are often understood as an impediment to the stability of the nation-state and communication. Therefore, placing dialect as the majority language of the narrative space of *Apollo* challenges the centrality and normativity of standard Japanese, or “Tokyo dialect,” and the perpetuation of a nationalist

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<sup>24</sup> Neriko Musha Doerr, “Standardization and Paradoxical Highlighting of Linguistic Diversity in Japan,” *Japanese Language and Literature* 49 (2015): 390.

<sup>25</sup> Musha Doerr, “Standardization,” 393.

ideology in which, to borrow Musha Doerr's phrasing, "Japan, Japanese language, and Japanese people are overlapping, bounded units."<sup>26</sup> While this can be read as an empowering act for dialects, specifically the Nagasaki dialect, at the same time, it also functions to emphasize Kaoru's marginalized status from the very onset of the narrative. This also seems to function as a way to complicate the idea that those who speak a standard "Tokyo Japanese" must necessarily be the same. As we have seen, after all, Kaoru in fact represents not a mainstream but rather an alternative lived experience of Japaneseness.

The awareness of Kaoru's own difference also reveals itself through the ways in which he perceives attention from others. Although he claims to be used to transferring schools due to his father's navy job, he exhibits an adverse physical reaction to attention from people around him. Feeling the other students staring at him as he tours his new high school in Sasebo, he starts to feel nauseated and soliloquizes, "The unfamiliar intonation of country dialect... The piercing stares... This is the gaudiest (*hade*) welcome I've had yet."<sup>27</sup> The mention of "piercing stares" reveals that Kaoru sees the students' visual discrimination in their eyes, while simultaneously feeling it as a puncture through his body that pushes him to the point of nausea. I, therefore, find it fitting to consider Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the "look" at work here, which postulates that pride and shame have a physiological manifestation on the body through the "look" of others. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre takes the perspective of the subject and writes, "I am ashamed of myself as *I appear* to the Other."<sup>28</sup> Sartre has often been criticized for placing ontological shame at the center of a discourse on human subjectivity and intersubjectivity, since it reveals an underlying pessimism about human relations that is not necessarily present. However, I find it

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<sup>26</sup> Musha Doerr, "Standardization," 397.

<sup>27</sup> Kodama, *Apollo*, vol. 1, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. H.E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), 246.

helpful in this case to consider philosophy scholar Luna Dolezal's contemporary philosophical reconsideration of shame within Sartre's framework as an emotion that aids in the capacity for reflective self-awareness and intersubjectivity as well as reveals embodied vulnerability before others. She argues,

What gives shame its significance is the human need for connections to others through the physical body, or what we can understand as a form of primary belonging [. . . defined here as] a sense of connection to others that is embodied and that, furthermore, alleviates anxieties about physical vulnerability.<sup>29</sup>

In Kaoru's case, becoming the object of the students' gaze leads him to feel discomfort possibly from a sense of shame of being seen and heard as different and, thus, vulnerable and alien. This discomfort is, then, notably relieved when he makes a meaningful connection with the class representative, Mukae Ritsuko, and later with Sentarō, both of whom become his lifelong friends. In this case, making a connection with others like him functions as an alleviation for Kaoru's anxieties sparked by the "look" of his classmates and manifests itself physically as the disappearance of his nausea.

In addition, the fact that Kaoru's above soliloquy explicitly highlights the particular intonations of dialect around him also reveals an acute awareness of the "look" as sound. In a way, he seems to sense his classmates' discriminatory gazes not only in their eyes but also through their voices, as their "unfamiliar" accents draw a sharp line of difference between him and them. Notably, the word "gaudy (*hade*)," which he uses to describe quality of the students' "welcome," has connotations in both Japanese and English of "loudness," which can be interpreted as either visual or audible. Therefore, it is possible to read Kaoru's perception of his classmates' "look" as "loud," in the various senses of the word. This highlights that the "look" is

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<sup>29</sup> Luna Dolezal, "Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging: Reconsidering Sartre's Account of Shame," *Human Studies* 40, no. 3 (2017): 422.

not necessarily performed solely with the organ of sight nor felt exclusively as such. For Kaoru, his classmates' "look" clearly manifests itself as painful transmodal noise with visceral consequences.

In contrast, Sentarō represents a more distinguishable illustration of race with visible physical characteristics that signify his ontological difference from mainstream society. His body is large and strong, his striped shirt under his uniform is unique from his classmates' attire, a prominent cross-like scar crosses his cheek, and his hair is curly and light-colored. These features are certainly not unusual for a manga character, especially if we consider those with lanky limbs, large eyes, and blonde hair like the common example of Sailor Moon. However, a reflection of the "world of the manga," also known as the *sekaikan*, can reveal that whereas *Sailor Moon* is full of fantastical characters with large eyes and unusually colored hair, *Apollo* is almost exclusively filled with comparatively realistic, black-haired characters. Therefore, while Sailor Moon's appearance mingles fairly seamlessly in her world, Sentarō is physically conspicuous in his. In her article "Seeing Faces, Making Races," Terry Kawashima argues that many people outside of Japan will understand Sailor Moon as white "only because that viewer has been culturally conditioned to read visual images in specific racialized ways that privilege certain cues at the expense of others and lead to an overdetermined conclusion."<sup>30</sup> In Japan, the same may be true but in reverse. In other words, Japanese readers have been culturally conditioned to understand all manga characters as Japanese despite their visual personas and, therefore, may be surprised when Sentarō reveals his mixed parentage. In *Apollo*'s case, racial cues are visually-constructed on Sentarō's body perhaps in order to encourage Japanese readers

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<sup>30</sup> Terry Kawashima, "Seeing Faces, Making Races: Challenging Visual Tropes of Racial Difference," *Meridians* 3, no. 1 (2002): 161, emphasis in the original.

to “see” him as a mixed-race character in order to at least initially understand him as different from those around him.

For instance, Sentarō’s hair becomes his primary emotional and psychological complex after he hears his adoptive grandmother comment that children with black hair are more adorable and precious. In a flashback, his classmates in elementary school are also seen mocking his hair as “curly” and “feminine,” suggesting that it marks him as weak and inferior to them (who have black hair). Here, Sartre’s “look” comes into play again as a force instigated by those in an imagined position of power that causes Sentarō to feel ashamed by, in this case, his physical appearance. By pointing out the markers of his physical difference, Sentarō’s classmates and adoptive grandmother reaffirm the imagined dichotomy of “us” and “them,” the imagined normativity of the Japanese body, and the imagined purity of Japanese identity.

This body politic connected to the “look” is most clearly illustrated in volume eight of the manga series when Sentarō has a literal moment of self-reflection. As he stares at his own image in the bathroom mirror, his reflection first appears as his current teenage image and shifts into a younger version of himself that ages frame-by-frame on the next page (Figure 8). Seeing himself simultaneously in the current moment and as a product of time, he soliloquizes,

“Sometimes... I don’t know what I am. Who is that person reflected in the mirror? Where is he from and what is he doing here? Today, some stranger told me to go back to America again. But my place is in this house. I don’t get it. Dad smiled today ’cuz someone said baby Kota [his son by blood] looked like him. If I looked like dad, would he smile at me, too?”<sup>31</sup>

This scene is significant because, first, it marks a rare instance in which Sentarō’s thoughts take the foreground in his Nagasaki dialect. For a brief moment, dialect decentralizes Kaoru’s

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<sup>31</sup> Kodama, *Apollo*, vol. 8, 23-4.



Figure 8. *Sentarō stares into the mirror.* (Apollo, vol. 8, pp. 23-4).

standard Japanese from the center of the narrative voice and adds a heightened sense of seeing and hearing of this differently intoned voice within the manga medium. In addition, Sentarō's fluctuating reflection appears between dark spaces of internal monologue that shifts between present and past tense. As a sequence of panels can articulate the temporal progression of narration, McCloud indicates that comics not only generally conflate space and time but are also uniquely able to represent past, present, and future in the same compositional unit of the page.<sup>32</sup> This is exactly what seems to be happening here. Although readers are likely meant to understand these images of Sentarō as occurring one-by-one along a linear passage of time, the past, present, and future are brought to the eye and ear simultaneously over the space of a three-page spread. As a result, the singularity of Sentarō's body, at least in its reflected form, is challenged by the conundrum of continuity and change. The faces in the mirror, existing in an uncanny zone between coexistence and separation, transform visibly on the page, each time with

<sup>32</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 104.

more scars, bruises, and a loss of innocence—suggesting a manifestation of the violence of Sentarō’s marginalization. As in Sartre’s “look,” the alienating perception of others affects the alienation that Sentarō experiences in the shifting of his own reflection within the mirror. In this vein, Sentarō’s case may offer a realm of possibilities for questioning established notions of identity through the body and vulnerability as well as modes of access to the workings of time and space. His distinctive outward appearance paired with his unmistakable dialect narrating the strange phenomenon of being called “America” although he is born and raised in Japan may be deliberately presented in order to ultimately deconstruct stereotypes around mixed race identity. However, it is also important to highlight that Sentarō does not experience relief from the “look” as immediately as Kaoru. Rather, the “look” in its various modes of perception becomes a type of trauma that stays with him as an uncanny reflection in the mirror. Therefore, the shame that Sentarō carries from the “look” is perhaps resonant with Sartre’s original pessimism. Read this way, the mirror scene could be emphasizing Sentarō’s inability to break free from marginal subjectivity, as in many racial narratives, depicted as his likeness futilely reflected in the mirror as multiple layers of loneliness and a failure to belong.

Throughout the series, both Sentarō and Kaoru are depicted as Other, figurative “exiles” in their environments through an aural, visual, and felt “look.” The disparities between the way in which their differences are manifested through the senses facilitates an exploration of various iterations of difference, marginality, race, and alternate lived experiences. While Sentarō’s experiences may have more pessimistic connotations than Kaoru’s, assessing these experiences side-by-side works to de-homogenize the marginal experience, as Kawashima argues is crucial to do, in order to portray it as a diverse space of people. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that marginalization is not a static form of categorization. In fact, one

reason for focusing on margins and the marginal is to analyze ways in which this very hegemonic formation is contested and reimagined. For instance, specifically focusing on authors writing from the margins in Germany, such as Tawada Yōko, Petra Fachinger says the following:

“Marginal” writers share an oppositional and counterdiscursive impulse through which they express the possibility of a community different from that offered by the dominant culture. Such resistance manifests itself in a process of deconstructing the binary structure of centre and margin, rather than replacing the centre. Rewriting thus entails a constructive moment that stresses the importance of agency, and may even anticipate solutions to potential cultural conflicts.<sup>33</sup>

This point is not only true for marginal writers but also for many who inhabit the interstitial non-place of the margin, which surely, in the fictional realm, includes Kaoru and Sentarō. In the following section, finding recourse in Fachinger’s claim, I suggest that it is these characters’ very marginality that drives them to actively search for the possibility of a community alternate from the mainstream that functions to deconstruct the current confined positions within the hegemonic constructs in which they find themselves. In *Apollo*, I find that this alternate community is reimagined through the emotional, sense-focused liberation provided through jazz and blackness.

### REIMAGINING COMMUNITY THROUGH JAZZ AND BLACKNESS

In her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, author bell hooks suggests that blues and, by extension, jazz began as a music and culture that provided a key means for black men to access their emotions and feel. She argues,

Just as today’s gangsta rap invites black males to adopt a cool pose, to front and fake it, to mask true feelings, the blues [and jazz] was an invitation to black men to be vulnerable, to express true feelings, to break open their hearts and expose them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Fachinger, *Rewriting Germany*, xii.

<sup>34</sup> bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), 139.

If an obstruction from the senses serves as a metaphor for Sentarō and Kaoru’s marginality, jazz then serves as a facilitation to reverse this positionality and difference, reopen the access to the senses, and making expression possible. However, it is crucial to highlight here that speaking about jazz necessitates an understanding of it not simply as a music, but as an originally *non-white American* music, performance, and culture. In the United States, this means that jazz’s foundations extend from the margins. In Japan, this means that jazz is both marginal and foreign. In fact, in his book *Blue Nippon*, Taylor Atkins contends that from a social mainstream perspective, jazz in Japan has continuously been considered both “an alien culture” and a “paramount example of cultural imperialism, which actively contributes to the erosion of indigenous social and aesthetic norms.”<sup>35</sup> It is, perhaps, because of this that jazz has maintained its marginal and “black” characterizations even upon its adaptation into Japan.

African American political activist Cornel West argues that it is precisely because of its often black positionality that jazz adopts “fluid and flexible positions toward reality [and is] suspicious of either/or viewpoints, dogmatic pronouncements, or supremacist ideologies.”<sup>36</sup> In this light, it can be understood that the marginality of blackness in American society generates a certain perspective unique to its position that is then reflected in many forms of African American music, culture, and performance. Here, we are reminded of Terri Elliott’s concept of “epistemic privilege” mentioned in Chapter One, which reveals itself as the ability of historically oppressed, exploited, or dominated groups to perceive strangeness in existing social constructs.<sup>37</sup> In the case of jazz, it is the “epistemic privilege,” ironically produced through disadvantages and hardship, of the black experience that provides jazz music, performance, and culture with a

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<sup>35</sup> Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 29.

<sup>36</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 150.

<sup>37</sup> Elliott, “Making Strange,” 475.

unique means of expression and unconventional outlook on society. This idea closely resonates with “black music ideology,” first expressed by political activists and artists Amiri Baraka, Frank Kofsky, and Stanley Crouch in 1960s United States, that suggests that music genres like jazz were in fact rooted in blackness and the black experience. This belief system, driven by a response to a perceived white encroachment on black music and culture, is used to assert that jazz is “not just a music but a world view,” and it is not simply what “African Americans *do* but how they *live*.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it cannot be ignored that jazz is often understood as an extension of black American culture, bodies, and experiences.

It is, then, meaningful that Sentarō’s entry point to jazz is through a black American soldier. Soon after constantly being told not to touch or look by his adoptive grandmother, Sentarō meets Roy, a black G.I. living in the American military base. Notably, the first thing Roy does is place two caramel candies in Sentarō’s hand (Figure 9). A stark difference from the treatment Sentarō receives from his adoptive family, this complete stranger reopens the young boy’s access to the senses of taste, movement, sight, smell, and touch. Roy is conspicuously the

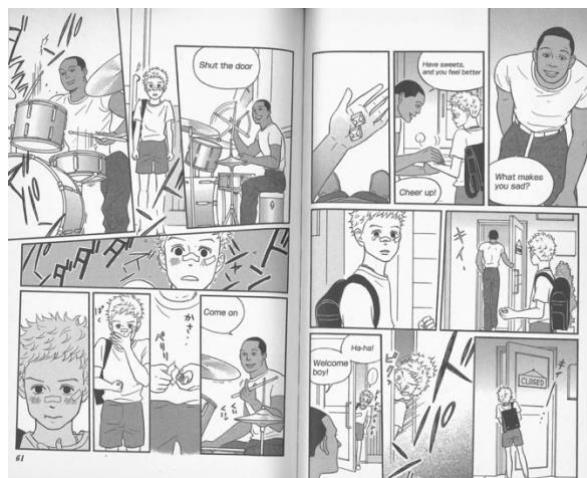


Figure 9. *Sentarō meets Roy*. (Apollo, vol. 3, pp. 60-1).

<sup>38</sup> Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 26.

first person for some time to speak kindly and directly to Sentarō, albeit in an untranslated English text: “What makes you sad? Have sweets, and you feel better. Cheer up!”<sup>39</sup> This English dialogue without subtitle or pronunciation gloss seems to be a deliberate choice to reflect a clouding of intelligibility for both Sentarō and many Japanese readers, as if encouraging readers to experience what Sentarō is experiencing and hear as he hears. At the same time, it does not seem to completely hinder communication between the two characters. An inspired expression lingers on a young Sentarō’s face as Roy walks away into a jazz bar. Sentarō is then moved to follow and finds the African American man playing the drums. At first, the sound of Roy’s drumming manifests itself in a comprehensible onomatopoeic Japanese text that simultaneously provides access to hearing and sight. Based on the sharp shapes of the onomatopoeic sounds, the drumming seems to sound loud and abrasive to the young boy. And yet, upon Roy’s invitation to try the drums himself, Sentarō does not speak but instead pops the caramel he was given into his mouth slowly over the span of three panels. This drawn out instant marks Sentarō’s movement as significant and suggests, through a physical representation of reaccess to perception, his measured acceptance of Roy’s invitation to reconnect with the senses.

Sentarō’s encounter with jazz through a black man is arguably not accidental, but rather organized with possibly two main reasons in mind. First, since jazz’s roots largely stem from black male experiences, Sentarō’s first lessons in jazz from a black man can be read as a conferral of authenticity. Authenticity is such a prominent concept in jazz that Taylor Atkins devotes an entire chapter to it in which he argues that authenticity has become a global “complex” or even “fetish” for many artists. While Atkins points to the ironic lack of a single “authentic” definition of the concept, he also notes that it is generally understood as “a peculiarly

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<sup>39</sup> Kodama, *Apollo*, vol. 3, 60.

modern response to the perceived erosion of particularized heritages and identities in an era of globalization.”<sup>40</sup> Authenticity is likely perceived as a modern response, because it was the modern era that produced mechanical devices that could record and then commodify cultural products, such as music. Through this commodification process, the necessity arose to claim ownership over certain products in order to earn a living as well as to avoid or at least reduce the chances of another group diminishing or at worst “stealing” the product. In other words, as cultural anthropologist Edward Bruner notes, authenticity implies a power structure in which one group claims rights over a particular cultural product or narrative and, therefore, acquire an “authority to authenticate.”<sup>41</sup> In American jazz, this authenticating power structure has often worked to flip mainstream racial politics in favor of black artists over white. It is perhaps the very struggle for and fragility of this power that, as Atkins indicates, positions authenticity as a central concern for any Japanese artist who performs or identifies with a musical genre typically characterized as “black.”<sup>42</sup> For Sentarō to take lessons in jazz from a black man, therefore, may be a necessary symbolic conferral of authenticity and permission to claim ownership over the music. At the same time, if the quality of jazz is judged by genuine life experiences and expressions of emotion, it is important to consider “authentic” as also signifying the “real,” “truthful,” and “heartfelt” aspects of performance.

This brings me to the second possible way in which Sentarō’s affiliation with blackness may be understood, which is as a symbolic correlation between black experiences and Sentarō’s experiences. In other words, Sentarō’s mixed identity is metaphorically “black” in the sense that he is marginalized and ostracized by society in ways similar to African Americans in the United

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<sup>40</sup> Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Edward Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism,” *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 2 (1994): 400.

<sup>42</sup> Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 27.

States. While this point is slightly more delicate to unpack than the one on authenticity, it may be helpful to consider Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, in which blackness plays a crucial role in the understanding of the meaning of the photograph. For Barthes, blackness is the site and the mark of the ideal object as well as the ideal spectator. It is the personification of a culture before purity and absolute looking. Many scholars identify a similar intense respect, idealism, and even fetishism of blackness in Japanese culture. Both Atkins and Ian Condry indicate that a solidarity with blackness is prevalent among many Japanese jazz and hip-hop communities, some of which balance precariously on the line between blatant cultural appropriation and respectful borrowing. Atkins suggests that this may extend from the belief instigated by Commodore Perry's forcible "opening" of Japan (1853-1854) and reinforced by Japan's defeat in World War II that Japanese is a "colored" race due to a shared familiarity of humiliation and oppression at the hands of the white race. At a 1971 jazz conference in Warsaw, for example, musician Yui Shoichi identified strongly with the black experience in America:

Just two years after the Negro slaves were emancipated in the United States, Emperor Meiji became the Emperor of Japan. So, the Japanese people and Black American people started for the New World, of which they never knew, almost at the same time. In their musical tradition, both did not have a harmony conception [. . .] And those two peoples had to abandon their old traditions, of which they were ashamed when they compared them to the old European traditions [. . .] That is why we Japanese can easily understand everything the American Black people are doing.<sup>43</sup>

Statements like these are undeniably problematic and essentialist. However, rather than dwell on their shortcomings, it is more valuable for the purposes of this chapter to recognize the underlying reasons for which they were made. Yui Shoichi seems to represent an tendency of Japanese jazz musicians in the late 60s and early 70s to affiliate with black experiences in an effort to legitimize "Japanese jazz" within a global jazz scene. Significantly, this "global" scene

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<sup>43</sup> In Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 251-2.

in the immediate postwar era was in part characterized by a Japanese inferiority complex in which the United States was an overwhelming physical—in the form of Occupation—and economic presence that provided a prominent source of social influence and racial hierarchy. This, then, led to two important points: first, late 1960s to early 70s jazz discourse in Japan became entrenched in a racial politics that carried over from the United States and second, within these racial politics, “black jazz” and “white jazz” contained a power dynamic that had to be assimilated to Japanese contexts.

An example of this appears most distinctly in volume two of *Apollo on the Slope* when Kaoru and Sentarō play in their first live event at a jazz bar with their makeshift band, the Mukae Tsutomu Quartet. From the very beginning, it is clear that their audience is a mix of Japanese and American guests. The four members start the night with an up-tempo melody, reflected in the movement both within and of the panels (Figure 10). At the peak of the performance, the reader is presented with a full “silent” page that is anything but silent. The characters’ faces and dynamic poses express energy and excitement; the lines and beads of sweat flying through the air



Figure 10. Jazz bar performance. (*Apollo*, vol. 2, pp. 165-7).

suggest active motion; and the slanted shape of the frames and the way that they only briefly pause on each performer is a significant contributing factor to the overall feeling of movement and dynamism from this page. The overall interaction of the frames and poses then creates a sense of balance across the page. If we consider that balance as perceived both through the eye and through the ear via the imagined music of the performance, it is clear that transsensory elements are at work in forming the experience of the comics page.

One of the most prominent scholars on European and American comics, Thierry Groensteen, suggests that an important function of frames on the comic book page is to create rhythm. Likening comics to a musical medium, he suggests,

The “text” [a.k.a. medium] of comics obeys a rhythm that is imposed on it by the succession of frames—a basic heartbeat that, as is seen in music, can be developed, nuanced, and recovered by more elaborate rhythmic effects stressed by other “instruments” (parameters), like those of the distribution of word balloons, the opposition of colors, or even the play of the graphic forms.<sup>44</sup>

If we take Groensteen’s definition to heart, perhaps portraying a musical scene in comics is not such an outlandish thing after all, since the comics page is rhythmic in the way that the frames are positioned and shaped in relation to each other. In the jazz bar scene in *Apollo*, these frames push against each other to give the illusion of a unified, rapid pace that leads the readers forward along an imagined path of gaze. This swift progression also seems to simulate cuts, as in a film, from one image to the next. The difference between a film and a comic book or manga, however, is that these cuts do not have to occur in solitude or even right after another in the comic book/manga medium. Instead, the reader’s eye is provided a level of freedom to move back and forth across the page, unrestricted by limits of time. Groensteen speaks of “silent” panels, like those in *Apollo*’s jazz bar scene, as negotiations of space and time, referring to them as a “pause

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<sup>44</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *System of Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 45.

between pages,” a “semi-pause between strips,” and a “sigh between images.”<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, this reference draws a similarity between sound and breath as sources of rhythm and important components of each manga page’s transsensory progression.

In the next couple of pages, images are no longer divided by panels. Rather, the characters come together in the freed and unified space of the two-page spread. Here, the dynamism from the previous page not only carries over but intensifies with the portrayal of the full bodies of the characters and their instruments. This broad depiction allows the marginalized characters a moment of community and empowerment where their entire bodies and tools of communication (i.e. their musical instruments) are placed together at the center of the narrative and are allowed to take up a significant amount of space both metaphorically and physically on the manga page. This, then, makes the interruption on the next page all the more significant.

A drunk white G.I. puts a sudden stop to the performance yelling, “I hate that kind of black jazz (*kokujin no jazu*)! I can’t stand all the noise (*dokadoka urusakute*)! If you’re gonna play jazz, play something white (*hakujin no jazu*)!”<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to note that this man’s text is not completely untranslated like Roy’s but is rather formatted in horizontal Japanese text read left to right to mark it as English (Figure 11). Therefore, we are perhaps perceiving the situation from Kaoru’s, or the main narrator’s, perspective, who has a basic understanding of English. Moreover, the clear demarcation of racialized categories of jazz in G.I.’s statement reflects a historically apt sentiment towards jazz both in Japan and in the United States that Atkins mentions in his ethnography on jazz in Japan. What is further noteworthy about the man’s statement is that race is not simply marked by textual/spoken cues of “black” (*kokujin*) and “white” (*hakujin*) but also refer to a specific level of *noise*. There is a general agreement among

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<sup>45</sup> Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> Kodama, *Apollo*, vol. 3, 168.



with noise.<sup>49</sup> This racialized conception of noise plays a fundamental role in both *Apollo*'s jazz bar scene and in the understanding of Sentarō as a racially marked character.

The fact that Sentarō is the one who becomes most visibly upset at the G.I.'s prejudiced remark suggests that he takes the slur personally. This is not to say that he considers himself “black,” *per se*, but his reaction seems to reflect his emotional affiliation to “black jazz” and that which is perceived as racial noise. Notably, the manner in which the G.I. complains about the noise of the music is parsed in Japanese as “*dokadoka urusakute*,” the *dokadoka* being an onomatopoeic representation of the sound of drums. In this way, the G.I.'s complaint can be understood as directly aimed not only at the racial characteristics of the music, but also at Sentarō's instrument, which in a way is an extension of himself. As a result, Sentarō sits out for the rest of the performance while Kaoru and the others decide to appease the drunk G.I. by playing some “white jazz,” or, more specifically, a version of “But Not for Me” by Chet Baker. Here, characters appear to be at least metaphorically racially categorized within the duality of the American jazz scene by the type of jazz that they choose to play—Sentarō being more “black” while Kaoru is more “white.” Furthermore, the contrast between the visual representation of “white” and “black” jazz performance is also notably stark. Whereas the expressions, poses, and frames are dynamic and representative of quick and freeing motion during the “black jazz” routine, the performance of “white jazz” is characterized by a much more stoic atmosphere (Figure 12). There are no longer any lines of motion and musical notes are kept organized in oblong balloons that flow along the page in a way that seems to imitate the mellow, somnolent languidness of the tune. While this second performance certainly embodies an ambiance of its own, it notably lacks the dynamism and energy present during the first. This stark distinction

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Dregni, *Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40 and Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, 109.



Figure 12. Depiction of “white jazz.” (*Apollo*, vol. 2, p. 171).

between “white jazz” and “black jazz” performances and musicians so clearly depicted in this single scene in *Apollo* is a historically recognized quality of jazz music on a global scale.

When French composer Darius Milhaud first heard African American jazz in New York in 1922, for example, he noted,

In the jazz of the whites everything has been worked out to perfection and studied in the most thorough way. Among the Negroes there is far more improvisation. But what tremendous musical gifts and what power of performance are necessary to bring improvisation to such a pitch of perfection! In their technique they possess great freedom and facility.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, while Milhaud heard “white jazz” as perfectionist and organized, he heard “black jazz” as free, powerful, and skillfully improvised, therefore serving as a fitting metaphor for the black struggle for individuality in American society. It is then significant that the struggling marginalized characters in *Apollo*, especially Sentarō, seem to hold more of an affinity with “black jazz” than “white.” Therefore, this depiction in the manga series represents a faithful

<sup>50</sup> Darius Milhaud, “The Jazz Band and Negro Music,” *The Living Age* 323 (October 18, 1924): 172.

reflection of a historical moment in which the existence of a racial politics in jazz in Japan. Moreover, the jazz bar scene and others reflect the author Kodama Yuki's mindfulness of the culture, history, and "sound" that she represents through a visual medium. The affiliation of marginal characters with a marginal "black" music, for example, seems to be a deliberate choice. Rather than an meaningless appropriation, I read Kodama's portrayal of the disruptive noisiness and emotion-freeing qualities of "black jazz" as a concept and experience adapted to understand a story of minority and margin in Japan through an acoustic, trans-sensory lens.

Although the white G.I. in the jazz bar complains about the noise of "black jazz," in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali suggests that it is precisely the disagreeability and disruption of noise that has an important role in the history of music and social power. Noise, he argues, carries structure and creates meaning for two main reasons:

"First, because the interruption of a message signifies the interdiction of the transmitted meaning, signifies censorship and rarity; and second, because the very absence of meaning in pure noise or in the meaningless repetition of a message, by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener's imagination."<sup>51</sup>

In other words, noise's absence of meaning in the way that "meaning" is traditionally understood is able to create alternative configurations and levels of meaning to work through. In this way, noise has the potential to unsettle current social orders and replace them with another that is not quite new but rather, perhaps, has always been dwelling at the margins. I, therefore, find Attali's theory useful to demonstrate how noise and blackness as represented in *Apollo* is not merely a destructive force but plays a key collaborative role in the creation of alternate meanings of individual and communal identity.

To build on this point, in an essay on black culture in contemporary Japanese society,

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<sup>51</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 33.

Nina Cornyetz sees potential in blackness for unsettling discourses on Japanese racial purity. She explains, “Remodeling the Japanese self in an African American image reproduces an indeterminacy and interlocation in Japanese self-identification.”<sup>52</sup> Cornyetz understands blackness as way to mediate Japanese identity by claiming a space in middle ground rather than an extreme form of nationalistic and homogenous purity. In this vein, adopting the African American image and, in *Apollo*’s case, sound, can be understood as a way to disrupt purity narratives and negotiate a space for a racial narrative and a place for racialized identities in Japanese society. To be sure, in *Apollo*, there exists a level of idolization of jazz and black culture, including the religious connotations involved in idealizing in the freedom that black jazz grants the body and senses. However, at the same time, there is also humanization. Roy is portrayed as a regular person, without caricaturized attributes, such as pitch black skin or thick lips. Therefore, I understand the overall attitude toward blackness in *Apollo* as immense respect for the founders of a music and culture that the characters then reinterpret according to their individual circumstances. I also read a deep appreciation for jazz’s ability to form a rift in the norm where identities such as Kaoru and Sentarō can exist. In this imagined, even idealized communal space of the jazz performance, they regain a control over the senses and the ability to express without words. The following section analyzes a particular jazz tune that represents this motif in the series and connects to Kodama’s goal of not simply depicting music in manga but also portraying the ways in which music connects characters at a deeper human and interpersonal level.

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<sup>52</sup> Cornyetz, “Fetishized Blackness,” 132.

### THE DUALITY OF “MOANIN”’: PLEASURE AND PAIN, COHESION AND TRAUMA

The fact that the jazz tune “Moanin’” (1958) by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers is a reoccurring refrain throughout *Apollo* that constantly works to connect and reconnect the leading male characters suggests that it merits further exploration. This archetypal hard bop track is a fusion of influences from blues and gospel music and, thus, despite its fairly upbeat and funky rhythm, notably contains darker emotive “black jazz” motifs, such as intense instrumentation, complex improvisation, and melancholy undertones. Kaoru first hears Sentarō play a clumsy version of the tune on the piano to give Kaoru a taste of jazz in an old record shop basement. When Kaoru attempts to correct Sentarō’s sloppy performance by playing the tune himself, Sentarō criticizes Kaoru’s version as not having enough “swing.” Stubbornly determined to prove that he can play jazz as well as Sentarō, Kaoru asks the record shop owner the name of this tune. The record shop owner pulls out an LP record and explains, “The only tune Sen can play on the piano is the intro to this song—Art Blakey and the Jazz Messenger’s “Moanin’.”<sup>53</sup> Kaoru immediately buys the record and takes it home in his hand to practice. In this scene, “Moanin’” is at once multisensory and transsensory, experienced by the characters and readers through various perceptions, including hearing, vision, and touch. From then on, the song appears in similar connective moments, both optimistic and melancholy, to mediate the focal characters’ emotions, friendship, and communication.

In order to understand the significance of “Moanin’” as a song and narrative device, it is first pertinent to ask, what is a “moan”? A moan is commonly defined as a human sound that can embody suffering or pleasure. It is also outlined as the sound of wind, a condition of the atmosphere that is invisible and yet felt, heard, and moving. In his introspective book *In the*

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<sup>53</sup> Kodama, *Apollo*, vol. 1, 101-2.

*Break*, Fred Moten specifically explores “black moanin’” as a meta-word that can be heard and seen not only as the act of moaning but also as “morning” and “mourning.” He particularly focuses on the performative display of the photograph of the corpse of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy who was brutally lynched in 1955, for allegedly whistling suggestively at a white woman in Mississippi. Notably, this tragedy occurred three years before Blakey and the Jazz Messengers’ “Moanin’” release, suggesting that the song and the incident are possibly connected. Moten emphasizes that in order to understand the depths *within* Till’s horrific photograph, its backstory, and its mourning afterlife, it is crucial to both face the image and approach moaning as a multisensory presence and experience. He argues that, while Till’s death represents a “redoubled nothing-ing, dead and castrated,” his mother’s decision to perform mourning through the photographed body of her son “reopens, the violent, ritual, sexual cutting of his death.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore, to observe Till’s photograph is to both see and hear an ongoing production of black performance, much like the mourning present in blues. This, then, leads Moten to contend that “looking must be accompanied by listening [. . .] even though what is listened to—an echo of a whistle or a phrase, moaning, mourning, desperate testimony and flight—is unbearable.”<sup>55</sup> In Moten’s understanding, Till’s photograph challenges ontological questioning by the very multisensory characteristics present within it, the decision to display the body publicly, and the performativity of “mo(ur)nin(g).” By suggesting that this photograph has an sonic component further challenges the hegemonic structures of ocularcentrism, which similarly shapes my argument in this chapter surrounding the comic book medium. In this vein, ignoring the sound of the photograph or audibility of the comic book page can be understood as a political silencing dismissal of its performance.

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<sup>54</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 199.

<sup>55</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 200.

“Moanin’” as a conceptual tool that bestrides the supposedly fixed line between visibility and audibility, melancholy and beauty, stillness and motion can function as a means of challenging these existing comfortable symmetries. This resistance of “normative” conventions provides a positive compelling force to consider these conventions at a deeper level. However, it is also crucial to consider “Moanin’” in the context of the culturally traumatic experience of “listening” to Emmitt Till’s photograph. Specifically through the publicization of the photograph, moaning becomes a *collective* cultural trauma that marks the very identity of those who see the photograph in fundamental and irrevocable ways. Sociologist Ron Eyerman in defining cultural trauma provides the useful metaphor of a “tear in the social fabric,” which signifies not only a shared event but also a shared *process* of experiencing crisis of meaning and identity among a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion.<sup>56</sup> Within this logic, collective cultural trauma can be further understood as an incongruous rupture in that it is simultaneously the site of disintegration and a framework that provides a sense of community. When Kaoru and Sentarō are cut off from their senses by the hegemonic forces around them, they are, in effect, forcibly disconnected from their ability to moan, or express their pain and lack of belonging. Their trauma extends from these marginalizing experiences yet also serves as a cohesive bond that helps them come together, independent from authoritative structures and realize the kind of self and society that they wish to see. Despite their social differences, both focal characters are connected by their collective cultural trauma and the discovery of their joint capacity to negotiate this trauma through jazz and the interstitiality of “Moanin’.”

In his book about youth movements, trauma, and alternative spaces in contemporary Japan, sociologist Carl Cassegård suggests that “alternative spaces,” which he defines as spaces

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<sup>56</sup> Ron Eyerman, “Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2004), 61-2.

that “offer relief from the oppressive features of mainstream arenas,” often play an important role in trauma recovery.<sup>57</sup> In order to illustrate his point, he cites sociologist Richard Couto’s example of black churches nurturing resistance in African American groups through a belief in the virtue of the oppressed as well as examples from his own study in Japan of homeless tent villages, campus facilities, and independent cafés. It is within these kinds of spaces, Cassegård argues, that groups that experience trauma not simply preserve existing traditions but rather develop new narratives through which they gain empowerment.<sup>58</sup> In *Apollo*, these alternative spaces are notably marked by a connective incline, or as the manga’s title suggests, a slope. Kaoru, for example, finds refuge from the oppressive “looks” of his classmates by climbing an incline to the school roof. He and Sentarō, then, reunite at the end of the series, after being estranged for several years, at a church at the top of a steep hill. The most significant “alternative space” in the series is perhaps the Mukae Records shop basement, a dark room at the bottom of a long flight of stairs, where Kaoru and Sentarō practice and perform their jazz sessions. It is in this space where Kaoru first witnesses Sentarō’s drum performance, where Kaoru joins his first live group jazz session, and where the two young men often reconcile after an argument. In an instance when a classmate—an “outsider” with little respect for jazz—steps into this space without permission, Sentarō says threateningly, “Don’t defile our sanctuary (*seiiki*) one second longer. Get out.”<sup>59</sup> The fact that Sentarō refers to their basement as a “sanctuary” both marks its importance in the leading characters’ lives and suggests its, at least imagined, inherent safety. Since Sentarō practices Christianity, there are inexorably religious tones in this term that intimate a desire for a holy place that offers therapeutic mercy for those who have sinned. At the same

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<sup>57</sup> Cassegård, *Youth Movements*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Cassegård, *Youth Movements*, 22.

<sup>59</sup> Kodama, *Apollo*, vol. 4, 126-7.

time, it also insinuates a desire for political safety for marginal groups from the negative judgements of the hegemonic parts of society. In both senses, the basement through Sentarō's statement especially reveals itself as a space of healing and refuge from the detrimental experiences that the focal characters face in society. It further reveals itself a space of empowerment where they find the language needed to communicate and find community in their trauma. Cassegård offers that empowerment is marked by an "effort to come to terms with or overcome the past" that occurs when "people regain the sense that their actions and opinions matter and that they have the power to influence things in society which they deem to be important."<sup>60</sup> If we are to understand Kaoru's and Sentarō's empowerment in the same way, their alternative spaces are perhaps not quite spaces of a prefigurative kind of politics, but certainly an emotional politics of collectively working through emotional trauma that resonates with the politics of "Moanin'" haunting Till's photograph. Through shared modes of expression occurring in the safe alternative space of the record shop basement, the two leading characters are able to work toward building the confidence necessary to challenge their current social positions, if only at a microlevel.

"Moanin'," characterized by its intrinsic "blackness" and ability to simultaneously signify pleasure and pain, resistance and trauma, facilitates a connection between the two very differently marginalized leading characters to outlets of emotion and communication. While it represents a rupture in the cores of their identity, it also serves as an orientation that constantly leads them back together, a cohesive tape that maintains their emotional connection, and a type of oppositional language through which the grip of their traumas are lessened. In this way, "Moanin'" performs as an emotional mediator through traumatic experiences in Kaoru's and

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<sup>60</sup> Cassegård, *Youth Movements*, 23, 26.

Sentarō's lives that helps them negotiate their relationships to society and each other.

### “MOANIN” AS IMPROVISED COMMUNICATION

In his book *The Gospel Sound*, American writer Anthony Heilbut says, “Words can’t begin to tell you but maybe moaning will.”<sup>61</sup> He understands moaning as a vocal, physical, and emotional sound system in which moaning mourns the “invisibility” of black life in society and calls an intangible spirit into sensed presence. In other words, if common definitions consider a moan as a sound without words, Heilbut understands a moan *in place* of words. Whenever Kaoru and Sentarō have a disagreement or are unable to explain themselves to each other, they use jazz and “Moanin” to express for them. When Kaoru jealously lashes out under the erroneous pretense that Sentarō has a place where he belongs, they make amends by playing a duet of “Moanin” on a church organ. When the two are estranged for years and Kaoru finds Sentarō again, they again play “Moanin” in a jazz session style as if they had never been a day apart. In this way, their instruments become their voices. This is reflected visually on the manga page in the shape of oblong balloons, ordinarily used as speech balloons, placed near the instruments as if representing the instruments’ voices rather than human speech. If, as comics scholar David Carrier argues, speech balloons are “the word [of the character] made image,” these “music balloons” can perhaps be understood as the sound of the instrument made image.<sup>62</sup> They are neither purely pictorial nor purely sonic, but rather both at once, bridging the gap between image and sound, perceived and imagined. Interestingly, when these balloons encase musical notes, their notation in the manga are often almost identical to the notes on sheet music. If seen side by

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<sup>61</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 194.

<sup>62</sup> David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Press, 2000), 28.

side, as in the scene in which Sentarō plays “Moanin” on the piano, it is clear that the types of notes are one and the same (Figure 13). The comprehensibility of these notes is limited to readers to who can read music. Yet, it intriguingly seems to echo cases in which English text appears. The fact that music is annotated from left to right in the direction that sheet music is read, seems to emphasize that music is its own “language” extending from the “voices” of instruments.



Figure 13. “Moanin”: *Apollo* (vol. 1, p. 78) vs. sheet music.

At the same time, similarities between other musical pieces throughout *Apollo* and their sheet music are not always as apparent. This may be because jazz is an impromptu type of music that differs based on the musician and the time and place in which it is played. The role of improvisation in jazz and its function in *Apollo* cannot be ignored. In their book *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, musicians Daniel Fishlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz define improvisation as the act of composing music collectively and spontaneously on the spot as well as a uniquely powerful model for rethinking how to engage with political and social issues.<sup>63</sup> It is also significant to note the key medical role of improvisation in music therapy for trauma patients. Psychotherapists Julie Sutton and Jos De Backer, for example, who use music and improvisation as a part of their therapeutical practices, suggest that music therapy offers a unique means of

<sup>63</sup> Daniel Fishlin, et al., *The Fierce Urgency of Now* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), i.

understanding of trauma, especially when patients lack the means or motivations necessary to verbalize their problems. They reason that “in music we have many possibilities for a creative process to open up, through the very act of improvisation [. . .] Music therapy follows a process in which passive victim moves towards active player, as the traumatic event is repeated in play (improvisation).”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, from both a musical and medical perspective, improvisation is a crucial part of facilitating collectivity, rethinking about political and social engagement, understanding trauma, and emboldening movement towards agency. We can then similarly understand Sentarō’s and Kaoru’s improvisations in their jazz sessions as an empowering process that facilitates these characters to digest and vocalize their trauma without human language through the act of playing music off of one another. In this way, improvisation necessitates one another not as a therapist-patient relationship, per se, but perhaps as a patient-patient relationship in which two people with a shared sense of trauma work to heal each other. By allowing themselves to be guided by the unknown of what sound or silence will come next, Sentarō and Kaoru offer each other a level of vulnerability that opens a communal space unavailable to them in other contexts for negotiating their respective experiences in tandem.

Furthermore, through improvisation, jazz and *Moanin’* resist singularity and stagnation. Much like the phenomenon of traumatic recall, they represent a repetition of emergences and wanings of emotions that are unpredictable, continually fluctuating, and never truly disappear. In fact, improvisation makes it so jazz and *Moanin’* are never the same, producing new syncopations, rhythms, and identities dependent on a particular time or place. As musician John McLaughlin asserts, improvisation is a way of “acting without thinking” and a “natural state of

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<sup>64</sup> Julie Sutton and Jos De Backer, “Music, trauma and silence: The state of the art,” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 36 (2009): 76.

being” in both music and life.<sup>65</sup> In this world with filled with stimuli wherever we go, listening has often become a tacit behavior without agency. *Apollo* challenges this phenomenon by demonstrating how its characters can collaborate in sessions to reconstruct identity through jazz and improvisation, moaning, mourning, and morning. The pages necessitate alternative ways of seeing and listening that involve multiple senses at once, inspiring readers to bring out the moanin’ for themselves in personal ways. Improvisation’s multiplicity of dialogues, unpredictable processes, and impetus to look beyond the surface is not only a metaphorical solution but is rather a mixed embodiment of lived agency. It enables jazz, like Emmitt Till’s photograph, to resist becoming a completely stagnant, dead artifact and instead implants a vibrant type of transsensory life. Likewise, by refusing to remain in a neutral state, “Moanin’” makes the body audible, visible, and present—a vocalization of marginalization or subalternity. “Moanin’,” too—simultaneously moaning, mourning, and morning—is a metaphor for the injustices of marginalization in the intangible form of both a painful and sensual cry that at once laments existing traumatic realities and expresses hope for alternate healing possibilities.

The most impressive instance of this occurs in volume five when Kaoru and Sentarō perform an impromptu jazz session at their high school’s culture festival. Prior to the performance, the two boys are on troubled terms, since Sentarō agrees to join a classmate’s rock band’s performance and Kaoru understands this as a form of abandonment of both him and jazz. However, when Kaoru overhears Sentarō refuse to continue the rock band in the future, because he treasures jazz and his jazz playing “partner” more, Kaoru realizes that he must amend with his friend. Unable to confront Sentarō with words, he instead sits at a piano near the gymnasium stage and starts to play a jazz arrangement of *The Sound of Music*’s “My Favorite Things,” a

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<sup>65</sup> Fishlin, et al., *The Fierce Urgency*, i.

song that they had rehearsed but never managed to perform in public. Sentarō, then, joins in on the drums, at which point Kaoru dares to speed up and add his own improvised lines.

Throughout this scene, no verbal dialogue passes between Kaoru and Sentarō, but rather their communication occurs exclusively through visual glances, onomatopoeic sound effects, and musical balloons. In fact, the placement of the balloons containing musical notation seem to substitute the speech balloon function entirely. Therefore, it is significant that the placement of these musical balloons near Kaoru and his piano make it appear as if the music notes are part of Kaoru's own speech or perhaps a type of speech expressed via his fingers through his instrument. In contrast to these graceful oblong balloons, Sentarō's own vernacular is in a more angular and crude onomatopoeia, creating a visual and aural difference between the two "voices." Through these two different mediums—music balloons and visual onomatopoeia—real sounds are translated into a visual of imagined sound, which encourages diverse ways of "listening" that is simultaneously seen, heard, and felt. It is almost as if both Kaoru and Sentarō compensate for their inability to express their feelings in words by conveying them through musical speech, a moan of pleasure in this case, that derives from both their instruments and themselves. From a narrative perspective, this is clearly a language that only Sentarō and Kaoru are capable of comprehending. As they drift through several tunes that have been important to them thus far in a medley-type fashion, their friend Ritsuko can clearly sense their emotional communication through their playing, and she thinks to herself, "[Their playing] is so intense... It's almost as if two princes bickering pleasantly have come back to their kingdom."<sup>66</sup>

As the performance comes to an end in a culminating two-page scene, Kaoru rises his feet and begins to play "Moanin'" (Figure 14). Here, the music balloons roughly push against

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<sup>66</sup> Kodama, *Apollo*, vol. 5, 94.



Figure 14. Culminating culture festival scene. (Apollo, vol. 5, pp. 98-9).

Sentarō's head, as if to convey Kaoru's stubborn personality. Whether these balloons are representative of Kaoru's own speech or the piano's has now become completely blurred, but the two boys' mutual gaze at the right hand side of the spread suggests that their feelings have been communally understood, their prior mistakes equally forgiven. The next two long panels are then composed in such a way that, although they each portray Kaoru and Sentarō separately, the central crease of the book makes it seem as if the two boys are united within the space of the same panel. In this way, they visibly face each other when the book is open and overlap each other when the page is turned. This seemingly deliberate mirroring of the two leading characters' exultant facial and corporal expressions conveys a joint moan of pleasure and initiation of healing at the very moment that they are both literally positioned at the center of their narrative.

In this scene, the reader bears witness to the ways in which both Sentarō's and Kaoru's encounters with and performances of jazz and "Moanin'" marks crucial moments that set their emotions and senses free and centralize them within their own storyline. Representing jazz (an audible medium) on the manga page (a visual medium) works, then, to emphasize the

transsensory characteristics of moments through spatial configurations, frame shapes, panel “silences,” and visual representations of imagined sounds and other senses. Therefore, through jazz and manga elements, Kaoru and Sentarō are given tools with which to negotiate their spaces, identities, friendship, and community in ways that transgress normative concepts of hegemony, homogenization, and social structures in order to attain their own sense of belonging.

## CONCLUSION

In his book *Reading Comics*, author and critic Douglas Wolk says the following about the world of comics:

“The broader philosophical implication of many comics, to one extent or another is: there is another world, which is this world. The places that cartoonists draw are very different from the ones where the readers live; every element of the comics world is created by the artist’s hands. The cartoonist’s image-world is a representation of our own, though, and it can be mapped onto ours. It can even be more meaningful in some ways than an accurate depiction of our image world—the same sort of relationship that prose fiction has to reportage.”<sup>67</sup>

Here, Wolk comments on the way comics are able to represent a subjectivity of vision and experience that is meaningful both to the world of comics and of humans. While it is important to push against this singularity of vision, it is also useful to think of vision in comics as intrinsically connected with other senses in synesthetic and necessarily imaginative ways. As if echoing this sentiment, in an author’s note at the beginning of volume three, Kodama Yuki suggests that *Apollo* is the most fantastical (*fantajii*) manga that she has ever created. I take this to mean not that *Apollo* takes place in a world of fantastical beings and beasts, but rather that it takes place in a historically-based yet imagined world that explores reality through a lens of

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<sup>67</sup> Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 134.

alternate possibilities of communal identities. Not only does it centralize a character of mixed race but also appears to expand an understanding of the diversity that exists within margins of Japanese identity by placing this character side-by-side with another character who is pushed to the cusps of society based on his environment rather than his race. Arguably, it is only when the strict frames of imagined purity collapse that traumatic healing, creative identity building, and community-making begins. As French philosopher Gaston Bachelard puts it, we must “hear oneself seeing” and “hear ourselves listen,” whether that be to language, images, music, or moanin’ as proof of existence.<sup>68</sup> This is the kind of reality that *Apollo* seems to imagine.

While Marshall McLuhan’s well-known mantra “the medium is the message” may be going too far, the manga medium definitely appears to have a significant role in *Apollo* in terms of buttressing the negotiation of central concepts that I have highlighted in this chapter, including racial purity, identity, and community. Its unique synesthetic, spatial, and transsensory qualities work together to bestow Kaoru and Sentarō with the power to construct creative identities that are not singular and static but rather work towards establishing a sense of belonging of their own. At the same time, this exact experimentation of form of the medium is also what exposes its own performative qualities, the imaginative representation of which produces discourse of specific historical, social, and cultural issues. Like jazz, these imagined, “fantastical” identities seek transsensory channels of emotion and the improvisational ability to “act without thinking.” Like “Moanin’,” these identities are also not purely either positive or negative but remain persistent and hopeful for healing.

Their progress is then notably apparent through their changing perception of the “slope.” If the school, the church, and the record store basement are alternative spaces in which

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<sup>68</sup> In Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell, eds., *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 20.

recovery and empowerment takes place, the slopes that connect them may be considered as physically manifested interstitial areas of process and transition. The series begins with Kaoru slowly climbing a slope to school, grumbling at how vexing (*imaimashii*) it is. Yet, after improvising with Sentarō through jazz and negotiating trauma, he finds himself flying down the same slope. Kaoru's relationship with the slope is not stable but rather fluctuates according to the state of his relationship with Sentarō and the rest of society. Therefore, his connection to the collective process of healing with Sentarō seems to manifest itself as the level of effort it takes to climb the slope. The slope's seemingly contradictory role as both a permanent space of connection and yet transitory, shifting ground echoes with the paradoxical duality of "Moanin'." At the very end of the series, Kaoru, now an adult, is faced with another slope that leads to his new workplace—a small clinic in the countryside. As if reprising the very first scene, he wipes the sweat from his brow and grumbles about how vexing (*imaimashii*) it is. However, this time, a smile reveals that he has finally gained a sense of footing on his trauma. While it still proves difficult, Kaoru has learned how to cope with the "slopes" in his life and, in a sense, become his own type of Apollo.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 3.11 Voices of the Invisible and the Silent: Sakamoto Ryūichi's "Tsunami Piano" and Itō Seikō's *Imagination Radio*

On March 11, 2011, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake at 2:45 p.m. off the Pacific coast of the Northeastern Tōhoku region of Japan devastated a total of 6 prefectures. Paired with an enormous tsunami, the disaster resulted in 20 million tons of debris with 1.2 million buildings either damaged or completely destroyed. As of 2016, 15,893 were reported dead and 2,556 missing.<sup>1</sup>

At least this is how most news reports and many initial scholarly articles began to address the 3.11 triple disaster. Perhaps in the place of a traumatic lack for words, “big data”—or analyzable and systematically extracted statistics—initially served as a method through which media, scholars, and politicians alike attempted to comprehend the incomprehensibility of the disaster’s immense proportions. Even to this day, the Japanese government, electric companies, and mass media sources have utilized big data and other scientific discourses to endeavor to remove any strands of blame for their role in the lack of information they provided to the Japanese population both prior to and following the disaster. Within these endeavors, numbers and diagrams allegedly represent the “fact” and “certainty” of Tōhoku’s current state and ultimately successful “road to recovery.” However, this in many ways runs the risk of compartmentalizing what was largely a *human* disaster into a box of positivistic optimism that can be recorded and tucked away unfeelingly onto a shelf. Not only is someone’s school, someone’s home, and someone’s loved one reduced to an emotionless number, but those were *left behind* by the dead and the missing and *affected* in some way by the trauma of an aftermath

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<sup>1</sup> Keisatsuchō Kinkyū Saigai Keibu Honbu (Japan’s National Police Agency), accessed May 31, 2021, <http://www.npa.go.jp/archive/keibi/biki/higaijokyo.pdf>.

that never quite ends remain inconspicuously unaccounted for, helpless, and silent.

Paradoxically, this “silence” after 3.11 was often portrayed by global media as admirable “self-discipline, orderliness, and patience” of the Japanese people.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this mythically oriental understanding of the Japanese as quiet people ignores that there exists an at least initial “unspeakability” of traumatic experiences intrinsically linked to psychological and political repression as well as a lack of publicly acceptable space for audible suffering. In his book *3.11 kara kangaeru “kazoku”* (*Considering “Family” After 3.11*), Asahi Newspaper journalist Manabe Hiroki seems to challenge the admirability of survivor silence by emphasizing its emotionally harmful facets. He writes,

It goes without saying that the tens of thousands of those who died and went missing in the disaster area had family [that they left behind]. Yet, it was rare to see those people go to pieces or grieve and moan (*nageki kanashimu*) out loud. Despite facing the irrationality of losing loved ones who a matter of hours prior were living a normal life, they kept their grief inside and proceeded in silence. This was perhaps even harder to watch.<sup>3</sup>

Here, Manabe reveals that the silences of those left behind are not simply metaphorical, as in gaps in knowledge, but also a perceptible lack of sound, or more specifically *moaning*. As discussed in Chapter Two, moaning can represent collective cultural trauma, a shared process of experiencing crisis of meaning and identity among a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. When Kaoru and Sentarō in *Apollo on the Slope* are forcibly disconnected from their ability to moan by hegemonic systems, they simultaneously lose their bearings, their cohesion, and their means of expressive presence. In the case of disaster, sociologist Aiko

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<sup>2</sup> Allen C. Choate, “In Face of Disaster, Japanese Citizens and Government Pull from Lessons Learned,” *The Asia Foundation*, Mar. 16, 2011, accessed Mar. 10, 2021, <https://asiafoundation.org/2011/03/16/in-face-of-disaster-japanese-citizens-and-government-pull-from-lessons-learned/>.

<sup>3</sup> Manabe Hiroki, *3.11 kara kangaeru “kazoku”: sengo o tō, genzai o aruku* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2012), 40.

Kashimura suggests that traditional Japanese norms mark vocalization as social taboo.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, in similar ways to Kaoru and Sentarō's fictional circumstance, hegemonically imposed norms are can at least partially be held responsible for a lack of audible moaning and mourning among 3.11 survivors. Yet, while and perhaps even following these norms, they are inevitably severed from a shared expression of grief as well as a sense of imagined national cohesion as they are rendered invisible in their state of inaudibility.

“At the same time,” Manabe continues, “in their silence, [those left behind] continue to hold onto the belief of honoring the dead by taking the time to grieve slowly and deliberately within themselves.”<sup>5</sup> By shining light specifically on the experiences of those left behind by the dead and missing in this way, Manabe in effect recognizes that there lies significance in their inaudible silence. There is merit, he seems to argue, in the seemingly paradoxical perspective of, in a sense, “living with the dead,” or sitting with the memory of those who have passed, in order to find a sense of connection between the dead and the living, rather consider death a complete severance from life. In fact, they may be more alike in their social invisibility and inaudibility than it initially seems. Considered more allegorically, challenging the dichotomy between the dead and the living can also provide space to think more critically about the discriminatory, race-like systems symptomatic of other “fixed” and “dichotomic” categories with marked margins and centers of 3.11 discourse, such as natural and human, Tokyo and Tōhoku. These polarizing factors did not suddenly appear, but rather have long gone unseen and undetected, much like what scientists call “silent earthquakes,” or deep, slow moving tremors below the earth's surface that precede the visible devastation of classic earthquakes and their subsequent tsunamis above

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<sup>4</sup> Aiko Kashimura, “Trauma, Subject, and Society in Japan after 3.11,” in *The Consequences of Global Disasters*, eds. Anthony Elliott and Eric L. Hsu (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 197-8.

<sup>5</sup> Manabe, *3.11 kara kangaeru*, 40.

the surface. It is times of crisis, such as the 3.11 triple disaster, that reveal these uncomfortable instabilities of knowledge and gaps between geographies and peoples.

Therefore, in this final chapter, I consider 3.11 a paradigm shift in which social structures in general and Japaneseness in particular began to be challenged, reassessed, and reimagined. I focus here particularly on the ways that providing space in which voices of the underrepresented dead and their survivors are audible has the potential to offer another perspective on post-disaster attentive to connection and empathy over separation and exclusion, and agency over helplessness. In this way, sound becomes a dynamic exploration of boundaries of grief between the living and the dead, the *tōjisha*, or who experienced trauma directly, and the “outsider” navigate the pressures of their new reality. Considering the traumatic silences that continue to surround the disaster, it is essential to confront audibility from all angles by asking both what is said and not said? To reiterate a concept in my introduction, how is the subaltern speaking, or rather, provided the space to be heard and listened to? And more specifically, how does mediated sound and vocalization prove essential in negotiating the complexities and ambiguities of post—but never finished—disaster?

### **THE “END” OF AN ERA: FROM VICTIMIZATION TO AGENCY**

It is significant to mention that when it became exposed that the damage suffered on March 11th was not only a natural disaster but also one of human error, government narratives were quick to flip from ones of collective mourning and national solidarity to those of a self-interested, Tokyo-centric disposition. In former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s 2013 speech before the International Olympic Committee, for example, he claimed that the situation in Fukushima

was “under control,” for “it has never done and will never do any damage to *Tokyo*.”<sup>6</sup> Even six years after the disaster in 2017, Reconstruction Minister Imamura Masahiro was forced to resign after commenting, most likely for the sake of social stability and commercial profit, that the earthquake “was okay because it happened *over there*, in Tōhoku.”<sup>7</sup> As comparative literature scholar Tamaki Mihic emphasizes in her chapter provocatively called “HETEROGENOUS JAPAN” in all capital letters, statements like these highlight that, “contrary to the popular Nihonjinron belief of Japan being a homogenous nation, significant economic and cultural differences” do in fact exist between Japan’s peripheral disaster-hit areas and its center of Tokyo.<sup>8</sup> In other words, since the triple disaster most directly affected a small, rural, and less wealthy part of Japan, it is deemed unworthy of full administrative attention. The problem was, that these imagined differences have existed ever since Fukushima Daiichi was first constructed, if not longer. The nuclear power plant’s meltdown was simply a catalyst to push the recognition of the real repercussions of these differences to the forefront of social awareness, making it clear that a disaster initially treated as “national” is ultimately “othered” in a way that isolates the disaster area geographically, economically, culturally, and socially from the rest of Japan.

In the afterword to *3.11 kara kangaeru* “*kazoku*,” Manabe Hiroki writes,

After the 3.11 Tōhoku triple disaster, I often saw discourse that expressed a notion that something had “ended.” Many cried it was “the end of the blissful millennium,” “the end of post-war Japan,” “the end of the modern age.” They also claimed now that “post-war Japan” had ended, “post-disaster Japan” had begun.<sup>9</sup>

As Manabe reveals, the triple disaster in the Northeastern Tōhoku region of Japan, on March 11,

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<sup>6</sup> Abe Shinzō, *Presentation by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the 125<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)*, Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, Sept. 7, 2013, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201309/07ioc\\_presentation\\_e.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201309/07ioc_presentation_e.html).

<sup>7</sup> “Imamura Fukkōshō jinin,” *Mainichi Shinbun*, Apr. 26, 2017, accessed Apr. 1, 2021, <http://mainichi.jp/articles/20170427/k00/00m/010/128000c>.

<sup>8</sup> Tamaki Mihic, *Re-imagining Japan After Fukushima* (Acton, AU: Australian National University Press, 2020), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Manabe, *3.11 kara kangaeru*, 164.

2011 marked an end of an era for many. From a governmental perspective, the 9.0 magnitude earthquake off the Pacific coast that devastated a total of 6 Japanese prefectures was arguably only the tip of the iceberg. Paired with an enormous tsunami, the disaster resulted in the damage or complete demolition of 1.2 million buildings, the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant perhaps being the most devastating of them all. Fukushima Daiichi was built in the towns of Futaba and Ōkuma in Fukushima Prefecture by the Tokyo Electric Company (TEPCO) from 1967 to the early 1970s, which was pointedly an era of exceptional social and economic growth in Japan. If we consider the nuclear power plant a relic of an era of Japanese global success—an era during which “Japan was great,” if you will, its destruction surely has nostalgic significance for an era that has “ended” and is long past. In other words, the devastation of a project extending from a successful history in a way serves as a stark reminder that Japan has lost one of the last glimmers of pride from its sparkling past.

However, this era cannot solely be remembered through rose-tinted glasses. It was no accident that the nuclear power plant was built 250 km away from Tokyo despite the Northeastern prefectures’ greater susceptibility to tsunami damage. As Manabe points out, Fukushima Daiichi from the very beginning was considered an “‘inconvenient facility’ (*meiwaku shisetsu*) that would bring convenience to the lives of all Japanese people.” [. . .] The mechanism that drove the government to build a nuclear power plant on the coast of tsunami-weak Fukushima and Miyagi Prefectures was exactly the same as that which drove them to allow the accumulation of American bases in Okinawa.”<sup>10</sup> The nuclear plant’s meltdown certainly caused an immense health risk and widespread environmental damage that continues to this day. Simultaneously, it also sent metaphorical tremors through the Japanese population by calling

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<sup>10</sup> Manabe, *3.11 kara kangaeru*, 90.

attention to the fragility of the Japanese “nation” and the many silent chasms of discriminatory, race-like structures that threaten the stable uniformity of Japanese society. Silence may preserve a level of social order, but it also represents spaces that, in a public way, are missing from the archives of victim experiences. Engagement with these spaces, therefore, may reveal a type of close listening needed to facilitate negotiations and healing of 3.11 trauma.

This engagement is important in order to re-instill agency in the seemingly hopeless and “finished” concept of “post-3.11.” Literature, such as Nosaka Akiyuki’s *Hotaru no Haka (Grave of the Fireflies, 1967)*, reveals that post-war Japan marked a turning point in which the Japanese identity was reimagined via a victim’s consciousness. As comparative literature scholar Kimberly Wickham points out in her thesis “Making Victims,” it was specifically “the dropping of the atomic bomb, the specific terms of defeat, and the adjustment between pre and post-war [that] massively affected the social imaginary of the [Japanese] nation.”<sup>11</sup> However, while the post-war had a clear enemy, post-3.11 significantly did not. Of course, there is justified anger at Tokyo Electric Company (TEPCO) for their irresponsible lack of upkeep of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, which led to a meltdown and a dangerous leakage of harmful nuclear particles during the tsunami-earthquake on March 11<sup>th</sup>. However, discriminatory comments and policies that mark those from Tōhoku as contaminated and different are representative of a form of violence from within Japan. Women and children moving from the disaster areas to Tokyo especially bore the brunt of a social stigma that they were in some way tainted by the nuclear plant radiation and capable of spreading it to others and future generations. Going back even farther, the fact that the brunt of nuclear power plants was built in Tōhoku in the first place reveals a history of centers like Tokyo profiting from a narrative of distance and

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<sup>11</sup> Kimberly Wickham, “Making Victims: History, Memory, and Literature in Japan’s Post-War Social Imaginary,” (Master’s thesis, University of South Carolina, 2010), 1.

difference, uncannily echoing the pasts delineated in Chapter Three concerning Hokkaido and Okinawa. In this way, post-3.11 seems to provide a new era of reassessment of Japaneseness in which it becomes crucial to move away from a narrative of victimization and shift towards an empathetic social attentiveness to the similarities within difference and the strengths of connection over separation.

In *Sonic Possible Worlds*, Salomé Voegelin suggests that listening to phenomena of the world through sound enables us to move “beyond the frame of factuality, knowledge, ideology, and aesthetic certainty, and come to understand how to inhabit that substance, how I partake in the construction of its reality, and how I can negotiate its value within the notion of actuality as a plurality, to know ‘what it is like’ and ‘what it could be like also.’”<sup>12</sup> If post-3.11 government narratives represent “knowledge” and “certainty,” close listening to sound can provide the means to delve into alternative ways to understand the disaster and society that now exists. “Knowledge” and “certainty” are also characteristics of the common post-war narrative of victimhood, in which the identity of an enemy and dichotomy of violence is more or less imagined as fixed. In this configuration, listening to sound provides the method to which the shift of eras from clarity to ambiguity and victimization to a more agency-driven mentality occurs.

### **NEGOTIATING DISASTER THROUGH SOUND & VOICE**

Significantly, many recovery projects immediately following the triple disaster invite close listening through a conspicuous interweaving of sound, music, and/or voice. Activist Sono

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<sup>12</sup> Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 46.

Ryōta suggests that music and sound signify a type of social awakening in the context of 3.11 precisely because of its initial absence due to societal constraints. In his book *Boku ga tōden mae ni tatta wake* (*Why I Stood Before TEPCO*), he recalls,

Immediately following the nuclear accident, almost all of the music had disappeared in Japanese society because of a “mood of self-restraint (*jishuku mūdo*).” It was then that I was strongly moved by [anti-nuclear rock singer, Imawano] Kiyoshiro’s unadorned exclamation in his song “Summer Time Blues”—“We have more than enough electricity to spare; / We don’t need it. We don’t need it no more (*denryoku wa amatteru, / iranē, mō iranē*).”<sup>13</sup>

Oguma Eiji similarly describes a moment in which, during a demonstration against nuclear power, he burst into tears upon hearing a band play music. He recalls, “I felt [in that moment] as if my suppressed feelings had broken through.”<sup>14</sup> Experiences like Sono’s and Oguma’s demonstrate the important role of music in the wake of the 3.11 disaster of breaking socially enforced regulations of silence and opening affective space. Through both an explicit mode of protest and an implicit sonic quality, music in post-3.11 seems to signify a dissonant audible movement with the complicity of contemporaneous social norms.

A prominent example of a 3.11 recovery project founded in this type of dissonant sound was “Festival FUKUSHIMA!,” a free outdoor musical event featuring famous artists and poets organized by the recovery group Project FUKUSHIMA!. The event’s name alone in all capital letters and an exclamation point at the end emphasizes the desperate need of a topographical space in danger of being stigmatized and ignored to be audible, loud, and heard. A survey of these kinds of 3.11 recovery projects reveals, however, that even when their medium is not traditionally understood as being conducive to perceptible sound, such as with a story, a

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<sup>13</sup> Sono Ryōta, *Boku ga tōden no mae ni tatta wake: 3.11 genpatsu jiken ni okoru wakamonotachi* (Tokyo: San-ichi shobō, 2011), 38-39.

<sup>14</sup> Oguma Eiji, *Genpatsu o tomeru hitobito: 3.11 kara kantei mae made* (Tokyo: Bungei shunjūsha, 2013), 13.

novel, or a poem, music and/or voice is still often present, prominent, and clearly *essential* to the negotiation and processing of trauma and marginalized position.

For instance, both Fukushima author Furukawa Hideo's *Umatachi yo, soredemo hikari wa muku de* (2011, translated by Doug Slaymaker as *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure*, 2016) and Zainichi Korean author Yū Miri's *JR Ueno Eki Kōenguchi* (2014, translated by Morgan Giles as *Tokyo Ueno Station*, 2020), in their discussions of the aftermath of 3.11, focus on echoes of sound and marginalized voices. *Horses, Horses* is told mainly through the voice of a social outcast who seeks a reconnection with community in the disaster zone in Tōhoku.<sup>15</sup> After closing an atlas that he consults to find his way through Tōhoku, the sound of it shutting triggers a series of seemingly disconnected memories and thoughts:

Once the [Beatles'] melody ["Strawberry Fields Forever"] starts in your head it won't stop. I hear it now. Maybe I'll be hearing it forever. "Forever." This is a scene from a novel. I am the author of that novel. / The place that is north and east is Tohoku. / That voice again. It echoes through the song, overlapping with the melody. It commands me: "Go there."<sup>16</sup>

This soliloquy seems chaotic, but it is importantly driven by sound—the sound of the closing atlas, the recalled melody of “Strawberry Fields Forever,” and the sound of the narrator’s own words. The passage, initiated by the visual atlas, seemingly becomes a type of sonic atlas in which sound guides the way and pushes the narrator towards movement and action.

The deceased homeless protagonist of *Tokyo Ueno Station* similarly is haunted by sound, although in his case it is the sound of a train. While it also suggests an invitation to movement, considering that the course of the Yamanote Line that passes through Ueno Station is circular, it

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<sup>15</sup> An in-depth of analysis of *Horses, Horses* can be found in Rachel DiNitto's *Fukushima Fiction* (2019). My analysis of these two 3.11 texts is kept short here intentionally for the sake of space and in order to inspire future projects (my own or otherwise).

<sup>16</sup> Furukawa Hideo, *Horses, Horses, in the End the Light Remains Pure: A Tale that Begins with Fukushima*, trans. Douglas Slaymaker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 3.

perhaps serves as a reminder of the trapped circumstances in which the homeless man finds himself even in death. In this text, what is most important is the audibility of the protagonist's voice which is marginal in the sense that it belongs to a man who is both homeless and a drifting ghost. Providing him with a voice central to the narrative opens space for a, perhaps, unexpected perspective on the 3.11 disaster and complicates the normative soundscape of post-3.11 Japan. Based on this emphatic sonic trend in 3.11-based texts, I wish to suggest that using orality and audibility, traits that are ephemeral and resist permanence, is an important part of the message of sonic texts that defines the spaces that they create. Furthermore, the utilization of a sonic component within a literary format does not only push the limits of each narrative's medium, but more broadly loosens the assumptions of what we know by embracing the instability of the audible, the emotional side of disaster, and the intersectionality of knowledge in order to challenge facts, certainty, and statistics represented by government archives.

In her book *Ecoambiguity*, Karen Thornber suggests that, in order to become comprehensible, let alone effect change, our experiences must be translated into narratives. "Our sense of reality," she claims, "understandings of who we are and of our relationships with our surroundings are constructed around stories."<sup>17</sup> While it can be restricting to limit these "stories" to a written format, I agree that popular texts—in the wide sense of the word—provide an important creative and affective venue to illuminate underrepresented aspects of crisis that remain invisible and/or inaudible, especially in a mainstream media and society that tends to repress spaces for opinion and emotion. This chapter, therefore, focuses on an analysis of two prominent post-3.11 projects, Sakamoto Ryūichi's "Tsunami Piano" (2012) and Itō Seiko's popular novel *Sōzō rajio (Imagination Radio)*, (2013), to provide a more complicated analysis on

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<sup>17</sup> Karen Thornber, *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 5.

the ways that they utilize sound and voice to emphasize the interconnected and contradictory relationships between people and nature, constructed and natural. Although the piano and the story of a radio exist on different sonic planes—one being perceptible sound and the other being imagined—I contend that they similarly utilize imaginative thinking to invite the listener or reader to expand their capacities to listen to the unheard and underheard, while interrogating larger social issues buried beneath the visual surface of post-disaster Japanese society. By speaking from the perspective of a voice that lies in a complex uncanny nexus between living and dead and natural and man-made, Sakamoto's and Itō's texts address the uncertainties around both the human and environmental issues highlighted by the triple disaster that have been overlooked and avoided. At the same time, they express a type of empathy that lends a listening ear to survivor experiences and provides imaginative space for survivors to negotiate trauma in their own way. In doing so, they seem to shift towards creative sonic possibilities of art and literature in service to connected communities and ecosystems belonging to 3.11 survivors in particular and human experience in general. This chapter, therefore, holds that these two texts' refocus on the act of active listening to silences, sounds, and voices generally beyond human perception is an important way to reveal depths of the human psyche that can serve as a powerful means of reflection on national community and experiences of post-disaster trauma.

***IMAGINATION RADIO: UNSETTLING INVISIBILITIES OF DEATH THROUGH IMAGINED VOICE***

Multi-talented musician, entertainer, and writer Itō Seikō's novel *Imagination Radio* revolves around the radio broadcast of a man turned talk show host who goes by the pseudonym DJ Ark. In the first chapter, the narrator Ark, or Akutagawa Fuyusuke, reveals from the outset

that he is inexplicably broadcasting from the top of a cypress tree (*itosugi*) in the mountains. Moreover, the components of his broadcast—the radio waves, the mic, the studio, the radio tower, and even his own voice—are not “real” in the sense that they form part of the typical human experience, but are rather only materialized via the power of the imagination. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the broadcast has an audience of a select few who can hear Ark’s voice, and Ark is somehow—to his own surprise—able to interact with listeners via email and phone. After chatting about his own childhood, his experience in the music business, and his missing his son and wife, interspersed with conversations with his audience, he receives an email from a listener who goes by “M.” Although filled with doubt and hesitation, M’s email implies that Ark was swept away by the March 11<sup>th</sup> tsunami and it is now his corpse that is caught in the branches of the cypress tree from which he “broadcasts.”

But why tell a story with the imagined voices of the dead? Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt and Barbara Geilhorn have discussed this point as directly addressing an issue of positionality, otherwise conceived in the question, who has the right to speak about 3.11? They argue that, by taking the perspective of a drowned tsunami victim,

Itō reminds us that while the ultimate *tōjisha* are dead and thus unable to speak, any individual can engage with the disaster if only she/he is willing to be led by imagination and human empathy.<sup>18</sup>

This is certainly an important point to consider in Itō’s employment of voice in his novel. Taking the perspective of the dead enables Itō to gain the “authenticity” of a *tōjisha*, while also pointing to the superficiality of this very “authenticity,” since those who have it are either dead or emotionally unable to speak. At the same time, I find it crucial to push this point further in terms

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<sup>18</sup> Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt and Barbara Geilhorn, “Negotiating Nuclear Disaster: An Introduction,” in *Fukushima and the Arts: Negotiating Nuclear Disaster*, eds. Barbara Geilhorn and Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt (London & New York: Routledge, 2017), 10.

of the role of sound or, more specifically, voice in Itō's work.

In a presentation that postulates “atonement” as a way to mourn the dead in *Imagination Radio*, Ritsumeikan University literature scholar Nakagawa Shigemi suggests that Itō's 3.11 novel is one that “imagines voice (*koe o sōzō suru*)” while also “usurping voice (*koe o sandatsu suru*).”<sup>19</sup> I understand this idea as concerning both Itō himself and his readers. In *Imagination Radio*, Itō imagines the sound of these invisible and inaudible voices of the dead while also “usurping” them in order to speak about the disaster. Similarly, readers imagine the sound of the dead's voices in their heads as they read the text and “usurp” them as a means through which to process the disaster. DJ Ark claims at the very beginning of the novel that his voice is not “real” in that it is perceived through waves through the air, but rather, is created via his listeners' imagination and will. He asks his audience,

That being said, how *is* my voice? Is it deep and hoarse like a baritone sax? Or high-pitched and nasally, like a kid crying on the beach? Is it dry like a piece of *washi* paper? Or smooth like melted chocolate? The possibilities are endless, but, in the end, what I sound like is up to you. Please tune in to the voice that's easiest on your ears.<sup>20</sup>

Here, Ark lays himself vulnerable to modification, bestowing the listener with the freedom to choose the pitch and textures of his own voice. Since voice is often considered the core of the body or identity, the listener is, in essence, given the freedom to choose who DJ Ark is.

However, while bestowing this freedom so explicitly upon the reader may be unusual, this availability of freedom in literature to decide what characters sound like is not necessarily new.

All literary characters, because their voice is only audible through imagined sound, provide a level of freedom to the reader to decide what their voices sound like. Moreover, this freedom to

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<sup>19</sup> Nakagawa Shigemi, “Shokuzai wa shisha e no itami ka—Itō Seikō *Sōzō Rajio* o kiten ni” (presentation, INALCO: *Lire la littérature japonaise à la lumière de l'après 11 mars*, Paris, December 2, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Itō Seikō, *Sōzō Rajio* (Tokyo: Kawade shobo shinsha, 2013), 10.

choose the sound of Ark's voice is also not all-inclusive. Like any other literary character, Ark has a background story and personality that somewhat inhibits an entirely blank slate. However, other than his characteristic red bomber jacket, the text significantly does not clarify any of Ark's physical features. Ark is, in this way, shrouded in an inherent invisibility, expounded by his position both as a "ghost" and radio show host. This consequentially disembodied voice seems to encourage a multiplicity of perception, through which the listener is able to imagine a personalized reality between what is heard and the time-space of what is perceived. It is this former positionality—the invisible ghost of the dead—that I will examine first.

Belief in the omnipresence of the dead, namely as ghosts and the supernatural, did not only surge in post-3.11 society, but has also long been an important part of Tōhoku's culture.<sup>21</sup> To take ghosts seriously and recenter them in their invisibility as prominent figures in literature, therefore, seems both to acknowledge the dead as a means through which to negotiate healing and to make visible and audible an often marginalized society's culture. In her book *Facing the Wave*, American travel-writer Gretel Elrich notes that the Tōhoku region is well-known for *itako*, or "blind mediums who communicate with the dead," with whom she spends many weeks speaking.<sup>22</sup> *Imagination Radio* also pointedly includes several mentions of mediums and their connection with ghosts. The secondary protagonist, S, who significantly finds himself one day deaf in one ear due to an ear infection, is a volunteer in Fukushima after 3.11 to help with recovery. There, he meets an older volunteer named Gamé, who speaks about a trip he took to an island off the coast of Pearl Harbor. A medium Gamé meets on the trip tells him that ghosts (*rei*) do not only visit the human realm during Obon, the festival of the dead, but are around us all of

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<sup>21</sup> See Richard Lloyd Parry's *Ghosts of the Tsunami* (2017) for a detailed summary of ghost sightings in post-3.11 Tōhoku and Yuka Kudō's "Shishatachi ga kayō machi: takushii doraibā no yūrei genshō" (2016) for taxi driver reports on "ghost customers" in Ishinomaki.

<sup>22</sup> Gretel Ehrlich, *Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013), 121.

the time. Gamé also pointedly recalls her say under her breath that she can hear voices of the dead loud and clear. He tells S in Fukushima, “Even if she [the medium] was a crazy person (*kyōjin*), her perspective on the world and her ideas on departed souls left a deep impression on me.”<sup>23</sup> Like modern folklorist Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) who collected ghost stories without being a complete believer in ghosts, Gamé reveals that his doubting the existence of the ghosts the medium speaks of does not inhibit him from respecting her perspective and experiences. He even seems to suggest that there is something to learn from them.

In a later chapter, S takes the words of Gamé and the other volunteers to heart as he speaks to a woman who seems to be a former girlfriend. In an impassioned rant littered with opinions and uncertainty, S asks,

“All we can do is try to rebuild this country along with the dead, yet why are we trying to put a lid on the situation as if it never happened? What has happened to this country? [. . .] During the air raids that Kimura Hirota talked about, during the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki that Gamé talked about, and during many other disasters, we [the living] moved forward holding hands with the dead, didn’t we? But, somewhere along the way, this country has lost the ability to embrace the dead. Why is that? [. . .] I believe it is because we stopped listening to their voices.”<sup>24</sup>

Influenced by his companions’ words and experiences, S seems to believe that joining hands with the dead rather than pushing them to the periphery has great healing potential. It is what, he claims, has helped Japanese people process previous traumas, such as those of World War II. Therefore, covering up layers of reality that go beyond the visible and the audible in post-3.11 society hinders the processes of traumatic healing. At the same time, it fosters the dissolution of community built around S’s use of the term “this country.” Letting go of the hands of the dead and not “*listening* to their voices,” he seems to warn, may not have a material form, but has dire consequences both human and natural.

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<sup>23</sup> Itō, *Sōzō rajio*, 58.

<sup>24</sup> Itō, *Sōzō rajio*, 141.

Notably, the dead in *Imagination Radio* are not only connected to the human world, but also to the natural world. In author Hoshino Tomoyuki's analysis of Itō's work, he argues that *Imagination Radio* more than the voice of the dead is about a world in which a tree becomes a novel.<sup>25</sup> This refers directly to the cypress tree (*itosugi*) from which DJ Ark broadcasts his show, but also points to the significance of nature in the novel. Itō's well-known obsession with plants, which inspired his 1999 Kodansha Award-winning essay "Botanikaru Raifu" ("Botanical Life") and took him all the way to Disneyland to research vegetation, makes it appear that this reference to nature is not accidental.<sup>26</sup> In the first chapter alone, natural elements make up characters' names (e.g. Sōsuke, which is literally "grass boy," and Fuyusuke, which is literally "winter boy") and DJ Ark makes various seemingly arbitrary references to the nature around him (e.g. the mountains that surround him and a persimmon tree from his childhood). Of course, the most prominent of these is the cypress tree. The significance of this cypress tree is touched upon in chapter four of the novel, when S's former girlfriend mentions reading in an online blog post that the cypress tree is considered a symbol of the dead in Croatia. She describes an ancient cypress in the government gardens of Croatia's capital of Zagreb around which blue souls are said to gather at night. The Croatians secretly fear these souls, she says, because they believe them to be the lingering, bitter souls of Serbs who they killed long ago. She explains,

"In other words, it's as if, because of the two peoples' past violent conflict, the Croatians' ears cannot catch up to the Serbs' words or cannot come to grips with them. Perhaps it is due to the Croatians' guilt for not being able to understand their enemy's feelings that they have closed their ears to the dead Serbs' words."<sup>27</sup>

She hints that a lack of listening to the dead's voices extends from a combination of survivor's

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<sup>25</sup> Hoshino Tomoyuki, "Analysis: A World Where a Tree Became a Novel," in *Imagination Radio* by Itō Seikō (Tokyo: Kawade bunko, 2013), 207.

<sup>26</sup> Ayako Nakano, "Written or rapped, Seiko Ito has a way with words," *Japan Times*, Sept. 14, 2017, accessed Mar. 20, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2017/09/14/general/written-rapped-seiko-ito-way-words/>.

<sup>27</sup> Itō, *Sōzō rajio*, 126.

guilt and a shortage of understanding of the experiences of the dead. In her conversation with S, this foreign example is employed to comprehend the aftermath of 3.11. The cypress tree, therefore, functions as a symbolic connection between Croatian and Japanese societies and their struggle with a relationship to the dead and the environment to which they are attached. Although somewhat different in form, this connection highlights a globally shared tendency and emotion of human experience.

Cypress wood is also the material with which Noah builds his ark in the Bible. Since Noah's ark is partially the source from which DJ Ark receives his namesake, this connection also does not seem coincidental. In this vein, cypress also signifies a rescuer of life. While this duality of the cypress tree seems contradictory, it may also point to an important theme in *Imagination Radio* of a lack of simple duality. Dead and life, nature and technology, silence and voice are not opposites but rather can be understood as complicated and mixed. As Itō notes in an interview, trees also “exist between the system of the living and the system of the dead.”<sup>28</sup> A tree trunk consists of many layers. In contrast to grasses and flowers which consist of entirely living material, trees consist of both living and dead material that work together to sustain the tree. There is dead bark, a layer of dead tissue that protects the trunk and branches, and there is live bark, a layer of living tissue that helps lead food produced by the leaves into the branches, trunk, and roots of the tree. There is also the Cambium layer, a layer of living cells which facilitates growth inside of the trunk, and the Heartwood, a layer of dead cells that provides a physical support for the tree.<sup>29</sup> In other words, since trees consists of portions that are living and portions that are dead, they can be considered as existing between or simultaneously within the two

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<sup>28</sup> In Hoshino, 207.

<sup>29</sup> “Cross Section of a Tree,” *Tree Growth and Structure*, Apr. 23, 2013, accessed Mar. 20, 2019, <https://treegrowthstructure.weebly.com/cross-section-of-a-tree.html>.

realms of life and death. This may then be a metaphor for DJ Ark, whose tree embodies both death and a savior of life and who has died but his voice still lives within the imagination.

As one Fukushima volunteer, Nao, says, “Corpses don’t talk. Anyone who believes differently has been corrupted by unscientific sentimentality.”<sup>30</sup> While this may be true, the significance of and further rationale for exhibiting the voices of DJ Ark and other dead in *Imagination Radio* can perhaps be explained by revisiting Salomé Voegelin’s concept of sound and voice as “invisible formlessness” discussed in my introduction. Voice, Voegelin argues,

[. . .] urges us to think of culture as invisible agency, as the simultaneous and unseen mobility of sound: actions and engagement rather than artifacts, outcomes, and visible relationships. A sonic culture is not about connections and exclusions but about practices connecting and disconnecting.<sup>31</sup>

Making the dead, which are similarly invisibly formless entities, apparent through voice in *Imagination Radio* opens a space alternative to those represented by vision, which is often understood as a signifier for one’s “authentic” reality, and fosters a reconnection with a type of community that includes multiple types of life or states of being. In other words, understanding invisibility as containing an important source of agency can help us think differently about relationships between seemingly opposite entities, such as living and dead, Tokyo and Tōhoku. If we listen closely, these opposites are not separate but closely connected.

This type of narrative can be considered an example of what Christine Murrin in her book *Ecology Without Culture* calls “obligate storytelling,” a kind of narration that emphasizes the bonds between beings that coexist within an ecological system, acknowledges the existence of diverse bodies in that system, and refuses to privilege human-centered writing or language.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Itō, *Sōzō rajio*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Christine L. Murrin, *Ecology Without Culture: Aesthetics for a Toxic World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 27-8.

It can be argued that the way that *Imagination Radio* negotiates post-3.11 traumas of loss of community and loved ones is through this “obligate storytelling” by opening a space for voices that are not usually audible, namely the dead and the earth. Vision and visibility is not given precedence. Instead, the invisible entity’s voice forces those who only believe what they see to exchange their existing understandings of reality for one that incorporates a lack of certainty and categorical representation. The inability to see those like DJ Ark encourages readers to explore new relationships with the usually unseen, unrepresented, and inaudible dead through a singular reliance on the imagined audible voice. Although the dead and the earth are usually unable to speak, DJ Ark and his listeners, who are also dead themselves, are significantly provided, through obligate storytelling, a recentralizing voice, a sound, and an audibility, albeit one that is only available to those guided by imagination and empathy. At the same time, as one of DJ Ark’s listeners, Kiichi, says, in the 3.11 triple disaster, “Humans are not the only ones who perished.”<sup>33</sup> The next section will discuss Sakamoto Ryūichi’s found object, the “Tsunami Piano,” which the composer understands as one type of tsunami victim.

### **TSUNAMI PIANO: NEGOTIATING THE TUNE OF A PIANO’S CORPSE**

It is perhaps a similar imaginative and empathetic practice in listening that led composer Sakamoto Ryūichi to engage in 3.11 through the peripheral voice of a “dead” piano. An NHK 2018 short documentary on Sakamoto’s discovery of what he calls the “Tsunami Piano” begins with his comment, “I heard about a piano that survived the tsunami and wanted to hear its

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<sup>33</sup> Itō, *Sōzō rajio*, 109.

sound.”<sup>34</sup> Arriving at the gymnasium of a then abandoned high school in Miyagi Prefecture in 2012, Sakamoto is told that the piano sitting on the stage in front of him had been floating in water from the tsunami for several days when it was found. The high water mark on its side shows how deeply the piano had been immersed. As Sakamoto climbs up a short flight of stairs onto the stage, the camera zooms in on the roots, grass, and weeds that are beginning to tear through the stage’s base. It is as if nature is beginning to take over this man-made structure only a few months after the disaster. Sakamoto thoroughly inspects the inside of the piano with a flashlight as if conducting a medical checkup before sitting down and beginning to play. As his fingers press down clumsily on the sticking keys, he finds that, although it is in better shape than he expected, the piano is extremely out of tune. His voice overlaps with the image on the screen:

In that moment, I felt pained and sad. To be honest, it really hurt to listen. It was heart-wrenching. [The piano] didn’t sound like a piano, and it was hard to play. I was sure it was done for. It felt as if I was playing the corpse of this piano that had drowned.<sup>35</sup>

Much of the same footage for this documentary was used in the 2017 feature-length documentary on Sakamoto’s life, called *Coda*. However, as Sakamoto speaks of the piano’s “corpse” in the documentary, the scene shifts to the endless piles of destruction that line the roads leading to Futaba, a town left uninhabitable due to the meltdown of Fukushima Dai’ichi Nuclear Power Plant. Just like the dead victims of the disaster, this scene is omitted or rendered invisible in the government sponsored NHK rendition.

Interestingly, in Sakamoto’s eyes, the “Tsunami Piano” is now dead or dying, another tragic victim of the tsunami-earthquake-nuclear meltdown. At the same time, his comment that this piano does not sound like a piano (*piano no oto ga shinai*) suggests an overreliance on the

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<sup>34</sup> Stephen Nomura Schible, dir., *Ryuichi Sakamoto: Coda* (New York: AVROTROS, 2017), DVD. Although this documentary has English subtitles, all quotes in this chapter are my own translation unless otherwise noted.

<sup>35</sup> *NHK Japan Documentary*, “‘Tsunami Piano’: Sakamoto Ryūichi to Tōhoku no nana nen,” NHK, March 16, 2018.

concrete visible entity that stands before him. Just as the vocality of the dead DJ unsettles his intrinsic invisibility and the preconceived concept that the dead are silent, the piano's dissonant sound that does not align with traditional, modern, and human understandings of what a piano is and sounds like.

However, this is arguably a question of perspective. Connections can be made with the case of René Magritte's famous painting "The Treachery of Images" (1928-1929) in which an image of a pipe that "talks" through the language of the phrase, "This is not a pipe." This painting seeks to expose the arbitrary relationship between an object and its name, or the very constructedness of objects through human visual perception and language. Similarly, but through an aural lens, the piano's lack of "piano-like" sonicity challenges us to search beyond our understandings of the visual, the word "piano," and the presupposed understandings of the musical. Just because the piano "does not sound like a piano" does not mean that it is no longer a piano. Rather, it is simply no longer a piano in the ways in which a piano is traditionally heard through contemporary perceptions. The dissonant sound of the "Tsunami Piano," therefore, works to unsettle and exceed its constructed visible and audible forms by relating us to a reality unseen, unrepresented, or not yet apparent that is alternate to that which human beings have constructed.

In fact, Sakamoto's opinion of the piano's sound changes a few years after his initial encounter. In 2017, he revises his statement on the piano from one of despair to one of hope and new understanding:

We humans say pianos fall out of tune (*kurū*), but that's not exactly true. Matter is simply struggling to return to its natural state. In a matter of seconds, the tsunami struck and became a restorative force to nature. Now, when I listen to the ways that nature has retuned (*chōritsu shite kureta*) the "Tsunami Piano," it feels really good. In short, objects like pianos (*piano teki na mono*) are forcibly tuned to please our ears and ideals. This may be natural to humans, but from nature's perspective, it's

unnatural.<sup>36</sup>

Here, Sakamoto recognizes the constructedness of the piano, both in terms of its shape, which has been built by human industry, and its sound, which can be perceived as “out of tune” (*kurū*) by human ears. This term “*kurū* (狂 ㄱ)” is interestingly echoes *Imagination Radio Gamé*’s recollection of the medium at Pearl Harbor when he calls her “crazy” (*kyōjin* 狂人). If we understand these terms as connected, “out of tune” can be read as a mark of insanity. However, just as Gamé finds something to be gained from the medium’s possible “insanity,” her “out-of-tuneness” with mainstream society, Sakamoto also finds insight in the “Tsunami Piano”’s “crazed” and “dissonant” tune. When listened to through a different, perhaps more positive, set of perceptions, Sakamoto argues that the “Tsunami Piano” does not necessarily need to be classified as “out of tune.” While it may be “out of tune” with human conceptions of music and sound, it is “in tune” with its source of origin in nature.

Sociologist Shoko Yoneyama argues in her joint study on post-Minamata and post-3.11 Japan that socioenvironmental disaster has encouraged a reemergence at the grassroots level of animism, which she defines as an approach to life that presupposes a presence of a spirit in all things in nature, including the living, the dead, and the yet to emerge.<sup>37</sup> While I do not mean to say that Sakamoto’s comment about the piano carries tones of animism, per se, I find it useful to position it as a similar nuanced understanding of the belief in connection between levels of existence and allows for the possibility of *presence*, even in those dead or near death. This may prove significant on an extremely personal level. In 2014, Sakamoto was diagnosed with stage

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<sup>36</sup> Nomura Schible, *Coda*.

<sup>37</sup> Shoko Yoneyama, “Animism: A Grassroots Response to Socioenvironmental Crisis in Japan,” in *New Worlds from Below*, eds. Tessa Morris-Suzuki and Eun Jeong Soh (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2007), 99-100.

three throat cancer. The disease killed part the bone structure in his mouth and made it difficult for his mouth to produce the necessary saliva to swallow food and sometimes even to speak. Faced with his own impending death and degrading body, he began thinking about the “Tsunami Piano” again. Notably, it was only after this diagnosis that Sakamoto began thinking of the piano in a more hopeful light. It is almost as if he senses similarities between himself and this dilapidating piano, an instrument that has accompanied him throughout his musical career. Seemingly overlapping himself with the “Tsunami Piano” “corpse,” he begins to think perhaps it is not a hopeless case and can be both dead *and* alive. Perhaps it may be “in tune” after all and still retain a glimmer of presence. Perhaps it in its “corpse-like” state it is able to retain meaning and sound uniquely natural and “really good.”

In a similar vein, East Asian folklore scholar Michael Dylan Foster finds key affective, political, and ideological meaning in the corpse of ghosts and other supernatural figures, specifically *tanuki*, or racoon dogs. “In the wake of progress,” he suggests, “it seems, there is always a dead body, and the *tanuki*’s corpse becomes a metonym for those things—nature, tradition, magic—that the narrative of modernity destroys.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, Foster argues that because *tanuki* represent a more simplistic, idyllic past of nature, tradition, and magic, its dead body forces Japanese society to confront uncomfortable, sometimes even threatening transformations of “progress” in daily life. Significantly, the *tanuki*’s dead body in many folklore stories is brought about by a clash with a train, which in Meiji period literature by authors such as Natsume Sōseki was often used as a symbol for “rapid national changes that have not been fully understood by the individuals they affect,” while also implicitly critiquing “Japan’s state-

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Dylan Foster, “Haunting Modernity: Tanuki, Trains, and Transformation in Japan,” *Asian Ethnology* 71, no. 1 (2012): 14.

sponsored capitalist development, imperialism and war.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the *tanuki*’s death by train becomes a metaphor for the loss of the traditional as well as a sense of impending danger in the face of modernity and modern technology characterized by destruction. While the “Tsunami Piano” “death” is not caused directly by similar forces of destructive technology, Sakamoto explicitly recognizes the connection between the piano’s corpse and environmental crisis.

In the documentary *Coda*, Sakamoto notes that his awareness of environmental crisis started to trouble him around 1992. He recalls,

I began to sense danger, feel alarm. I didn’t exactly know how or why, but we musicians seem to sense these things early, like canaries in a coal mine. But [the environment] wasn’t worsening on its own. There was a link to human activity.<sup>40</sup>

Like the train in Meiji society, Sakamoto senses that the pace at which Japan’s technology was growing in the late 1980s and early 90s inevitably came with a price. For the sake of technological possibility, convenience, and efficiency may have increased, other aspects of society, such as the natural environment, traditional beliefs, and social disparities, were often swept aside, the dangerous often forgotten. Sakamoto is part of a generation who has witnessed the harmful effects of nuclear technology, such as the catastrophic nuclear accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in 1986. While he says that he is not interested in going against the current and returning to a completely natural society, he has explicitly stated that he is interested in “the erosion of technology, such as errors and noises.”<sup>41</sup> If we consider the corpse-like “Tsunami Piano” as similar to Foster’s *tanuki* corpses, it can also be understood as posing a type of contextual error in the current complacency of the technology-based society narrative. Foster’s use of the concept of “haunting” can especially provide insight into the “Tsunami

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<sup>39</sup> Alisa Freedman, *Tokyo in Transit: Japanese Culture on the Rails and Road* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 70.

<sup>40</sup> Nomura Schible, *Coda*.

<sup>41</sup> Nomura Schible, *Coda*.

Piano” not as a frightening error, per se, but one that in the face of technological advancement reflects a disjuncture between time and space, the known and unknown, certain and ambiguous.

Foster argues, “If Bakhtin’s chronotope suggests that a particular place is linked to a particular time, haunting complicates indexicality: time is out of place, or place is out of time.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, as previously mentioned, 3.11 created many ruptures in the chronotopic unity of Japanese society between rural and urban spaces, Tōhoku and Tokyo, living and dead. If understood through Foster’s conceptualization, the disorientation of these kinds of ruptures and losses give rise to hauntings. Like the pointed use of anachronism in *Samurai Champloo* that I described in chapter 2, the somewhat atavistic and uncanny presence of both the “corpse” of a piano and the deceased voice of a radio DJ in 3.11 discourse seems to expose a fracture in normative and mainstream concepts of society and the marginalization of voices that have been forgotten. The reality of the impact of 3.11 on Japanese society and the global ecological system is a lot more complicated and ambiguous than statistics can ever show. As Karen Thornber indicates, “General patterns exist but ambiguities are often a basic component of even the most expected, repeated actions. This is part of what makes human damage of environments so difficult to prevent and remediate.”<sup>43</sup> Yet, creative texts are able to expose the extent of these ambiguities and their connections to a network of political and affective indexicalities that suggest a retuning to alternative perspectives. The next section will analyze how the particular types of voices in Sakamoto’s and Itō’s works illustrate how the disembodied shrouding of darkness reflects the fractured chronotope and the disorientations of haunting. In other words, it is not only the state of being of these texts but their medium—namely, a piano in a dark room and a disembodied voice on the radio—as well. Here, it becomes clearer than ever that the

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<sup>42</sup> Foster, “Haunting Modernity,” 16.

<sup>43</sup> Thornber, *Ecoambiguity*, 215.

audience can no longer rely on the visual and must instead gain a renewed faith in the imagination and other forms of perception and re-tuning.

### **LISTENING INTO THE DARK: THE ROLE OF DISEMBODIED VOICES OF A PIANO AND A DJ**

Notably, the “Tsunami Piano” was first featured in public in the back of a dark room of a 2017 exhibit in Shinjuku. Utilizing an automated machine to press down on the piano’s keys, it plays the piece “*Zure*,” meaning “dislodged,” “shifted,” or “out of synch.” The first section provides an open, reverberating silence that is suddenly disturbed by digitally modified bursts of sound produced by a synchronizer, accompanied by pulses of light that temporarily illuminate the room’s black walls. This opening audio-visually represents the actual seismic waves of the earthquake that hit Tōhoku on March 11<sup>th</sup>. In a way, the digital noises and flashing lights open up a multisensory space to hear the inaudible vibrations of the earth’s “voice.” Sakamoto, in *Coda*, reveals that these first pulses of sound actually echo the main theme of the 2015 film *The Revenant*, which he composed while battling cancer. The original musical piece attempts to conjure the film’s themes of the simultaneous beauty and indiscriminate terrors of nature, the harshness of desolation, and hints of what saxophonist Tom Moon calls in a review of the film’s music, “a sense of psychoactive urgency.”<sup>44</sup> These themes are seamlessly reapplied to the context of the tsunami-earthquake and, in a sonic chaotic yet unified blending, emphasize the complexities of crisis in its many personal, affective, environmental, and social facets. As if putting the earth’s normative silence into audible and visible form, this section seems to challenge

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<sup>44</sup> Tom Moon, “Review: Ryuichi Sakamoto, Alva Noto & Bryce Dessner, ‘The Revenant,’” *NPR: First Listen*, Dec. 30, 2015, accessed Apr. 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/30/461409253/first-listen-ryuichi-sakamoto-alva-noto-bryce-dessner-the-revenant>.

the audience to retune their attention to the pluralities of nature, death, and disaster.

As the piece continues, the initial notes gradually become asynchronous, as if desperately attempting to catch up to an invisible goal and transforming into a different tune. Then, a programmed machine attached to the “Tsunami Piano” plays one dissonant key at a time, puncturing the digital sounds of the synthesizer. Especially in the darkness, the mechanically played piano gives the illusion that it is playing, or speaking, on its own. The fact that a machine, rather than a human hand, is the force behind the piano’s dissonant melody draws attention to the tension between nature and technology, noise and silence, life and death. At the same time, the darkness blurs these tensions in a way that they are no longer separate dichotomies, but rather paradoxically “natural” concepts that necessitate one another. In other words, the “Tsunami Piano” brings these dichotomies together into a multisensory piece that is in-between and both, or perhaps simply “naturally tuned.” It takes up space as an uncanny instrument and sound that is an affective representative of the 3.11 disaster. It also symbolizes an instance of sonic presencing that reassesses the politics of silence and sounds out the space of the dark room. In this way, the piano’s voice, mixed with the synthesizer and flashing lights in the darkness produces an affective geography that maps 3.11 into a sonic network of bonds amid and between the living and the dead, humankind and the landscape, technology and nature.

To reiterate, I contend that the darkness plays a key role in this re-mapping process of knowledge and experienced reality. In the darkness of the piano’s room, people are invited to reconceptualize temporality and spatiality in order to consider other realities and lose themselves in the intangibilities of location reinforced by lack of sight. This disappearance of the both the personal and piano’s body, provides space to reflect on the personal significance of the sound that fills the room. In this way, the “Tsunami Piano” exhibit not only reanimates the voice of the

dead but also, via Sakamoto's mediation and the people in the room, provides a multiway communication and community for mourning of multilayered trauma in the darkness. In *Sonic Agency*, Brandon LaBelle argues that disappearance and interruption provided through the invisibility of sound encourage a deep form of listening, which he calls "listening into the dark."<sup>45</sup> While this seems to be a metaphor, the "Tsunami Piano" exhibit makes use of the darkness to draw out its haunting sound and forcibly encourage close listening. LaBelle postulates,

If the gaze performs to often define limits, to pinpoint those who may cross lines or borders, to delimit the permissible within the social field according to what or who appears, and how, the invisible quality of sounding events or subjects may afford opportunities for not only entering spaces—to *appear*—but for finding solidarities within the dark, or upon peripheries of appearance. [. . .] Importantly, invisibility may extend precisely what or who counts, within the space of appearance, by widening the sphere of the uncountable and the in-existent as bodies that matter.<sup>46</sup>

In the darkness, we are able to focus not only on the sonicity of the voice but more specifically the reestablishment of audibility for the invisible—the dead and living victims, human and not, of traumatic disaster, not treated as separate but as one. Not all of those who died are accounted for in post-disaster statistics. Some are recorded as missing, while livestock, wildlife, and other natural elements are not recorded at all. Yet, in the darkness, marked by the absence of vision, everything is recorded sonically as loss while space is also found to regain the space for reflection on these losses unaccounted for. Because the darkness encourages close listening, speaking and listening are reciprocal and therapeutic. Just as the passive victim of the piano moves towards the active player, the passive human survivor moves towards the position of active listener. If the title of the piano's piece "*Zure*" highlights the disparities between beings

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<sup>45</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 19.

<sup>46</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 32, emphasis in original.

and landscapes and knowledge and uncertainty, listening into the darkness of the exhibition room is a democratizing act that mends these disparities through a transient, figurative sense of reciprocal community.

Listening to the radio has a similar effect. Itō's choice to make Ark a radio host rather than a television host likewise provides a focus on the invisibility of his presence, encourages a retuning to the qualities of his imagined voice in the darkness, and encourages active speaking and listening reciprocity between the inaudible. The radio has often been understood as a part of modern technology that condensed time and space or at least created a shared time and space with a specific object or event. *Imagination Radio* begins by establishing this synchronized sense of time. DJ Ark begins with a vague greeting, "Good evening. Or good morning. Or maybe good afternoon. You're listening to 'Imagination Radio.'"<sup>47</sup> His reasoning for this is because his program is being broadcast via the power of the imagination regardless of time of day. However, claiming that it is difficult to speak without a tangible sense of time, he synchronizes his listener to his personal time zone of 2:46 A.M. This interestingly centers the reader-listener's time and space around the usually peripheral voice of the dead, the voice of a radio.

In *Electrified Voices*, Kerim Yasar notes that the radio was first introduced into Japanese society in 1925. From its very beginning, Yasar writes, "radio was immediately put to effective use consolidating the subjective presence and reach of the imagined community of the nation-state."<sup>48</sup> In this sense, it propagated an imagined perspective that "the nation was listening as one."<sup>49</sup> This being said, the radio is an antiquated form of technology. If we consider the complications with information technology in the many months post-3.11 and the fact that many

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<sup>47</sup> Itō, *Sōzō rajio*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Yasar, *Electrified Voices*, 118.

<sup>49</sup> Yasar, *Electrified Voices*, 140.

elderly in the disaster area, which one of Ark's listeners points out, did not and still do not use Internet, turning to older technology seems like an appropriate choice. At the same time, this choice also appears to be returning to this sense of "imagined community" and "listening as one" established from radio's very beginnings. Yet, instead of a conventional national rhetoric, *Imagination Radio* imagines a community that has retuned its means of listening to the unheard and underheard. It is a community that is powered by empathy and the desire to connect to shared traumas both natural and manmade. Instead of the visualities of disaster, DJ Ark and other victim voices provide a mosaic of experiences to which reader-listeners can connect or detach on both an intimate level and as a community.

Voegelin, in her musings on the workings of sound and creative sound works, also significantly comments on the radio, which she describes as a "stream of now" coming at me "out of the dark."<sup>50</sup> She argues that,

In the invisibility of radio-sound, the listener becomes producer, inventing his own contingent reality between what is heard and the time-space of perception. [. . .] Here, no image preserves the listener's hold on an authentic sense of reality, and thus no sense of non-reality limits his imagination.<sup>51</sup>

Here, Voegelin importantly reaffirms how the invisibility of radio voice can enable imagination and a sort of agency on the part of the listener, as well, that is not as available in visual content. The radio represents communication between the listener and speaker while both disconnecting from the concept of a body, or concrete materiality. Many victims were similarly swept away by the 3.11 tsunami and did not leave behind a body for the living to mourn. The disembodied communication provided by the radio, therefore, seems to represent this traumatic loss while also reestablishing connection through alternative forms, namely the imagination.

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<sup>50</sup> Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 37.

<sup>51</sup> Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 37.

The imagination must function in order to animate sound in thought, or imagined sound, in the first place. In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze similarly speaks of imagination as he grapples with embodiment of the intangible, exploring how ideas, much like radio-sound, can be real without being actual (i.e. outside and against representation and cohesion). While 3.11 government policy and S's girlfriend's Croatian example have shown us that the doubtful and unknown is usually avoided, Deleuzian theory calls for an exercise in creative thought to solve complex examples because "problems are ideas themselves."<sup>52</sup> Deleuze argues that it is the particular workings of the imagination that are able to "grasp the process of actualization from the point of view of these echoes and reprises" and "cross domains, orders, and levels, knocking down the partitions coextensive with the world, guiding our bodies and inspiring our souls, grasping the unity of mind and nature."<sup>53</sup> It is arguably possible to apply this same argument to imagined radio-sound, whose very intangibility makes it a useful tool to problematize unquestioned beliefs of representation and notions of existent distinctions. Like Deleuze's reference to "idea," the radio-sound's resistance to concrete form makes it malleable and potential, which, through creative imagination, signifies the ability to lead therapeutically to new thoughts, reflections, and movements.

In this way, largely through listening and imagining into the darkness, both the piano and radio foster a sense of community and reciprocal communication, in which voice and sound have the capacities to develop a resonant space between players and listeners or reader-listeners. However, because there is no such thing as eternal sound or an eternal text on sound, their medium makes us conscious of sound's intrinsic transience and fragility. Because the listener or reader-listener is thrust into the darkness, we are democratized yet separated by invisibility. This

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<sup>52</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 20.

<sup>53</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 220.

darkness of the “Tsunami Piano” exhibit and DJ Ark’s disembodied radio voice emphasize the paradox between concrete categories rather than displaying visible, knowable content apparent in government statistics. In so doing, they offer a different engagement with the world. As revealed above, theirs is a politics that is both affective and political, which emphasizes that the complexities of disaster and trauma go beyond simple dualities. At the same time, it is also a politics of ethical empathetic responsibility that resonates with a need for planetary consciousness, or a realization that disaster and humankind must be understood as connected. These politics, embedded in the voices of the “Tsunami Piano” and *Imagination Radio*, are key to 3.11 discourse because of how they help expand the agentive possibilities of the underheard, pass over or around structures of dominance to embolden the voices of the few, and provide alternative coping strategies to the national catchphrase, “*Ganbare Nippon!*” (“Hang in there/Do your best, Japan!”). In post-3.11 society, people are disillusioned with government narratives of misinformation are no longer able to the incantation of “*ganbare*,” which once constructed via sports radio broadcasts a nationalistic mantra of “we [the nation] are all trying hard.”<sup>54</sup> As Kashimura argues,

We do not need the imaginary symptom of shutting off reality, such as in Prime Minister Abe’s ultra-nationalistic military ideology. Instead we need the metaphors and thoughts that support us in facing reality and creating relations and communities.<sup>55</sup>

As Kashimura points out, 3.11 caused people to seek alternative means to interact the world that provides meaning to traumatic experiences of loss on multiple levels in response to a nationalistic, unfeeling rhetoric. It is precisely this plight that Sakamoto Ryūichi and Itō Seikō attempt to address, utilizing imagination.

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<sup>54</sup> Yasar, *Electrified Voices*, 142.

<sup>55</sup> Kashimura, “Trauma, Subject, and Subjectivity,” 207.

In *Imagination Radio*, S suggests, “I think it’s important to devote the time to lend an ear to the dead’s voices, feel sad, grieve, and, at the same time, move forward step-by-step, hand-in-hand with the dead.”<sup>56</sup> The dead are not part of the world of the living, so it is impossible to hold onto them for too long. However, simply forgetting them or sealing them away does not help those left behind heal. Here, the dead represent not only those physically lost as a result of the 3.11 disaster, but seems to include an entire ecological system, a global humanity from which knowledge and experiences of trauma and healing can be shared. Instead of providing answers, facts, or certainty, DJ Ark’s radio and the “Tsunami Piano” open up an accessible space for those with imagination to join hands and draw their own conclusions on both an imagined communal and personal level. It is this alternative space in which sound and voice make it possible for speaker and listener to resonate with each other as a pre-verbal exchange. It further provides a democratized opportunity for mourning and healing that extends beyond the borders of nation in its traditional sense to a global ecological network that is largely inclusive, incorporating the dead, the living, technology, nature, Tōhoku, Tokyo, as well as those that exist in-between.

### **CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING A PLANETARY CONSCIOUSNESS**

Especially if we consider the nuclear power plant meltdowns in the wake of the 3.11 earthquake-tsunami, it is clear that complete national regulation and certainty in the face of Japan’s current levels of technology—especially nuclear technology—proves impossible. This is due to the intrinsic invisibility and intangibility of nuclear power and the risks that it imposes across both national and international borders. Landscapes ravaged by a combination of natural

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<sup>56</sup> Itō, *Sōzō radio*, 141.

and human disaster, a tremendous loss of life and psychological stability, and a growing distrust in mainstream media and national government, forced a pervasive break up of communities both living and dead, natural and human. *Imagination Radio* and the “Tsunami Piano,” therefore, represent an attempt to repair not national but rather “local” cracks in community through an far-reaching imagined community bounded by an empathetic shared belief, shared ecosystem, and shared time-space of darkness. They emphasize that the dead, the voiceless, and the silent must not be pushed to the side but rather learned from and carried with us so that history does not repeat itself. There is no room to be complacent, for, as 3.11 has demonstrated 66 years after the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and 25 years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, it is easy to slip back into past patterns.

Projects like *Imagination Radio* and the “Tsunami Piano” demonstrate that, if images and data play a central role in constructing 3.11 as a national event, sound offers space for an alternative imagined community in post-3.11 Japan based on lessons taught by the invisible and inaudible dead and those who were left behind. Voice, sound, and music has also been shown in psychological studies to be an important means of giving trauma a form of expression, enabling trauma patients to reexperiencing themselves as active participants rather than passive victims trapped in an endless cycle.<sup>57</sup> This leads to healing not because it is a language given by a national order, but rather, because it is a type of expression that enables those who experience to trauma to actively explore new rhetoric separate from the national one based on certainty and “*ganbare*.” Exploring the 3.11 disaster through a sonic register thus reminds us that there is more to the world than the confines of victimization, the visual, and traditional definitions of identity. It is a medium that challenges us to overcome what African American writer Audre Lorde calls

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<sup>57</sup> Sutton and Backer, “Music, trauma and silence,” 76.

“false dichotomies” of the body and mind, the spiritual and the political in order to reexamine ways in which our world can be different.<sup>58</sup> This further encourages formations of community based on human experiences and emotional knowledge, rather than the often superficial “fact” and “certainty” of reconstructive nationalism that downplay risks and other potential dangers.

On an even broader scale, the tsunami radio’s personal connection to Sakamoto Ryūichi’s experiences and *Imagination Radio*’s connections to other global issues throughout history, demonstrates an attempt to encourage listeners and reader-listeners to think more carefully about the implications of trauma and disaster in a more connected way. This can be understood similarly through the lens of planetary consciousness coined by Paul Gilroy, a postcolonial scholar who studied under Stuart Hall. This concept offers a framework with which to comprehend the “universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit upon each other” and to become aware of “the tragedy, fragility, and brevity of indivisible human existence.”<sup>59</sup> It is also reminiscent of the Japanese term “*kyōsei*,” which originally means “living together,” but in the contemporary sociological context points to a society where “Japanese people are living together in a multicultural way with foreign residents, that is, people living in Japan who came from foreign countries.”<sup>60</sup> Perhaps, however, as Itō, Sakamoto, and Gilroy suggest, this “living together” can extend to a wider group of people and existences. Planetary consciousness is useful in that it helps to further the existing models of globalization and multiculturalism in a way that helps us understand societies as interconnected and informed by interdependent encounters. Instead of assuming the superiority of one group or another through

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<sup>58</sup> Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Tucson, Arizona: Kore Press, 1981), 89.

<sup>59</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2004), 4, 84.

<sup>60</sup> Kazuhisa Nishihara and Mari Shiba, “New Emotion, Action and Recognition of Migrants and Mediators After the Great East Japan Earthquake: Toward a new sociological theoretical approach to multicultural situations in Japan,” in *The Consequences of Global Disasters*, eds. Anthony Elliott and Eric L. Hsu (New York & London: Routledge, 2015), 116.

systems, such as racialism, culturalism, and speciesism, planetary consciousness can lead people to seek more egalitarian and connected ways to interact with social issues and disaster.

Similar to what Isabel Wilkerson calls “radical empathy,” this involves not simply imagining how others feel but putting in the heart work to *listen* to the experiences of others.<sup>61</sup> Sakamoto’s and Itō’s interconnection of human, supernatural, natural, technological, local, and global perspectives appear to uphold a type of empathetic planetary consciousness as a way to address post-3.11 society on a deeper level. Their texts do this by depicting possible interactions of networks existing in the world both “real” and “imagined” and provide a reciprocal communication that listens as it speaks. Again, this does not provide a singular solution, but it can potentially offer a helpful starting point for reflection. Survivors—both in and out of the disaster area—are then left to imagine their own individual and connected post-disaster futures in which, to borrow Kerim Yasar’s eloquent wording, “the past is always present—perhaps only as memory, or as something even more spectral, but never inconsequentially.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 386.

<sup>62</sup> Yasar, *Electrified Voices*, 226.

## CODA

Sound, especially in the form of voice, language, and music, has become so prevalent in today's society that it is impossible to ignore. However, it has also become apparent that, due to this very pervasiveness as well as an acclimatization to "normative" structures in society, there has been an increase in passive listening or a complete lack of listening at all. It is for these reasons that I have taken a reassessment of listening to sound to task throughout this dissertation. I have argued that it is crucial to consider the political potential of sound to hold concrete and traditional knowledge in contention and that it is no longer adequate to reduce sound to a metrics of physical vibrations. Its intrinsic fluidity of definition and construct enables sound, in both its perceived and imagined form, to extend accessibility across and between boundaries of body, culture, politics, and environment. Lines are still drawn, but more porously, thereby encouraged to think of cultural processes as we may sonic processes, replete with repetitions, seepages, noise, resonances, and rhythm. Close listening, then—as opposed to passive listening—represents close reflection, a disruption and increased flexibility of preconceived discourses of race, and a critical tool to actively negotiate accessibility to difference-intimating spaces.

This dissertation has studied a broad sampling of texts that consider sound in some way or form and how they may suggest potential for close listening to sonic negotiations of "racial" difference, marginalized communities, and becoming in Japanese contexts. In this way, these texts provide an example for the ways in which we can question dichotomies and "normative" methods of representation. They further provide a reevaluative framework to recognize alternative Japanese identities to those nationally procured through notions, such as "mother tongue," traditional samurai, mainstream regiments of space, and often insincere and insensitive appeals for "*ganbare*" perseverance. Portraying, as the texts analyzed here, the limitations of

these national and/or mainstream systems and habits of thought is not only crucial to understanding their problems and fallacies but also to identifying silent or inaudible gaps that call for deeper and more creative thinking. The shortfalls of traditional knowledge and concepts, which I relate to a form of “race,” also fosters a sense of urgency to question and develop an awareness of the pitfalls to avoid or improve for the sake of a more radically empathetic society towards acceptance of multiplicities and alternative modes of connectivity.

This project has been a highly personal one for me. Growing up in a Spanish-Cuban-American multiracial family and diverse D.C. metropolitan environment, multiplicity and mixture played a large role in my life through the food I ate, the people I met, and the music my parents played. Especially because my father is a writer and a poet, wordplay that traversed languages and cultures, like that of Tawada Yōko, has always been a natural portion of my vernacular and part of my identity. Therefore, recent discourse on race, decolonization of language, and inclusivity covers topics and information of which I have been aware for a very long time. In fact, thinking flexibly and plurally about these topics is the only way that I have found which vindicates my chaotic identity as a Spanish-Cuban-American woman living in the United States and highly immersed in Japanese language and culture. For me, alterity and marginalization is a lived experience. Looking forward to the future, it will surely be much the same for my children who will be a confusing jumble of Spanish, Cuban, American, Japanese, and whatever else they choose to be. Therefore, I hope to continue questioning “normative” borders, categories, and structures beyond the limits of this dissertation in order to encourage a more accepting and cognizant society for my sake and theirs. Although recently I have been horrified at the seemingly endless series of American racial injustices that have been thrust into public consciousness in 2020 and 2021, I am thankful that my research has proved timely enough

to add to and hopefully expand the boundaries of this discourse to address both global and particularly Japanese issues of audibility, identity, marginality, and race. In these final pages, I would like to end with one last text that is a direct response to 3.11 approximately a decade since the triple disaster. Its intriguing connection between the 3.11 triple disaster and a wave of social consciousness concerning marginality, race, and race-like structures in current-day Japan (2020) led especially by immigration, locality, and interracial marriage suggests that post-3.11 perhaps truly does mark a “new era” of identity politics.

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Suwa Nobuhiro’s 3.11 film is called *Kaze no Denwa* (lit. *Wind Telephone*; English title: *Voices on the Wind*, 2020) and is based on garden designer Sasaki Itaru’s “wind telephone,” a whitewashed telephone booth that houses a disconnected dial phone in a garden in the small town and former disaster area of Otsuchi, Iwate Prefecture. Sasaki set up the booth to cope with the loss of his own cousin to the tsunami. “Because my thoughts couldn’t be relayed over a regular phone line,” he explained to NHK Sendai, “I wanted them to be carried on the wind.”<sup>1</sup> Ever since he set up the telephone booth, thousands of grief-stricken 3.11 survivors as well as those who have lost loved ones to other causes have traveled to it as if it were a pilgrimage site in order to “speak” with the departed over the disconnected phone. The 2020 film follows a similar pilgrimage of Haru, a seventeen-year-old girl whose father, mother, and younger brother were one of many pronounced “missing” after the 3.11 tsunami.<sup>2</sup> At the outset of the film, Haru is living in 2020 Hiroshima with her aunt, who has taken her in. However, when this aunt suddenly

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<sup>1</sup> See Jessica Leigh Hester, “The Phone Booth for Japanese Mourners,” *CityLab*, January 10, 2017, accessed Dec. 7, 2018, <https://www.citylab.com/life/2017/01/otsuchi-wind-phone-japanese-mourners/512681/>.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the actress who plays Haru, Motola Serena, is a young biracial model. The fact that she not only plays a protagonist but her full Japaneseness is also never questioned throughout the film is rare for biracial actresses in the Japanese entertainment industry.

falls into a coma, Haru is left utterly alone, screaming and wishing she were dead. When a middle-aged truck driver helps her off the streets, gives her food, and encourages her to keep living, Haru is suddenly inspired to hitchhike back to visit her hometown in Iwate Prefecture.

While the connection to Hiroshima at the beginning of the film is subtle, it is no coincidence. In both academic, literary, and activist circles, similarities are often drawn between the nuclear disasters of 3.11 and the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima at the end of World War II. Making Hiroshima the starting point of Haru's pilgrimage-like journey seems to depict a historically sequential thread from Hiroshima to the end point in the 3.11 disaster area of Iwate Prefecture. This symbolizes a seemingly pointed trajectory that suggests not only that the two are connected by nuclear tragedy, but also that "Hiroshima" *led* to "Fukushima" or, as Ōe Kenzaburō wrote in a 2011 essay published in *The New Yorker*, "History repeats. [. . .] If you consider Japanese history through these stories [of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the 1954 hydrogen bomb testing at Bikini Atoll, and the accidents at Fukushima nuclear facilities], the tragedy is self-evident."<sup>3</sup>

However, this is not the sole message of the film. While there are a few comments about nuclear power, the main focus is clearly to portray of humanity and human experience.

Throughout Haru's hitchhiking journey back to her hometown, she meets a diverse group of people who share similar experiences of life, death, marginality, and loss. Yūka, for example, who treats Haru to a meal and takes her part of the journey by car, is an unmarried 40-year-old pregnant woman travelling with her brother. She tells Haru that even though people tell her she is too old to have children and her child will be without a father, she yearns to be a mother.

Although she is not directly tied to the 3.11 disaster, her pregnant state seems to symbolize for

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<sup>3</sup> Ōe Kenzaburō, "History Repeats," *The New Yorker*, Mar. 21, 2011, accessed Apr. 15, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/03/28/history-repeats>.

Haru a continuation and hope of future life, despite the “non-normative” circumstances that constitute it. Significantly, anthropologist Christine Yano argues that the relationship between the mother and child in traditional ballad-like *enka* music is equivalent to the connection between Japanese people and their identity.<sup>4</sup> In many *enka* ballads, the mother represents the *furusato*, or the physical and emotional location called home, and the child separated from his mother eternally seeks her presence. While *enka* and invocations of *furusato* are often associated with nationalistic rhetoric, Yūka’s non-normative circumstances as well as the ways in which *furusato* is invoked later in the film suggest a somewhat different strain of discourse that goes beyond the national to address a more global human experience.

One invocation of this occurs when Haru meets a family of Kurdish refugees, who are depicted as sharing her and other 3.11 survivors’ sense of loss of *furusato*. Uprooted by years of war and violence, the Kurds are often called the world’s largest nation without its own independent state. Having long abandoned the idea of a Kurdish homeland, many have been forced to immigrate to places like Japan. The wife of the family laments through an interpreter, “If we had our own country, everyone could go home. If only we had our own homeland (*furusato*).”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, her husband, who served as a volunteer in Fukushima during 3.11 clean-up efforts, has since been abruptly detained by immigration authorities for no apparent reason. Although he provided aid to Japanese people, he is treated like a criminal for his immigration status. This particular encounter with the Kurdish family and seemingly political stance on immigration in Japan feels fairly random in the grand scheme of the film’s narrative. However, it seems to point to the ability of disasters, as discussed in chapter four, to push social

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<sup>4</sup> Christine Yano, *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and Nation in Japanese Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 178.

<sup>5</sup> Suwa Nobuhiro, dir., *Kaze no denwa (Voices in the Wind)* (Tokyo: Broadmedia Studio, 2020), DVD.

issues, racial discrepancies, and socioeconomic gaps to the surface that have often long remained unnoticed or “silent.” Moreover, the *furusato* connection between the people of Fukushima and the Kurdish family appears to postulate the concept of *furusato* and its loss as a global experience, much like S’s former girlfriend’s mention of the Croatians closing their ears to the voices of the dead in *Imagination Radio*. The invocation of *furusato* in the film further similarly addresses a strong connection to the natural land, which has been violently severed by violence and disaster.

Another invocation of *furusato* occurs in an interaction with Imada, the elderly father of middle-aged Morio, a former nuclear worker who takes Haru all the way to Fukushima in his car. Morio, like Haru, is similarly haunted by the loss of his family to the tsunami, who were also proclaimed as “missing.” Morio’s loss becomes painfully clear when they visit his abandoned home in Fukushima, which is now covered in weeds and scattered with children’s toys and drawings, as if representing a spectral moment frozen in time. It is significantly in this same scene that Haru imagines that she is reunited with her deceased family. As she hugs her mother and father and begins to play catch with her little brother, one of the only pieces of music in the film plays—a piece mainly of female vocalization that sounds hauntingly melancholic and spectral-like. Haru then meets Imada, played by famous actor and Fukushima native Nishida Toshiyuki, that night. In heavy Fukushima dialect, he comments, “Have you looked around? They’ve fixed things up a lot, but it’s still hard going (*taihen nan da ga*).”<sup>6</sup> Imada proceeds to describe how the main type of people who stayed in the Fukushima region after 3.11 were the elderly due to a desire to breathe the air of and eventually die in the place they were born—the *furusato*, which is here both idealized by traditional songs and concrete in its location. “It’s

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<sup>6</sup> Suwa, dir., *Kaze no denwa (Voices in the Wind)*.

logical,” he reasons, “It’s a natural thing.”<sup>7</sup> His voice later echoes melancholily through the room as he sings a traditional Fukushima folk song that he says has recently brought him to tears. With its lyrics that describe the Fukushima landscape, it is as if this song symbolizes the music of his land. However, the landscape in the song is one that has now been disrupted, transformed, and largely lost both visibly by natural disaster and invisibly by nuclear catastrophe. In opposition to the “cool Japan” image propagated by popular culture and technological gadgets, Yano suggests that *enka* song represents an intimately “vulnerable” and “tearful” version of Japan.<sup>8</sup> This image perhaps works to signify a nostalgically imagined national “Japan,” but, even if at one time existed in perception or imagination, it is notably one that is long gone. This is further highlighted by Imada’s comment on the experiences of Fukushima residents evacuated from the exclusion zone around the damaged Fukushima Dai’ichi nuclear power plant. He recalls,

“If you’re from Fukushima, everyone’s always asking if the radiation is okay. Like they can catch radiation from you and they’ll get sick, too! They don’t do anything to educate themselves about it. [And] they don’t do anything about the bullying of Fukushima kids. [ . . . ] Why do they do that...what do you call it? Discrimination (*sabetsu*).”<sup>9</sup>

Though ten years have passed since 3.11, Imada’s comment demonstrates on a deeply affective level that the lingering traumas of natural and human disaster clearly still affect Japanese people and have revealed social fissures that indicate underlying systems of “race” and result in systems of discrimination. Adding another layer concern is the fact that these disasters have brought about irrevocable destruction of the environment as well as a loss of life and home. At the same time, *Voices in the Wind* is a cultural example of how sense of loss, displacement, and discriminatory fracturing has positively inspired a wave of ecological and planetary

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<sup>7</sup> Suwa, dir., *Kaze no denwa (Voices in the Wind)*.

<sup>8</sup> Yano, *Tears of Longing*, 154.

<sup>9</sup> Suwa, dir., *Kaze no denwa (Voices in the Wind)*.

consciousness and making connections that go beyond the boundaries of the concept of Japanese nation. Understanding Japan as more of a globally connected and collective entity suggests an increased possibility for a world in which people are invested in the well-being of each other. As Wilkerson contends, each time a person reaches across caste—or “race” or any other discriminatory system for that matter, it helps to break the back of that system.<sup>10</sup> As the texts in this dissertation have demonstrated, sound in the form of language, music, and/or voice can be an important negotiating piece to this process. *A Voice on the Wind* follows in this same pattern.

In the film, voice plays an especially important role in the film’s final scene when Haru finally reaches the wind telephone by chance in Otsuchi. Haru, who is usually shown as an extremely quiet girl, is notably only highly vocal when she is angry. In two main instances—once when her aunt collapses and another time when she finds her home in Otsuchi in ruins—she screams into the air, furious at her situation that has left her desperately alone in the world. When she steps inside of the wind telephone box, she is unusually vocal once more, but this time, her voice is calm and collected. For perhaps the longest period of time that she speaks uninterrupted throughout the entire film, Haru seems to perform an extensive cathartic monologue into the mouthpiece of the old dial telephone. However, for her, this is not a monologue but a dialogue—an imagined conversation with the dead. While she does not receive any audible response, the pauses and hesitations in her speech seem to make space for the possibility of a reply. Moreover, the wind blows strongly around the telephone booth, swaying the trees, weeds, and flowers that form its natural garden. This sound of the invisible wind causing the movement of natural life perhaps signifies the invisible presence of supernatural beings. Perhaps their voices are imaginatively audible to her to the extent to which she needs to begin to heal.

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<sup>10</sup> Wilkerson, *Caste*, 386.

Either way, the wind telephone clearly creates a space that facilitates Haru's vocalization, which, along with her long journey filled with encounters, provides her with the realization that she is not powerless to act back on society and disaster and she is capable of taking control of her own future. The phone's disconnection from wires and artificial sounds also serves a reminder that the usually disembodied voice over the phone has an actual body, a tangible flesh encased in the narrow space of the booth. Perhaps she is not yet fully healed. Perhaps she never will be, as trauma often tends to reemerge in a various forms throughout the process to true recovery. But Haru is there. She is centered within the camera frame. And, to the audience, she is audible, as long as we are willing to listen.

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