Bodies and Economic Violences in Contemporary Japanese Fiction
Absence, Change, and Empowerment in Yū Miri, Murata Sayaka, and Kawakami Mieko

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Abstract This paper explores how different ways of articulating the idea of the body in contemporary Japanese literature are inscribed within a paradigm of criticism against ongoing modes of economic violence. The goal is to explore three ways of articulating the body represented in these works: change and adaptation to neoliberal demands in the case of Murata Sayaka's *Konbini ningen* (*Convenience Store Woman*), a quest for empowerment in Kawakami Mieko's *Natsu monogatari* (*Breasts and Eggs*), and the invisibilization of poverty in Yū Miri's *JR Ueno eki kōen guchi* (*Tokyo Ueno Station*).

Keywords Japanese literature. Economic violence. Symbolic violence. Body literature. Murata Sayaka. Yū Miri. Kawakami Mieko.

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1 Introduction

I explore in this piece different ways in which the body has been treated as a vehicle for the articulation of economic violence in contemporary Japanese literature. My goal is to study how literary representations of alterations to the body fit with a decades-long critical trend of criticizing hegemonic heteronormativities in Japan. The discourse by

Japanese authorities to promote and sustain a healthy body as a way to uphold social and economic prosperity has a well-established history of cultural confrontations. The trope of the altered body mocks the impossibility of attaining these standards and offers a visual and figurative gateway to express dissent and propose alternatives to the imposed paradigm of social suitability. I work under the hypothesis that contemporary iterations of these denunciations can reflect a recent focus by artists, activists, and critical thinkers on intersectionality as the means to fully understand and tackle effectively the multiple ongoing modes of oppression. In this regard, representations of the altered body have evolved to signal not only an isolated complaint, but an entangled web of constraints that are dependent upon questions of gender, race, class, origin, and else. In this line, the individual expected for normalcy and whose body is put to the test of symbolic (and material) transformation must incorporate a wider range of potential subjects that incarnate diversity in repression and resistance.

To explore this particular promise of contemporary body representations, I narrow down the study to an analysis of the way they convey criticism against economic violence. For this work, I define economic violence as the implementation, reproduction, and enforcement of rules and circumstances that harm collectives in a way that normalises their unfair economic situation and perpetuates a system of unequal distribution and access to resources. In order to survey the points in common and the particularities of these inequalities, I look at the relationship between body representations and economic violence in three novels, exposing how each of them adopts a different strategy and targets of criticism. In *JR Ueno-eki kōen-guchi* (2014) (*Tokyo Ueno Station*, 2019), by Yū Miri, I study the theme of invisibility; in *Konbini ningen* (2016) (*Convenience Store Woman*, 2018), by Murata Sayaka, the focus is set on imitation and metamorphosis; and in *Natsu monogatari* (2019) (translated with the title of *Breasts and Eggs*, 2019), by Kawakami Mieko, I centre on the idea of empowerment through resistance. I vertebrate my analysis of these three works by looking at how the representation of the body as a space of conflict carries a broader objection to Japan's hegemonic neoliberal biopolitics. I ultimately link these representations with the concurrent changes in protest dynamics happening across the country.

2 Representing Economic Violence

Economic violence, along with physical and symbolic violence, establishes and naturalises the otherwise arbitrary power relations that define the positions of members within a certain social structure, or a field, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms (1991), with its own set of rules and practices ('habitus' [Bourdieu 1998]) that manage the means (the

'capital') with which players position and legitimise their preponderance in relation to the rest. The reproduction of modes of coveted and interiorised aggressions, like economic violence, subtle in their delineation even when their effects are clearly identifiable, can entail a challenge for the analyst to uncover. They tend to be compared with flashier and seemingly more polarising representations of physical violence, a question that is particularly prevailing in the quest for justice after natural or man-made disasters (Sharp 2014). In some instances, the fight against openly visible abuses of power through physical violence, like that of authoritarian regimes, can obscure or displace other pervasive structures that sustain unfair hierarchies. As Sharp points out (2014, 11), efforts to carry out projects of transitional justice, aimed at restoration, accounting for wrongdoings, and restitution of political power, can leave untouched or substantially unaffected economic structures that keep benefiting those groups previously in power and continue oppressing those formerly subjugated.

There are at least three reasons that can explain this phenomenon. First, physical violence inflicts a type of visible damage that demands direct attention. The nature of its consequences, albeit contingent to the degree of its application, is short-term survival. It tends to manifest in material displays, for instance, in corporeal wounds, a matter that is relevant for our current discussion. Although economic violence can also leave a visible mark on those suffering them (Allen 2001; Benzeval et al. 2000), they can be perceived as corresponding to a different typeset of predicaments, one that can only be tackled in the mid to long term. Second, there is the scale. Issues associated with economic violence tend to be assumed as belonging to deep-rooted, systemic, broad-encompassing dynamics within a community. This perception of economic violence as something that happens in a wide-ranging dimension is also supported by the World Health Organization, which circumscribes economic violence as a "collective violence".[1] This connotation, while true in many accounts, also obfuscates the individual impact of economic violence. Its causes are systemic, but the consequences are also personal, a matter often overlooked and at the centre of contemporary strategies of confrontation to these structures. Third, intrinsic of this type of violence and sharing in this regard the same trait with symbolic violence in a Bourdieusian sense, economic violence require the acceptance and internalization of the groups inflicting and inflicted by them in order to work (Thapar-Björkert, Samelius, Sanghera, 2016). For these power structures to operate, they demand the consent of the members affected by them, even if this consent goes against their individual and direct interests. This process is called 'misrecognition' by Bourdieu

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[1] https://www.who.int/violenceprevention/approach/definition/en/.

(Thapar-Björkert, Samelius, Sanghera 2016, 149) and while it doesn't hinder our capacity of identifying the source of our problems, it can account for part of the reason why it is difficult – although not impossible – to articulate operative alternatives, a challenge also reflected in the literary works explored in this piece.

The relationship between body tropes and the hegemonic biopolitical paradigm has a long history in Japan. During the Tokugawa era (1603-1868), the existence of a caste system that included a pariah group (the *eta*) was justified using distorted interpretations of Shintoist ideas regarding the corruption of the body. The stigma associated with members of these groups, usually conscripted to low-income and undesired jobs, persisted even decades after the abolition of this class system at the end of the nineteenth century. At that same moment, a political philosophy that among other things equated the state with a body (and the emperor as its head), called *kokutai*, came into place and stayed dominant until the end of World War II. The end of this conflict brought a new framework for conceiving the body that, in turn, perpetuated a dichotomy between pure and corrupted as the basis to arrange power relations. In his work *Bodies of Memory*, Yoshikuni Igarashi (2000) tracks down how Japan's treatment of postwar memories can be traced through its treatment of the body trope. Bodies are used to articulate Japan's understanding of the war, from suffering and decay of the direct aftermath, to then the will of promoting a healthy body that came during the 1960s and 1970s, and later to the returning of the rotting body when addressing repressed memories and traumatic reenactments of the conflict. The promotion of healthy bodies by state authorities had the purpose of replacing the image of Japan as 'unclean', both materially and morally, because of the war. It served the dominant conservative stance that predicated amnesia and acritical forgetfulness of the past, for a healthy body is free from past imperfections (Igarashi 2000, 199). It also had the function of fostering the alternative image, abroad and domestically, of Japan as an economically prosperous country, whose wealth was horizontally distributed among a seemingly homogeneous middle class. While Japan achieved to overcome the aftermath of the war and generally raise the average income of many of its citizens during the decades prior to the bursting of the bubble in the early 1990s, it did so by maintaining and reproducing unequal structures that would make it harder to recover once the market crashed. The most precarious groups (women, racial and ethnic minorities, and younger generations) suffer since the turn of the century from the combined weight of having been made an accomplice of a crisis they did not provoke or managed and co-responsible for the recovery of a system that had oppressed them and which kept them inherently subjugated. They inhabit bodies whose expectation of healthiness and normalcy is disproportionate or directly inaccessible.

The reaction to that pressure to comply has manifested precisely in the embracement of this rejection by caricature and excess. In the 1930s it was through the *ero guro nansensu* (erotic grotesque nonsense) movement that mocked consumerism indulgences in an increasingly militarised country (Silverberg 2006). During the immediate postwar, the literature of the flesh (*nikutai bungaku*) by the likes of Sakaguchi Ango basked in the supposed new freedoms while teasing the limits of the US Occupation. Cyberpunk and apocalyptic dystopias during the 1980s played with collective fears of social collapse via posthuman or bizarre corporeal alterations, as in *Ghost in the Shell* (1989) or *Akira* (1982-1990). During the 1990s, trash literature by Yamada Ami and Murakami Ryū kept pushing the boundaries of what acceptable bodies meant in Japan. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Amamiya Karin (Allison 2012, 349) coins the term *precariat* (an amalgam of 'precarious' and 'proletariat') to define the experience of her generation, echoing and updating a legacy of more class-based literature that gave unsuspected popularity to the works of Communist writer Takiji Kobayashi, killed by the police in 1933 (Field 2009). The triple disaster of March 11, 2011, became a turning point for Japan and exposed the interrelationship between physical, economic, and social violence in the handling of the aftermath, the management of the recovery, and the search for meaning. The three novels here analysed are written within this paradigm and react both to a need to articulate criticism to ongoing crises and an inheritance of critical corporeal representations.

3   Out of Sight, Out of Mind

It is possible to follow and understand many of the traits and paths of Japan's economic rise and decline by taking a look at Japanese wristwatches. During the 1980s, Japanese clocks were global leaders in terms of technological advancement and brand attractiveness. Heading the industry was Seiko, the pioneer of the quartz watch and the democratisation of acquired status. However, a series of misguided managerial decisions that had to do with an inability to adapt to global markets and an insistence on sticking with increasingly old-fashioned workflows brought the 'Seiko Empire' down in favour of Swiss and Chinese brands in the 1990s (Donzé 2015). Seiko and other Japanese watches have remained profitable and have kept quality standards high even when producing cheaper lines of product, but their time in the perch has gone. They struggle on the sidelines, their fame, glory, and status turned bittersweet.

Yū Miri's *Tokyo Ueno Station* explores the different ways in which a person can be rendered invisible. The reader follows the voice of a homeless person living in the camps right next to Ueno Park. The

protagonist came from Fukushima during the late 1950s and early 1960s, during the construction boom, to be employed as a temporary worker particularly in the projects associated with the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo. He describes a life of coming back and forth between the capital and his birthplace in Tōhoku, unable to settle anywhere, a constant victim of systemic economic violence. He returns as an old man to his wife in Fukushima, but when widowed, the narrator decides to go back to Ueno and live as a homeless person. He ends up jumping in front of a moving train in that same station.

This novel plays with the lack of significant difference between the living and the dead when it comes to the economically oppressed. The narrator dies, but his spirit remains trapped in this world. As the plot unfolds using several time jumps, the reader can never be sure whether some of the actions described in the story happened to the protagonist while alive or in his ghost stage. The distinction is irrelevant, as he is unable to project his agency nonetheless. A witness of his several misfortunes, the narrator is a mere spectator, moved around to wherever he is considered useful as skilled labour, later discarded when old and unproductive, and finally a phantom that roams the scenarios of his previous life unable to change anything on them:

> The clip-clop of their shoes rang out. When one of them stepped on a fallen leaf, there was a rustling sound, too. I can no longer hear sounds or voices with my ears. But I feel like I'm listening closely. I can't watch people anymore, either. But I feel like I'm watching intently. And I can't speak about what I hear or see anymore. But I can talk to people. The people in my memories, whether they're alive or dead. (Yū 2019, 39)

The ghost acts in this regard as an allegory of the homeless. The two are invisible to the eye, equating being an economically healthy member of society to being alive and becoming poor to passing away. They represent the fear of a potential future: the declassing of regular citizens into a life of poverty and the *memento mori* of ghosts. Ghosts are defined as abnormal creatures haunted by a curse of non-belonging; trapped between realms, they cannot be considered non-existent, but their fittingness in a positivist world is problematic. This connection is also material: while the homeless have a restricted association with material belongings, ghosts have no material substance, no proper body. By fleshing a story out of the voice of one of these ghosts, as Kristina Iwata-Weickgennant suggests (2019, 193), Yū is providing silenced and repressed subjects humanity and emphatic bonds.

In one of the final scenes, the narrator, now a spirit, travels to Fukushima on the day of the triple disaster and is forced to watch as his granddaughter dies drowned by a tsunami wave. The novel had

played up until that point a subtle but constant relationship with the region despite most of the action happening in Tokyo. The narrator's account of displacement and exploitation seems to stress the necessity of framing the 3.11 disasters as part of a historical situation of repression and away from lamenting it only as an isolated event. Yū became involved in the region after the episode, first by hosting a radio show that invited residents to tell how their lives had changed, and later by opening a bookstore-cafeteria in Minamisōma, one of the towns that were hit hardest by the catastrophe. Other authors like Furukawa Hideo (2016) also expressed in fiction the historical situation of oppression of Tōhoku, creating links that stretch in time beyond those particular disasters.

The novel explores inequality also by establishing a cruel and acknowledged parallelism between the lives of the narrator's family and that of Japan's imperial household. The protagonist is obsessed over this running trope: how he was born the same year as Emperor Akihito, and his son the same day as Emperor Naruhito. Their fates, however, couldn't be any more different: the narrator kills himself, poor and homeless, and his son dies young from a sudden and inexplicable death while a university student. The protagonist is forced to live most of his life apart from his family and to watch how his own clan disintegrates. He is deprived of a family as a site of memory, restoration, legacy, and affect. Towards the end of the novel, Yū places the narrator and the Emperor briefly in the same space. Akihito has to pass through Ueno Park to attend an event, a moment in which the police evicts the homeless and temporarily dismantles the camp to disguise reality. When given the chance to address the Emperor, even if at a distance and in the streets, the narrator is, however, incapable of speaking. He is invisible and voiceless; the Emperor is seen but doesn't witness. By putting next to each other representatives of the two farthest echelons of Japan's society, Yū exposes the materiality of its oppressions.

Tokyo Ueno Station is crossed by another main trope: trauma. Trauma signals the open, exposed wounds of individuals and communities. It indicates the existence of unsolved, unaccounted, unsettled damage, both physical and psychological. Ghosts are trapped in the material world because they have unresolved businesses. There is no closure or peace for them, as there is no closure for those suffering from trauma. The narrator carries the weight of his tragedies without openly processing them, as injuries that must be kept out of sight for they are socially unacknowledged and unknowledgeable. His suicide happens out of view, a matter that appears in contrast with the other two significant deaths: that of his son, Kōichi, and his granddaughter Mari. Kōichi's corpse is found in his student apartment and his father refuses to recognise the body at the morgue. He is from then on unable to find himself in the mirror, his identity shattered

by the loss of a son. Yū also describes in detail how the body of Mari is washed away by the tsunami tide:

> When the breath of the tide calmed, the car was enveloped in the light of the sea. Through the windscreen I could see Mari's pink uniform from the animal hospital. Seawater in her mouth and nose, her hair flowing with the waves appeared brown in one light, black in another. Her wide-open eyes had lost their sight, but they shone like black slits. (Yū 2019, 159)

This effort of portrayal is significant once we frame it within the hegemonic discourse around the victims of the triple disaster. The imagery has been focused on pictures of material and structural destruction (torn asphalt, wrecked houses, ruined harbours), but devoid of human presence. The absence of injured bodies can be approached simultaneously as a way to show respect to the deceased and their families, but also as a means of hiding the abnormality of harmed, exceptional bodies that could alter hegemonic ideas of the healthy body as representative of the nation. It shares similarities to corpopolitical strategies happening in other parts of the world, like Latin America (Audran 2017), in which the aberrant body's overexposure or utter disappearance sends the message that there are individuals that simply do not matter. The narrator received from his family upon retirement a Seiko watch. It was meant as a token of appreciation, a reward for his efforts, and as a material compensation for a life of deprivation. In the end, it was his only possession while homeless and he kept it in the hopes it could help the authorities identify his dead body, unaware that these watches were mass-produced and could hardly be associated with one anonymous individual. Ultimately, Yū denounces this idea of insignificance not by excessive display of the damaged body, but by playing with the willingly unseen, those made invisible.

4 The Uncanny Valley of Normality

The development of the mechanical clock and the idea that time could be properly divided, subdivided, standardised, and tracked in or near the workplace first, and at home later, was integral to the success of the Industrial Revolution. Authors like Richard Biernacki (1994) have studied how the apparition of means of monitoring time in a way that could be converted into profit and could be assigned a monetary value transformed the lives of workers both in their productive and reproductive dimensions. The clock shaped our habits, our rhythms, and the way we perceived and differentiated between time at work and time off, for both blue and white-collar workers. The protagonist

of *Tokyo Ueno Station*, for instance, asks his family for what reason would he need a wristwatch if he has already retired (Yū 2019, 134), disclosing the clock's primary function as a worktool. This meddling of economic instruments in the organisation of our daily lives led to a relative standardisation of our experiences as members of a shared community. The blurring of this division between productive and re-productive lives has been since the Industrial Revolution intensifying, and with it, the gender gap worsening, a matter that some suggest (Chung et al. 2021; Nahum 2020) might be aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The rituals, habits, and expectations associated with our economic activity are integrated but largely remain a role to be played, not a consubstantial trait. Murata Sayaka explores in her novel *Convenience Store Woman* precisely how absurd and dehumanising it would be to assume uncritically the precepts dictated by economic principles. How abiding by the rules and expectations of a hyper-productive lifestyle that defines your identity, instead of bringing about success and acceptance, leads to alienation and rejection. Furukura Keiko is a woman in her mid-thirties that works in a *konbini*, a 24h small supermarket. In a profession almost defined by impermanence and precariousness, she has kept the same post for almost twenty years. Furukura has always felt disconnected from implicit social rules and inherent expectations based on gender, class, and age, so, by contrast, the multiple scripted rules and regulations of working in a convenience store bring her solace.

The novel's first conflict concerns her age. *Konbini* workers are usually students, foreigners, housewives, retirees, or other part-time employees that want to earn some additional income. These companies depend on the accepted exploitation of their employees and the assumption of precariousness. These are predatory postings with little career prospects that do not lead to individual prosperity and, because they hardly allow for individual sustenance, make it difficult or near impossible to support larger households, pushing workers that depend on them to postpone or forsake that decision. Convenience store positions are representative of what is known as *freeter* jobs: part-time, undervalued, temporary occupations that were hailed during Japan's economic boom as the neoliberal's evolutionary apex point. Starting from the 1990s, however, many workers were unable to secure fixed positions and so the number of freeters skyrocketed. Now associated with deprivation and transience, freeters' so-called flexibility was exposed as instability, and their position disfavoured, disgraced, and left even more vulnerable to economic violence (Kosugi 2006). Furukura, however, problematises even further the already uncomfortable position of freeters for Japan's normativity. She is perceived as too old to work in a convenience store, but she cannot get another job based on that experience alone or become

an attractive suitor because of that same stigma. She is a glitch in a system that produced the trap but never cared to design an escape.

Furukura doesn't seem burdened by the connotations associated with her job. As a matter of fact, she loves it. Throughout the novel, we see how she expresses a deep connection with her responsibilities at the *konbini*. Her display of passion is caustic precisely because it mocks the socially rewarded approval of one's economic commitment with the inherent precariousness and clout deficit of being a convenience store employee. Furukura's bond with her job is not rational, but corporeal. She describes sounds, smells, and texture of products as part of her biological experience, as if she and the shop were one and the same:

> A cold drink is often the last item customers take before coming to the checkout till, and my body responds automatically to the sound. (Murata 2018, 3)

> The sound of my chewing was extraordinarily loud. It was probably because I'd been surrounded by the sounds of the convenience store until shortly before. When I closed my eyes and pictured the store, in my mind its sounds came back to life. That sound flowed through me like music. Swaying to the sounds etched deep within me of the store performing, of the store operating, I stuffed the food before me into my body so that I would be fit to work again tomorrow. (Murata 2018, 77)

Even when she is not working, Furukura adapts her life to the needs of the store. When she leaves the store and becomes briefly unemployed, her body reacts as in withdrawal. She loses her sense of direction and her time management skills, unable to procure a stable timetable of meals and sleeping hours:

> Normally I would be concerned about work the next day and would be sure to care for my physical needs with food and sleep. My body had belonged to the convenience store even when I wasn't at work. Having been liberated from this, I didn't know what to do with myself. (Murata, 2018, 90)

Nothing in her attitude is, in itself, extraordinary. It is precisely the excess of normativity, her abidance of the rules, that which makes it abnormal. Her body becomes estranged from the reader, as Furukura appears more closely related to the shop than to fellow human beings.

The choice of a *konbini* is suitable for the articulation of this message. It is a profoundly encoded environment, defined by rituals and repetition. The employees' physical appearance and attitude are homogenised, with a clear hierarchy based on position, gender,

and seniority. These rules are written down in company manuals, but the focus on repetition pushes the employee to mimic their colleagues. Furukura also likes this feature of her job. Throughout her life, she has been unable to get social clues. She requests the assistance of her sister to tell her what is acceptable or not. Furukura also imitates the way her coworkers talk, dress, and express emotions hoping to fit in.

The conflict of fitting in is the second theme that runs through the novel. Murata introduces another main character, Shiraha, as a counterpart to the protagonist. Like Furukura, he defies expectations of social acceptance, but does so by actively refusing to be productive. They meet during Shiraha's brief interlude as a worker in the same *konbini*, but he is fired for stalking customers. Shiraha is bitter, egoistic, arrogant, and a social outcast, but contrary to Furukura, he is aware of the codes, he just doesn't want to partake in them. He wants to live by his own rules, even if that means exploiting other people to do so. Furukura believes the reason why she doesn't fit in society is within her. Shiraha blames society for the way it is and is unable to assume any level of responsibility for his actions. They partner up because of their shared trait: a necessity to avoid being perceived as unfit and to be left alone. This desire of fitting in is in both of their cases a hoax: Furukura wants to keep living a scripted, automatised life, and Shiraha wants to escape from society. His physicality also expresses this wish: he is described as incredibly thin and progressively looks for narrower spaces to be confined in, ending up living in Furukura's toilet.

One of the novel's strengths is its capacity for remaining ambivalent in its criticism. It would be an unjust oversimplification to frame Furukura as a satirical hyperbole of the contemporary individual devoted to social and economic normativities. She is also not the conventional heroine struggling to expose the structures of oppression and overthrow them by breaking free from these configurations. While social assumptions mystify her, Furukura appears to be genuinely at peace with herself in the reproduction of *konbini* conventions. Throughout the novel, she feels the need transmitted by her parents and sister 'to be cured', that is, to be reintegrated as a functional member of society that understands and integrates what is expected in terms of age, gender, and class. She follows the guidance given to her by members of the community even if that goes against her direct interests. Furukura's eventual realisation that her place is the convenience store requires from her a renunciation of her humanity. If social expectations are what define a human being, she will stop being one and turn, instead, into a 'convenience store being'. In Japanese, Murata uses the word *ningen*, a term referring to humans that is free from gender associations. Her body became one with the *konbini* and we are left to judge whether that is subversive freedom

or claudication to economic life. The subject originally perceived to be receiving the burden of economic violence shifts from Furukura to the implied reader, questioning our role as passive or sometimes inadvertently active arbiters of economic rules.

5 Owning Your Body

The integration of clocks into our daily lives had an impact that went beyond the artificial delineation – but often not even separation anymore – between productive and leisure time. Other aspects started succumbing to the standardised clock even if that meant changing the scale way beyond its original twenty-four hours radius. The conversion of individual lifetimes into clocks, mirroring the phases of the day, has, on the one hand, a poetic effect that tries to organise and give meaning to the cycles and evolutionary processes experienced by each of us at different points in our life. But it can also have a more sinister effect as it transfers the productive pressures of achieving certain goals within a limited time span associated with the working day. The clock becomes through this association not only a physical but also a mental mechanism of control that fuses productive and reproductive lives. This effect is particularly significant in governing the lives of women, as Martina Yopo Díaz (2021) studies in her piece on how the narrative of the 'biological clock' impacts the perception of reproduction, childbearing, and conciliation.

The struggle for acceptance, resistance, or adaptation against gender conventions and expectations define Kawakami Mieko's *Breasts and Eggs*. To clarify, the volume in English refers to Kawakami's *Natsu monogatari*, published in 2019, which includes a rewriting of her previous novella *Chichi to ran* (*Breasts and Eggs*), originally published in 2008, and a continuation of the same story and characters but ten years later. The first story presents three women from the same family, in the span of a weekend, and three conflicts associated with their bodies, gender expectations, age, and even economic dependencies. The second story is focused on the main character's struggle with the idea of maternity. Kawakami locates the conflicts of these characters at the problematisation of to what extend women can change the narrative of what's imposed in their bodies.

Natsuko has been living in Tokyo for a few years trying to make it as a novelist and is embracing her decision to become a single mother. She describes herself as coming from a poor, unstructured family, raised in Osaka by her mother and her grandmother after her abusive father ran away. Throughout the novel, we see her coming to terms with the institution of the family, disentangling the extent to which the pressure to find a couple and take up motherhood is socially imposed on her or whether it really can be considered an autonomous

desire. She wrestles with a relationship with her body that is considered non-normative and which goes against the prescriptive means of gender identification:

> 'If you think about it,' I said, 'that's what it was like when we were younger. Sex wasn't a thing, it had no real role in our lives, you know? It didn't matter if you were a woman or not. It's just, for me, things stayed that way. It's like that part of me never grew up. I don't think there's anything strange or unusual about it, though. That's why sometimes I have to ask myself: Am I really a woman? Like I said, I have the body of a woman, I know that. But do I have the mind of a woman? Do I feel like a woman? I can't say either way with any confidence. I mean, what does feeling like a woman actually entail? I'm not sure how that relates to how I feel about sex, but it must.' (Kawakami 2019, 440)

She had never felt particularly attached to her sexual desires, and although capable of enjoying meaningful emotional connections, she preferred to embark on the journey to motherhood on her own. Kawakami offers through Natsuko's case an exploration of the many hurdles and hardships for non-conventional family units: the exorbitant prices of fertility treatments, the privatisation of these services, the assumption of rules of exclusion, taboos surrounding sterility and adoption, or the existence of a potentially dangerous underground industry of sperm donation. Kawakami creates in Natsuko a character that can navigate with sincerity the doubts and contradictions of this process but which is, in the end, firm in her resolution of doing things on her own account.

While Natsuko's conflicts occupy the whole of the second story, it is her older sister, Makiko, who is at the centre of the first one. Makiko is close to forty, works in a hostess club, and wants to get breasts implants. This decision occupies her mind and the conversations between their sisters for months. Makiko's job is hard, badly paid, and undesired, but her precarious situation as an uneducated single mom left her without any other prospects. Her body is her means of sustenance, and as she was becoming older, she worried for the future. As put by Juliana Buriticá Alzate:

> Makiko emphasizes the different places and research she did while making her decision, and it is precisely the wide variety of offers that reinforce the notion of an ideal, perfect type of body that should be, and can be pursued. Hence, cosmetic surgery can be viewed as a service – that "cuts," hurts, and heals – offered by an industry that merges health and beauty discourses, a by-product of current consumer-driven, neoliberal societies. (2020, 536)

Kawakami pushes the argument even further, problematising the debate by opening up the possibility for Makiko to also honestly and independently wish to strive to specific beauty standards that would require modifications and interventions to her body. Makiko is hard-pressed to commodify her body to the economic violence of her precarious position in the sex industry, but as Natsuko suggests, it is simultaneously true that she can also be doing it for her own sake, out of enjoyment of aesthetic corporeal beauty. The two sisters' approaches to their bodies are complimentary, from detachment and apathy to change and alteration; Kawakami seems to suggest that there is no single normativity and that empowerment comes from accepting the limitations and opportunities of the two stances.

Midoriko is Makiko's daughter and Natsuko's nephew. We first learn from her diary that she is torn by the changes happening in her life. She is becoming fully aware of the precarious situation in her family, her mother's sacrifices, and the struggles to keep them two economically afloat. At the same time, she is puzzled and outraged by the physiological changes in her body, concerning menstruation, sex, and the idea of fertility as linked to femininity and motherhood:

> It feels like I'm trapped inside my body. It decides when I get hungry, and when I'll get my period. From birth to death, you have to keep eating and making money just to stay alive. I see what working every night does to my mom. It takes it out of her. But what's it all for? Life is hard enough with just one body. Why would anyone ever want to make another one? (Kawakami 2019, 49)

These tensions eventually explode in a final confrontation with her mother in which she reclaims agency and respect. She wants better, more open emotional communication and an acknowledgment that facing challenges collectively is more effective in being more affectively responsible. Midoriko grows to become a strong young woman, level-headed and caring, more in touch with her thoughts and emotions than her mother and aunt. Kawakami seems to bring forward with her character the idea that choosing alternative pathways to life is not the only way to change and confront the norm. Midoriko is a university student in a seemingly happy heteronormative relationship. She is also aware of the conflicts and limitations of this model and has learned from the previous generation of women in her life to be skeptical even when hopeful.

There is another theme that runs through the novel, and that is an understanding of sorority as a basis for dealing with the conflicts presented in this work. Kawakami has self-identified as a feminist (McNeill 2020) and has called out, for instance, Murakami Haruki's treatment of women in his novels (Literary Hub 2020). Most of the characters in *Breasts and Eggs* are women, and their relationships

are based on mutual, regular, everyday expressions of aid instead of exceptional assistance at specific, isolated episodes. Natsuko's process of getting to terms with her desire for motherhood is inspired by feedback from people in her circles, like her friend Rika, who is also a single mother. These expressions of support and affection are not uncritical, and there is room for judgment (for instance, Natsuko's bewilderment at the idea of breasts implants or Makiko's admonition against single motherhood), but it is precisely a critical while supportive attitude that sends a message of adaptation, acceptance, and empowerment against the situations and structures of oppression suffered by the characters. Through the representation of these connections, Kawakami seems to suggest that while the suffering of violence might be perceived as an individual burden, it should be tackled as a collective struggle.

6 Conclusions

In this piece, I have explored how the representation of bodies in contemporary Japanese fiction can be inscribed within strategies of criticism and dissent to hegemonic biopolitical paradigms, particularly in its denunciation of neoliberal economic violence. Through the themes of invisibilisation, mimesis, and empowerment, Yū, Murata, and Kawakami question normativities by claiming the need of breaking free from the shaping gaze of the implicit and explicit Other. The alternatives considered in these novels are bodies that expose the unfairness of systemic structures of economic and social oppression, the diversity of their violence, but also the different ways in which solutions can be tackled and alternatives proposed. These works go beyond criticism and put forward modes of experiencing the body that, in their varying degree of subversiveness, can potentially dismantle the hegemonic norm. In that sense, they can be inscribed within a more contemporary paradigm of expressing dissent, a generation critical and distrustful of institutions of power, but also more put off by traditional left-leaning party strategies than in previous decades. Dissent has been channelled through the artistic, individual, and collective performance, indeed the *embodiment* of alternative choices, institutions, projects, and politics (Andrews 2016; Cassegård 2014).

Instead of expecting massive mobilisations and demonstrations as the only way to confront predispositions of power and lament when they cool down or die out, as it happened with post-Fukushima rallies, we must look at how a more diverse pool of agents is articulating criticism against hegemonic powers and their positions of legitimacy. Instead of focusing on the direct effects of unidirectional calls for action from specific parties as our only way to measure the temper-

ature of conformity of dissent in a community, I propose to take into account how these different streams of confrontation against discursive propositions that help agents stay in power speak to each other. I invite readers to take into account a larger net-system of solidarity in dissenting representations. The attention that I devote to highlight the characteristics of this framing should not obscure its limitations. First, these methods of protest have difficulties in achieving changes through institutional channels. Policy-making requires actors to play by a set of rules that do not easily fit with the ethos and medium of these alternatives. Second, for a network to accomplish structural feats, it has to act with an awareness of its interconnectedness. Many of these dissident representations push for change but lack a common strategy. What they gain in autonomy and plurality is missing from having a centralised unit of command, as it is more common in traditional units of opposition like political parties or unions. Despite these shortcomings, it remains a valuable setting to explore the means through which dissent is articulated in contemporary Japan and to contest recurring discourses on passivity and social compliance, disputed but still predominant in public perceptions on the country. More research needs to be done on the relationship between these representations and the capacity of literature to articulate contemporary dissent through them against these biopolitical structures, but as I have attempted to show in this piece, the direction is promising.

These authors and their works have a more open predisposition towards articulating their criticism integrating an intersectional approach to understanding economic violence, in which class, gender, and origin are vectors that help us explain and counter its causes and effects. Moreover, they further push a tendency towards the feminisation of dissent in which the private is reclaimed as a space and a tool for denunciation and for the implementation of alternatives. Economic violence has long been studied at a level of larger systems and it needs to be refocused also in their individual impacts. Literary representations can help in validating this recent shift, but further research will help us keep track of the evolution of this movement.

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