

ISSN 1598-2661 (Print)
ISSN 2586-0380 (Online)

SUNGKYUN JOURNAL OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES

VOL.18 No.1

APR. 2018



Academy of East Asian Studies
Sungkyunkwan University

Fat Phobia in Matsuura Rieko's "Himantai kyōfushō"*

David HOLLOWAY
University of Rochester

ABSTRACT

This essay examines discursive representations of the fat female body in Matsuura Rieko's short story "Himantai kyōfushō" or "Fat Phobia." Following an interdisciplinary consideration of fatness based in gender theory, this essay contextualizes Matsuura's story in a cross-cultural discussion of gender and body size in Japan and the West. One goal of the essay is to add dimension to scholarly interest in gender, the body, and body discrimination by elucidating the ways in which Matsuura's text reproduces prejudicial stereotypes about women of size. The essay ultimately argues that "Himantai kyōfushō," published in 1980, anticipates, and attempts to combat, the contemporary stigmatization of the fat female body in Japan. Because the thin protagonist must overcome her own prejudices regarding fat women, the text provides a timely reminder of the importance of acceptance. At the same time, it underscores the necessity of allies to advocate on behalf of marginalized and discriminated identities.

Keywords: Japanese literature, Matsuura Rieko, gender, body, obesity, Japan

This essay examines the fat female body in Matsuura's (1980) short story "Himantai kyōfushō" (肥満体恐怖症), or "Fat Phobia," with particular interest in how the text engages and ultimately critiques Japanese social discourses surrounding female fatness in late twentieth-century Japan.¹ Describing the tumultuous relationship between protagonist Yuiko, a thin first-year college student, and her three second-year roommates, all of whom are fat, Matsuura's story evokes a number of prejudices against fat women, which remain prominent in a variety of media and contexts today, while simultaneously speaking to issues of gender, body, and selfhood. I demonstrate that the aim of the text is to ultimately position Yuiko as a fat ally. While I do not attend to the extra-textual context to a great degree, I argue that Matsuura's text is ahead of its time and the author's positionality even more so.

With these thoughts in mind, I point out that my aims here are modest and even myopic. I offer a close reading of but one short story. Rather than an extended or comparative analysis of literary evocations of gender and body size, I attend to a quiet work that did not achieve acclaim among Japanese literary critics and which remains untranslated today. As such, I eschew making claims regarding trends or currents in Japanese fiction and instead read the text against the historical moment of its production (Japan in the early 1980s). However, I also suggest that the central concerns of Matsuura's story are relevant today. My hope is to demonstrate the ways

in which the text anticipates concerns that are now receiving scholarly interest. The body is indeed the subject of much scholarly work in fields of literature and gender, among many others. While my study is not exhaustive in scope, perhaps its thematic and intellectual goals coincide with those of other scholars invested in the political good that literature can do. In this respect, Matsuura's "Himantai kyōfushō" deserves special attention for its investment in envisioning both a space of bodily acceptance and, as I ultimately argue below, bonds between women that are resistant to the constraints of Japanese hegemony.

Matsuura's career began with a flourish. Her debut work, "Sōgi no hi" (葬儀の日 The day of the funeral, 1978), which she wrote while still in college, received the 47th Bungakukai Prize, and was nominated for the 80th Akutagawa Prize – awards given annually for the year's best new writers. Thereafter, she published several short stories in the early 1980s (including an anthology in which "Sōgi no hi" and "Himantai kyōfushō" both appear), two novels, and a number of essays, but struggled to recreate her initial success. Not until her 1994 novel *Oyayubi P no shūgyō jidai* (親指Pの修業時代 translated as *The apprenticeship of Big Toe P*) did Matsuura find literary acclaim again. This novel—concerning the instabilities of sex and gender categories—solidified Matsuura's unwavering interest in what it means to be a woman in contemporary Japan. Her subject matter seems to resist time, and her works can be read with equal appreciation today as when they were initially published.

Matsuura's "Himantai kyōfushō" is anomalous in Japanese fiction for its commitment to addressing a divisive topic that, with several exceptions, has yet to receive appropriate attention in academic contexts. Spielvogel's (2003) anthropological analysis of health clubs in Tokyo elucidates the ways in which body size is a gendered concern. She examines the lengths to which many women go to manage and sculpt their bodies to reflect a largely unattainable ideal. Pike and Borovoy (2004) similarly draw attention to the etiology of eating disorders in Japan, arguing that the erosion of traditional values, shifts in Japan's beauty culture, and residual sociocultural pressures on women have cultivated a climate in which women's relationships with their bodies are increasingly antagonistic. Literary and media analyses on the subject can help contextualize and augment the real-life issues the above scholars address. Indeed, Hansen's (2016) recent monograph *Femininity, Self-harm and Eating Disorders in Japan* is a timely investigation into the ways in which women's "self-directed violence" is treated in a variety of Japanese media.² Although Hansen does not discuss Matsuura's short story (perhaps because the short story is not concerned with self-harm), her work is to be commended for

¹ I thank the anonymous reviewers and editors of the *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* for their time and attention to my article.

² As in English, there are myriad ways to describe people of size in Japanese. Just as the terms obese, chubby, portly, heavy, and fat all carry particular connotations, so, too, do the Japanese terms have slightly different subtexts. I have chosen to use "fat" in this article because research suggests that it is the least threatening and least judgmental of the terms in current usage.

³ I offer thanks to my anonymous readers for drawing my attention to Hansen's insightful book.

its devotion to grave social issues, as well as for thematizing issues of gender and self-harm across media, including literature and film.

Matsuura's short story offers discursive insight into how young Japanese women—the most susceptible to body issues and anxieties—negotiate a divisive cultural terrain. Furthermore, because the number of cases of eating disorders doubled from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s (Pike and Borovoy 2004, 497), "Himantai kyōfushō" is a prescient intervention into the kinds of issues that have, in the years since its publication, come to occupy a prominent place on the social landscape. Matsuura's story is not interested in body ideals, eating disorders, or gendered manifestations of self-harm. It is, however, interested in drawing attention to the negativity surrounding female fatness, a harmful discourse that can lead to the problems the above scholars address.

My goal is not to equate literature with real life, or to "over read" Matsuura's narrative. Instead, I interpret her "Himantai kyōfushō" in light of prevalent social discourses that malign the fat female body in a specific historical moment. Because the body is a "text of culture" (Bordo, 2004, 165), it reflects the imperatives of hegemonic paradigms. Accordingly, I argue that Matsuura's text embodies, in a sense, the political anxieties of female bodies out of bounds in a cultural moment saturated with "biopedagogies" (Wright and Harwood 2009, 6) that reward control, mastery, and restraint of self. The term "biopedagogy" relates to Foucault's (1978) conceptualization of "biopower," the notion that the physical body is subject to implicit modes of training and normalization that have political implications. In this conceptualization, the state's ability to regulate and manage bodies—such as, but certainly not limited to, reproductive policies—is crucial to its ability to build and maintain healthy populations. Foucault's argument is that biopower is largely a mode of self-governance and institutional surveillance rather than the explicit exercising of disciplinary power by an authority or sovereign power. Biopedagogies, then, are practices of instruction that are meant to normalize certain bodies and bodily practices. In terms of the arguments I present below, a particularly pointed biopedagogical discourse concerns the avenues through which certain bodies acquire status and value.

In the short story, protagonist Yuiko's dismissal of her roommates—Okuni, Matsumoto, and their "leader" Mizuki (Matsuura 1980, 157)—establishes a prejudicial and derisive discourse that paradoxically and importantly leads to Yuiko's own sense of alienation and self-hatred. In this way, the text is about exploiting the social and cultural drama fixated on the fat body; but it is more importantly concerned with figuring body acceptance and "curing" Yuiko's "fat phobia" and positioning her as a fat ally. In line with Sedgwick's (1993) discussion of the pleasures of "coming out as a fat woman" (230), "Himantai kyōfushō" reverses the typical and anachronistic body image discourse by revealing the thin-bodied Yuiko to be pathological, undesirable, and marginalized.

Negative Feelings

Central to the story's agenda is the establishing of the prejudicial narratives and images with which many of us are familiar. From the beginning of the story, Yuiko,

matriculating to F University, harbors deep resentment toward fat women. The narrator, through free indirect discourse, likens Yuiko's roommates to "a three-headed witch" (Matsuura, 1980, 157), a terrible monster "from which fat and the stench of armpit and head hair seemed to erupt" (Matsuura, 1980, 162). Similarly, their individual bodies, "[standing] over five-seven and God knows how heavy" (Matsuura 1980, 162), are cast in derogatory, confrontational terms: Matsumoto has "thick, angry shoulders;" Okuni possess a "double, triple chin;" and Mizuki is "plump, but with elbows and hip bones protruding like a knife" (Matsuura, 1980, 162). In contrast, Yuiko is "small-framed [*kogara*] and thin" (Matsuura, 1980, 162). Even textually, then, the roommates take up more space with their bodies than Yuiko does. The biased language here positions the fat female body as a source of negative linguistic expression, reminding readers that the body provides context for language. In this case, the castigation of Matsumoto, Okuni, and Mizuki depends on a culturally acceptable form of indexing bodies as those that are acceptable and those that are not.

The biopedagogical discourse through which thin bodies are elevated and fat bodies denigrated has been the subject of academic interest in Japan. Furugōri (2010), for example, draws attention to the presumed threat of the fat body in her study *Himan no keizaigaku* (肥満の経済学 The political economy of obesity). She poses and then quizzically answers this rhetorical question: "There are a lot of fat people around these days, aren't there? Today, the girl sitting next to me on the train had to have been no taller than 5'3" but weighed at least a hundred and thirty pounds" (Furugōri 2010, 2). She goes on to state that seventy percent of American adults would be classified as obese by Japanese standards—a height-to-weight ratio of five feet six inches to one hundred and sixty pounds. She then asks somewhat forebodingly, "Could this happen in Japan?" (Furugōri, 2010, 2). Interpreting data provided by The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (厚生労働省 *Kōseirōdōshō*), Furugōri suggests that indeed such a reality is possible. During a thirty-year period from 1976 to 2006, she says, the percentage of Japanese women classified as "too fat" (that is, citizens with a Body Mass Index of twenty-five or above) reached an all-time high in 1982, twenty-three percent of the adult female population, before declining to twenty percent three years later (Furugōri, 2010, 57).³ Furugōri's interest in the fat body is ostensibly nonspecific, invested in tracing shifts in the physical size of ordinary Japanese regardless of gender. Yet the anecdote with which she begins her study is clearly gendered, as though the presence of a fat woman on the train is an ominous harbinger of things to come.

Furugōri's attention to the imbrication of gender and body size reflects that dominant social paradigm in which women are relegated to the realm of the body while men "are ultimately allowed to soar in the transcendent space of the intellect" (Bardsley 2006, 55). Feminists such as Bordo (2004) have analyzed the means through which women become gendered, calling attention to the philosophical, religious, and cultural doctrines that have historically aligned women with the (gendered) body and men with the (genderless) mind. Greenspan (1983) argues

³ The male corollary occurred in 2006 (Furugōri 2010, 57).

that the cultural construction of "woman as body" compromises women's abilities to be acknowledged as anything but: "There is no running away from the problem . . . of Woman as Body: of suffering from an overexposure of physical visibility as a body combined with an impoverishment of genuine recognition as a person" (181). The conflation of woman with body, then, strips an individual of her subjectivity.

Greenspan's words echo the ways that Matsuura's narrator conflates Matsumoto, Okuni, and Mizuki into a single organism. As a "three-headed witch" they have no individuality or personhood (Matsuura 1980, 157). Even when described individually, they are not people, but rather parts: shoulders, chins, and elbows (Matsuura 1980, 162). The publication of "Himantai kyōfushō" is thus a timely coincidence given that the zenith of Japanese female obesity according to Furugōri occurred two years prior. The text affords entry into the mindset of a young woman—Yuiko—who is unable to reconcile her feelings toward an as yet historically unprecedented encounter with fatness in postwar Japan. In other words, Japan in the early 1980s was approaching what Boesveld (2009) calls "a fat moment," a time when obesity encroaches into the public sphere. Boesveld (2009) suggests that "a fat moment" leads to the normalization and acceptance of fat bodies on the social landscape and helps to neutralize the threat of intolerance. "Himantai kyōfushō" recasts the fat moment as a thin moment, however, introducing Yuiko into an environment where *she* is abnormal, anomalous, and abject.

Indeed, the reader learns through a flashback that Yuiko came back from summer vacation to find that her only friend in the apartment, a thin woman (who becomes fat) named Nagahara, had been driven out and replaced by the fat Matsumoto. Yuiko is outnumbered, marginalized. Matsumoto says:

We were just talking: Okuni, Mizuki, and I are all fat; but you, you're skinny. . . . Since we're all living here together, we were thinking about forming a fat alliance. But you can't join, can you? Since skinny doesn't really fit with what we're doing here, do you want to fatten up? (Matsuura 1980, 171)

Here, Matsumoto creates a new conception of what is considered normal by stripping Yuiko's thin body of its social capital and privilege. Matsumoto then goes further, turning the thin body against itself by inverting the typical rhetoric that equates fatness with sloth. She explains:

It's just lazy to stay skinny your whole life. [So just get fat.] If you do, you can join our fat alliance. And we'll be able to be friends. Women all get fat at some point, anyways. So how 'bout it? Are you into it? Besides, big is beautiful. (Matsuura 1980, 171–72)

Yuiko resists Matsumoto's invitation, which disappoints Matsumoto, who sighs, "What a shame. We really wanted you to get fat. This room would have been an empire of flab. Wouldn't that have been something?" (Matsuura 1980, 172). This passage is comedic, if only because the idea of thinness as sloth is a reversal of prevalent discourses portraying the fat body as lazy. Fatness takes *effort*, Matsumoto suggests. At the same time, however, Matsumoto's words intimate a

certain inevitability to female fatness. Because all women eventually become fat, Matsumoto suggests, Yuiko might as well embrace her fate.

On the fringes of this exchange between Yuiko and Matsumoto is the fear of fatness as contagion. In fact, fatness as a form of contagious illness is central to Yuiko's issues with women of size. The narrator explains:

It goes without saying that she hated being touched [by fat women], but she also hated looking at them. . . . You might say that when she saw fat [women] she was overcome by shivers as though she herself was fat or that she had become infected by their fatness. (Matsuura 1980, 176)

Fatness as contagion positions corporeal excess as a threat to personal and, more broadly, social order and normalcy; it is a threat to the public sphere. Cultural critic Berlant (2007) demonstrates the social implications when bodies are treated as plagues: "The epidemic concept is not a neutral description; it's inevitably part of an argument about classification, causality, responsibility, degeneracy, and the imaginable and pragmatic logics of cure" (763). Berlant's words elucidate the disruptive potential attached to the rhetorical mechanisms of "curing" certain bodies. In the context of Matsuura's story, which is devoted to examining a countervailing rhetoric *against* the thin body, Yuiko's resistance to fatness places her in a position of self-imposed isolation and quarantine. As Matsumoto's words above suggest, for the three roommates fatness is an egress to community and optimism—a "fat alliance" and an "empire of flab" (Matsuura 1980, 172). Their construction of communion and togetherness mirrors Berlant's theorization of fatness as a physical record of "happiness, if not health" (2011, 116). In contrast to the notion that the fat body circulates among cultural signifiers of isolation, gloom, and unhappiness, Berlant sees in this body the potential for "a sense of well-being that spreads out for a moment" (2011, 117). For Berlant, the contagion is not fatness itself, but optimism and calm.

Out of context, Berlant's words reverberate with notions of acceptance. Her broader discussion, however, is about a particular *kind* of body, that which has become fat through acts of eating. In other words, the body that has grown large through eating is one that has accumulated the positive associations of the dinner table—family, friends, significant others. This is an important distinction, for the body that becomes fat is not the same as the body that is always already that way.

Tellingly, despite the emphasis on body size in Matsuura's narrative, the narrator pays minimal attention to food and the eating of it; little is said about the acquisition of fatness and its corresponding associations, either negative or positive, as in Berlant's (2011) formulation. There are only two scenes in which the roommates are together eating. In the first, everyone is in the university cafeteria. The air is tense:

The four ate in silence. Yuiko kept her head down, pushing forcefully at the starches and proteins on her plate. The fat girls, as though simply because they had to, seemed to be eating *out of necessity rather than pleasure*, stuffing their faces with such vigor that Yuiko lost her

appetite. The cafeteria was filling up now, and Yuiko—a slow eater—found that although she ate only half the amount her roommates did, they always finished at about the same time.

(Matsuura 1980, 187; emphasis added)

The narrator offers up Yuiko's roommates as a nondescript collective, an eating machine, thus echoing pejorative discourse equating women with body—and fat women especially, who are body in excess. In contrast, the slow and deliberate manner in which Yuiko eats reflects the supposed controlled and moderated nature of the thin body. Furthermore, the emphasized sentence strips of its positive potential the excess of the fat body. These roommates are eating because they must, not because they want to. The communion of the dinner table is purged here, leaving only the mechanically consuming fat body.

In the second scene in which food is present in Matsuura's text, Yuiko is offered some snacks by her roommates, who have gathered to play cards. She refuses. "You don't want any," Matsumoto asks dejectedly. "That's no way to be. Eat" (Matsuura 1980, 207). Yuiko is uneasy and feels "as though they are trying to make [me] fat" (Matsuura 1980, 207). Even though food is all around them, the fat roommates are not eating. They press Yuiko to eat, however, perhaps exploiting her simultaneous fear of fatness and of *becoming* fat herself. Other than in the first example above, then, the fat body in the text is divorced from the supposed conditions under which it becomes fat. Yuiko's roommates are not "spreading out for a moment" (Berlant 2011, 117), so much as they exist in a permanent state of excess.

Processes of consuming are nevertheless central to the text's countervailing agenda. Yuiko is the agent of consumption in several ways. Most obviously, she is full, nearly bursting, with negative feelings toward her roommates; she "can't stand the sight of them" (Matsuura 1980, 174). Toward the end of the narrative, Mizuki, no longer able to tolerate Yuiko's visible abhorrence and intolerance, confronts her:

"So you really hate fat people don't you?" Mizuki grabbed her arm to prevent her from getting away and spat more words at her. "You want nothing to do with us. You hate even to be touched, yeah? How sad, to have to live with a bunch of people that make you want to puke. But you're in the wrong, you know, for hating fat people; we don't hate you, you know. So what if you gain weight. You wouldn't hate us anymore. But that being said, it's too much for you to handle right now, isn't it? I mean, you're shaking just sitting next to me." (Matsuura 1980, 196–97)

In this excerpt, textual emphasis is on acts of purging and abjection—spitting, puking, and shaking (as a physical manifestation of inner turmoil). Yet the cause of the confrontation between Mizuki and Yuiko is the latter's accumulated, unwarranted, and irreconcilable ill-will. To be sure, Yuiko's resistance to fatness and its attendant associations with physical consumption is matched by her willingness to be psychically consumed by her own prejudices.

Less textually important but no less illustrative of her imperative to consume is the fact that Yuiko is also a thief. Having witnessed a woman steal a

piece of underwear at the store where she works part time, Yuiko decides to start stealing her roommates' belongings. Justifying her actions as "revenge" because she "hates" her roommates (Matsuura 1980, 216), Yuiko begins stealing small items like erasers. Soon, however, she grows bold (perhaps hungry for more), and begins taking more precious objects like their day planners and cigarettes. This is Yuiko's own version of gluttonous consumption that affects those around her negatively, just as she is negatively affected by their gluttonous (that is, consuming or even consumptive) bodies. Their cigarettes, in particular, are symbols of consumption, disease, and fatness. "It feels like my body swells up when I smoke, and I can't stand it," she reflects at one point, turning away a cigarette offered by Nagahara (Matsuura 1980, 170). Her fat roommates seem to get fatter when they smoke because, to her, they are feeding on "greed" or *don'yoku* (貪欲) in Japanese (Matsuura 1980, 170).⁴

The most sobering and important instance of consumption in the text, however, concerns Yuiko's mother and her death from breast cancer. In a narrative invested in the "plague" of fatness and its contagious properties, the discursive presence of an actual illness—though not a contagious one—is not incidental. Sontag has eloquently described the cancerous body as one that has been "invaded" or "colonized" (1991, 5 and 67). Her language, couched in masculine militaristic terms, portrays the body as a war-torn landscape. The "war on cancer," in Anglo-American discourse, draws on implications of modern technology as the source of treatment against, and ultimately victory over, the enemy. Reflecting the proximity of fatness to illness, the US "war on obesity" deploys similar rhetoric to mobilize an aggressive political stance against a supposed common threat. For Yuiko, fatness thus has dual pathological implications, as a cancer in both literal and symbolic ways.

Therefore, the narrative rests on Yuiko's (in)ability to disassociate her feelings about her mother from her feelings about female bodies. The reader comes to learn that Yuiko was raised by her "extremely fat" mother (Matsuura 1980, 190). As a child, Yuiko did not realize that her mother was disproportionately large; only after seeing her alongside her classmates' mothers did she begin to see her own mother in a different light. The narrator explains:

⁴ The term in question, greed, or *don'yoku*, is interesting because of its moral association with fatness and even illness. This confluence of greed, fatness, and illness is poignantly captured in the *Yamai no sōshi* series (病草紙 Diseases and deformities) entitled "Himan no onna" (肥満の女 Fat woman), which dates from the twelfth-century. In it, a fat moneylender is helped down the street by her two maids while two men stare in amazement. The viewer may be encouraged to note that the wealthy moneylender's luxuriant lifestyle led to her massive size and, potentially, ill health. As the name of the series may imply, the *Yamai no sōshi*—produced from the Heian (794–1185) to Kamakura (1185–1333) periods by unidentified artists—was meant to call attention to certain illnesses, abnormalities, and deformities. Other scrolls in the series include, for example, "Tsubijirami o utsusareta otoko" (陰しらみをうつされた男 Man with crabs), which depicts a man combing lice from his pubic region while a smirking woman looks over his shoulder, and "Kakuran onna" (霍乱女 Woman suffering from cholera), in which a woman vomits while she is comforted by an old woman, perhaps her maid. Some argue that monks painted these scrolls to capture the inherent sickness and suffering of humanity. The scrolls do not engage religious or moral discourse, however, and so their role in transmitting Buddhist doctrine is contestable (Williams 1983, 36). Regardless, it is useful to note the connection not only between greed and girth, but also the gendered context of the print of the fat woman that is echoed in Matsuura's story: giving in to temptation, she is so large that she cannot walk by herself, earning the disapproving gaze of the male onlookers.

[Yuiko] was fine until she started elementary school. She didn't attend kindergarten, and instead played by her mother's side as other children her age marched off to school every morning in front of her house, sporting those little yellow hats. She never really looked critically at her mother in those days. All she remembers are her mother's oval toenails and the down pillow-like softness of her arms. Her mother was just her mother—a part of her. Yuiko first became conscious of her mother's body during Parents' Day at her elementary school. Her mother stood out against her classmates' mothers. It wasn't that she wore anything atrocious or talked loudly; she was three times the size of the other parents and attracted all the eyes in the room, and their attempts to resist the urge to gawk made her stand out all the more. (Matsuura, 1980, 191)

From this point in her childhood, Yuiko began to “distance herself from her mother” (Matsuura 1980, 192) and by the time she was nine years old she succeeded in preventing her from making any subsequent appearances at Parents' Day: she tells her mother, “Stop coming to school, Mom. You're so fat. And it's embarrassing” (Matsuura 1980, 192). Yuiko's mother died the following year from breast cancer. Yuiko was ten years old and therein forever robbed of any opportunity for apology or reconciliation. Here, Yuiko's mother is crafted as caring and motherly, but nevertheless ghastly. She is ghastly in her excessive, gluttonous body, which, for Yuiko, eclipses her other qualities. She is only a body, in fact; in the excerpt above, she is toenails, arms, and then simply a fat body. In fact, Yuiko's mother receives no in-depth treatment by either the narrator or Yuiko herself—she has no voice, no dimension in the text, except for her fatness. Echoing Berlant's observation that “fat is always fundamentally a thing, a thing of excess” (1997, 91), Yuiko's mother is simply too much body.

This is how *all* of the women in the text appear—as either fat or thin bodies. (Recall that Yuiko categorizes her roommates in terms of body parts and size, something she ostensibly began doing as a child.) Yuiko's understanding of fatness is thus completely gendered, for she sees those around her as either fat women or people who are not fat women. The narrator elaborates:

Yuiko's aversion to fat people was apparently an aversion to fat women. If you compare the gushing, corpulent fat of fat women, which seems to make fat women even fatter, to the self-contained fat of fat men, it appeared to her that male fat was a personal issue while female fat was a worldwide problem. Fat women stand out, and the more you try to ignore them the more conspicuous they become. By comparison, you might not even notice a fat man. . . . To Yuiko, there were only two types of people: fat women and those who were not fat women. (Matsuura 1980, 199–200)

The passage is striking because it reaffirms the popular argument that fatness as aberration applies only to women. Bordo has shown that in the West “women are more obsessed with their bodies than men, less satisfied with them, and permitted less latitude with them by themselves, by men, and by the culture” (2004, 154). Yuiko's figuration of women depends on the same bias that, for her, borders on obsession. In fact, Yuiko has an even more detailed taxonomy: “[She] secretly

categorized [women] in the following manner,” the narrator offers, “healthy ones were normal [*nōmaru*], unhealthy ones were abnormal [*abunōmaru*], and fat ones were flab-normal [*debu-nōmaru*” (Matsuura 1980, 178). For Yuiko, then, fat women are twice removed: they are beyond abnormal. And her relationship with her mother, somebody who was “flab-normal” (Matsuura 1980, 178), defines Yuiko’s relationship with all women.

Men, meanwhile, are peripheral to the narrative. The narrator makes only a passing remark about Yuiko’s relationship with her father, the only male figure of note in the story.

What could she say about her father, other than, ‘Oh, it’s Dad?’ She didn’t love him, but neither did she hate him. To Yuiko, he was just someone she had shared a house with for eighteen years, someone who had given sperm to her mother to make her. They may have at one point been something like friends. But that’s all. (Matsuura 1980, 194)

Yamasaki (2011, 40–42) analyzes this story from a psychoanalytic perspective, focusing on the intensity of the mother-daughter relationship that pushes the father to the edges of the narrative. If, as Hirsch argues, “the female figures neglected by psychoanalytic theories and submerged in traditional plot structures” (1989, 3) have historically been mothers and daughters, Yamasaki’s reading directs attention back to the vicissitudes of female “subject-formation.” Yamasaki sees the textual emphasis on female bodies as an “extremely erotic” (*hijō ni erochikku*) narrative motif that conveys homosexual and incestuous implications (2011, 41–42). There is an emphasis on women’s bodies in the text, and Yuiko’s gaze is always slow, lingering, and calculating. And because there are no men in the text, bonds between women are potentially, as Yamasaki suggests, erotically charged. Mother-daughter desire is an attractive angle for feminist psychoanalytic theory, given that female sexual desire tends to be ignored or subsumed under the rubric of heterosexuality. The primacy of the Oedipal narrative, and its connotations of patricide, incest, and heterosexuality, overshadows the degree to which the mother may be a love object for her child.

Matsuura may complicate this structure, however, portraying Yuiko’s mother as an object that slides from love into hate. In the excerpt above, in which Yuiko realizes her mother is fat, the presence of ordinarily sized women is what makes Yuiko’s mother anomalous. In other words, prior to being socialized, Yuiko did not conceive of her mother in antagonistic terms. Their bond was strong, familial. But the intrusion of Japanese social life severs that bond and transforms her mother into an object of scorn and derision. From this experience Yuiko learns to hate other women who have large, and therefore implicitly maternal, bodies. Her hatred of her roommates, then, is maintained by unreconciled negative feelings toward her mother.

Feminist Misogyny and the Lost Maternal Body

Is Matsuura’s text, then, an instance of what Gubar (1994, 453) calls “feminist misogyny,” the internalization and replication of misogynistic rhetoric by women?

Gubar uses this term in order to call attention to how the work of western feminism has been eclipsed by those activists who would criticize each other just as readily as they would anti-feminists and upholders of the patriarchal status-quo. She writes: "The histories of feminism and misogyny have been (sometimes shockingly) dialogic" (454). Infighting and competition, she suggests, is unwarranted and counterproductive. In the Japanese context, Bullock (2010) invokes Gubar's rhetoric in her discussion of several texts by Japanese women in which female protagonists see themselves as inferior to their male counterparts:

In each case the hierarchical nature of such relationships, whereby the male occupies a dominant position vis-à-vis the female, encourages the protagonist to compensate for her relative lack of power through her compliance with and/or manipulation of the standards used to judge her as inferior. (77)

But what of Matsuura's text, in which there is no male figure? We might argue that it is the very absence of a male figure that makes this text so seemingly misogynistic. Yuiko has internalized and reproduced the thin/fat dichotomy. In other words, she does not need a man to tell her that fat women are awful when she is capable of coming to that conclusion herself. In typical misogynistic economies, male privilege and dominance dictates female competition and inferiority. In removing male figures from "Himantai kyōfushō," Matsuura demonstrates the degree to which body anxieties have become internalized by young Japanese women who may take out their emotional anguish on each other.

The text's goal, however, is to demonstrate the emotional consequences of such gendered hatred. In this light, the death of Yuiko's mother represents an important moment of potential reconciliation and reflection. The narrator captures Yuiko's mounting sense of ambivalence and remorse in a passage that compares Yuiko as a child with a more mature, introspective Yuiko:

Yuiko began to detest taking baths with her mother at about the time she began to feel nauseated at the sight of her mother bathing. She couldn't forgive herself for having drunk unconcerned from those saggy, swollen breasts as an infant. Rather, she couldn't forgive herself for being able to forgive the fat body of her mother. And that was that for a while. Once she was old enough to bathe on her own, she never had to look at her mother's exposed breasts again, and could pass the time as though she wasn't to blame. But once she heard that her mother had been hospitalized and her breasts, ravaged by cancer, cut off, Yuiko sank to the depths of despair, tormenting herself with thoughts that, because she could never abide them, she had been the one to rip off her mother's breasts. (Matsuura 1980, 217)

Signifiers of the maternal body—the breasts—engender both disgust and self-disgust. As a child, Yuiko was repulsed by her mother's maternity, perhaps aware that this is not just a fat woman, but *her mother*. Compared with her roommates' bodies, Yuiko has much more intimate knowledge of her mother's physique. Yuiko's hatred of her mother's body seems to manifest as cancer, offering a parallel between symbolic and literal figurations of consumption: as Yuiko is consumed by negative

feelings about her mother's breasts, those same objects of scorn are consumed by cancer. In other words, Yuiko seems to embody the cancer that strips her mother of her breasts and then her life.

In this way, the fat women Yuiko encounters represent the lost maternal body; they are ultimately objects of sympathy and remorse rather than derision. And Yuiko's "fat phobia" reads more like a means of self-preservation and misdirection than an actual fear of fatness. Mocking and criticizing fat women allows Yuiko to avoid telling herself the truth. As the above passage reveals, the narrative crux depends on her emotional progression from avoidance to acceptance. That is, "curing" her fat phobia requires honesty and introspection. Late in the story, she reflects: "Why do [I] suffer from some stupid disease like Fat Phobia or whatever? The disease has completely taken over; didn't it make me treat my mother so cruelly that I killed her?" (Matsuura 1980, 227).

At the same time, Yuiko's roommates are proxies for her mother, and she gradually realizes that liberating herself from her "fat phobia" depends on making amends with them. Mizuki confronts Yuiko in the following manner:

Let me tell you what's wrong with you. You don't hate us because we push you around, you hate us because we're fat—am I right? But it's not just fat bodies that you hate, is it; it's that you hate people who have fat bodies. . . . You stole all of that stuff from us so you could hate us even more. But it's only the fat us that you hate, not who we are. You hate us for your own sake, and you stole from us for your own sake . . . You're pathetic." (Matsuura 1980, 233–34)

Mizuki exposes the complexities of Yuiko's hatred/fear of fat women, portraying the latter as selfish and self-destructive. In this light, Yuiko's illness is indeed that—something that eats away at her. In an ironic twist on the prejudicial discourse surrounding fatness in popular culture, Mizuki's confrontational admonition liberates Yuiko from her negative feelings toward fat women and, by implication, those feelings she harbors toward herself. Yuiko admits (though only to herself): "I wonder if I will get fat—like Nagahara, like Mizuki, like my mother. . . . I wonder if I will be able to love fat people; that's what I've wanted ever since my mother died. Forgive me. I'll return what I stole, and I'll give you what's mine. I don't need anything else. So please be nice to me; please love me" (Matsuura 1980, 234–35). Typical attacks on the fat body portray a corpulent shell in which a skinny person is trapped. Matsuura inverts the rhetoric, offering fatness as the ideal. For Yuiko, fatness becomes a sanctuary, and the flesh she ardently mocked previously is transformed from an unruly force to a maternal refuge.

Conclusion: Toward a Fat Ally, Toward a New Status Quo

At the beginning of this article, I drew briefly from Sedgwick's work on the politics of female fatness, in which she discusses the similarities between "coming out" as gay and "coming out" as fat. She argues that both acts require declarations of "truth," addressing potentially derisive remarks from others, and, most importantly, figuring "a renegotiation of the *representational contract* between one's body and one's world" (1993, 229–30). In other words, for Sedgwick speaking of one's

fatness redresses what one knows about one's body as well as the bodies of others. "Himantai kyōfushō" manifests Sedgwick's reading of the fat body by placing the burden of knowledge on Yuiko's shoulders. What she knows about fat women and, initially, what she *thinks* she knows about fat women do not align, and the "truth," Sedgwick's representational contract, about fatness proves continually elusive. She requires the help of fat women to acquire an intelligible understanding of the fat female body. Central to that discourse is love, maternity, and community, affective economies from which Yuiko had previously fled. Drawing from Sedgwick's analogy, I would argue that Yuiko closeted herself. To this end, the text's conclusion requires that she come out.

Embracing the metaphorical fat woman within is different from embracing oneself as a fat woman, of course. Yuiko is still thin and in possession of a socially desirable body. For this reason, her acceptance of fatness is particularly important. Because she is representative of a dominant prejudicial point of view, Yuiko is a political ally. This is not to suggest that the only ally for marginalized and politicized identities is a heteronormative and separatist one. Rather, allies are agents of change. In this sense, I read the story as one of quiet activism. Nothing is certain, given that Yuiko's confession is a silent one, admitted only to herself. On the fringes of her thoughts, however, is an optimistic nod toward accepting and embracing difference.

To this end, I reiterate my claim that Matsuura's aims in her novella anticipate those that have recently reached critical mass. The prevalence of body regimes, surveillance, and maintenance "from the mid-1990s" suggests that Japanese "values and attitudes" regarding the body and beauty have shifted (Miller 2006, 19–20). Miller has thoughtfully demonstrated that the ways in which the body is sculpted and manicured reflect important "developments in the coding and definition of gender" (20). Beyond the aims of my essay are comprehensive considerations of how body regimes have changed over time. Perhaps it will suffice here to point out that body projects such as dieting, but also exercise or the use of make-up, seem to hinge on issues of sovereignty, offering the chance for invention, reinvention, and self-expression. But body projects are deceptive practices, given that self-invention is itself ideologically bound to certain cultural practices that are marked by historical, economic, gendered, racial, and even national boundaries. "Himantai kyōfushō" "works" as a critique because it successfully indexes issues of female body size in a historical moment in which such issues had yet to be fully unearthed. The novella also works because its aims and accomplishments reverberate through the daily struggles many women face today.

While much scholarly and literary efforts have been devoted to drawing attention to the female body as a site of social, cultural, and political strife, the male body is also bound to ideological processes and codes. Miller has shown that from the 1990s "the media in Japan has had a major role in turning the male body into an object of assessment" (2006, 128). The popular media has targeted the male body through fitness and style magazines, for example. So, too, has public policy attended to men and their bodies. For instance, the passage of the so-called "metabo law" ("metabo" is short for metabolic syndrome メタボリックシンドローム, which is a

term that encompasses obesity and its complications) in 2008 promulgated a state-authorized waistline for Japanese corporate employees. Those (primarily male) employees above the “healthy” standard determined by the government—for non-medical reasons—are subject to ridicule and his or her company may be subject to a fine. Individuals in violation of the law may be required to attend counseling sessions. The aim of the law is to reduce insurance premiums for corporations, with the additional benefit of educating employees on lifestyle management. However, the slope is slippery, and the “metabo law” reads like a political sleight of hand that legitimates the surveillance of overweight bodies in corporate contexts. Because Japanese corporate life is systemically exclusionary, privileging male professional ascent while marginalizing female experiences, the majority of those surveilled by the “metabo law” are men.

Although this is just one example, in one particular context, in which the male body is subject to a policing gaze, shifts in popular conceptions of what Hansen calls “normative masculinity” are evident (2016, 132). She observes that the term *sōshoku-kei danshi* (草食系男子), which means “herbivore men” or “plant-eating men” and refers to men who are not necessarily interested in sexual relationships with women (therefore uninterested in “meat”), “suggests that a redefinition or extension of the gender leash is taking place” (132). These men are seen as the antidote to the stale salaryman, whose corporate masculinity has determined Japanese conceptualizations of manhood since the end of the war. However, the cultural category of “herbivore men” may also betray a certain degree of cultural ambivalence. Allison’s (2016) research on the subject reveals that these men who reject traditional masculinity are “portrayed as being sensitive to feelings, relationships, lifestyle, [and] aesthetics. But women [do not] necessarily want to get married to them” (99). Therefore, Japanese men today are caught in a confusing moment in which traditionally staid ideas of masculinity have broken down but no viable replacement is yet culturally acceptable.

Because the body is “the inescapable vehicle from which masculinity takes its defining components” (Christensen 2015, 15), when Japanese men rewrite cultural scripts of masculinity, they similarly draw attention to the body as a platform of expression and possibility. However, we would be remiss if we did not attend to Bordo’s warning that “to focus only on multiple interpretations is to miss important effects of the everyday deployment of mass cultural representations of masculinity, femininity, beauty, and success” (2004, 24). That is, the failure of herbivorous men—attentive, sympathetic, feeling, fashionable—to attract potential mates may simply reaffirm the dominant masculine paradigm, as unappealing as it may be to some. Even so, the potential for competing and indeed complementary expressions of masculinities (Connell 1995) tells us of the vulnerability of dominant paradigms to the threat of subordinate groups.

To return to Matsuura’s novella—it offers a brief journey into the difficult terrain of identity politics, revealing the subversive power of the protagonist’s maligned roommates. Although the author’s concern is with how women negotiate gendered scripts of body size, the text is valuable for its construction of a space beyond the reach of hegemony. The dorm room, the “empire of flab” (Matsuura

1980, 172), in which the majority of the narrative unfolds offers an inversion to the usual order of things; Yuiko is the minority, the outcaste. Because her thin body grants her privilege within a culture that rewards bodily conformity, mastery, and surveillance, Yuiko is not of the subaltern in the dorm room. Instead, she is marked as an agent of oppression, which is conveyed through her hostility to her fat roommates, even though she is the one on the fringes. The emotional work she has to do to reconcile her feelings toward fat women speaks to the cultural work necessary for many Japanese who are as yet uncomfortable with breaches in normality or expectation. In this way, the text's disruptive potential extends beyond a single gender identity or social issue. Its engagement with fatness and femininity is readily applicable to social developments and shifts in masculinity. The text's lessons do not stop there; they are relevant to instances of nonconformity, oppression, and struggle that result from brave individuals challenging the status quo.

GLOSSARY

don'yoku	貪欲	<i>metaborikku shindorōmu</i>	
<i>himantai</i>	肥満体		メタボリックシンドローム
Kōseirōdōshō	厚生労働省	<i>sōshoku-kei danshi</i>	草食系男子
<i>kyōfushō</i>	恐怖症	<i>Yamai no sōshi</i>	病草紙

REFERENCES

- Allison, Anne. 2013. *Precarious Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bardsley, Jan. 2006. "The Essential Woman Writer." In *Woman Critiqued: Translated Essays*, edited by Rebecca Copeland, 53–60. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Berlant, Lauren. 1997. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- _____. 2007. "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)." *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4: 754–80.
- _____. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Boesveld, Sarah. 2009. "Thin's Not In." *The Globe and Mail*. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/were-having-a-fat-moment/article1319369> Accessed February 1, 2017.
- Bordo, Susan. 2004. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 10th edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bullock, Julia. 2010. *The Other Women's Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women's Fiction*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

- Christensen, Paul A. 2015. *Japan, Alcoholism, and Masculinity: Suffering Sobriety in Tokyo*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Connell, R. W. 2005. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- Furugōri, Tomoko 古郡頼子. 2010. *Himan no keizaigaku 肥満の経済学* [The political economy of obesity]. Tokyo: Kakukawagakugei Shuppan.
- Greenspan, Miriam. 1983. *A New Approach to Women and Therapy*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Gubar, Susan. 1994. "Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of 'It Takes One to Know One.'" *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 3: 453–74.
- Hansen, Gitte Marianne. 2016. *Femininity, Self-harm and Eating Disorders in Japan: Navigating Contradiction in Narrative and Visual Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 1989. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Matsuura, Rieko 松浦理英子. 1980. "Himantai kyōfushō" 肥満体恐怖症 [Fear of Fatness]. In *Sōgi no hi 葬儀の日* [The day of the funeral], by Matsuura Rieko, 155–235. Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha.
- _____. 1993. *Oyayubi P no shūgyō jidai 親指Pの修業時代* [The apprenticeship of Big Toe P]. Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha.
- Miller, Laura. 2006. *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pike, Kathleen. M. and Amy Borovoy. 2004. "The Rise of Eating Disorders in Japan: Issues of Cultural Limitations of the Model of 'Westernization.'" *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 28: 493–531.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1993. *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 1991. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. London: Penguin.
- Spielvogel, Laura. 2003. *Working Out in Japan: Shaping the Female Body in Tokyo Fitness Clubs*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Williams, Marjorie. 1983. *Japanese Prints: Realities of the "Floating World"*. Indiana University Press, 1983.
- Wright, Jan and Valerie Harwood, eds. 2009. *Biopolitics and the 'Obesity Epidemic.'* London: Routledge.
- "Yamai no sōshi (Diseases and Deformities)." E-Museum: National Treasure & Important Cultural Properties of National Museums, Japan. <http://www.emuseum.jp/detail/100995> Accessed May 13, 2017.
- Yamasaki, Makiko 山崎眞紀子. 2011. "Sengo Nihon ni okeru 'himan' bungaku" 戦後日本における『肥満』文学 ["Fatness" in postwar Japanese literature]. *Nihon bungaku 日本文学* [Japanese literature] 11, no. 59: 37–58.