A SPACE OF RENEGOTIATION: JAPANESE *SHACHŪHAKU* NARRATIVES

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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In the past decade there has been a growing interest in representations of *shachūhaku*, or car camping, in Japanese media. In this thesis, I examine three different kinds of media representations of *shachūhaku* to understand how these narratives provide the distance from the rhythms of everyday life necessary to renegotiate one's place within the hegemonies that structure them. Each kind of media that I examine has its own formal considerations, and each one utilizes both the spatial configurations of the vehicle and the narrative arc of *shachūhaku* to bring different aspects of the quotidian under scrutiny, but they all ultimately engage in this renegotiation, whether it be with the concept of death, gender, labor, or home.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A boxy, bright yellow car sits alone in a parking lot covered in a thick blanket of snow, a line of tall pine trees towering over it. A man roots around in the back of the car, pulling various items out of small bags, spreading them out atop the back row of seats which have been lain flat. Every time he steps to reposition himself, his boots press down on the powder with a pleasant crunching sound. The camera moves closer, taking on the man's perspective and giving us a peek into the space that he has set up for himself: an orange sleeping bag is spread atop a camping mat, next to a bulky battery pack and a small plastic table which holds a variety of miniature versions of kitchen appliances. He climbs into the car, pulling the trunk down shut behind him with a small rope attached to the inside. He plugs a single USB cable into the battery, and a warm light floods the interior of the car. A small digital screen on the table reads a chilly but tolerable 54.5 degrees inside as snow continues to fall outside the vehicle.[1]

This idyllic scene is the beginning of a video posted to a channel called *Dentan* on YouTube. With eleven million views, it is his second most popular video, behind one which garnered five times as many. This video belongs to a thriving community of Japanese YouTube channels which catalogue their experiences with a growing phenomenon referred to as "*shachūhaku*," which translates most literally to "staying in a car." At the same time that I was exploring the popularity of these videos, I was in the middle of translating a novella which also featured the phenomenon. Living on the West Coast of the United States, I was well familiar with a "Van Life" craze which flooded social media with images of the van. With this bit of synchronicity, I became fascinated with exploring exactly why so many forms of "staying in a

[1] *Dentan*, "Light car."

car" were proliferating across multiple kinds of media, and what kinds of stories were being told with this framework.

In this thesis, I analyze three different depictions of *shachūhaku* to show how authors and video artists have used the idea of temporarily living in a car, minivan, or campervan to step outside of the pressures of everyday life and reexamine it: (1) *shachūhaku* as a means to come to terms with loss in Furuhata Yasuo's 2012 film *To You* (*Anata-e*); (2) *shachūhaku* as a means to negotiate domestic roles in Motoya Yukiko's 2018 novella *You Don't Mind the Dog, Do You Okusan*? (*Okusan, inu ha daijoubu da yo ne?*); and (3) *shachūhaku* as comfort (*iyashi*) in specialized YouTube videos. This analysis shows that these narratives utilize the collision of liminality and domesticity to create a narrative space distant from rhythms and settings structured by a variety of hegemonies of family, gender, and labor that leave little room for different modes of living, allowing for their subsequent renegotiation.

As a text-based analysis, close reading is the primary tool at my disposal for examining the different narratives and their particular deployments of *shachūhaku*. I look closely at form, in terms of medium and narrative, to understand how the activity creates space for speculation. Drawing on the conceptual framework of affordances laid out by formalist scholar Caroline Levine, I place a careful attention to the potential uses, actions, and configurations of meaning latent in the form of *shachūhaku* and the mediums it appears in.[2] The physical and material compositions of the spatio-temporal experience of the activity structure a number of possible interactions between the vehicles, journey, and the characters of each narrative; since each of these works is concerned with different discourses, they utilize different aspects of this

[2] Levine, *Forms*, 6.

experience to suit their individual needs. In examining the discourses which these works engage with directly and indirectly, I show both their constructed nature and the real power that they exert.

Defining *Shachūhaku*

Before I go any further, I have to first line out exactly what I mean by the word *shachūhaku* and set out the boundaries of my one of numerous conversations that could arise around the term. *Shachūhaku* is a term that refers to a rather broad array of activities, but in its most basic sense, it is the act of spending the night in a vehicle which is ordinarily used for transportation, typically a car or a train.[3] Of course, one can imagine the circumstances under which this would occur varying wildly: Spending the night sleeping in the front seat of one's car parked in front of a convenience store because one is too tired to continue driving can be called *shachūhaku*, but so can staying the night in a car at a campsite. In addition, there are many different kinds of vehicles that it could refer to. The first kanji that comprises the term (*sha*) can refer to a wide range of wheeled vehicles, including trains, sedans, trucks, and campervans.[4] The term does not quite carry the same associations that "Van-life" would in an Anglophone context—the last kanji in the compound (*haku*) connotes a certain temporariness akin to lodging at a hotel rather than a sustained lifestyle.

Today, there are two images that are primarily associated with the term *shachūhaku*. The first is the image of the evacuee who is forced to stay in their car in the wake of disaster. Though it was a common response by victims of a number of different disasters, up until 2016 the Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act of 1961 (*saigaitaisakukihonhou*) did not recognize it as a

[3] *JapanKnowledge.com,* "*shachūhaku*."
[4] *JapanKnowledge.com,* "*kuruma*."

means of refuge, meaning that those who were forced to evacuate to their cars were not eligible for relief supplies. However, in the wake of the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake, the stress placed on shelters in the area forced mass amounts of people to stay in their cars for long durations without access to relief supplies.[5] As a result of this incident, the government came to recognize "*shachūhaku* evacuees" as a group under the language of the same act, and then subsequently began formulating new evacuation guidelines in consideration of their needs.[6]

Standing in stark contrast to this image, and the subject of this thesis, is that of car camping as a form of recreation and travel. Unlike the former image, this form of *shachūhaku* is a voluntary activity, wherein one utilizes the mobility of the car and its sheltering properties to embark on an overnight journey. Assessing the popularity of the phenomenon is difficult, but companies have reported an increase in sales of specialty campervans in the past few years, particularly in the first years of the Covid-19 pandemic.[7] A keyword search in Google Trends for the term *shachūhaku* correlates with these reports as well, showing a steady increase in search popularity in Japan over the past ten years, with a bump in the first few months of 2020.[8] More than anything, though, it's been a burgeoning genre of YouTube videos in the past few years, garnering millions of views on individual videos.

Though other media deployments of *shachūhaku*, houselessness, and alternative modes of dwelling are certainly worth examining in their own right, the required attention to their historicity and intersecting conceptual frameworks places them outside of the scope of this thesis. This particular manifestation of *shachūhaku* as a recreational activity is relevant in the

[5] Sugimoto, "Prevent Van-dwelling Economy Syndrome."
[6] Ōshima, "Answer to the Question."
[7] Hiratsuka, "Explore the Latest Three Trends in Campervans."
[8] Google Trends, "*Shachūhaku.*"

breadth of its media representations. Though it entails a departure from everyday life, the very act of dwelling necessitates much of what is fundamental to the mundane domesticity which it is a step away from. In this layering of liminality and domesticity, a space for speculation opens up.

Thinking with Liminality

In this section, I want to spend a little time discussing the first of the overarching conceptual frameworks for this thesis—the "liminal" and specifically how it relates to the phenomenon of car camping. Liminal is a term which has been imbued with several meanings across a long life from its start with Van Gennep to its current place in academic and popular discourses. Its current presence in academic spaces is owed to the anthropologist Victor Turner, who applies the term to the in-between phase of rituals in his book *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Building off of Van Gennep's explanation that rites-of-passage comprise of three phases—separation, margin, and aggregation—Turner pays close attention to this marginal period, which he dubs the "liminal."[9] In this phase, the individual is detached from their original position in society, rendered an ambiguous and categorically unstable figure.[10]

Here in its earliest conceptions, we can already see some of the qualities that make liminality so valuable. This emphasis on transition and categorical ambiguity will lead Turner and others to expand the definitions out beyond the boundaries of rites-of-passage. Anthropologist Björn Thomassen has posited in several works that liminality operates in multiple temporalities and group sizes; according to this figuring, single moments for an individual can be liminal, but so can a period of life be considered such, and even nations go through ages and

[9] Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 94.
[10] Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 94.

moments of liminality.[11] Outside of this temporal understanding is also the idea of spatial liminality. The notion of in-between lends itself easily to spatial imaginations, the archetype of which being the threshold, a transitional space between two other distinct spaces. Following this line of thinking, borders between countries, marginal spaces in a city, or even geographic features such as coastlines can be understood as being liminal.

According to this broader conceptualization, the car is a profoundly liminal space. As an object, its primary function is that of transporting people and things from one destination to another: a banal observation, but significant in its implications for meaning making. The car is not typically the destination in and of itself, but rather the temporal and spatial in-between of the point of departure and one's destination. Though the car itself moves through geographic space, the driver and passengers experience that space as something external, with the interior of the car comprising the bulk of their primary sensory inputs. Furthermore, the car with climate controls, integrated speakers, and interior lights provides people inside with ways to further ensconce them in a space that is decidedly cut off from the outside world. The world outside of the windows of the car is not experienced as the connection between two places, but the car itself is the interstice between locations. Even as the car itself is a liminal space, the act of *shachūhaku* combines this spatial liminality with a temporal kind of in-betweenness. This practice resembles the tripartite structure that Van Gennep outlines as well: The moment of departure is the separation where the logic and rhythms that govern everyday life are suspended. Then the bulk of the journey comprises the liminal stage—now estranged from the everyday, characters are in

[11] Andrews, *Liminal Landscapes,* 26.

an ambiguous environment, where the scripts, so to speak, that are the touchstones for the everyday are no longer relevant.[12] Finally, every one of these narratives results in a return.

However, to simply say that the activity is liminal does little to provide insight into the narratives in which they prominently feature. Thomassen suggests that there is great utility in liminality as a broader concept with which scholars can engage in interpretive analysis of events:

> Liminality is not just any concept, but a concept with which to think, and it points toward a certain kind of interpretative analysis of events and experiences. Liminality does not and cannot 'explain.' In liminality there is no certainty concerning the outcome but rather a world of contingency where events and ideas— and indeed, 'reality' itself— can be carried in different directions.[13]

It is exactly this kind of thinking with liminality that I attempt in this thesis. What I am interested in is not just that these different narrative forms contain liminal qualities, but that this liminality acts upon the stage that contains it, inflecting everything that it touches with the possibility of transformation. As Turner puts it: "Liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence."[14] This space for inquiry that liminality entails allows for exploration of the disjuncture between hegemonic ideals, varied lived realities, and the possibility for something altogether new. In the case of these stories, examining how the liminality of the car connects to the other forms that accompany it within narratives opens their associated cultural discourses to this world of contingence and becoming.

[12] Turner, *Forest of Symbols,* 94.
[13] Horvath and Thomassen, *Breaking Boundaries*, 42.
[14] Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 97.

Domestic Space as a Nexus of Meaning

The other part of this conceptual collision is the notion of domesticity, and in this section, I set up some of the representations and ideas which can accompany its evocation. The act of dwelling and the space within it occurs is a space wherein culture and social practices take shape, forming boundaries around groups and regulating relationships between individuals and families, families and communities, communities and a broader society.[15] The organization of the physical space of a home and the activities that take place inside of it are deeply cultural and ideological in nature. Domestic space and accompanying notions of the home in Japanese society serve as a nexus of meaning where discourses about family and gender intersect and unravel alongside the everyday activities that unfold within. In *shachūhaku* narratives, these domestic forms are placed in a liminal context where these discourses can be renegotiated. As such, it is worth examining some of the discursive constructions that accompany images of domesticity.

Domestic space and housing in general, through a series of cultural, economic, and political developments pushed by both the state and private sector, has become inextricably tied to the idea of a nuclear, middle-class, heteronormative Japanese family, such that the image of domestic space evokes simultaneously the kind of family that is supposed to fill it. A variety of policies and initiatives created material and economic structures around which a hegemonic image of the postwar nuclear family congealed, binding these notions of family structures and gender roles tightly to the physical space of the home. The result of these developments was the notion of a housing system that delineates a social flow of people moving to the inside through a "housing ladder" which emphasizes a life path along which people reached higher wages and a

[15] Alexy and Ronald, *Home and Family in Japan*, 175.

consummate increase in standards of living. People were expected to move from a rental dwelling to an owner-occupied one, and from condominium to a single-family home. [16] However, this ladder is linked to the idealized progression of a breadwinner husband's career, so the home, and the married woman who is represented as its manager, becomes represented as the support to this idealized corporate career. Crucially, this housing ladder explicitly delineates a life path wherein the family structures are a given and intimately intertwined with the home and set gender roles. In fact, the ladder does not make sense at all outside these rigid expectations. Perceived deviant family structures, such as childless couples, single parents, or individuals do not necessarily map onto the stated need for periodic moves into larger homes. In this way, domestic space becomes the point of convergence for a hegemonic image of the "average" Japanese citizens who dwell within it, namely the nuclear family with a breadwinner husband whose domain is out in the public and a wife who is tasked with the management of said space.

Of course, these notions do not map well onto people's actual lives, particularly in the wake of the massive societal shifts that have taken place since the bubble collapse. In the past few decades, family structures have undergone dramatic changes. Between 1975 and 2005, as the ratio of "nuclear" conjugal families decreased by roughly a third, the number of single-person households doubled, and the fertility rates dropped down to 1.57 children per woman. Furthermore, fewer and fewer women are getting married in general, with more people becoming divorced as well.[17] Combined with changes in employment practices brought on by neoliberal policies of the Koizumi administration, the ideal of the nuclear family centered around the breadwinner husband has slid further and further away from the reality of most family lives.

[16] Hirayama and Ronald, *Housing and Social Transition*, 18.
[17] White, *Perfectly Japanese*, 6.

What is important here is not these gender roles and family structures as the reality of the way in which people interact or the ways in which families are structured, but it is the representations of how the state and society at large expects people to conduct themselves—tells them the ways that they ought to behave. The gaps between people's lived realities and the ways of living promoted by the state create a friction in people's lives. In each of the examples of *shachūhaku* narratives that I explore, the representation of the domestic brings along with it this wider discourse. The act of dwelling inevitably ties them to larger discourses around family, gender roles, and labor, but this dwelling occurring within in the liminality of *shachūhaku* creates a space with a critical distance from these discourses, allowing for the creators and consumers of those narratives to interrogate these gaps between discourse and the lived. In the following chapters, I examine this collision of liminality and domesticity in a variety of *shachūhaku* narratives to show the ways that these gaps are explored to renegotiate the terms of one's everyday life.

In chapter two, I start with the film *To You*, to show how the *shachūhaku* narrative can create the space to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. In this film the minivan, personally retrofitted by the protagonist, becomes a space of quiet reflection when in transit but also a space of active remembering in moments of dwelling. Furthermore, the narrative structures the encounters that the protagonist has with others in a state of liminality, allowing him and viewers to wrestle with the complexities of family and home and the necessity of closure.

In chapter three, I move on to the novella *You Don't Mind the Dog, Do You Okusan?* Here, rather than a space of quiet reflection, the campervan that the narrator finds herself in is one that is uncomfortable and uncanny. In this space that is domestic and liminal, the narrator's

own performance of gender is contrasted with the other woman accompanying her on the trip. This results in the defamiliarization of gender performances that are in step with hegemonic ideals of femininity, disrupting their claims to naturalness.

In chapter four, I finish my analysis with a set of YouTube videos that depict the act of *shachūhaku* as a comforting, healing recreational activity. They utilize the vehicle as a sort of incubatory space, safe from the elements and removed from the pressures of everyday life. In these videos, the domestic becomes a source of profound comfort, often used to generate comforting sensory inputs to lull the viewer into a state of relaxation. This creates a space where viewers are free from quotidian pressures, free to wander in the ambient and renegotiate their relationship to labor and home.

CHAPTER II

SHACHŪHAKU IN THE FILM *TO YOU*:

ACHIEVING CLOSURE THROUGH LIMINALITY

To You (*Anata-e)* follows Kurashima Eiji, played by Takakura Ken, who receives a letter from his wife Yoko, played by Tanaka Yūko, after her death, setting him on a journey to her hometown of Hirado, Nagasaki to spread her ashes into the ocean as she wished. He retrofits his car and embarks on a journey across Japan with her ashes and memory accompanying him, just as he had promised that they would do together in life. Along the way, Kurashima meets a colorful cast of characters with their own troubles, and through his connections with them, he comes to find the peace that he needs to continue on in life.

Directed by Furuhata Yasuo and filmed with a star-studded cast including Beat Takeshi and Takakura Ken, the film debuted in 2012 at the 36th Montreal World Film Festival, and then went on to receive several awards in the 36th Japan Academy Awards. Highly sentimental in its own right, it gained a particularly special place as the last film that Takakura Ken would act in prior to his death in 2014. In his career spanning fifty years of acting and dozens of films, his "clumsy sincerity" and his devotion to fully immersing himself in those won him international renown, and this final film is representative of his restrained, yet emotionally charged style.[18]

To You is a film that utilizes the form of the minivan the *shachūhaku* narrative to create a narrative sinewave of meaningful interactions and personal reflections. Kurashima's journey to Hirado is marked by these alternating sequences of contemplative solitude in the car, both driving and dwelling, and the encounters that he has with others along the road. The longest

[18] Hibi, *Ken-san.*

journey depicted in all of the media that I examine, *shachūhaku* structures this by providing both the personal, incubatory space of the car with the chance for encounter in the spaces "off road" that are necessary parts of journey by car, and in their combination comes the possibility of closure for Kurashima.

The Liminal Minivan as a Private Space of Reflection

In this section, I look closely at the form of the minivan itself, examining how the material properties, spatial configurations, and filmic techniques that utilize it structure a reflective space for both the character of Kurashima and the viewers to grapple with the death of a loved one and how to move forward after it. As I explained in the introduction, the car is a closed off space which draws what is inside of it into a strange temporariness, moving through the world while staying still. By engaging in *shachūhaku* for the span of the movie, this temporariness becomes tinged with the intimately quotidian, becoming a vehicle for reflection as much as physical conveyance. This incubatory space creates an atmosphere where characters and viewers have the time and mental space to sit with both the encounters brought by the road and the memories that he brought with him.

In *To You*, the car serves as a very private space, affording solitude for both Kurashima and the viewers to reflect, remember, and unpack the events that occur outside its doors. The film is replete with scenes where the camera is situated in the passenger's seat of the van, providing film audiences both the outside world seen through the windshield and Kurashima's stolid face. On his departure from Toyama, sweeping, hopeful music plays. Audiences see his van amble through busy city streets, heading off into the direction of the mountains in the background. The scene cuts to the van crossing a bridge that runs over a shallow river, with a set

of train tracks on the other side of it. The film cuts into a shot, from just outside the windshield, of Kurashima at the steering wheel, his face scanning the road ahead. Trees blur by in the corner of the screen and on the transparent reflections in the glass of the van. The scene changes again, to a winding road through green and rocky hills. The van, tiny in this shot, moves toward the camera, the only moving thing in the setting. It passes through the camera's field of vision, and the viewpoint flips, watching the van now retreat away from it along the same road. There is one more shot of the van on the road being overtaken by a train above, the symmetry of the two moving vehicles creating a pleasing visual effect, and then Kurashima pulls into a busy rest stop. Throughout the scene, Kurashima is entirely silent, letting the music and the sounds of the road and passing trains and cars pull readers along for a minute and a half. There is no plot progression in these moments which fill the film, and they do not provide any characterization either. Rather than asserting Kurashima's self-hood in this moment by providing the internal monologue of Kurashima or some kind of narration of his emotions, the film wraps viewers up in the rhythmic movement and sounds of the tires on the pavement and the images passing by outside the window. In these moments, Kurashima does not come to any grand conclusions about his own situations, and he does not lapse into memory as he does at other points in the film where he is alone, but rather, the film leaves the task of unpacking the prior events to the viewers, inspiring self-reflection in these moments. To do so, Kurashima, and the viewers by extension, need these moments of solitude in the van, where the inputs received from the chance encounters along the way can be properly processed. It is important to note the emptiness of the landscape in this first transition scene as well. Once Kurashima leaves the city, the only other sign of life are the trains passing like features of the landscape. These beautiful, yet empty backgrounds leave a space for the mind to wander without too much distraction.

In addition to inspiring reflection, these interstitial scenes also do the work of attuning viewers to the appropriate affective environment for different story beats. Taking the first of these, as the beginning of the journey, where Kurashima is taking a leap of faith, the music provides the sense that something grand is beginning, as orchestral background music plays in bright tones that draw out as wide as the scenery, which itself seems to invoke the sense of a grand adventure in its open spaces and beautiful greenery. The same song plays throughout different points of the movie, but in a later scene, where Kurashima is on the last stretch of road before his wife's hometown, a different section of it plays.[19] While carrying the same motifs, this part of the song is a little more muted and solemn. This time, beneath a gray and hazy sky, Kurashima drives along a harbor. He stops in the middle of this drive for a moment as the camera pans down from dark clouds with cracks of a lighter sky forming in between them. The first thing to come into view is the top of the van, and then viewers see Kurashima, stretching as if to prepare physically for the emotional strain of the day. Below him, the ocean fills spaces between green islands and coastline. We cut to a close up shot of small purple flowers in the foreground, with the road and Kurashima's van coming towards the camera blurred behind them. As the van rounds a corner, the shot opens up to a tall red suspension bridge, and the van and road come into focus as the camera pans to follow. There is a quick shot from the driver's seat of the van as it goes over the bridge, but then the camera moves outside, panning in a circle around Kurashima's face. The final shot before the van comes to a stop is an overhead view of a few houses and boats, nestled into a small divot in the coast underneath a canopy of greenery. As the story nears the end, this transitional scene moves viewers into an affective space to match the mounting tension of the end of Kurashima's journey. Compared to the excitement produced by

[19] Furuhata, *To You.*

wide open scenery and bright music and lighting, the atmosphere is thicker at this point, with the sky looking threatening and suffocating, and the light and colors being a more oppressive dark grey. There is a sense of apprehension at the coming confrontation that readers are being tuned for at this point.

These driving scenes are only half of the equation of a narrative focused on *shachūhaku*—there remains the fact of the act of actually dwelling in the van. The space that he stays in is intensely personal—the minivan in which Kurashima sets out on his trip is one that he converts himself into a livable space. Before he sets out, there is a set of scenes that depict him creating every element that goes inside. He handcrafted the wood furniture that fills the van: two wooden chairs and a low-lying table. To give himself privacy and add some elements of home, he sets up lovely green curtains around the windows in the back. There are even some rather impressive additions such as a glass lamp that he affixes to the wall and seemingly wires into the van's battery, as well as a green cloth inlaid in wood that runs around the edge of the van in a strip—in terms of car conversions, this kind of configuration is on the professional end, as opposed to simply laying a futon down in the back. Through his labor, Kurashima puts some of himself into the van.

In a way, when Kurashima is living in the minivan, he is living in a dream. Early in the film, there is a flashback scene of him and his wife, Yoko, sitting in her hospital bed, awash in the sepia tones used for scenes of Kurashima's memories. He holds a diagram of his plans to retrofit the van, explaining to her how he will take out the back seats to make space for a mini-kitchen and a cabin space. They daydream about driving around Japan, her painting in the back.

"There are so many places that I want to go to" she tells him as they stare longingly at the drawings. "We can go anywhere," he replies, "but first I need you to get better."[20]

These plans, conceived as a dream wherein Yoko survives her illness, become a reality that he inhabits. Although his wife is no longer there, the space is still tinged with his dreams of her—a place that should not exist without her, yet does, nonetheless. The hope that he has for a life of travel and leisure with his wife becomes replaced by a different hope, that of understanding how to move forward without her, but both of these hopes center on the space of the retrofitted van. His wife's presence is sensed all throughout the van, both in her ashes that he brings along and the small splash of color in the form of a blue wildflower vase that she wanted him to keep.

Living in this space charged with emotion serves as a connection to his wife. The small aspects of everyday life that Kurashima now undertakes alone become jumping off points for Kurashima to dive into memory. After the first day on the road, the film cuts to a scene of Kurashima trying to sleep alone in the darkness of the vehicle, a sleeping bag pulled up to his chin. He tosses and turns for a few moments, and then promptly sits up, looks around the van briefly, and then sets an unfocused gaze out to the edge of the screen. His mind wanders off to a memory where he and his wife are on a beach together, talking about their future and settling down somewhere near the ocean. The two of them in the memory are sitting at the edge of the water and staring out at it when the scene cuts back to Kurashima, standing alone at the water's edge at night, having stepped out of the van alone.

[20] Furuhata, *To You.*

Later in the movie, the camera looks down on the minivan, crammed in between several trucks that have stopped for the night, a soft warm light glowing behind the curtains that he has pulled shut. Inside, Kurashima is cutting carrots into thin slices in preparation for dinner. As he does so, he thinks back to his wife in the hospital chastising him for not eating well enough. In the memory, she hands him a small notebook filled with simple recipes. Back in the present, he dons a set of reading glasses to consult the book in between steps, placing it back next to the small blue vase when he has finished. These domestic acts of sleeping and cooking unfolding in this sentimental, liminal space bring about a much more active reminiscing than the scenes where he is driving. It is important that when Kurashima is in the minivan, these memories only come back when he is stopped for the day and is engaged with some aspect of the rhythms of everyday life which he has left behind. The domestic activities unfolding in the space of the campervan is at once familiar and unfamiliar—Yoko's presence is felt throughout, yet there are no memories of her in the space at all. This sets up a parallel between Kurashima's acclimation to living in a new space and his acclimation to a new life without Yoko.

Encountering Permanent Liminality as "Wandering"

In this section I take a step back from the immediate physicality of the car to examine the ways that the narrative arc of a journey by *shachūhaku* structures encounters and personal transformation, providing the external inputs which can be mulled over alone in the minivan in the scenes depicted in the previous section. Here my analysis is guided by the work of Simon Ward. In the book *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-Between*, his chapter "'Danger zones': The British 'road movie' and the liminal landscape" explores how the liminal nature of the British road movie opens up its characters to experiences outside of the boundaries of their everyday lives. The journey as a narrative structure resembles Van Gennep's liminal

phase within tripartite rites of passage: the protagonist leaves an environment which is familiar to them (separation), entering into an unfamiliar and uncertain space wherein they are "tested" (liminal), and finally returns home changed (reaggregation).[21] Ward explains that a hallmark of this narrative structure is the "chance encounter," which is fundamental to this "testing" of the individual on the journey.[22] For Ward, reasserting the fundamental liminality of the space or the narrative is not enough, but to understand a narrative predicated on liminality, such as the "road movie" or the "*shachūhaku* narrative," one must ask: "what kind of tests emerge from the landscape, and what are the consequences for the subjectivity of the protagonist who encounters them?"[23] I find this model to be particularly useful in examining how *To You* uses *shachūhaku* to explore the search for closure and a way to move forward from tragedy. To answer these questions, I examine three people that Kurashima encounters by chance as he drives across Japan, each one with their own complicated relationship to home and loss. These chance encounters bring Kurashima a little bit closer to comprehending his own situation. Most notable about all of these characters is that they all find themselves stuck in a permanent, stagnant liminality, unable to enter into the period of "reaggregation." In examining these encounters, I reveal the narrative importance of the definite closure of the liminal period that distinguishes *shachūhaku* from permanent modes of dwelling in a vehicle.

The first of these encounters is with Beat Takeshi's character, Sugino Teruo, who Kurashima runs into on his first day of travel—first at a rest stop, and later at a gas station. Sugino takes an interest in Kurashima's van and, without asking permission, opens the back door and invasively peeks inside. After marveling at the inside, he questions Kurashima about his

[21] Andrews and Roberts, *Liminal Landscapes,* 185.
[22] Andrews and Roberts, *Liminal Landscapes,* 186.
[23] Andrews and Roberts, *Liminal Landscapes,* 186.

plans for the night: “Do you intend to do *shachūhaku* tonight?” [24]Deciding that his new acquaintance is not suitably prepared for the reality of sleeping in a van, invites him along to a campsite. The campsite is a beautiful spot on the edge of the water, with a line of trees and shrubs framing a soft sunset that casts the two of them in shadows. While there, Sugino talks rapidly, quoting poetry and telling tender stories about his own life, which mirror Kurashima’s life quite well. He claims “I used to teach literature up until March. Then my wife died. We did not have any kids, but we spoke of traveling Japan together once I retired.”[25]

At this point he explains a key distinction that Kurashima keeps in mind and has deep thematic implications. He asks, “Do you know the difference between wandering and traveling? Whether or not you have a destination.” He then alludes to two poets, Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) and Taneda Santōka (1882-1940), to explain the difference. Both men were haiku poets that were known for their traveling, albeit in different periods, with Bashō writing in the Edo Period and Santōka straddling the Meiji and Taishō periods. He explains:

> “Basho was a traveler. Santōka was a wanderer. ‘Further and further in. Still endless green mountains.’ Santōka wandered around freely as he pleased and wrote what came to mind. I imagine that’s why his works touched so many people.” [26]

In the morning, Kurashima finds that the man has departed already, but has left behind a book of poetry from which he had quoted the night before. A few scenes later Kurashima is reading the book by himself in the van. The distinction between wandering and traveling made by Sugino sticks with Kurashima, and he quotes Sugino several times to the other characters he

[24] Furuhata, *To You.*
[25] Furuhata, *To You.*
[26] Furuhata, *To You.*

later meets. In this distinction Kurashima has a destination and a definite end to his travels, what we might call the final phase of reaggregation in Van Gennep's tripartite structure of ritual. It is this destination, the end of the journey, which consummates the changes that arise in the liminal phase. However, wandering, with its lack of destination, precludes that closure and the liminal phase spins out without end. This distinction shows that this destination and return are crucial to the narrative structure which *shachūhaku* provides against long term modes of living in a car which Sugino engages in. It's the coming closure of Kurashima's time in his car, which requires him to reintegrate his experiences and changes into the everyday, that makes the experience a transitional one, rather than a suspended stagnation.

Kurashima encounters Sugino one other time on his journey, in Shimonoseki, Yamaguchi. Sugino does not seem to remember the stories which he had told Kurashima "I said such a thing?"[27] he asks. They talk for a little while, Kurashima opening up about his own journey, but are then interrupted by the police, who take Sugino into custody. As Sugino is taken into police custody, he remarks, "As I wandered, I got lost along the way."[28] It turns out that he had been stealing cars all throughout Japan and lying to Kurashima about his background. It is unclear exactly how much of what he told Kurashima was the truth, but Kurashima chooses to believe that Sugino's wife had died, sending him down that path. At this point, the contrast between the two men is fully realized: both men have lost their wife, and both men have set off on a journey as a result. However, in the form of their journeying, they each take on one of the roles of the two poets which Sugino drew a distinction between earlier—Sugino plays the part of Santōka, wandering in perpetual liminality as he steals and lives in cars across the country, while

[27] Furuhata, *To You.*
[28] Furuhata, *To You.*

Kurashima here takes the role of Basho, traveling to a destination in the hopes of finding a way out. Sugino serves as a mirror for Kurashima—spinning his own wheels, nothing has changed for Sugino between the times that they met, but Kurashima seems to be changing in some ways. No longer quite as truculent, this time Kurashima is the one who quotes poetry at Sugino, and he is able to talk about his own journey rather than hold the reason for it close to his chest. This shows that the journey has already led to some kind of healing already at this point. Sugino, and Kurashima's tenderness toward him, reveals a shadow of what might have been, had his wife not sent him on a journey in a minivan.

Immediately after, Kurashima encounters a man whose car has broken down on the way to work; this leads to the second intrusion into Kurashima's personal space of the van. Tamiya Yuji, played by Kusanagi Tsuyoshi, is a young, energetic, personable squid-seller from Hokkaido, who desperately needs to get to Osaka for a food show where he is scheduled to sell grilled squid. Tamiya convinces Kurashima to take him and his work materials all the way into the city. Once there, Kurashima offers to help him set up for the food show the next day, giving the two of them time to chat while they work.

Tamiya has traveled all over Japan for work, something that he seems to take great pride in on their first meeting, constantly referring back to the grand reward of the smiles on his customers' faces. In Osaka, his sunny disposition seems impenetrable, and he seems to truly enjoy the lifestyle that he leads. He jokes that, sometimes, it is more of a pain to go home than be on the road. However, they meet again when Tamiya invites Kurashima to come drinking in Kyushu as thanks, and the façade comes down. As the night drags on, he reveals that his traveling for work is nothing more than running away from his fears: "My wife is having an

affair, but I'm afraid of confronting her about it. So, I have to keep doing this."[29] He explains that staying in the business hotels is the worst part: "Business hotels look the same everywhere. Sometimes I wake up and have no idea where I am. That's when it gets unbearably lonely."[30] Kurashima, by contrast, is staying in a space which is his own. The van, while different from his everyday life, is still invested with the labor that he put into modifying it, whereas the hotels in which Tamiya stays are devoid of this kind of personal connection. Here, Kurashima comes into contact with another character who is stuck in a permanent wandering. Though unlike Sugino, Tamiya physically has a place to return to, but his wife's affair makes it difficult for him to return. Rather than facing his problems, he continues to work, moving from hotel room to hotel room, never quite sure where he is when he wakes up. With nothing at home, and nothing for him on the road ahead but more work, Tamiya is simply moving so that he does not have to stop to face the reality. They are different both in method and duration of travel: Kurashima's being a temporary directed journey, with an eventual return in mind, and Tamiya's a permanent attempt at avoiding that return and the change that comes with it.

The final chance encounter takes place at the ostensible endpoint of Kurashima's journey. Having reached his wife's hometown, he is unable to find anyone who is willing to take him out to sea to spread her ashes. With the city beset by a powerful typhoon, everyone tells him that it would be impossible. In his search, he ends up taken in for the night by a family that runs a local restaurant. He bonds with the matriarch of the family, Hamazaki Taeko, over their shared experience of the loss of a spouse, although she lost her husband at sea seven years before. Kurashima struggles to come to terms with the fact that once he scatters Yoko's ashes, she will

[29] Furuhata, *To You.*
[30] Furuhata, *To You.*

truly be gone from his life. Taeko explains that having lost her husband at sea, there was never any body to bury, and so his grave lies empty. For her, there was never any closure to be found, and as such she remains in the in-between of the "before" and "after" of her husband's death. Part of what this shows is that this "wandering," this permanent liminality, does not solely entail a constant movement through physical space, but that it can be a personal state of being, even if one never moves from their hometown.

Each of these encounters shows that what Kurashima's wife has done for him in her final act is give him a way forward. The other characters, lacking the journey that Kurashima has been forced into or a destination to end their wandering, are all in stasis and remain unchanged. Kurashima is the one who changes through these encounters. Sufficiently removed from the everyday of his job and everyday routine, he has a chance to change and grow. Sugino continued wandering until he was seized in prison. Tamiya is still selling squid, as far away as he can be from his family while still in the country. The woman is in the same town, still clinging to her husband's memory. Only Kurashima completes his journey, with "his own time continuing to flow"[31] as he puts it. For this "flow of time" to be restored, the liminal phase has to come to an end, which is what makes *shachūhaku* so important to this narrative as opposed to other methods of "wandering." For the liminal to be a transformative spatio-temporality, there has to be a before and an after between which one is transitioning.

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In this chapter, I showed how the film *To You* uses the space of the minivan and the narrative arc of *shachūhaku* to create a space within which personal responses to the death of a

[31] Furuhata, *To You.*

loved one can be explored and bring a sense of closure. The minivan as private and personal creates an incubatory space wherein both the rhythms of driving and the act of dwelling within it allow for reflection on the encounters that occur off of the road. This film shows the importance of the temporary nature of a liminal experience which *shachūhaku* provides, as an antidote to the kinds of permanent liminalities that the other characters experience.

In the next chapter, rather than being a place of quiet reflection, the campervan becomes an unsettled space where the domestic elements that serve to reify certain notions of gender in this film become destabilized.

CHAPTER III

SHACHŪHAKU IN *YOU DON'T MIND THE DOG, DO YOU OKUSAN?:* THE CAMPERVAN AS DEFAMILIARIZING SPACE

You Don't Mind the Dog, Do You Okusan? was published and reprinted in a 2018 collection by Akutagawa Prize-winning author Motoya Yukiko, which follows two couples on their overnight trip in a campervan. The narrator, a woman with a self-proclaimed "existential illness"[32] compelling her to shop online, does not know the other couple whatsoever and her relationship with her husband is strained before they've even left. As the day goes by in the confines of the campervan, the couple's relationship continues to sour. Forced to be together in a small space with the constant comparison of another couple's relationship dynamics looming in the background, the narrator and her husband reach a breaking point.

In this chapter, I show how Motoya Yukiko utilizes the collision of liminality and domesticity in the form of the campervan to create a space wherein the hegemonic ideal of gender roles can be defamiliarized and brought under scrutiny. By setting up a contrast between the gender performances of the narrator and the other wife within a space which is separated from the everyday and tinged with the liminality of the car, yet contains signifying elements of a domestic space, Motoya makes the constructed nature of these roles visible—the end result of which being their critique and a subsequent openness to what it can mean to be a woman.

Before moving into a close reading of the novella, I wish to situate it within the broader oeuvre of her work and show how it reflects a particular attitude toward reality that has come to be a hallmark of her writing. Originally a playwright, Motoya Yukiko moved into literature in

[32] Motoya, *Okusan*, 123.

2003 with her collection *Eriko and Absolute* (*Eriko to zettai)*. Her work primarily is published with Kodansha and the monthly literary magazine that is under it, Gunzo. She has received several of the most prestigious literary prizes in the country, including the Akutagawa Prize, the Ōe Kenzaburo Prize, and the Mishima Yukio Prize. Many of Motoya's stories contain an element of something strange, the intrusion of the unbelievable into the world of the logical. This approach to making the familiar into something wholly strange is called a number of things by reviewers, among which are the descriptors absurdism and surrealism, but the most appropriate framework by which I understand these works is that of magical realism. While the novella *You Don't Mind the Dog, Do You Okusan?* may not qualify as one of her explicitly magical realist works, it shares an attitude toward reality that is a central part of those other works, making it worth outlining briefly how it operates in similar ways. Here I draw on a similar definition of magical realism in Japanese literature as Matthew Carl Strecher, who has written at length about the magical realism of Murakami Haruki. There is a certain political and cultural connotation to the term magical realism that does not fit with the work of Murakami, and neither does it apply to the works of Motoya Yukiko. Many would argue that magical realism is a regionally specific phenomenon, arising from the particular history and culture of Latin America, but there are those such as Latin-American literary scholar Luis Leal who open up the definition of magical realism to become a worldview applicable to any number of methodologies or contexts.

> Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structures. ... . In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it.[33]

[33] Leal, *"Magical Realism in Spanish America,*" 121.

Strecher argues that this particular understanding of magical realism allows Murakami to borrow the techniques of magical realism without attaching himself to the region-bound cultural contexts many would insist are inherent to the phenomenon.[34] I place the work of Motoya Yukiko in a similar context—her work is decidedly not a part of the tradition that engages with a postcolonial endeavor, nor does she try to assert any kind of broader national or cultural identity. However, she undoubtedly uses techniques that accomplish what Leal describes, untangling reality through a collision with the unreal. For Motoya, magical realism is a means by which to approach subjects that are difficult to make sense of, or even recognize otherwise. Her injection of the unbelievable into the real serves to make the familiar just strange enough to be comprehensible. Aspects of modern life so embedded in the commonplace as to be invisible suddenly take a defined shape against an entirely different background. Often, her preoccupation is with the "everyday" in the vein of Lefebvre and DeCerteau, the site of both the forces of alienation and generative creativity that form out of the mundane routines people set them in. Her deliberate juxtaposition of the marvelous and the mundane shows the complex and mysterious processes that underlie everyday life and relationships.

From first glance, it may seem this comparison her magical realist works might be a facile one—after all, in this novella, there are no men flying off into a rainy night or husbands made out of straw as feature in her other stories. However, it shares the same attitude toward reality that her other stories do—something to be confronted, interrogated, and played with. As Yokō Kazuhiro puts it, Murakami explores "how the world might or might not change after introducing one tiny vibration into our insignificant daily lives," which I have found to be a useful way to bridge the gap between Motoya's works that are more fantastical and ones such as

[34] Strecher, *Dances with Sheep*, 82.

"Okusan."[35] The "one tiny vibration" that is featured in this novella is far less dramatic, but still a challenge to the hegemonic notion of "reality." Here, the liminality of the campervan is the destabilizing force, introducing a similar kind of contingence and possibility that is such an integral part of her firmly magical realist works. In this liminal phase of their overnight journey, the characters become estranged from the "reality" of their everyday as they know it in the rhythms of their workdays and domestic lives, and with the new distance from it are fully capable of reckoning with it.

A Space where the Liminal and Domestic Collide

As the primary setting of the story, the inside of the campervan plays a large role in shaping the kinds of conflicts and interactions that unfold within. Motoya carefully crafts this interior space within the narrative to emphasize its liminal qualities, especially as they affect the domestic elements that are included in it. This results in a space which is both cut off from the rest of the world around it and suffused with a sense of unease and tension for the narrator. Just in terms of ink spent, the vast majority of the novella's narration is spent within the confines of the car. Out of forty-seven pages, only six of them take place outside of the car, and none of these are at their actual destination for the evening. The majority of the time is spent moving between the van's cab and the back. There are two major scenes that take place outside of the van. The first comes at the very beginning of the story: the narrator and her husband sit in an unspecified part of town, in front of a stranger's yard, waiting to be picked up by the other couple in the van to set off on the trip. The campervan stops several other times, but the narrator is not all that interested in what happens there. During the first stop at a rest stop, the outside

[35] Yokō Kazuhiro, *Murakami Haruki*, 31.

surroundings are barely discussed.[36] The narrator notes that they stop like this nearly every hour, but only describes one instance in detail. The other time described is when they stop for the evening—there is a wide span of time where quite a few things are all but skipped over in the narrative. The group of four goes to the supermarket, has dinner together and even takes a bath in a hot springs at the rest stop, but all these events are hardly given more than a sentence between them.[37]

The act of gazing out the windows becomes one of the main ways in which Motoya Yukiko establishes this separation of inside and outside. When the narrator looks out at the scenery beyond the window it takes on a distant quality, as if she is residing in a different world while inside of the campervan. At one point, she moves up to the front of the campervan where she has access to the passenger window. The campervan is taller than ordinary passenger cars, and this height provides a different perspective of the passing scenery. The narrator is taken aback by how strange it is to be seeing the world in such a different way. She remarks, "Resting in the passenger seat, I scrutinize the other cars, looking down from an angle I have never experienced before. The part on a person called the crown of the head—that I'd be seeing that part of each driver, I would not have dreamed"[38] This motif is carried on throughout the novella, but its most powerful iteration comes toward the end once the sun has set, and the characters are inside for the evening. At this point, the narrator's husband has left the campervan out of his anger at her, so she climbs back into the driver's seat to move while he is gone as a prank. At that moment she gets a good look at the parking lot outside of the car.

[36] Motoya, *Okusan*, 96.
[37] Motoya, *Okusan*, 110.
[38] Motoya, *Okusan*, 104.

> The vast plot of the parking lot is totally black—the only things outside that I can see are the headlights of other cars coming and going way out in the road and the far-off pale glow of the vending machine, standing alone and shining. A group of large trucks huddles together like an island. I adjust the AC and send in warm air to the driver's seat. Through the back mirror, I look at the darkness where the rest stop should be. "It's like an ocean."[39]

The fact that the outside world here is likened to the ocean in this case conjures another image of profound liminality: the coast. As the borderline between two concepts as ontologically opposed as land and sea, the coastline is that hazy border between the two. The moving of the tides and rhythm of the waves constitutes a constant negotiation of this border, as well as a sense of wonder at the vast expanse that lies ahead of one standing at this precipice. Here too, the image of the ocean situates the narrator's position in the car as just on the boundary of something, a space at once thrilling, awe-inducing, and terrifying in its implications.

This sense of a self-contained nowhere renders everything that would otherwise be familiar somewhat strange. The space, though it possesses all of the familiar furnishings of a domestic space, feels uncomfortable. The expectations that these domestic features do not fit neatly into a liminal, mobile vehicle provides a sense of tension underlying the narrator's experience of this campervan. When the narrator first boards the campervan, she does not quite know what to expect, having never been in one before. She is struck by a certain sense of artificiality about the space, and her first impression is that "the inside was like an elaborately put together model of a home."[40] She sweeps her gaze over the room, listing off the familiar

[39] Motoya, *Okusan*, 116.
[40] Motoya, *Okusan*, 86.

features: “A small table. A small sofa. A small bench. A small burner. A small sink.”[41] Rather than a space where someone might actually live, it seems like a playhouse filled with kitchenware that dangles from hooks on the wall like toys.[42] Everything seems like it is trying to convince her that it is really what it says it is, despite the obvious fact that it is not, like the curtains that hang on either side of the window, “as if proof that this is here is a living room.”[43]

Later on, after all the other members of their group have made themselves at home in the campervan, the narrator tries to find a place for her and her husband to sleep. She selects the loft above the driver’s seat, but upon climbing up the ladder, she is unnerved by the concept of spending the night with her husband in “*that space*” that is “merely a space that one would hesitate to call a loft.” [44] Even looking at it causes her to shudder and close her eyes.[45] She continues to look back at that space throughout the story, dreading the thought of being forced to crawl up into it in the evening. The place of rest, a supposedly comfortable space, is a terrifying one in this instance. Here too, the domestic must cede priority to the liminal nature of the car as transportation—resulting in a strange hole of a dwelling space.

Another place where the expectation of domestic space is disrupted is the lack of privacy. As small as the van is, there is no psychic separation between the people that are inhabiting it for the day. At any given time, everyone is visible to everyone else in the car. After stopping at a rest stop where the narrator and her husband have a cold, pointed discussion about how disappointed he is, everyone boards the campervan again, and the narrator finds herself up front with her

[41] Motoya, *Okusan*, 86.
[42]Motoya, *Okusan*, 86.
[43] Motoya, *Okusan*, 86.
[44] Motoya, *Okusan*, 92.
[45] Motoya, *Okusan*, 92.

husband's coworker. The two are in the van's cab, with some separation from the others, but any conversation occurring in the cab can be heard clearly by those in the living space in the back of the van. As the man talks at length about his current wife and his ex-wife, the narrator's eyes are constantly being drawn up to the rearview mirror. The movement of the man's wife behind them in the kitchen catches her eyes, and the coconut figurine dangling from the rearview mirror keeps drawing attention to the fact that there are two other people directly behind them, listening, however intently, to whatever is being said.[46] Toward the end of the novella, the narrator and the coworker's wife move up to the cab to play a trick on the narrator's husband and move the van from the spot where he left it. As they wait to see his reaction when he realizes it is gone, they sit up front and drink and talk together. Throughout their conversation, however, the coworker's presence in the back of the van is constantly felt. At first, they hear the sound of the television and him shouting to them to ask what they have gotten up to. This prompts the wife to pull closed the curtains between the living space and the cab. Even then, although he has grown quiet, the smell of the meat that he grills wafts into the cab, inserting him into the conversation as the topic from then on.[47] With this expectation of privacy interrupted, the sense of security that accompanies it disappears as well, leaving a sense of unease and tension in its place.

Defamiliarized Gender Performances in a Liminal Space

It is in this space, ambiguous, unstable and uncomfortable, that the plot unravels. Performances of gender which otherwise would seem natural and appropriate become defamiliarized through their unfolding within such a space. Motoya Yukiko uses character contrast between the narrator and the other wife in this space to highlight the strange,

[46] Motoya, *Okusan*, 104.
[47] Motoya, *Okusan*, 119.

manufactured nature of these gender roles, and uses the interiority of the narrator reacting to the space to reveal the effort that goes into maintaining such performances. In this tension and strangeness, distant from the everyday, a space opens up for Motoya to question the validity of the naturalized gender roles.

The novella begins with a sharp focus on the tension between the narrator and her husband. She calls out to him, but, receiving no answer, simply stands next to him silently, noting to herself that he is probably upset with the fact that she broke her promise once again. Readers later learn that the promise was that she would not buy anything online for the span of a week. This time, she has bought an air mattress to bring along on the trip. Her husband's disgust for her spending habits does not seem to have anything to do with money but stems instead from his conservative conception of how a wife should behave. He expects the wife to be the manager of the domestic realm, among which includes finances and purchases, while the husband works outside the home. In her book on the history of the notion of waste in Postwar Japan, Eiko Siniawer explains that even as women entered the workforces in increasing numbers from the 1970s, this home management role continued to dominate perceptions and dictate options for women, something we can see in the ways in which the division of household and familial labor remained this drastic even into the late 2000s.[48] According to Siniawer, "Part and parcel of keeping the household humming along, it was usually wives who dealt with household waste in its various incarnations, be it the scheduling of time, household finances, garbage and recycling, or electricity use."[49] Thus, his disgust is due to what he perceives as the unsightly and frivolous

[48] North, "Negotiating," 25.
[49] Siniawer, *Waste*, 10.

behavior of a woman who is a wife rather due to any strain of the family's finances. In his eyes, the issue is her failure to fulfill her role as a wife properly.

The first time that the two of them have a full conversation in the novella, her husband makes sure to remind her that she is standing out: "More importantly, have you noticed the fact that you're the only one with that much luggage?" The narrator says that she has, throwing in a challenging "What about it?" but her husband continues to sip on his coffee in silence.[50] Later, the narrator explains to the other wife that this kind of visual impact was a large part of why he is upset, and that he has attempted to use this visual impact to convey her failures to her:

> "But, my husband, right, he told me that it's dreadful, the cardboard arriving every day. Of course, I told him I'm only buying them because they're necessary. I haven't once bought anything useless." I glance at her. She nods. A kind of signal to move forward. I do just that. "So, I made a promise with my husband. A promise that, for the time being, I would not buy anything for the span of one week. Of course, I said I could do it. It's simple, I thought. All I have to do is just not buy anything, after all."
>
> "But it was no good?" Okusan says, her head nodding in quick, small motions.
>
> I nod. "That's right. By the third day, I couldn't bear it. After all, when something comes to mind, if you don't buy it, you'll forget, won't you? Whether it's sticking plaster for kitchen work or a device for chopping vegetables. I apologized to my husband, and he let me redo the promise. But, in the end, I couldn't keep it again." I bring the glass to my mouth and sip. "No matter how many times I did it, it was the same. Then, my husband suddenly said, in that case, don't throw away the cardboard. Take all of them, set them

[50] Motoya, *Okusan*, 98.

aside, and look at them. And I did just that. It was from thereabouts. Somewhere, I began to think I might be a little strange."[51]

Later, the coworker tells stories about his ex-wife which reinforce the gravity of the narrator's own failures to live up to expectations. His ex-wife had also been fond of spending money. He explains that with her he was "frantically working" in order to provide for what he describes as an extravagant lifestyle for the two of them. In doing so, he blames his ex-wife as the reason for his dissatisfaction with life and his constant working. For this man, as well, it is the visual representations of this failure to properly manage the household that become the focal point of his memory.

"My wife, she came all the way up to the *genkan* to ask if it was okay for her to pick up a plastic container that had been set out in front of the house, meant to be thrown out. At that time, inside the house was a mountain of unused things that my ex-wife had set aside."[52]

His fond remembering of the juxtaposition between the image of the "mountain" of things representing his ex-wife and his current wife asking to take up a used plastic container highlights that the central conflict in his past relationship was what he perceived to be an injudicious consumption. His ex-wife is guilty of the exact same lack of temperance that the narrator's husband is so incensed by, hinting at a possible outcome for the couple should they continue in such a manner.

[51] Motoya, *Okusan*, 124.
[52] Motoya, *Okusan*, 107.

This comparison between the narrator and the other man's ex-wife solidifies the contrast which is to play a large role here: that between the narrator and the other wife. None of the characters are given names at any point in the story, except for the dog belonging to the other couple, Momoko. Instead, each character is simply referred to by their relation to another character, namely their marital partner. While it is a common feature of the Japanese language to refer to others in this way, the story's adamance on not using names stands out as a deliberate choice. There are two occasions where introductions occur, and on both, the narrator makes a note of how strange it is that the other couple neither asks nor offers their own names. This kind of remark reveals the intentional nature behind using only this relational way of referencing. There is a constellation of ways that the characters refer to each other, depending on who is speaking to whom about whom; the most important of these, however, is *okusan*. As a method of direct address, it interpolates the subject as that of the wife. What is more, is that it sets up a direct line between the narrator and the other wife. Both are referred to as "Okusan" by the other characters, and each of them refers to the other as "Okusan," both internally and externally.

The two of them are set as foils to one another from the very beginning. The other woman performs effortlessly, at least from the outside, while the narrator is always putting in effort to meet expectations. The narrator herself displays a constant split between the way that she feels and the way that she knows that she is expected to act. The strife between her and her husband causes her to pay special attention to her actions and how they may be perceived. When the narrator first meets the other couple, she is constantly pressing down her impulses so that she may act, as she calls it, "*tsuma-rashii*" or, "wife-like." These first couple scenes pile on the wife's discomfort, and every time, she puts on her best front. Because her husband is not speaking to her, it seems like everyone is in on the plan except for her. She does not know what

the campervan is like, that they are going to pick up the wife separately, or even that there is going to be a dog on board. Then, there is the car and the other couple themselves—hard-core thrifters, their standards of comfort are totally different from what the narrator is accustomed to. Internally, she bristles against what seems to her like an absolutely ridiculous situation, but the need to be *tsuma-rashii* limits her expression to simple pleasantries and forced smiles. Meanwhile, the other woman is so conscientious, offering coffee and asking permission for every little thing, that the narrator grows irritated with her cloying presence. This contrast between the two women is later made explicitly clear by the narrator's husband, who admits that the entire reason that he brought the narrator on the trip is because of the fact that the other couple are renowned for their thrifty natures, with the hope that the narrator would learn something from them.

However, with this juxtaposition set against the backdrop of the inside of the campervan, the other wife's economical nature and domestic activities end up coming across as strange, more than anything. The campervan being strange is central to casting doubt on the other wife's fulfillment of these ideals. There are consistent images of the other wife performing domestic tasks, like piecing together rice balls in the mini kitchen, but the fact that she is cooking in what appears more like a child's playpen rather than a proper kitchen casts the whole process in a different light. This image of the "properly domestic" wife is recontextualized to be like a child playing house, simply imitating what they have seen. The performative aspect of these normative gender roles becomes abundantly clear here. A motif that bolsters this is the smell of the wife's homemade beef jerky. The wife is constantly making things from scratch instead of purchasing it pre-made, whether it be furikake or coffee. This kind of self-reliance and thrift that is often lauded becomes a point of disgust for the narrator. The small space of the campervan leaves no

escape from the smell of the beef jerky that the other wife makes, and it is such a pungent force that it leaves the narrator feeling ill. The campervan, comprised of domestic elements pulled out of their typical environments, allows for all of these familiar and normative performances of gender to become strange in both the eyes of the narrator and the reader. A powerful feature of the first-person narration, the effort that this kind of performance necessitates becomes clear as well, and the "naturalness" that these hegemonic ideals of womanhood lay claim to becomes more clearly compromised. This is all the more emphasized by the fact that the other wife comes to admit at the end of the novella that there are aspects of life that she is dissatisfied with as well but is too afraid to change.

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In this chapter, I showed how Motoya Yukiko carefully describes the space of the car to emphasize its disconnect from the rest of the world around it and the way that ordinary domestic elements become strange. Normative gender performances become defamiliarized by the liminal qualities of the space, allowing for their renegotiation. In the next chapter, the inside of the vehicle approaches these same domestic rituals from a rather different perspective, showing how the space can, rather than being unsettling, be a sort of incubatory space wherein they can recover from the stresses of daily life.

CHAPTER IV

SHACHŪHAKU YOUTUBE: CREATING SPACE TO BREATHE WITH *IYASHI*

Around the late 2010s, a number of YouTube channels began putting out videos centered around cars and minivans that the channel creators had converted themselves to include spaces for sleeping and cooking. A broad range of videos are published to the platform under the title *shachūhaku* or "car camping," including timelapses of interior conversions and "how-to" videos that give tips for viewers interested in embarking on similar journeys. Most common—and often most popular—on these YouTube channels are videos in which car campers describe in detail their overnight car camping trips. Their videos all share a similar formula with slight deviations depending on the mood and characteristics of their particular channel: they leave behind their chaotic lives in the city to drive out to the countryside for a night. Upon arriving, they spend a little time showing off their destination. Then they enclose themselves in their cars, where they spend the evening doing relatively ordinary domestic activities, such as eating, cleaning, quietly relaxing, and sleeping. The next day, they return to their lives feeling refreshed. These YouTube videos always entail a return to a daily life which is constructed as separate from their time in the car. The YouTubers devote more time in their videos to describing their time in the car than the places they go in it. The car or van is the central space of their experiences. These videos are less attempts to carve out an entirely new life, or the kind of travel to cope with loss and change shown in the film To You, but instead represent brief transformative reprieves.

In this chapter, I analyze example videos from four different *shachūhaku* YouTube channels—*Tales Along the Way* (originally written in English), *Outdoor Moriko* (*Yagai no Moriko*), *TerusanTV*, and *Dentan*. The video creators enact rituals associated with everyday domestic life within the liminal space of the car. As I will argue, this enactment of the quotidian

in the space of the car or van is accompanied by a host of affective cues in order to produce a sense of comfort and healing, which I see as part of a larger trend for *iyashi-kei* culture Japan; this comfort creates a calming space where viewers can reimagine their relationships with the rhythms of everyday life. The domestic sphere, despite its cultural imaginings as a place of rest and personal privacy, is deeply intertwined with one's status as a worker—the everyday chores of cooking, cleaning, and childrearing all being a part of the reproductive labor required to perpetuate and replenish the pool of labor. However, in these videos, the domestic labor that is featured becomes one of the primary mechanisms by which this *iyashi* is produced. Removing the domestic rituals from the spaces they are typically associated with and placing them within the space of the car, their quotidian nature becomes destabilized, and allows for permutations of meaning. Here, the emphasis of their comforting qualities within the liminal creates the possibility for reimagination.

There are plenty of valid critiques that have been leveled against manifestations of this kind of culture of healing as a form of political passivity, both within and outside of Japan. While it is crucial to be aware of this criticism in discussion of *iyashi*, I want to caution against a reductive rejection of any and all instances of media that is intended to bring about comfort without a careful attention to the mechanisms by which and the ends to which these comforting media are deployed. I believe that if there is a radical potential to be found in comfort, it is this mechanism of creating an affective space wherein for a brief amount of time the demands of a neoliberal system that has subjected all aspects of human life to the logic of the market are silenced. For the span of the video, nothing is asked of viewers beyond the creator's hopes that they enjoy themselves. Furthermore, there is an aspirational quality that underscores these videos—the creators often position themselves as embarking on these small journeys as a way of

searching for an alternative mode of existence. In one video, "[Vlog] I quit my long-term care job [VAN LIFE]," *Outdoor Moriko* describes this as a pursuit of a "the life that I long for."[53] This invites viewers to rethink their own relationships to the rhythms of their own lives, and the comforting qualities afford them the mental and emotional space to do so. This longing, as an act of imagination, leaves the door open for the possibility of a life where domestic rituals are not simply the reproductive labor required for one's continued survival, but some of the very things that can provide comfort and healing.

I look to a number of writers to help explain the production of *iyashi* and what exactly it does in a narrative. The author that I draw on most frequently in this chapter to lay out a conceptual framework is Paul Roquet. In his book *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self*, he explores what he calls "ambient media," media which serves as a tool with which individuals can manipulate the atmosphere that they dwell in personally to regulate their own moods. Since the production of *iyashi* is fundamentally the production of an atmosphere to which viewers attune, *shachūhaku* videos fall neatly within the boundaries of ambient media. In fact, his most relevant chapter titled "Healing Style: Ambient Literature and the Aesthetic of Calm" delves into the mechanisms by which *iyashi* is produced in the novel *Hotel Môle* by Kurita Yuki. Though the medium which is his subject of analysis is very different from the collection of YouTube videos which I will be examining, his attention in this chapter to the ways in which affective cues in the form of sensory inputs and narrative framing construct a "healing" space is relevant to my discussion of YouTube videos.

[53] *Outdoor Moriko*, "I quit."

The other major source that I look to in terms of how *iyashi* is produced is an article by Gabrielle Koch titled "Producing Iyashi: Healing and Labor in Tokyo's Sex Industry." In this article, she examines the heavily gendered production of *iyashi* by some women in specific sectors of the sex work industry. She points to the way that those encounters are narratively structured as the healing of men to maintain their productivity as workers through the performance of essentializing notions of femininity. Given the vast difference between the context that Koch's article discusses and the one that I am looking at, it would be problematic to import her work wholesale into this piece—especially given that most of the YouTubers that publish *shachūhaku* videos are men. However, some of the methods of which *iyashi* is produced in the settings that she describes are present in these videos as well, and it's for this reason that I look to her work.

YouTube: An Intimate Medium

First, I want to discuss the existence of these videos on a social media platform as a key part in understanding how these videos operate. As social media, these videos carry the promise of being more personal and in some ways, more authentic than a film can pretend to. The barrier to entry for an individual is far lower than that of a film. Theoretically, all that one would need is a camera and a working computer, rather than a full team with a large budget and expensive equipment. Certainly, these can be a part of a successful channel, but there is at least the possibility of reaching millions of people with far less. Even though many people make their living off of content creation, the fact that the platform is home to amateur and professional alike, and that supposedly anyone could become a prominent creator off of their own merit, lends even what could be called professional content creators a sense of authentic amateur-ness. That the videos are free to watch, too, with the advertisements typically a part of the platform rather

than the videos themselves, typically, removes a layer of obvious commodification, creating the sense that creators are simply people doing what they enjoy, not selling you a product.

In addition, the videos take up an intimate narrative format which finds more purchase in this kind of platform. Aside from *Dentan*, who does not speak or include text in his videos, the creators that I examine all create narratives in the form of a video blog. This format takes viewers along throughout the course of a day, and the content being filled with mostly quotidian activities rather than a grand sweeping narrative makes it feel less distant from one's own life as a viewer. It seems to say "this is my real life" as if viewers have a special insight into the creators by seeing these moments which are ordinarily private. Moreover, throughout this personal account, the creators implicate the viewers as an integral part of the videos by directly addressing them, acknowledging their existence and even crediting them as the reason that the videos are being created in the first place, deepening the tie between them. This more intimate relationship plays a role in producing the comfort as well, constructing a familiarity that puts viewers at ease.

This relationship which viewers are brought into with the creator through their address is one layer of another promise that social media makes to its users: community. Viewers not only are interacted with by way of watching the videos, but they can also interact with channel creators and other viewers in a variety of ways. The platform is organized to reveal the vast array of connections that you become a part of just through your participation in watching a single video. Several numbers quantify a range of interactions: comments, likes, views. On the right side of the screen, several other videos drop down, recommending further connection to other videos and channels. In the comment section, direct conversation can unfold between viewers,

and it is not uncommon for the creators to interact with their viewers there, whether it be a direct reply, or a simple like to inform the commenter that their voice has really been heard.

This kind of perceived and, at times, real sense of community similarly acts as a salve for the isolation imposed upon individuals through the alienating forces of neoliberal capitalism, but perhaps more importantly, it creates an online space. The very word used to define YouTube, a social media "platform," implies a certain spatiality to it, with the thing displayed on top of it being social connection. This digital space becomes the infrastructure on which discursive spaces can find a more tangible hold, similar to the way that a library might hold a number of texts and be a space for interaction around them.

Contextualizing "*Iyashi*"

The assertion that in these videos a "healing" is taking place implies a question: what is it that people are being healed from? Though a sweeping declaration that every individual who seeks out these videos is seeking healing from the same thing would be a gross oversimplification, it is worth looking to scholars who have pointed out social and economic trends that have led to both a real material precarity and an accompanying perception of national insecurity. In the past few decades since the burst of the bubble economy, Japanese society has been shifting in a number of ways that have led to the destabilization of the postwar systems and structures. In her book *Precarious Japan*, Anne Allison lays out some of these tectonic shifts: the lifelong employment long considered a hallmark of the Japanese labor market has fallen away in recent years, with "irregular" employment in part-time jobs or contract work composing more and more of the workforce, miring more people in economic precarity.[54] Poverty is on the rise,

[54] Allison, *Precarious Japan*, 5.

even as the nation's economic growth continues, and there is a growing awareness of this part of the population once given little mind.[55] Not to mention the succession of disasters that have left the country reeling, from the triple disaster of 3/11 to the Covid-19 pandemic that interrupted the long-awaited 2020 Olympics. Throughout Japan, like much of the world, there is a growing sense of estrangement and alienation—as evidenced in forms of social precarity such as *hikikomori* or the proliferation of terms like *muen shakai* and *ikizurasa*, which describe the psychological pain of the instability that marks contemporary life for so many.[56] Of course, this precarity, both economic and social, does not affect every single person living in Japan in the same way, and it certainly does not mean that everyone is a member of this precariat. However, one of the important moves that Allison makes in her book is making note of the way that the notion of precarity has become a part of public discourse and how a perception of national decline leads to a general pessimism about individual futures for many.[57] While the makers of these videos might not be in economic precarity themselves, hinted at by their ownership of cars in urban centers and the tools that they have at their disposal, these videos are being published in the midst of this public discourse, where many people are stressed from a perceived or actual precarity. Whether those making or viewing these videos are truly in a place of economic precarity or not, these narratives of a national precarity and stressful work environments can instill a personal sense of alienation and anxiety from which people can feel the need to be healed.

While certainly not the only driver of the popularity of these kinds of videos, this idea of precarity, both personally experienced and perceived societally, provides at least one possible

[55] Allison, *Precarious Japan*, 5.
[56] Ozawa-de Silva, "Too Lonely to Die Alone," 524.
[57] Allison, *Precarious Japan*, 12.

explanation for some of the popularity of the concept of *iyashi*. The concept of *iyashi*, or "healing" can be linked to longer trends of mood regulation, but the term came into popular discourse in the mid-1990s as part of a boom in healing goods.[58] Rather than being about healing from illness or injury, the term encapsulates a kind of spiritual healing. As Chikako Ozawa de-Silva, an anthropologist who studies loneliness and isolation in contemporary Japan, puts it, *iyashi* is "something that is soothing, is comfortable, or brings one heavenly feelings."[59] As Anne Allison argues, *iyashi* is a salve of sorts to the pain that accompanies the increasing precarity of the past few decades. It entails a pervasive discourse about the need for people to be healed from the ongoing traumas and stress that one accumulates from being a member of contemporary Japanese, particularly urban, society. As explored by Gabrielle Koch, Laura, Miller, and Christine Yano, among other scholars, *iyashi* has been marketed in a wide array of products and services, including various media, spa deals, vacations, and even sex work. Most relevant to this thesis, *shachūhaku* videos are part of a proliferation of soothing media that produce a sense of calm; they fall into the classification that Roquet dubs "ambient media," media that is designed to help consumers attune to a particular kind of affective environment that better allows themselves to respond to intensifying biopolitical demands.[60] These YouTube videos that feature calm car camping excursions fall under this umbrella of ambient media, allowing viewers to change their own moods to match the calming affective environment of the video.

Producing *Iyashi* with Liminality

With nearly four million views as of May 2022, the most popular video on *TerusanTV*'s channel, "[Lonely Car Camp] Lone Car Camp in heavy rain [X-trail T32]," opens with a view

[58] Roquet, *Ambient Media*, 153.
[59] Ozawa-de Silva, "Too Lonely to Die Alone," 536.
[60] Roquet, *Ambient Media*, 4.

outside the front windshield of Teru's car as he drives down a raised Tokyo road, gray skies blending into the gray concrete of the buildings below.[61] The text written on the video welcomes viewers to his channel, as soft background music featuring bright drum beats and electronic notes plays. We cut quickly to a shot of the shinkansen bullet train pulling into a station and then to a brief bird's-eye view of the city waking up with the hint of a warm note of a sunrise. Against this background of the city, Teru silently explains through captions that he was so swamped with work the previous week that he collapsed at home. He contrasts these scenes of his car driving out of the city with the excitement and peace that he feels for his trip to the beautiful nature of Hakone, a small, historical town, around 55.5 miles outside of Tokyo. As the video transitions into shots of the mountains and trees, the music shifts into a light and gentle guitar picking with some sweeping notes underneath it. This kind of construction of Tokyo as a place of stress, filled with too many people and the demands of work, is a common thread through many *shachūhaku* videos. Through the windshields of the YouTubers' cars, viewers watch buildings and urban stimuli fade into fields, forests, and mountains. As the drive progresses, the music becomes increasingly calm to match the rural landscape, changing the mood along with the scenery.[62]

In this section, I examine the ways in which these videos utilize a number of narrative framings and formal techniques which play off of both the affordances of car camping and the medium of a social media platform. As the first example of *TerusanTV* shows, the main way that this is achieved is through the framing of the journey. When viewers first watch these videos, they begin with the act of separation—the video creators nearly always include these shots of the

[61] *TerusanTV*, "Lone Car Camp in Heavy Rain."
[62] *TerusanTV*, "Lone Car Camp in Heavy Rain."

car departing from their home city—preparing them to enter into a phase where some of the logic which undergirds their daily lives is not applicable. In this liminal phase which constitutes the bulk of the videos, domestic activities and objects are unmoored from the space that they usually occupy. By setting up the spatio-temporality of the journey as the framing, these videos allow for the reimagination of these domestic tasks as generative of comfort. While in the cars, these YouTubers do not actually do anything all that remarkable or different from what one might do in their day-to-day life. They cook, clean up, and sometimes read or play video games before going to sleep. But by placing these mundane things into a new environment, they are transformed into something with a more powerful impact, they are the tools of an intentional, unproductive-of-capital rest.

Another prominent framing device in this and other *shachūhaku* videos is the shelter that the car provides from the elements. Some of the most viewed videos on each channel feature some kind of inclement weather, using it as both narrative framing device and a video title with which to draw people in. In *Dentan*'s most-watched video, "[28th night] Car camp alone in a strong wind with a light car," *Dentan* makes sure to include the sound and sights of strong wind. The wind is powerful enough to make small waves on the surface of a lake, and it blows past the microphone on his camera. The moment he closes the door of his car, however, the sound immediately stops. *Dentan* uses a set of heavy-duty curtains to cut off his car from all outside stimuli, making the inside of the walls a single, enveloping space.[63]

A number of the most popular videos posted on *TerusanTV* are centered around camping in the rain. "[Lonely Car Camp] Lone Car Camp in heavy rain," falls into this category. The

[63] *Dentan,* "Car camp alone."

arrival of a typhoon deters him from his original plan, sending him to Hakone instead of Odawara, another town not too far from Tokyo. He juxtaposes scenes of calm with the elements raging outside. For example, right after he finishes dinner, he shows his viewers trees violently swaying in the wind and rain pouring down from a streetlight outside the car, before cutting back to the inside of his car, which is dry and still.[64] He transmutes the typhoon into a source of relaxation itself—the sound of rain falling on the roof of the car plays underneath soft music as he lays out a selection of movies for himself to choose from for the night. *Tales Along the Way* has several of these rainy videos as well, but some of his most popular tend to take place in the middle of winter, with snow falling outside in the sub-freezing temperatures.

Each of these videos shows the interior of the car as a comfortable refuge from the elements raging outside, emphasizing the security that the hard-shell walls and glass windows provide. At the same time, the camera shots of the interior and the lighting create an enveloping space. In explaining the way that ambient literature produces healing, Roquet identifies the construction of this kind of space as a key part of ambient media writ large:

> This safe enclosure provides a heightened level of protection from exterior threats, allowing a person to redirect energies usually devoted to coping with the outside world to the interior task of physical and emotional healing. This incubatory structure is found (at least ideally) in in-patient hospital care, in the protected space of the therapy session, and…in the practice of the spiritual retreat.[65]

S*hachūhaku* is certainly a kind of retreat, even if not explicitly spiritual. These videos often emphasize this retreat from the outside world through their introduction of an external

[64] *TerusanTV*, "Lone Car Camp in Heavy Rain."
[65] Roquet, *Ambient Media*, 162.

threat, and then contrasting the turmoil outside with the peaceful interior of their vehicles. Without protection, even slight inclement weather can be an existential threat, and the videos play up the danger rolling by outside of their vans. The emphasis of this weather allows for the subsequent display of the security of the van, the protection that allows the viewers and the creators of the videos to fully unwind. This threat itself becomes transmuted into a source of comfort. Similarly, for the duration of the video, the usual threats to the well-being of the viewers become repelled by the enveloping space of the car that they become drawn into. It is important to note that this kind of comfort could not be achieved in a tent in the same way, due to the thinner distinction between the inside and the world outside.

Healing with Sensory Inputs

These videos indulge in clear, painstaking attention to sensory details in order to enact a sense of calm among the viewers. Their repeated usage of auditory and visual cues is reminiscent of ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) videos, which are typically explicitly designed to produce a sense of comfort in the viewer. In his analysis of Kurita Yuki's *Hôtel Mole*, Roquet explains that this flooding of the senses with affective cues can be an effective strategy. He writes,

> The high redundancy of emotional cues in *Hôtel Mole* pointing toward a relaxing mood helps ensure that even if every reader does not respond to every affective cue, and even if individual cues are of varying impact based on the different sensory proclivities of each reader, the cumulative effect will still be to establish an ambient mood.[66]

[66] Roquet, *Ambient Media*, 161.

The creators of these videos act as the hands of the viewers, exploring the landscape, and in doing so producing the sensory input that blurs the line between the environment of the viewer and the video. The stimuli imply other aspects of an experience that the viewers cannot ordinarily access, like textures, motion, or temperature. It is this implication which builds a full sensory world around the viewers and allows them to properly immerse themselves in the comforting environment which the creators themselves have created and inhabit.

One of the places that this can most easily be seen is in a shot that is common among these videos: the departure drive. In his video "[Rain car camping] A pond in the mountains. A lonely solo trip to make nasi goreng" *Tales Along the Way* begins the video with the shot of himself climbing into the driver's seat of the car in an empty parking lot as the opening theme of his channel plays: soft and warm guitar picking with a few bright and cheery piano notes. Rather than just playing this music, he chooses to leave in the sounds that are characteristic of the experience. After he climbs in, the engine starts—ordinarily a sound that is harsh and loud to those standing outside, but here the sound is diminished slightly, resulting in a soft purr of the engine that picks up in pitch as it rolls out of the parking lot. As he drives out to his destination, he still is careful to leave sounds of the car audible just under the music; we hear the sound of the tires rolling against the pavement below, the engine humming smoothly, and even the slightest rattle of the car body as it passes over bumps in the road. The camera, too, moves in the passenger seat in gentle bounces, using the visual input of a shaking image to create the sense that the viewer themselves is bouncing. When paired with the scenery moving by outside of the window and the rhythmic sounds like white noise below the soft music, it places viewers in the position of riding alongside in the passenger seat, no input or sharp attention required of them to keep the car on the road, able to simply lay back against the headrest and give themselves up to

the comforting rhythm of the road.[67] The other channels have their variations on this, some opting not to do music, some including these sounds a little more sparingly, but it is a technique consistent across videos and channels.

Another common usage of sound is to submerge viewers into the comfortable soundscapes of environments removed from the high-stimulus ones of the city. In his most popular video, the aforementioned "[28th night] Car camp alone in a strong wind with a light car," *Dentan* takes viewers on a brief tour of the campsite that he has stopped at for the night. In the evening, he takes care to capture the sounds of the waves made by the strong winds on the beach, and the sound of the cicadas chirring in the background. Then, in the morning, the landscape, like the viewers, has settled into a calmer state, with the wind dying down enough to hear the slow stirring of creatures in soft bird calls and cricket chirping. The sound of the water, too, becomes a gentle lapping against the bank, and his measured footsteps make a crisp crunching sound as he walks down the pebble-strewn shore.[68] *TerusanTV*, also, seems to be particularly aware of the efficacy of this—after making videos for some years, he has come to include introductions to his videos that are often no longer than five or six seconds of clips in rapid-fire succession. They serve to highlight the contents of the video, but his selection of pleasing auditory stimuli such as the sound of frying meat, pouring soda into a glass, or rain upon the roof of the car, stacked one after another in the intro reveals an attentiveness to the role that these stimuli play for his viewers. It is important to note, as well, that none of these videos include any speech from their creators whatsoever. Not one of these channels has videos where they speak aloud to the camera. *Dentan* chooses not to address the viewers whatsoever in his

[67] *Tales Along the Way,* "A pond in the mountains."
[68] *Dentan*, "Car camp alone in a strong wind."

videos, but the others opt to speak to the viewers in text form instead of intruding. The lack of voices allows viewers to immerse themselves more directly in the auditory inputs, rather than having those inputs have to fight for attention with speech.

This mention of text also serves to jump into the other sense which the videos can act upon: sight. The way that these videos address viewers is through on-screen captions—this has the practical function of explaining to viewers what is happening at any given moment, and the text itself becomes another layer of affective cues, affirming the other visual and auditory inputs with language that is itself comforting. *Tales Along the Way* can be poetic in his descriptions at times, and he often uses his words to invite viewers to take in the relaxing stimuli as he takes the time to do so himself. In his video "[Rain car camping] A pond in the mountains. A lonely solo trip to make nasi goreng ｜ 62" he meanders his car down the road into the mountains and through lush woods as rain gently falls along his roof. As he drives, he describes the feeling as such: "A soft drizzle falls, granting the journey color."[69] In another video, "[Winter car camping] Stay in the car to enjoy the winter rain alone. ｜ DIY light truck camper ｜ 84" after he has reached his destination, he pauses for a moment to let viewers take in the sound of the river, commenting that "Here at the riverside, the water's murmuring echoes pleasantly."[70] These comments draw attention to the aspects of the video that viewers should be focusing on, while also being relaxing descriptions in their own rights.

Lighting is another vital part of creating a comforting environment. Take, for example, a video on *Tales Along the Way,* "[Car Camping] First stay in a self-made light truck camper." In

[69] *Tales Along the Way*, "A pond in the mountains."
[70] *Tales Along the Way*, "Stay in the car to enjoy the winter rain."

this video he pulls his car into his destination in the middle of the night, the only light coming from the headlights of his truck. First, he shuts off his headlights, leaving only the soft red glow of the taillights in the center of the screen. A second later, these blink out as well. Then, the scene cuts to the back of his truck where his homemade camper sits. The light inside shines out through the glass door, seeping out of the cracks in the frame, just barely illuminating a few inches of the world outside of the shelter.[71] The soft warm light is inviting, a beacon of safety in the midst of a pitch-black darkness. On the other hand, *Dentan* and *TerusanTV* both stay in cars with all-black interiors, so the light does not reflect around the room in quite the same way. Pairing this gentler lighting with their first-person filming perspectives, their videos produce a sense that they are in a space much more compact and confined, much in the way a light in the space under a blanket might.

Of these four, however, the most effective at utilizing lighting is *Outdoor Moriko*. She spends much more time outside of her car than the other *shachūhaku* videographers seem to. However, the camera rarely steps away from the van, placing an importance on the visual effect that it has as an anchoring shelter in the midst of the woods. She also tends to use more daytime footage with higher exposure, giving the video the quality of softer, morning light. Looking at her video "#2 Car camping at a campsite at an altitude of 730m," she uses the same kind of lighting, making herself and the van crisp and clear, while behind her, the trees are made dreamlike and fuzzy from the white light in the spaces between them. Later in the video, she starts a fire outside the van, but crucially still sheltered by the trunk lifted up overhead. She

[71] *Tales Along the Way*, "First stay."

makes sure to intersperse her cooking and eating with a number of close-up shots of the dancing flames and red coals, as if trying to warm the viewer up with their image.[72]

Intimacy, Effort, and Comfort

In this last section, I want to explore a complex interplay between intimacy and performance that is key to the production of *iyashi* in these videos. To orient myself here, I first want to introduce a quote from Gabrielle Koch's analysis of the production of *iyashi* in particular sectors of the sex work industry in Japan.

> The qualities that make iyashi effective as "healing" rest precisely on the downplaying of it as labor—that is, as work that is productive of capital. Generating affect in this context rests on establishing intimacy. This, in turn, rests on the assumption that sex workers' performance emerges not from the pursuit of wages but from a basic kindness that is naturalized as female.[73]

I want to stress again that the contexts are very different—the YouTube channels are not appealing to suspect notions of a feminine essence, and neither is their work erotic in any way. What I am interested in here is the way that *iyashi* is produced by a perception of intimacy and a performance that masquerades as natural. Intimacy in these videos is instead created through the medium itself and a performance of relaxation that hides the very labor involved in producing the calming atmosphere. As I explored earlier, the medium of YouTube brings with it a certain promise of community and an air of being amateur. There is the sense that what unfolds on the screen is somehow more of a reflection of the real lives of the YouTubers, and that these

[72] *Outdoor Moriko*, "Car camping at a campsite."
[73] Koch, "Producing Iyashi," 705.

experiences are inherently and consistently comforting. This sense of authenticity allows creators to position themselves as simply sharing their relaxing experiences with the viewers, rather than painstakingly crafting an *iyashi*-inducing video. For Koch, this downplaying of the labor is vital to maintaining the assumption that these performances are not fabricated for the benefit of the one being "healed," but simply natural. While the women that Koch analyzes leverage ideas of a feminine essence which is calming and caring, the YouTube creators leverage the medium's claim to authenticity and the inherent healing qualities of the experience.

To paint the picture better, in none of these videos do we get the sense that there is any discomfort, or any amount of real effort involved. The adventure of car camping portrayed by the YouTubers is simple and relaxing, with everything that one could possibly need immediately in arm's reach. All of the work is already done in these videos, going unseen unless the work itself is something to produce comfort, as in the case of cooking and cleaning. The less savory parts of the endeavor either do not exist or get cut down to a few seconds of work—long enough to feature any pleasant sounds it may produce, but short enough to avoid boring anyone, such as how *Tales Along the Way* cleans his dishes in "[Winter car camping] -10 ℃. Solitude on a snowstorm night ｜ DIY light truck camper ｜ 94."[74] Key to the construction of the videos is that there is no packing or unpacking. The car is simply ready to embark at the whims of the channel creators, it seems, without the inconvenience of putting everything together that has to take place behind the scenes. Not to mention some of the uncomfortable realities, such as a lack of toilets inside their vehicles, or the research required to ensure that it is legal for them to sleep at their destinations.

[74] *Tales Along the Way*, "Solitude on a snowstorm night."

The perfect example of this fabrication of ease and effortlessness, however, is in a particular kind of shot that is poetic in its visual impact, but also carries the implication of the work that goes on behind the scenes. At the end of his video "[Winter car camping] A cold, rainy night. Alone in the mountains ｜ DIY light truck camper ｜ 83," Tales Along the Way climbs into his car, bright, refreshing music playing as the captions send off the viewers, wishing to meet them at the next trip. And then the car ambles slowly out of the parking lot, turning into the woods. The scene seamlessly cuts to the inside of the car for a blurry window shot to ride out the credits to, implying a direct jump from the shot in the parking lot to the shot in the car.[75] Of course, given that he is presumably filming these alone, it can only be assumed that he had to exit the parking lot, turn back around, and return for his camera.

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In this chapter, I have examined several different YouTube channels that primarily feature *shachūhaku* videos. They utilize the form of the car to produce a sense of healing, or *iyashi*, opening up a space for rest and reflection within and about the very systems which produce such a present need for this healing. These YouTube channels, reaching millions of viewers, provide a space and a platform to connect to a sense of community and engage in the act of finding rest.

[75] *Tales Along the Way*, "A cold, rainy night."

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I took as objects of analysis three different kinds of media which featured narratives structured around the activity of *shachūhaku*. Each one utilizes the form of the vehicles featured and the activity itself for different narrative and affective ends, but in putting them in conversation with one another the appeal of these kinds of narratives becomes visible. The act of temporarily dwelling in a van removes people from day-to-day life along with its myriad social and economic pressures. For the brief time, the liminal spatio-temporality that the characters find themselves in and which consumers follow them into suspends the rules that ordinarily govern their lives. However, staying in a vehicle overnight does not remove everything from their lives. What it does grant is space and perspective, allowing for a renegotiation of these everyday expectations and contexts. In each of these examples that I have explored we can see this mechanism at work. In *To You*, this space allows Kurashima to figure out how to continue living beyond the death of a loved one, how to "restore his own flow of time;" in "Okusan" the distance renders normative gender roles strange; and in the collection of *shachūhaku* YouTube videos, there is the chance for viewers to imagine what a different relationship to work and domestic labor might look like. These narratives are full of characters renegotiating the gaps between their own lives and experiences and the normative images which claim a totalizing naturalness.

Inevitable at the end of each of these narratives, however, is the eventual return. The YouTubers must return to each of their jobs, the trip in Okusan must come to a close, and so too must Kurashima return to the community waiting for him at the end of his journey. The liminal phase gives way to the eventual reaggregation at the end of the ritual. These narratives are not

utopian imagining—they aren't attempts to fully reach an "outside" of the social and economic structures that govern everyday life, as opposed to popular images of "Van Life" in America. Instead, they explore the gaps in these structures, asking how one might widen them perhaps, in order to encompass more of their quotidian experience, with the implicit understanding being that there is no "outside" to be accessed in the first place. In the end, what these narratives provide is a way to carve out space for oneself in a quotidianly radical act of imagination.

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