

THE LIMITS OF EXISTENTIAL THERAPY IN THE FICTION OF NAKAMURA FUMINORI

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures  
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts

September 2015

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: The Limits of Existential Therapy in the Fiction of Nakamura Fuminori

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Degree awarded September 2015

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures

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Written within an existentialist mode, Nakamura Fuminori's early fictional works lend themselves to be read as therapeutic technologies reaching out to Japanese youth whose lives are marked by anxiety, isolation, and precariousness. Because English-language scholarship on Nakamura is lacking, this thesis analyzes two of his novels – *Child of Dirt* and *Evil and the Mask* – in order to introduce how Nakamura understands the human, how his texts function formally as therapeutic technologies, and how, in the final analysis, they exhibit a nascent sexism that borders on misogyny.

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Alan Wolfe Memorial Fellowship, University of Oregon, 2015

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my sincere gratitude to the three learned scholars who worked with me on this project and provided the support I needed to weather it: Alisa Freedman, for her unwavering advocacy of my research, manifested in kind words and close scrutiny of my manuscripts; Glynne Walley, for introducing me to Nakamura Fuminori in the first place, and for guiding me to ever-sharper modes of analysis; and Roy Chan, for the many moments of inspiration that revealed to me what I was actually writing about. Further, I thank my parents and two brothers for their continued support throughout my life, and who were at times the brunt of vehement vent sessions over vacations.

I would like to acknowledge the privilege of which I have partaken in terms of financial support from the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures – without a Graduate Teaching Fellowship, this thesis would not exist. I also acknowledge the intersectional privilege into which I was born, and will continue to leverage it in favor of those who have been, and continue to be, silenced and marginalized.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### *The Power of Literature in an Age of Disaster*

After the devastating triple disaster in northeastern Japan of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant in 2011, the literary journal *Shinchō* (*New Currents*) asked fifty Japanese authors to respond to two questions in a short essay: since the disaster, what has changed in your craft, and what has changed in you? Nakamura Fuminori, a prolific young writer and graduate from Fukushima University, answered, “Essentially, nothing has changed” (2012, 191). To him, literature – both Japanese and foreign – is that which progresses within, and passes through, the “multitudinous and turbulent tragedies” of history (2012, 192). Having debuted after the two great domestic disasters of 1995 – the Great Hanshin Earthquake in January, and the Tokyo sarin gas attacks by the Aum Shinrikyō doomsday cult in March – and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in America in 2001, Nakamura quips that his work has always been post-disaster literature: one more tragedy is not going to change his approach.

Nakamura draws a parallel in his essay between natural disasters, terrorist attacks, war, and toxic political systems – what could be considered issues faced by entire nations of people – and the internal worlds of the 30,000 individuals who commit suicide every year in Japan. By doing so, he suggests that the structures buttressing Japanese society – those that disenfranchise and abandon so many to a place where suicide is the only response – are an ongoing disaster, a quotidian war constantly



unfolding upon its citizens. With this conceptual turn, Nakamura simultaneously describes his literature as not concerned with a certain “post-disaster” moment, but instead with “life’s impenetrably armored succession” (Neely 2004) of linked moments felt by alienated individuals to be overflowing with tragedy.

In this thesis, I analyze two of Nakamura Fuminori’s novels: *Child of Dirt* (*Tsuchi no naka no kodomo*, 2005) and *Evil and the Mask* (*Aku to kamen no rūru*, 2010). *Child of Dirt* is Nakamura’s fifth novel, the third to be published, and the first to be consciously told from the perspective of a victim of violence, rather than a perpetrator. It is also the text that won him the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 2005, which catapulted him fully into his career as a full-time author of so-called “pure literature” (*junbungaku*). *Evil and the Mask* did not win any Japanese awards, but has a far more complex construction than *Child of Dirt*: whereas the latter is solely concerned with the narrator’s personal existential condition, the former introduces many characters, each with their own goals and ideological drive. These two texts from his early career establish three of Nakamura’s most defining characteristics as an author: i) his texts act as a therapeutic technology; ii) he assumes that the human who reads the text is similar in construction to the human character written into it, thus creating a conceptual bridge between the two that allows a sense of camaraderie to arise; and iii) despite Nakamura’s belief in the power of existentialism insofar as it allows those who suffer at the hands of society a philosophical method of escape, he displays an open disdain for women that at times borders on misogyny and works to alienate his female readers.

The mode of reading that transforms Nakamura's texts into technologies of

therapy is distinctly different from that described by Paul Roquet. In an article on the *iyashi-kei* (healing-style) boom of the 1990s, Roquet defines literature meant "to generate calming moods and to provide a space to think relatively free from outside affective manipulation" (2009, 90) as so-called ambient literature. Within texts whose contents lend themselves to an *iyashi* mode of reading, an emphasis on calming sensuousness obtains: characters retreat from anxiety by, for example, taking hot showers and letting the air dry their skin; they displace irritation "on the level of affect," a process which, as Roquet suggests, does "not depend on cognition for [its] efficacy" (2009, 88).

In contrast, the mode of reading I undertake in this thesis reveals Nakamura's intense concentration on irritation, instability, and fear. Rather than generating calming moods, he creates anxiety-ridden ones in which his characters constantly struggle with external manipulation and their own internalization of such. Whereas Roquet describes literature that shies away from moments of intense affective buildup and release, instead opting for a quiet, soothing style, Nakamura's texts could not function without a rising action and climax. In both *Child of Dirt* and *Evil and the Mask*, this affective climax coincides with the respective narrators experiencing an intense revelation about their own lives. The climactic catharsis felt after the resolution of the texts' main conflicts rather than a slow-burning atmosphere of stress relief is that which brings calm to the characters, and thus to the reader.

After supplying background information on Nakamura in this chapter of the thesis, in Chapter II I open *Child of Dirt*. There, I elaborate the model of the human that

Nakamura creates, one that strategically employs aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis such as the unconscious, and creates the mind and body as ontologically coextensive. Using that model, I argue that the narrator as a person and the narrative as a text are both seeking escape from a repressive existential loop that forestalls the former's humanization. The text itself works to alert its readers to the existence of child abuse in Japan, a phenomenon that has largely been considered an extraordinary occurrence, rather than an everyday one. In conjunction with this and Nakamura's use of the existentialist dictum "existence precedes essence," the text becomes a therapeutic technology able to build solidarity amongst its readers. In Chapter III, I continue to elucidate how Nakamura understands the human experience in terms of its conflicts as it is described in *Evil and the Mask*. There, I argue that despite the narrator's desire to extinguish his self that is beholden to the past, he nonetheless feels a deep nostalgia for it. "History" in its polyvalence is problematized as the narrator navigates an ideological battlefield. In the final chapter of this thesis, I make clear the sexism in Nakamura's texts, arguing that he essentializes his female characters, makes them subordinate in every way to the male narrator, and in the process betrays what could be half of his audience. In this way, his existentialism is in fact a reproduction of the oppressive patriarchal values of male-dominated heteronormativity.

### *Directing the Literary Field*

Nakamura Fuminori was born in 1977 in Aichi Prefecture in central Japan. He graduated from Fukushima University in 2000 after focusing primarily on criminology

and theories of social deviance, concepts that are ever-present in his work. Two years after graduating he passed the governmental test needed to become an instructor at a juvenile detention center, but was unable to find employment for a lack of vacant positions. He was able to observe the inner workings of a certain reformatory, however, where he came to understand that once the boys were placed in a space isolated from the outside world – the world in which they were allowed or compelled to become precipitously nonconforming – they quickly became well-behaved and friendly (Nakamura 2005b, 151-152). Although Nakamura’s desire to enter into this type of employment was not an effect of his wanting to become a writer, it undoubtedly continues to influence his work.

Debuting in 2002, Nakamura has since proven to be a prolific writer, with fifteen book-length publications under his belt. He has also received a number of prestigious literary awards: the Shinchō Prize for New Writers for *The Gun (Jū)* (2002), the Noma Prize for New Writers for *A Deeper Shade (Shakō)* (2004), the Akutagawa Prize for *Child of Dirt (Tsuchi no naka no kodomo)* (2005), and the Ōe Kenzaburō Prize for *The Thief (Suri)* (2010). Three of his novels have been translated into English (*The Thief, Evil and the Mask*, and *Last Winter, We Parted*), all published on the Soho Crime imprint. In 2014, he became the first Japanese author to be awarded the David L. Goodis Award for Noir Fiction, an honor directed not at a specific text, but at Nakamura’s career.

American critics are quick to place Nakamura within the Crime Fiction category. The *Wall Street Journal* review on the cover of the 2013 English-language translation of *Evil and the Mask* calls Nakamura “the Japanese zen-noir master.” *The Wall Street*

*Journal* included the same text in its 2014 Top 10 Mystery Novels list. With a similar sentiment but in different terminology, Japanese critics describe his work as attempting to bridge the gap between the categories of pure literature and mass literature, with one suggesting Nakamura is "the most sellable author of pure literature" (Yoshida 2014). Jin'no Toshifumi (2012), scholar of Japanese and French literature as well as an avid soccer fan, compares Nakamura to a defensive midfielder. Players in that position are not in the limelight like strikers, but play a vital role in watching the field, anticipating the movements of every other player so as to direct the ball in the perfect way. Jin'no suggests that the field of literature can be seen in the same way: themes like terrorism become popular to write about, with authors like Murakami Haruki, Tsujihara Noboru, and Ōe Kenzaburō garnering media attention for their publications exploring such, but it is Nakamura who is the first of the group to publish on that topic. Despite this, he is not awarded as much media attention. Just as the defensive midfielder observes and directs the movements of the entire field but is not in a conspicuous role, so Nakamura, as Jin'no argues, has been anticipating and directing the movements of the Japanese literary field.

All of Nakamura's cited literary influences – including Ōe Kenzaburō, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jean-Paul Sartre, Dazai Osamu, and Franz Kafka – point towards an intense and sustained interest in interrogating the nauseating realities of human existence (Nakamura 2005b, 144-147). The vast majority of his early texts center on adult survivors of cruel or tragic childhoods as they try to engage with an external reality void of meaning as a result of their broken interiorities. His characters are always fallen as a

result of their environments (i.e., their immediate social circumstances) failing to provide adequate support. This often manifests itself as an abusive family life – severe physical beatings, unloving and uncaring parents, or being abandoned to the state’s care. In *Child of Dirt*, the narrator is given up by his biological parents and eventually raised by distant relatives who viciously abuse him. The narrator in *Evil and the Mask* is raised by his father to be a “shard of evil” who will spread hate, fear, and misery around the world.

In an interview conducted after Nakamura won the Akutagawa Prize, the interviewer noted that all of Nakamura’s texts published up until then (*The Gun*, *A Deeper Shade*, and *Child of Dirt*) had narrators who were abandoned by their real parents. The interviewer then asked, “Why is it that you stress such upbringings when one could say that they are so rare in today’s Japan?” Nakamura’s response was very guarded: “Well, that’s not really something I want to talk about right now, or rather, explaining would be difficult for me...I’ll say that it’s a very big problem within me. Not really tales of orphans, but thinking about human beings who have been discarded by their parents and raised by total strangers [...] is a very important problem with deep connections to my interiority” (2005b, 153). Considering that Nakamura’s texts are almost always written from a male first-person perspective, and that his thematic concerns revolve around exploring how adult survivors of tragic childhoods make meaning in their despair-laden lives, one is tempted to ask the question, Is Nakamura Fuminori himself a product of a broken home? That question cannot be answered definitely without Nakamura’s own corroboration. But the kind of concerns he has as an

author tirelessly interrogate the existence of fallen human beings, their crippled sense of self-worth, and the terrible quality of a society that allows such people to come into being.

Nakamura has said that he rarely judges the characters in his texts, no matter how broken or evil they may be. In a 2009 roundtable discussion about the expressive power of literature in the realm of law, Nakamura stated that, “I believe that novelists are not entities who judge others. We simply look from the viewpoints of various human beings and write.” Further strengthening his statement, he also believes “literature is not, from the first, something that judges” (Nakamura 2009, 162; 168). In sum, neither he as a writer, nor the product of his craft shall pass judgment – not on the characters within, nor on the readers without. In the coming pages, we shall see that he contradicts himself on these points.

In an essay titled “Puerile Criminals” (*Chisetsu na hanzaisha*) published in the literary journal *Bungei Shunjū*, Nakamura expressed his reaction to the 2008 Akihabara Massacre, a senseless crime enacted by an alienated, precarious youth. The massacre occurred when Katō Tomohiro, age twenty-five, drove a truck through a busy crowd of shopping pedestrians, exited the vehicle, and then continued to randomly stab a number of people. The event shocked the nation, not only because of its wanton brutality, but because many had considered Japan a society safe from violent crime (*The Daily Yomiuri* June 10, 2008).<sup>1</sup> That shock deepened after a number of copycat criminals

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<sup>1</sup> The same sentiments can be seen in the nation’s reactions to the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō doomsday cult’s sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway. However, whereas the cult’s attacks were planned far in advance and were highly coordinated, Katō acted alone with little planning beforehand.

executed similar attacks in the months to follow. The information gradually uncovered on Katō depicted a lonely young man without support from his family, an individual who drifted between temporary jobs, one without any meaningful human connections. One reason he gave to the police for the attack was that he feared he was to be fired (*The Daily Yomiuri* June 11, 2008); another, that he didn't have a girlfriend (*The Straits Times* June 10, 2008).

Nakamura is always conscious of the tense relationship between the self and society, especially as the latter fails the former. "Society, schools, and the like teach you that you should get along with everyone, that you should succeed," but those institutions never teach one how to "get through times of solitude, or what to do in times of frustration" (2008, 83). He, too, understands the feeling of hating his environment and society at large (2008, 83). His work as an author is entirely built upon the premise that society often fails to normalize the individual, and his style – highly insular, marked by the conspicuous repetition of feelings of anxiety (*fuan*), terror (*kyōfu*), and instability (*midareru*) – reflects this.

But he is unforgiving in his denunciation of "puerile criminals" like Katō who "thoughtlessly lash out with their vapid opinions" (Nakamura 2008, 83). Rather than become just another copycat criminal, Nakamura suggests that the fallen of Japan should "push themselves up" out of their despair; rather than consume "manga replete with brutal descriptions," they should read the kind of literature that once saved him: Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Mishima Yukio's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus (Nakamura 2008, 83). By reading "pure



literature,” Nakamura suggests, alienated youth like Katō and his copycats can truly begin to ruminate on the quality of their depressive thoughts, and realize that “the world is far deeper” than that which is allowed by their shallow perspectives (2008, 83). Such literature “nestles close” to those people “about to be bashed down by the absurd phenomena of the world,” draws out their instability and gloom, and “revitalizes the feeling that life goes on” (Nakamura 2012, 192-93). In fine, literature, to Nakamura, is the most appropriate tool for individuals to existentially overcome an uncaring, bleak environment, and construct a worldview that does not simply blame a society “out there” for failing them, but instead encourages an authentic investigation into the interface between self and other, agency and structure, and finally, free will and determinism.

## CHAPTER II

### RECURSIVITY AND EXISTENTIAL SUICIDE

After two of Nakamura's other texts were considered by the Akutagawa Prize committee and found lacking, *Child of Dirt* (*Tsuchi no naka no kodomo*) won the 135<sup>th</sup> Akutagawa Prize in 2005, thus launching his career as a writer of "pure literature" (*junbungaku*). At its core, the text attempts to demonstrate the difficulty adult survivors of child abuse have in placing their stunted, withdrawn interiorities within a horizon of meaningful engagement vis-à-vis external reality. Notably, it is the first text Nakamura has written in which the narrator is a victim of violence, rather than a perpetrator.

The first-person narrator of *Child of Dirt* is a twenty-seven-year-old taxi driver who as a child suffered years of savage abuse at the hands (and feet, and...) of his foster parents (or as I'll call them, his caretakers).<sup>2</sup> The abuse culminates in his being dropped from a second-floor veranda by his caretakers, and, thinking him dead from the fall, they bury him on a mountainside. But he is in fact alive and escapes his dirt tomb, leading to the arrest of his caretakers and the narrator himself being placed in a rehabilitation center. As an adult, the narrator's life is gray and without meaningful connections – he doesn't care about his job, he has an ambiguous relationship with a woman named Sayuko (an alcoholic who lives with him), and he has no friends to speak of. He moves

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<sup>2</sup> This is the preferred nomenclature for sociologists, psychologists, and other professionals who produce research on child abuse. The term does not assume a biological or even familial connection between the child and adult, but it does assume a standard model of responsibilities the adult has when taking care of the child (providing comfort, trust, sustenance, shelter, etc.). That the term is used in this thesis to describe characters who never actually "care" for the narrator is a strategic deployment meant to support Nakamura's continual aversion to the family unit, developmental environment, and society that have all totally failed the abused child.

through the world in an existential daze as some unknown thing deep within his being compels him to place himself in deadly situations, e.g., provoking a bike gang into beating him unconscious with iron pipes, or see-sawing his body on the ledge of a tall apartment building. As an oft-repeated motif, the narrator is plagued by a sense of falling (*rakka*), the genesis of which he does not comprehend, but is an integral phenomenon accompanying his experience of the world.

In this chapter of the thesis, after introducing the initial critical reception of *Child of Dirt*, I go on to explain the narrator's childhood experience with Elaine Scarry and Judith Butler in mind, making use of their thoughts concerning, respectively, torture and subjection in order to help sketch the kind of ontological entity Nakamura creates of the narrator, arguing that his entire being is defined in and through the act of torture. From there, I argue that the falling motif mentioned above marks and makes operational an existentially recursive loop from which the narrative as text and the narrator as person seek an escape. In conclusion, the only escape afforded both entities lies in the narrator's revelation that life is arbitrary, meaning is self-created, and, although difficult in the extreme, his particular method of escape is what I call existential suicide. This text sets the tone for many of Nakamura's subsequent works in that it presents a model of the human that is instrumental in making *Child of Dirt* function as a therapeutic technology for those who have suffered abuse in their childhoods.

### *The Power of Torture*

Like many Akutagawa Prize winners, *Child of Dirt* was met with mixed reviews

from the selection committee, with only one member, Kuroi Senji, giving his full support. Kuroi calls the work “a masterpiece with structural rigor” and, contrary to the negative comments proffered by other committee members, he suggests that “this text is not a simple-minded correspondence between cause and effect, but rather a far more willful corroboration between the past” and the narrator’s ongoing struggle to grope for meaning in the present (Kuroi 2005, 382). In other words, the text is not formulaic in its handling of temporal relationships, nor naïve in its handling of the themes of trauma, child abuse, depression, and suicide.

Moving towards the other end of the spectrum, bad-boy-turned-conservative-politician Ishihara Shintarō (b. 1932) writes that even if Nakamura is able to communicate “the essence of powerfully deep emotion” through his writing, it is exactly the narrator’s abusive childhood that makes his adult actions “far too easy to understand, and the work is undeniably weakened” (Ishihara 2005, 383). Ikezawa Natsuki (b. 1945), an author who is interested in post-colonial literature and environmentalism, comments on the honing of Nakamura’s craft in *Child of Dirt’s* structure, writing that “its form as a novel is far better compared to [Nakamura’s] two previous works.” Nevertheless the text is a practice in “navel gazing” wherein no “true Other” exists (Ikezawa 2005, 385). Known for her skillful exploration of the female Japanese psyche, Kōno Taeko (1926-2015) praises moments of Nakamura’s style as “extraordinarily marvelous,” but contends that he was “unable to reliably make contact with human interiority” (Kōno 2005, 385). The most incisive comment comes from Murakami Ryū (b. 1952), an author specializing in shocking his audiences with gratuitous

sex and grotesque violence. He criticizes Nakamura for “having further clichéd the truth about abuse, trauma, and PTSD like a variety show host” and indeed being blind to the fact that “sincere novelists” don’t write about such topics in the way that Nakamura apparently did (Murakami 2005, 384).

As is frequently the case with negative reviews by the Akutagawa selection committee, these here are either hyperbolic or betray an insoluble ideological disagreement between the authors. The comments by Ishihara and Murakami are of the former category. As for the latter, there is indeed no “true Other” in *Child of Dirt* for Ikezawa, and, concomitantly, no description of female subjectivity for Kōno. But for Nakamura, *Child of Dirt* necessarily cannot contain any well-developed Other: the issues he portrays within the text are created by the Other in its first instantiation – the figure of the parent – as it viciously brutalizes an utterly defenseless child. The damage wrought to that child’s outlook on what it means to be human largely precludes the possibility of trust, let alone empathy or intimacy. An Other does not exist in description because it is unintelligible to the narrator.

The parental figure (the inaugural Other) is imaged in *Child of Dirt* as without affective substance as it beats the narrator with a “bored looking expression. Exasperated, with no hate, no anger or curiosity, just a feeling of inconvenience” (53). The narrator is left with a sense that he is valueless, somehow a different type of creature than “them” (*karera*), the term he uses for his nameless caretakers (52). In order to explain his violent circumstances to himself, the narrator comes to believe that “they” are able to visit cruelty upon him simply because they are “people other than me

[...]. If they were me, they wouldn't do this. I thought that it wasn't strange for an external entity to do whatever it wanted, and that there was the possibility it could do any manner of thing" (53).<sup>3</sup>

The narrator is confined to a squalid room in his caretakers' apartment. The one time he is able to see a representation of the outside world is through a hole in the wall made while he was beaten: after the abuse, looking into the living room, a television show features a man and a woman flirting while on vacation. This scene offers a chilling contrast of relationships: on the one hand, the people on television are loving and carefree, partaking in what many would consider an essential human joy (i.e., romantic intimacy); on the other, in reality, the narrator is alienated from his very status as a human being by his caretakers' abuse. The narrator abhors that other world and the gulf separating the two, yet is powerless in the face of it. Arbitrary violence – and the terror of it – mediates his every experience; even the glimpse at the idealistic world within the television is the result of it.

While "living" with his caretakers, the narrator is only ever recognized as a body, one to be starved and beaten, one that is not living at all, at least not in a humanistic sense. His primary vulnerability – the ever-present possibility of fatal violence enacted by the Other, to whom he is beholden – is not recognized as such, and is in fact made "unrecognizable" by his caretakers (Butler 2006, 43). For philosopher Judith Butler, as bodies always already given over to the Other, dispossessed into the public sphere,

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<sup>3</sup> Note that at times Nakamura employs ellipses (suspension points) in his writing, and when necessary or advantageous I have included them in my translations. In contrast, here and throughout this thesis, a bracketed ellipsis signals that I have left portions of the source text out of a quotation. Furthermore, I have preserved as closely as possible Nakamura's use of emphasis by way of italics, i.e., all emphasis is in the source text.

human beings must petition for the Other's recognition of one's own vulnerability. This is only at its most desperate a verbal attempt at communication; otherwise, it is a phenomenological query that asks after ontological status. Further, this "is precisely not to ask for recognition of what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other" (Butler 2006, 44). By consistently and utterly refusing to recognize the narrator as vulnerable, his caretakers forestall his humanization, a process by which he could become a fellow person, rather than continue as merely an object to be beaten. His caretakers' continual answer to his query is not "there exists someone here who will interact with me," but "there is no person here able to interact; there is only an object."

Nevertheless, the narrator is fully dependent on his caretakers for the continuation of his existence, even if further abuse is inevitable and death is included as a possibility. This predicament, as Butler writes, may be expressed as "I would rather exist in subordination than not exist" (1997, 7). The narrator is not suicidal in the material sense, either as a child or as an adult, and so continues to exist. By existing, the power to which the narrator is subordinated reproduces itself along two modalities.

First and most obvious is the repeated abuse leveled at him from an external source (his caretakers) that works to teach him that the violence visited upon him is simply the way of the world. The caretakers have their own biological child, an infant, and when it cries, "they" beat the narrator, saying, "You gettin' hit is a natural thing, got it" (51)? He is placed within a separate ontological category than the infant and by extension its parents, which in turn legitimizes their treatment of him. The gulf that the

narrator witnessed between his reality and the fantasy of intimacy on the television stretches out from the realm of representation to further alienate him as a creature instantiated in a material context from others who are nominally in the same category.

According to Elaine Scarry in her philosophical treatise on torture entitled *The Body in Pain*, the experience of physical pain is incontestably real, yet, because it has no referential content (it is not “of” or “for” anything), it resists objectification in language (1985, 4-5). One of the effects of torture is a loss of language after the self, mutilated and disintegrated, reverts “to a state anterior to language,” and can no longer extend “beyond the boundaries of the body” into a civilized world (Scarry 1985, 4; 33). There is no such thing as civilization for a victim of torture in the moment of the act; there is only totalizing pain, able to rob “that which would express and project the self [...] of its source and its subject” (Scarry 1985, 35). The torturer and his weapons are employed to produce such pain as a physical fact, but also as a perceptual one in order to act “as a bridge or mechanism across which some of pain’s attributes – its incontestable reality, its totality [...]– can be lifted away from their source, can be separated from the sufferer and referred to power, broken off from the body and attached instead to the regime” (Scarry 1985, 56). Once this occurs, it is the regime that becomes totalizing, eclipsing, that which dissolves the world and the self.

Scarry writes in the context of torture that is politically motivated, perpetrated by a regime that for one savage reason or another imprisons and tortures “dissidents” or “terrorists.” While certain aspects of this form of torture are not evident in *Child of Dirt* (e.g., there is no interrogation, the torturers are not an extension of a political group,



etc.), it is apparent through the narrator's descriptions that his caretakers' abuse and the terror he feels towards it/them are both torturous and totalizing in the way Scarry describes:

The man raises his arm to me. It is inevitable that his power-filled fist is sure to strike somewhere on my body. While I clench my teeth, stiffen my whole body, I merely wait for the predetermined result. Terror dominates my body. Terror is imagining and predicting the strike, and it surpasses my level of tolerance to expand infinitely. The fist approaches me. Like smashing into the ground, it falls, and that is the predetermined result. I merely wait...(52)

For the narrator, there is no alternative to the "predetermined" result of the man's posture; there is no escape from the terrible impact of the fist; the terror he feels explodes wildly out of control, eclipsing all else. Although narrated from his position as an adult, that this excerpt is in the source text written with the non-past/future tense is indicative of the power the narrator's caretakers had and still have over him: they, as a monstrous household regime, "lift" the totalizing, disintegrating experience of physical pain from the narrator's body, steal from him the world, his ability to speak (54), and transmute these things into pure power attached to themselves. The narrator has no choice in the face of this – he can only wait, receive, be stolen from. The possibility of expressing his agency is lost in the depths of silence marked by the ellipsis at the end of the excerpt.

In a very real sense – as is evident in the kind of language I have been borrowing from Scarry's work – the narrator has his entire being defined for him through and in torture. There is no portion of it that is left out of the eclipsing effect of his abuse, for the "totalizing" power of his torture is not simply a blinding physical pain or terror that "expands infinitely," but more horrifyingly an operation that situates him at the

teleological end of his caretakers' ontology, a vector by which he becomes an object to be beaten. Even writing that "he becomes an object" is excessive signification – so thorough is his objectification, so concrete and immobile his definition, that it is not only his language that fails, but mine as well; and, outside of intelligibility, he becomes what Jacques Derrida would call a monstrosity (1978, 294). But because the narrator is defined by his caretakers and it is through their very torture that his experience is "lifted" away, so too does the just-stated unintelligibility, the monstrous impossibility of signification detach from the narrator and adhere to his caretakers.

This use of power is directed at the narrator from an external source, but it is only one of two modes by which he is subordinated. Nakamura writes a more convoluted scenario:

I didn't understand why, but the me of that period simply had to be cared about by someone. Perhaps I didn't think of it as a problem whether it was my real parents or not. In the beginning, "they" would laugh, saying the cries I gave out every time they punched me were funny. I found some hope in the thought that I was pleasing them. They would punch me, and sometimes even kick me, just because they wanted to hear my cries. More than being kicked, I preferred getting punched. I thought that at least with punching I could still feel a closeness to them (50-51).

Abandoned by his biological parents and old enough to realize this fact, passed from one institution to the next, the child narrator is starved for love. The ugly truth of his situation is that he knows his caretakers made the choice to bring him in to their home (50), so the abuse leveled at him becomes the only available price to pay for that semblance of acceptance. The narrator is hopeful that if he can only continue pleasing his caretakers by continually becoming the abject object of their violence, there is a chance that he will become important to them, a necessity for their happiness, and thus

come to feel he himself has some value. In reality, he has no choice in the matter – he does not get to decide whether or not he will be beaten; whether it will be the fist or the boot, the heat of the clothing iron or the whip of a vacuum cleaner hose (52-53). His existence is literally beat into shape so that he comes to believe that “This is the world [...]. The world is that sort of thing, and I am simply living within it” (51).

### *Power in Recoil*

I want to suggest that this is what Judith Butler calls “power in recoil” (1997, 6). The power that once was enacted upon the narrator from an external source “recoils” and begins to enact *through* him. The norms of the household regime become engrained in his everyday existence so that he must comport himself in such a way as to reproduce them, and in their reproduction the possibility of his becoming – his ontological transformation into a human being, understood within the context of linguistic signification and primary vulnerability – is violently deferred.

“Power in recoil” can be employed outside of Butler’s conceptualization for its poetic usage to describe the wrenching, haunting absence of the narrator’s caretakers in his life after he escapes them. This is not to suggest that he has any nostalgic feelings or good memories of his life with them, but because he was produced as a complete object under their regime, there is a vacuum that exists when he is relocated to the rehabilitation center. This vacuum is supposed to be filled by a new, gentler normative discourse – figured most prosaically when the narrator describes going to school – but there is nothing there for him (95). He recoils when he sees the quotidian joy in his

classmates' activities first because it is so alien to him, but second because it is a mode of being whose assumption was made impossible by his caretakers. The power that at one point totalized his existence as a "product of abuse" recoils again and again, refuses to either dissipate or unwind in a way so as to allow the narrator to integrate into "normal" society. That is to say, the narrator's very being is implicated in the reiteration of the torturous conditions (psychic and physical) he once faced insofar as it is constituted by its formulation within them, and so the continuation of his existence as an adult is equivalent to the continuation of his subjection. He is compelled to reenact or mimic the external operations of power that produced him by staging events in which he places himself in the way of potentially fatal danger. But the anguish he feels as a result of these embodied reproductions of his torture – physical anguish, yes, but also existential in that he does not understand how to engage with the world around him – is tempered by a "hidden something" driving him forward.

The following passage is taken from the opening scene of the *Child of Dirt* in which the adult narrator provokes a biker gang into beating him. It begins as he regains consciousness in the middle of the scene.

At some point the engine sound had stopped. With that hint, I realized there were several people looking down at me. Smelling the scent of dirt, I was assailed by a bizarre feeling. At the depth of this feeling – a dread that oppressed my entire body, an utterly unpredicted anxiety – it was definitely there, something of unknowable essence, stirring my heart. My mouth is split in a meager grin. If I keep getting beaten, and kicked, just maybe I'll get minced, and fade into nothingness like turning into dirt, deep under the ground. I was terrified. As if it were stolen the strength in me was pulled out, and although the throbbing of my receding heartbeat was painful, I could feel my convulsing spinal column, and it wasn't bad. The dread-inspired trembling, bit by bit, is transforming into some other thing. I had been, without a doubt, waiting for something. In spite of the terror, the sensation that I was patiently awaiting its arrival was there. Some

suspicions flitted across my consciousness, but I just didn't care. I wonder if perhaps the men would come at me as one, swinging down their steel pipes. Hallucinated as if my body was falling down and down from some high place. Anxiety, of when it will be slammed into the ground. Anxiety, of when they will resume their attack...(12)

The violence being visited upon the narrator, terrible though it may be, does not overwhelm the text. The narrator's self-reflexivity, his phenomenological engagement with the world-out-there, continues unbroken as long as he is conscious (and, the narrative being given by the narrator, the text cannot speak from unconsciousness). Aspects of the body and those of the mind are frequently featured in the same sentence: the narrator *smells* the dirt as he is assailed by a *bizarre feeling*; that *bizarre feeling* oppresses his entire *body*, and in the depths of that *emotion* his heart stirs; he *hallucinates* as if his body were *falling*. Although the sentences contained within this paragraph are not all ones that mix the mind and body, those featuring exclusively one or the other alternate, creating a sense of unbiased symmetry. In contrast to the narrator's childhood – where the pain visited upon him was so complete so as to disintegrate his mind – here the body and mind are coterminous. They work in tandem as the scene unfolds to present to him the feeling that he has been “patiently awaiting” the arrival of something fundamental to his existence.

Temporally, this scene features a present that is overflowing with the future. The narrator directs his attention from the movements of his body – his heartbeat, his convulsing spine – to an anxiety-ridden future that is both terrifying and impelling. He “looks forward to” the arrival of the hidden something locked deep within the recesses of his being by continually mapping the cartography of his situation as it transforms. In

part, this anxiety is indicative of the difficulty with which the narrator manages his tragic childhood – the tension that exists between the strain of *becoming* in the face of his subjection to the past in which the Other did not recognize his primary vulnerability, and the perpetual deferral to an unspecified future of existential growth beyond the boundaries of torturous abuse: this tension defines him as a person.

Such a deferral is signaled and made operational by the “falling” (*rakka*) motif, a device appearing in the majority of the scenes of the text, but most prominently in those featuring the narrator recounting or mimicking his childhood abuse. In a sense, the motif permeates the text to the extent that it binds the narrative into a coherent whole and, since the narrative is about and told by the narrator, it binds him as well. In other words, the narrative as text and the narrator as person are ontologically coextensive, and they extend along and move forward in the same horizon of continuity. For phenomenologist Maurice Natanson (1998) in his analysis of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, the motif as a literary device can be understood as a kind of signpost placed within the horizon that is the text. In a simultaneous triple function the motif is, remembers, and portends; it “is not thought through self-consciously,” and it presents itself “suddenly, all in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (Natanson 1998, 90).

What this means for *Child of Dirt* is that each instance of the “falling” motif *is* an experience that *remembers* the genesis of the feeling as it *portends* the repetition of it as such. The narrator's ignorance of its source notwithstanding, the motif points directly and exclusively back to the original moment of falling, so in effect each instance of it is identical in function. The motif is employed, and at that moment it invokes all other

instances, puts them on display along a flat topography, a recursive loop charged with the subjectivating power that continues to enact itself through the narrator. Furthermore, because the motif presents itself in an instant, unbidden – the presentation of which is totally disconnected from the narrator's agency – all of his actions and thoughts up to that point must be considered links in the necessary chain of causation leading up to the motif's instantiation. Thus, as long as the motif is still in play and marking the narrator's compulsive psychic recursion, all of the text prior to it is similarly swept into recursion: the text on a formal level performs the recursivity found in the narrator's psyche.

In the bike gang passage above, the motif is prompted by the “bizarre feeling” that the narrator experiences after smelling the scent of dirt. At its heart, this prompt is an attempt to rehabilitate the narrator's fractured memory. This fracture occurred not as a result of some mechanism of repression in the narrator's unconscious defending his psyche from a traumatic dissolution, but rather as memory loss following a concussion (87) received when he was dropped by his caretakers from a second-floor veranda (and as we recall, subsequently buried alive on a mountainside). There is a gap in memory that exists for the narrator before his fall and after he is buried, one that he himself does not grasp until the end of the text, but why is it important for that gap to be closed?

In order for the “falling” motif to cease functioning, the narrator must become fully cognizant of the entirety of his life; he must have the opportunity to view the whole of his personal narrative so that a rupture in the recursive loop may open. A

chance is given to him when, after his lover Sayuko drunkenly falls down a staircase and is hospitalized, he begins to work in earnest to pay her hospital bills. After a productive evening in his taxi, the narrator gives two men a ride; they rob and decide to kill him. As he is being choked to death by one of his assailants, he suddenly remembers his childhood experience of being held aloft by “the man” (his male caretaker) over a veranda as he repeatedly sings a twisted song: “Two stories high, he won’t die” (102). But the boy knows that in his condition – feeble, starving – death is at hand. His body “recoils in terror,” but he feels

a single desire, like a knot of power, spring forth mightily. “I’ve had enough,” I whispered in my head. The repetition of this nonsense, I don’t need it any more.[...] I told myself to take in the terror. Make this terror my own flesh and blood — and then I, wretched as mud, knew I had surpassed “them.” In the face of this violence, I do not feel terror. I will not abide. I will do no such thing as feel terror towards all the violence, the senselessness, of this world. I begin summoning a grin. There is no need to surrender. I will die laughing. I will not validate this world – even if it means my death, I will be victorious (103).

In opposition to how the narrator had been living his life haunted by his experience as “a product of abuse,” this climactic moment of *Child of Dirt* reveals to him that he was able to exist on his own terms, if only for a moment, over and against the power to which he had been subjected. In a fascinating transmutation, he takes the phenomenon of terror in all its valences (recall how it once overwhelmed his existence, “expanding infinitely”) and, by bringing it into and equating it with his body, annihilates it of meaning. The language that had been tortured out of him and the self that had been disintegrated by pain are revived and consolidated into a compact, commanding bulwark that asserts ownership of the body once taken completely by torture: “I’ve had enough.” At the same moment, the “I” who resists its subjugators creates an existential



space in which agency manifests.

The forceful potency of the narrator's status as agent surges up from his past and breaks into his present predicament of being choked to death. He is able to escape in his taxi, begins speeding down the empty street, and in a moment of revelation, finds that what he had been seeking his whole life is "a conquering. It was a method that others would frown upon, but I had to create a situation in which I would be terrified so that I could overcome it, the terror that had rooted itself in me – I had to conquer it in my own way" (106). The "method" of which he speaks is none other than the narrator mimicking his childhood abuse; the hidden something that compelled him to place himself in deadly situations was the desire to conquer, overcome, indeed *become* that which is not an object that was beaten, but a human being who occupies an agential position unrestrained by the torturous past.

In a stylistic representation of the shock of revelation, the road on which the narrator drives "stretched straight out forever" while "light from the evenly spaced street lamps continued with no end into forever" (105). There is a double *made mo* grammatical construction employed here that makes the scene in front of the narrator seem to expand infinitely both in time (*itsumade mo*) and space (*dokomade mo*). However, a sharp curve appears – the narrator has the choice to slow down or slam through the guardrail. As he accelerates ever faster, he feels as if he is falling. He does not stop.

This is the last instance of the falling motif in the text; after it is employed, a rupture bursts open in the narrative and the narrator, allowing both to escape from

recursivity and in to existential authenticity. However, this moment should not be read as “the romantic experience of a world that is 'all before us' like a limitless dream” (Davis 1989, 109), a world that is pried open by free will so as to expose an existential void from which one might pick any path within its infinite plane. Instead, Nakamura reminds us that to live is to act, to pick one possible course of action out of a bracketed set. “Possibility,” as philosopher Walter A. Davis writes in his work *Inwardness and Existence*, “bites into the very being of subject; one exists only when one chooses in a finite world, fully bound to all the consequences of one's choice” (1989, 109).

Although the choice the narrator of *Child of Dirt* makes lands him in the hospital, barely able to move, it was *his*. And as he already understood, it was not the kind of method of self-discovery others would accept without question. Sayuko visits the narrator at his sickbed and asks him to explain his reckless actions.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “It’s just...I felt this gentleness. Like nothing could top it, I mean, if it happened, nothing else could be done to me, right? The world, it was so gentle right then. Shockingly so.”

“What’re you saying? I don’t get it. Besides, to say that, you’re talking about dying. What’ll you do if you die?”

“It’s like dying, but different. I get the feeling it’s different. And...” As I said that, my voice wavered. “Before I hit the rail, I really felt that I was going to face myself, so I didn’t stop.”

Sayuko thinks that he’s talking about suicide when he says “if it happened,” that he tried to escape from a dark life into the “gentle” embrace of death. Rather than that, he, for the first time, recognized and “faced” his own recursivity – the overwhelming and brute existence of it, a continual turning-back to the past accompanied by “power in recoil” – and realized that, if he made the choice, he could escape that recursivity and never let the subjecting power of his abusive caretakers affect him again. This is what he

means when he says “nothing else could be done to me” – his caretakers could no longer abuse him.

The language in the source text is vague, so it works to express the very difficulty of expressing not just the experience of the self, but more precisely of the subjective import of revelation, authentic action, and the reclaiming of his embodied existence from the senselessness and absurdity of the past. In that very absurdity lies revelation: life is arbitrary. It is the experience of one’s being as it is always already fallen (*rakka*) into contexts not of its choosing, contexts in which it is dispossessed into a social field populated by entities that are liable “to do whatever [they] want” (53) to oneself or each other, from utter indifference to violent domination. The narrator’s intense experience of total “gentleness” in the world as he pried it open concomitantly exposed its possibilities and the truth (to the narrator) that all meaning is self-created.

The difficulty accompanying the narrator’s choice is gargantuan. One does not simply turn the page and become a new person. Nakamura does not equate with any levity the sheer struggle of committing existential suicide with that possible in material suicide. So momentous is the occasion for the narrator that the entire narrative has been soaked in scenes of bloody violence and near-death experiences in order to give weight to his climactic decision to commit existential suicide, his over/becoming, a wholesale shedding of that portion of his being beholden to the power made operational by the torturous abuse his caretakers once enacted upon him. And although the lion’s share of the text concerns depression, anxiety, violence, and pain, Nakamura leaves it open and cautiously optimistic at the end: the narrator and Sayuko grow closer,

perhaps even lovingly so; the former continues working as a taxi driver with some satisfaction, and the two plan to go on a “short trip” together (116).

### *The Unseen Child*

The work that this text does if we consider it in terms of Nakamura’s career is threefold: i) it alerts the reader to the existence of child abuse in Japan, a phenomenon Nakamura continually returns to; ii) it displays Nakamura’s fundamental understanding of the human experience, a model on which he continues to rely; and iii) it elucidates one of many therapeutic possibilities contained within his authorial project.

Child abuse in Japan has been considered a hidden phenomenon by sociologists until very recently. The first sociological study on the prevalence of child abuse was conducted as late as 1995 (Kitamura et al. 1999, 22), and federal legislation defining child abuse in its internationally accepted form (i.e., it can be physical, psychological, sexual, or neglect) wasn’t passed until 2000 (Ito 2014). According to a study published in 1999, “many people have long believed that child abuse is an exceptional rather than everyday phenomenon” (Kitamura et al. 1999, 22). The social costs are enormous, with one study suggesting over ¥1.6 trillion in expenditures just for FY 2012 – in comparison, the estimated cost of the 2011 Tōhoku Triple Disaster is ¥1.9 trillion – yet “there is an extreme scarcity of data on the subject,” so researchers suggest that Japan is more than a decade behind comparator nations in terms of policy (Wada and Igarashi 2014, 72).

Child abuse and the possibility of its survivors developing psychopathological behavior feature heavily in Nakamura’s texts, including *The Thief* (2009), *Evil and the*

*Mask* (2010), and *Last Winter, We Parted* (*Kyonen no fuyu, kimi to wakare*, 2013).

Because he takes as his primary problematic in as early a text as *Child of Dirt* the social and existential crippling of adults as a result of child abuse suggests two things: that he has a vested interest in raising awareness of its prevalence, and that his texts are able to function in a therapeutic mode. By this I mean that readers of his texts who are themselves survivors of child abuse may find courage to speak out or otherwise seek help once they see that they are not the only ones who have arbitrary violence visited upon them by their caretakers.

If at least a portion of Nakamura's target audience consists of such survivors, then the model of the human he constructs in *Child of Dirt* and upholds elsewhere gains further significance. That model, as described above and in the next chapter of this thesis, consists of a mind that is coextensive with the body. For the most part the body is that which experiences external stimuli, while the mind interprets those experiences into conceptual categories. The mind is further divided into conscious and unconscious aspects, with the latter able to covertly influence the former, as well as how the body senses its environment. What Nakamura is problematizing is the notion that the unconscious specifically and the mind-body system – that is to say, the human – in general can only ever be, respectively, constructed and made intelligible within a preexisting ideological structure, with intelligibility being produced through discursive formulation. In other words, he calls into question the idea that “essence precedes existence.” The entirety of *Child of Dirt* is, in simple terms, the narrator's struggle to invert these two terms so it becomes the existentialist dictum that “existence precedes

essence.” If the text is considered in the therapeutic mode, it not only builds solidarity between survivors of child abuse by saying, “You are not alone,” but of equal importance it invalidates the very ground from which abusive attacks launch. It does this by telling the reader their abuser does not have sole authority on how or what they should be, and that, in fact, authority rests exclusively with the reader when the question of their being is taken up.

It is not only the narrator but also Sayuko who has the ability to become a sort of role model for a specific reader: she is the victim of abuse at the hands of her intimate partner rather than her parents, and although her perspective on her own life is only given in dialogue with the narrator, she, too, seems to overcome the pain of her past. Her strength could be galvanizing. And while *Child of Dirt* is far from a feminist text, the possibility exists of a female reader gleaning a similar lesson from the text as her male counterpart.

On the other hand, in the next chapter of this thesis I explore *Evil and the Mask*, which is both actively sexist and betrays Nakamura’s nascent misogyny. Nakamura employs similar themes in *Evil and the Mask* – including abusive childhoods, existential suicide, and the weight of the past – while introducing a new problematic: obsession. *Evil and the Mask* can also be considered in the therapeutic mode, but the scope of its accessibility attempts to reach much farther than that seen in *Child of Dirt*.

## CHAPTER III

### EVIL, LOSS, AND THE UNCONSCIOUS IN *EVIL AND THE MASK*

Over three times as long as *Child of Dirt, Evil and the Mask* (*Aku to kamen no rûru*, 2010) is an ambitious work in which Nakamura problematizes the various meanings of “history” – genetic, personal, national, global – as they impact the individual. Featuring a host of well-developed secondary characters with whom the narrator Kuki Fumihiro interacts, *Evil and the Mask* is largely constructed as a space in which Nakamura (through the voices of his characters in conversation with one another) elaborates pressing issues: on a structural level – anarchy, global war, domestic terrorism; and on a personal level – obsession, guilt, the possibility of interpersonal trust, romantic love. As in *Child of Dirt*, the failure of the family unit, and the society that created that family, wraps the text in a sustained critique of both constructs.

The text is divided into four sections: the first two feature chapters set both in the narrator’s childhood and his current life; the second two are entirely set in the present. The past is interwoven into the present as a testimony to its ongoing influence in the narrator’s life despite his wish to be rid of it. This thesis chapter is similarly divided into two major sections: one details the narrator’s past, and the other describes his present.

In the first section of this chapter, I show how Nakamura creates a space to metaphorically house the narrator Fumihiro’s unconscious, within which exists an inescapable, deterministic force: genetics. I argue that it is not only the physical manifestations of a restricted familial gene pool that seep out of the space, but ideology

itself is transmitted “through the blood” and overflows into Fumihiro’s everyday life. Such a construction of the unconscious becomes the basis for the second section of this chapter. There, I argue that Fumihiro – despite his desire to extinguish his status as a subject within history – is nevertheless nostalgic for his past, and grieves the loss of it. Finally, because Nakamura writes this text in a therapeutic mode, I argue that he creates two secondary characters, Mikihiko and Itō, to elaborate the extremes of structure – either omnipresent or nonexistent – in order to place Fumihiro in the middle, a ground from which he is able to launch an existential critique of the philosophical stance “essence precedes existence.”

### *Evil as History*

Kuki Fumihiro was born to Kuki Shōzō, the elderly patriarch of the Kuki Group – a *zaibatsu*, or a wealthy conglomerate of businesses that hold political sway both domestically and internationally – and an unnamed mother, who died before he knew her. Although he has siblings, they are decades older than he, and only one, Mikihiko, plays a part in the narrative. With a handful of young servant girls, Fumihiro and Shōzō live in a massive mansion on the outskirts of Nagoya in Aichi Prefecture. This is also where Nakamura himself grew up, but the inclusion of such a detail simply constitutes a rhetorical trope of the contemporary *shishōsetsu* genre – there is no evidence that any of the substantial details of the narrative, its characters or their circumstances, are taken from his life.

As expected from Nakamura’s work, Fumihiro’s childhood is an incredibly dark, depressive one. His first memory is of playfully waddling about under the watchful gaze



of some of the mansion's servants when his father appears, only to push the boy out of the way with his foot. Shōzō (and, later, Mikihiko) is described as evil incarnate, a mysterious figure perpetually in darkness, a gargantuan, pillar-like shadow that blocks out the light. He is a hedonist: constantly drunk, always lounging in his study, and sleeping with any number of the female-only servant staff. Although descriptions of the activities his Kuki Group undertake are limited – the only concrete example is that the Group helps western powers (Nakamura's term – *nishigawashokoku* [4]) orchestrate ethnic wars in Africa so that his companies can win bids for post-conflict reconstruction contracts – the kind of political and legal power Shōzō wields can only stem from deep-rooted corruption.

Fumihiko's childhood is dominated by Shōzō's promise to turn the boy into a "cancer," "a being who will make the world miserable. One who yearns to make people think that they shouldn't have been born in this world, or, at the very least, make them think that this is not a world of shining virtue" (10). Fumihiko learns that his life is the result of a family custom beginning in the Taishō Period (1912-1926), a custom by which the aging patriarch of the Kuki family, seeing the end of his life approaching, fathers a child in order for him (all "cancers" are invariably male) to "end the world" that will stubbornly continue on after the patriarch's death.

I use the term "cancer" from Satoko Izumo and Stephen Coates' 2012 English-language translation for the source text's term *ja* not because of its obviousness, but because "cancer" seems to encompass most effectively the various meanings of the source term, as well as its particular use. The ideograph for the term, also pronounced

*yokoshima*, can broadly mean “incorrect” or “deviant” in terms of morality, or point to “a person whose ethics are twisted and thus not proper.” It is diametrically opposed to “correctness” or “virtue,” and can be found in such compounds as “evil ways” (*jadō*), “malicious” (*ja’aku*), and “groundless suspicion” (*jasui*). An alternative translation might render *ja* as “blight,” as in “a thing that spoils and damages,” or perhaps “scourge,” as in “a person or thing that causes great trouble or suffering.” But the manner in which Nakamura employs the term is unexpected, and attention is always drawn to its idiosyncratic usage in the source text by the term being encased in a type of formatting mark usually reserved for book or film titles (*nijūkagikakko*). Thus, while “blight” or “scourge” may be quickly understandable in an English-language context, both terms erase the stylistic choice Nakamura makes when he writes *ja*. “Cancer,” on the other hand, does not.

Shōzō tells the boy at the age of eleven that, in order to be engulfed with an evil that will make him want to reject the world as a “cancer,” he will be shown hell on his fourteenth birthday. During the rest of his teens, he will again be shown hell a number of times and “learn truths about [his] life” (13). He is told that there will be no deviation from this plan. Though Shōzō seems to think his eleven-year-old son cannot understand what he is being told – after all, he is only a child, “and there’s no being more foolish than a child” (15) – not only does Fumihiko grasp the import of his situation, but has in fact been plotting to kill his father for some time. “Father was mistaken. I was already a ‘cancer’ [...]. I had always been thinking constantly, fantasizing almost every day, of a plan to make him disappear” (15). As we learn in detail later, Fumihiko has spent a great

deal of time hatching different ways to kill his father, one of which is eventually successful.

The wish for violent revenge aside, there is a critical difference between the deterministic function of abuse in *Child of Dirt* and how Fumihiko's life is revealed as predetermined. The core problem for the narrator in the former is conquering the power his past holds over him, and is a narrative of self-discovery: an uncovering of the past so as to historicize it. On the other hand, from the time he was a small child Fumihiko knew outright that his father had bred him to become a "cancer." It did not come as a surprise to the boy when his father explained the Kuki family custom; speech acts conveying knowledge of the past changed nothing of his ontological status of "already a 'cancer.'" While Fumihiko struggles with his identity as a "cancer," just as the narrator of *Child of Dirt* with his as a "product of abuse," the former is always conscious of every quality of that identity; the latter must fit together the pieces of his subjective puzzle in order to understand himself. In short, Fumihiko has a strikingly well-developed, self-reflexive understanding of his particular circumstances.

Nevertheless, he must struggle against the manacles of fate his father has maliciously forged. This childhood struggle is twofold. First, Fumihiko falls helplessly in love with an orphan girl, Kaori, who is adopted into the Kuki household by Shōzō specifically to torture the boy: the two must navigate their loving emotional landscape even though it was made possible by Shōzō himself. And second, after successfully murdering his father, Fumihiko must live with the fact that he has killed another human being. Although he attempts to rationalize away the feeling that he has done something

wrong, he cannot escape the weight of his deed, which leads to unexpected physical and psychological transformations in the boy.

The orphan Kaori is introduced in the first chapter of the novel as a tool Shōzō will use to break down Fumihiko. The two children have a similar emotional makeup: they have never experienced interpersonal intimacy, and they guard themselves against an uncaring and unfair external reality. Ordered to become close, they go to school together (where, using his influence, Shōzō has them placed in the same class), walk home together, and spend much of their time after school in Fumihiko's room talking, playing cards, and reading magazines. Eventually they begin flirting with each other, and, despite Shōzō's obvious machinations, Fumihiko confesses his love to Kaori; their relationship enters a phase of physical intimacy.

As a literary device, Kaori is symbolic of innocence, purity, and all-embracing love. She is often described as wearing white clothing and being bathed in light. She puts on a cheerful face despite her personal history, and she is uncompromisingly supportive of Fumihiko. This latter aspect is of particular importance. Never knowing his mother, and not told that she had died in childbirth until much later in his life, the child Fumihiko wanted to believe that remnants of her presence existed in the Kuki mansion. In a small box, he collects fingernail clippings and hair fallen to the ground. This habit began with the hope that at least some of what he gathered was from his mother, and, although he knows by the age of twelve that such a hope can no longer be possible, he fears that if he stops his embarrassing habit, his "mother will disappear forever" (29). When Kaori – dressed in a white sweater and white pants – finds the box one day after

school, she reacts not with disgust, but with pure sympathy, supporting Fumihiko by saying that “some of your mother is definitely in there” (30). It is this moment, the first time in his life that another person accepted him for who he was, that Fumihiko “truly fell in love” with Kaori (30).

Entering middle school, Fumihiko becomes obsessive over Kaori. The energy that had been sunk in his depression “strongly burst forth, too direct as to make it somewhat abnormal, on Kaori” (31). Fumihiko’s attention “focused solely and directly on Kaori” to the exclusion of everything else (32). Although he himself is aware that the directness of his absorption is abnormal, he cannot help but describe Kaori as his “entire happiness” (32). Kaori is effectively collapsed into a conceptual entity by Fumihiko’s obsession: she is not a person with her own subjectivity, but instead an avatar of Romantic Love, an ideal made flesh.

But for Nakamura, no ideal can be left unsullied. Six months before his fourteenth birthday, Fumihiko is given shocking news. Kaori reports that she has been getting called into Shōzō’s study late at night, where he makes her strip naked. She does not reveal it here, but the fact is that Shōzō molests her. Fumihiko correctly assumes that on his next birthday, in order to further his descent into “cancerdom,” his father will make him watch as a group of men gang-rape Kaori. This brings us to the second childhood struggle alluded to earlier: Fumihiko’s transformation after he kills his father.

On the grounds of the Kuki mansion exists a cellar filled with forgotten objects – furniture, electric appliances, tires – and below that, a soundproofed basement. Fumihiko discovers this hidden, forbidden place in the fourth grade, a full year before he

meets Kaori. The basement exudes a “darkness like [Fumihiro] had never seen,” one that has a physical weight to it and overwhelms the boy (24). The quality of the darkness is conflated with Fumihiro’s father: overpowering, uncaring, judgmental, so that Fumihiro feels like an outsider in the presence of both.

Two months before his fourteenth birthday, Fumihiro silently follows his father into the basement of the cellar. He plans to throw in a bag of poisonous mushrooms and lock Shōzō in – this way the man’s death is inevitable, but the exact method (eating the mushrooms and dying from poison, or refusing to eat them and dying of starvation) is Shōzō’s choice. Fumihiro naïvely believes that distancing himself from his father’s choice of death by this one level will justify and legitimize his act of patricide.

Shōzō, however, had planned that Fumihiro would murder him, and confronts the boy before he is locked in the cellar. Up until this point, Fumihiro had rationalized murdering his father by convincing himself that it was the only way to save him and Kaori from “being shown hell.” Because Shōzō had significant political connections, any complaint lodged against him to the police would be ignored; what’s more, Fumihiro doubted that any figure of authority would believe his story about the Kuki “cancer” custom in the first place. Thus, established institutions of legal power were useless to the children.

Shōzō introduces a new layer of meaning to the act of murder when he confronts his son. He explains that animals, including human beings, instinctively do not kill members of their own species. Once a person commits murder, the “fundamental basis” (*kihon bēsu*) of their unconscious mind will “become warped” (75-76).

Furthermore, once he is murdered by his son, Shōzō will “be taken into [Fumihiro’s] interiority” (76), wherein he will continue to pull the strings of Fumihiro’s life. Shōzō promises his son that “[he] will never be happy” (77). The “overwhelming darkness” of Shōzō’s evil steals any sense of victory from the boy as he locks the cellar door and escapes.

The cellar in which Shōzō rests is metaphorically constructed as Fumihiro’s unconscious mind. The relics of the past that litter the cellar, along with the “overwhelming darkness” he feels to be the same as his father, represent the accretion of significance – incomprehensible to the logic-driven conscious mind – that is passed down through the generations by DNA; or, in Shōzō’s rendering, the instinctual “fundamental basis” of the unconscious. That Fumihiro acknowledges at the age of eleven that he was already a “cancer” well before any direct “training” under his father’s regimen (i.e., before he was shown hell or met Kaori) further suggests the innate evil within the boy’s core.

Vitality, it is not only Shōzō’s presence that exists in Fumihiro’s unconscious mind (the cellar). The first time Fumihiro enters the basement below the cellar, he sees a bed in the room’s center covered by a white quilt and sheets. Along with bundles of rope, on top of the sheets “a strange amount of old [black] hair was strewn about,” and Fumihiro immediately thinks that “mother is sleeping” there (24-25). The boy can only surmise for what the bed was used, but, just like with his father, even after he leaves the cellar he cannot escape: images of the bed seep out from his unconscious mind in the form of dreams. “Every time I would sleep from then on, the bed in the middle of that gloom

would float into my mind. There were even times when I could hear a woman's voice coming from underground. But there was no way I could actually hear such a thing” (25).

A connection between Kaori and Fumihiko's mother is apparent in the text. Kaori alleviates the dread Fumihiko felt as a child that his mother would forever disappear, thus replacing her absence. She lavishes him with attention and affection. Both Kaori and the mother in Fumihiko's mind are associated with the color white. And finally, through Shōzō's molestation of Kaori, the three characters are placed within what appears to be a perverse Oedipal triangle. To psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1960 [1923]), the Oedipus complex is a fundamental conflict seen in the human psyche. Though it exists in both males and females, only its manifestation in the former is relevant here. A male child becomes jealous after he realizes that his father enjoys an exclusive sexual access to his mother. That jealousy tends to manifest itself as hate for the father, and the child can act out violently towards him. Fumihiko carries that hate to its extreme: he murders Shōzō and locks him away in the cellar. Only after committing patricide do Fumihiko and Kaori first have sex (86), realizing the taboo at the heart of the Oedipal conflict: the male child gains total and exclusive access to his mother.

However, the Oedipalization of Fumihiko remains incomplete; his desire cannot be confined to the “Oedipal orbit” (Deleuze and Guattari 2000 [1972], 52). Although there are strong connections to be made between Kaori and his mother, it is critical to our understanding of his psyche to stress that he never knew his mother. Any possible jealousy Fumihiko could have felt towards his father is not located in an actual mother



figure, but rather in its absence. Kaori may be compassionate and accepting, but there is no textual evidence to suggest Fumihiko equates those behaviors with the figure of the mother. Instead, as mentioned above, Kaori is abstracted into the conceptual (humanistic, but non-human) entity of Romantic Love.

This reading, of course, seems to undercut the reason for bringing Freud into the picture in the first place. However, if *Evil and the Mask* is essentially a text that problematizes “history” in its polyvalence, then, on the contrary, one would expect psychoanalysis to be implicated in the narrative. Freud's theory of the fractured, conflicted portions of the mind as they manifest in displaced, neurotic ways is ultimately one that attempts to describe the developmental history of the mind while, at the same time, making universalist claims of the ubiquity of such formal structures as the Oedipal triangle. That Nakamura does not allow his characters to be subsumed by psychoanalytic theory is indicative of his refusal to subscribe wholesale to its edicts (although we will later have recourse to mention Freud once again).

Soon after Fumihiko kills his father, the warping of his unconscious becomes apparent. The space of the cellar is described as having “deep cracks” in its concrete walls (72), signaling the corruption of Fumihiko's core; objects within the space are animated with their own will as they watch the boy “solemnly in silence” and deny him as he touches their surfaces (93). Outside of the cellar, the “repulsive being of otherworldly evil that made up half” (95) of Fumihiko's being haunts the boy, appearing in his nightmares, in his bed as a hallucinated ghost – and in the mirror. By locking Shōzō away, Fumihiko unlocks the physical characteristics of his father's genes: much to the

horror of both Kaori and Fumihiko, his face begins to progressively look more like Shōzō's. Previously, Kaori had commented that when she looked at Shōzō's face, "it was like all these things, like ancient Kukis and their actions, are all mixed together, and float up to the surface from the depths of his face" (33). Soon, Kaori can no longer reconcile the feelings of love she holds for Fumihiko and the terror with which she reacts when seeing his new countenance. She reveals now that not only did Shōzō order her to strip in front of him, but he also molested her. Kaori's body can no longer react to Fumihiko's touch because for her, his face – his father's face – can only represent sexual violence, along with the totality of the violent lineage of the Kuki family. Inevitably, the two children grow distant. To escape the confused, painful state of their relationship, Kaori moves away to attend a separate high school.

As a being thrust into a context not of his choosing, born to a man whose last wishes were to create unhappiness and discontent in the world, Fumihiko finds himself bound to a life over which he has little control. The legacy of familial circumstances that led to his childhood are of such a weight that even those actions in which he finds joy – namely, his interactions with Kaori – have been scrupulously engineered to a plan outside the possibility of change directed by his will. As a child, still totally dependent upon and beholden to Shōzō, Fumihiko must react to situations deviously constructed exclusively by that ultimate malicious Other – his father.

Family as a historical process becomes evil if we follow the path Nakamura cuts in these sections of the text. It is a lineage both biological and ideological – an escape from either set of characteristics is impossible. Shōzō passes on those characteristics to

Fumihiro – first when he is born of the man, and second when he murders him – the act of which constitutes the boy's being.

This is further complicated by the Kuki's involvement in the Pacific War, as Shōzō refers to it. As mentioned above, the “cancer” custom was created by a man in the Taishō Period. The widespread, systematic colonization of Japan's neighbors was underway at this point, but it had yet to escalate to the fervor seen in the 1930s and 1940s. He fathered a pair of twin boys who both became “cancers,” wreaking havoc as officers in the Japanese military as it pillaged its way across Asia. Furthermore, the Kuki family itself was made up of war profiteers, supporting the war with the manufacture of weapons. Fumihiro's inherited evil is thus implicated in the destruction seen in the Pacific War by way of his ancestor's involvement: war is in his genes.

Kaori, who is outside of the familial system as an orphan, and in any case is abstracted into an ahistorical entity – an avatar of Romantic Love – is terrified by the accumulation of actions and meanings in Shōzō's face; and, after Fumihiro murders Shōzō, physical manifestations of the Kuki lineage accompany the family's ideological disposition within the boy. Within the logic of the text, it is impossible for Kaori (purity, innocence, idealism, outside of history) to be with Fumihiro (pollution, corruption, gritty reality, biological determinism).

### *The Inescapable Past*

Fumihiro lives in a depressive slump after Kaori moves away. He drops out of high school but passes entrance exams for an unspecified university in northeastern Japan (the same area Nakamura himself attended school). His obsession with Kaori

dictates that, with her absent, his life “passed by as if [he] were watching a superfluous series of images” (112). Twice he halfheartedly attempts suicide, but on the third attempt – standing on top of his apartment building, looking over the edge – he decides he wants to see Kaori once more before “ending [his] life as one among the thirty thousand who kill themselves every year in this country” (113).

This moment in the narrative is the first signal that Nakamura has extended the reach of his text *qua* therapeutic technology. Unlike in *Child of Dirt*, whose “ideal reader” would more than likely be an adult male survivor of child abuse, when Nakamura cites the well-known suicide statistic above, he places the entire text within wider discourses of economic depression, social alienation, and general existential malaise within which the statistic is employed. On the one hand, Fumihiro’s life is so outlandish that it makes his character difficult to approach, which makes the kind of solidarity *Child of Dirt* attempts to build between readers less likely. On the other, it is the very fantastical quality of his life that abstracts it and the narrative from the realm of realism, allowing it to become an entity into which a reader suffering from a more general condition than trauma stemming from childhood abuse may cathartically displace their anguish.

Metaphorically, Fumihiro killed himself by jumping off the roof of his apartment building. Years later, at the age of twenty-seven (the same age as the narrator in *Child of Dirt*), he has undergone massive reconstructive surgery of his face in order to illegally take on the identity of a dead man, Shintani Kōichi. This is not to create a new life, but rather his attempt to “extinguish [himself], become nothingness, and to become a

bystander of life” (114).

A closer look at the language employed here will reveal the manner in which Nakamura creates Fumihoro's being. The first verb, *shōmetsu saseru* – a causative noun-verb construction meaning “to make extinguish,” but more broadly “to make die out,” as in extinction; to make something that has thus far existed completely disappear – has as its direct object *jibun* (oneself; one's self), while the agent carrying out the verb is implied to be *boku* (I, the narrator). That which is to be made to completely disappear is Fumihoro's self, his subjectivity, the entirety of his being that leads to sentience. Once this is complete, the totality of his existence will become *mu* (total and utter lack or absence; nothingness proper; also the most well-known Zen parable). Finally, contra to being the protagonist in his own life, Fumihoro will become a *bōkansha* – an observer; a bystander; one who witnesses events, but does not play an active role in their unfolding. Because Kaori is the object of his sole obsession, naturally he would become a bystander in/of/for her life, moving about as if he were “the air that hung around [her]” (114).

The desired outcome of this trio of verbs is ultimately unattainable; all of the events after Fumihoro's surgical transformation are proof. The act of extinguishing the self and its reduction into nothingness was meant to take place before Fumihoro awakens from his surgery; he was supposed to be prepared as a vessel without agency (i.e., without desires, reactions, thoughts, etc.) so as to become purely an observer of Kaori's existence. The following passage, which is the first instance of the text set in the present, betrays the process' malfunction.

The lighting is indistinct and dimly visible.

I'm lying on my back on top of a soft bed. My head isn't working right, perhaps because the anesthetic is still in effect. Rain weakly hits the surface of the window, and that rain, I figure it's making the expressway I can see in the distance cold and wet, too. But inside the room, it's staying warm. I realize that there is still no feeling on the surface of my face.

"So I have a daughter."

The doctor says this to I, who has just opened his eyes.

"She has gotten to the age when she realizes what kind of business I'm in. She keeps bugging me, I want you to fix me, too."

The doctor says this, and laughs softly. (55-56)

In this passage, Fumihiko immediately takes stock of his situation. He analyzes the fact that he can't think straight because of an ongoing event (being anesthetized) that points to a moment *prior* to the self-extinguishing process. He makes the assumption (a mental action based on past experience) that the rain outside the window is similar to that in the distance. He ascertains his position: on a soft bed, within a warm, lighted room. He makes a creative connection (in its basic sense: a creation of meaning that was not there before, necessitating an agent who creates) between the "surface" of the window and the "surface" of his face; a second is made between the "soft" (*yawaraka na*) bed and the doctor's "soft" (*yawarakai*) laugh. Fumihiko understands that first, the man who speaks is a doctor; second, the language in which he speaks is Japanese; and third, he himself has just opened his eyes – that is to say, he acknowledges that prior to his awakening, he was already involved in a temporal relationship with the doctor, mediated by a learned language. Perhaps most importantly, the first words Fumihiko hear are about family, aging, and the desire to change. His desire to make disappear his inherited genetics, the past in which he proved to his father that he was a "cancer," and the attendant "warping" of his core remains

not only unfulfilled, but impossible.

It is with “something akin to despair” that Fumihiko realizes his embodied identity as Shintani shall “feel hunger with no connection to [his] own will” (85). The banal minutia of biological life insists that Fumihiko *as Fumihiko* recognize and own the path along which he walks. But after entering onto the path of transformation, however faulty its mechanisms, it takes more than an empty stomach to bring down the shelter in which he hides his past.

Released from the black market clinic, Fumihiko quickly sets to work. He hires a *tantei* (a private investigator named Sakakibara, but only once in passing in the entire text; otherwise he is referred to as *tantei no otoko*, or simply *tantei*) to track down Kaori and keep her under surveillance. She works as a hostess in a high-end club – one that only sells the company of beautiful women, not their flesh (Nakamura would not allow Kaori, pure as she is, become a prostitute; that is for other characters) – so the investigator has one of his contacts, a woman named Konishi Azusa, begin working at the same establishment in order to become Kaori's friend. They provide information on Kaori's habits, her personality, and short video clips of her everyday life. Fumihiko stays in his newly rented apartment and watches the videos on repeat, obsessing over the smallest of details: how Kaori folds her receipt as she walks out of a convenience store; the timbre of her laugh as she has a drink with Konishi; the white of her form-fitting clothes.

The *tantei* and Konishi learn that Kaori is being targeted by a drug-addicted con man named Yajima. He specializes in getting women addicted to amphetamines to a

point where they will be forced to yield to his demands for large sums of cash just so they can get their fix. After learning that Kaori is sitting on a large inheritance from the dead Kuki Shōzō, Yajima targets her. Fumihiko quickly finds Yajima at a bar and deceives him: if they work together, there are documents at the old Kuki mansion that would prove to be very lucrative if Kaori can be made to retrieve them. Fumihiko gives Yajima a packet of white powder, saying it contains speed “of the highest quality” (130) to get Kaori hooked on. He takes his leave; the chapter ends.

In the following chapter, Yajima is found dead in his car after shooting up the white powder. Fumihiko laced it with potassium cyanide. In a meeting with the *tantei* about Yajima, Fumihiko describes his surroundings:

The scene around me, for some reason it unfolded in perfect clarity. It seemed like the air was becoming transparent, and for a while I gave my self over to that strange sight.

“It seems that this man is without a doubt Yajima. Though they don't know whether he killed himself or was killed by another.”

I start to show a small smile at the investigator's carefully delivered line. He continues.

“I believe it will be impossible for the police to find *this criminal*. They don't know Yajima's true identity, of course, but even with a criminal investigation, they will only find people with grudges against him. After that they'll flush out his regular supply routes, and that will be the end of it.”

“...I agree.” Pause. “Please continue monitoring Kaori.”

The scene around me, it's becoming far too clear. I can see the seams of the sofa on which the investigator sits, the settled dust on the table, so many things as if they were right in front of me.

“This man's death is *very fortunate* for Ms. Kuki.”

The private investigator, he looks at me and says this.

“That is true.” Pause. “A *very fortunate* thing.”

While I'm wondering why it's so quiet, I look at the clock and it's already 2:00. Even the sharp, pointed second hand moving along is too clear (131-32).

Fumihiko gives his self over to the scene around him (*shikai ni jibun wo azukeru*), one that is crisp, precise: he has eliminated a dire threat to Kaori's life, and, at least on



the surface, seems to flex the power of his will. His subjectivity illuminates the scene with potent intentionality, fills it with idiosyncratic meaning that is nevertheless the dialogical product of his conversation with the *tantei*. As the scene unfolds – and it is exactly that, despite Fumihoro’s wishes for the contrary: a theatrical scene in which two characters, each playing the lead role in their respective lives, exchange “carefully delivered line[s]” marked by italics – the sharpness of it becomes excessive, uncomfortable, yet Fumihoro does not consciously grasp the mechanisms of his unconscious that crank the contrast of his surroundings into an almost overwhelming range.

It is in fact a deep-seated, unconscious sense of guilt – created when Fumihoro murdered Yajima – that attempts to reach through the defenses Fumihoro has consciously created in his attempt to completely subsume himself into the role of Shintani. His unconscious extends itself into the scene, details its prohibition of murder on the seams of the sofa, the dust on the table, the hand of the clock. What is striking about this scene is that it shows that Fumihoro can feel guilt over murder. Nominally he does not feel guilty for committing patricide, and even though Yajima proved himself to be just as evil as Shōzō, Fumihoro’s unconscious quickly recoils in admonishment. In effect, then, Nakamura displays his ideological bias against the family unit in favor of the larger social unit governed by law.

In order for the text to suffuse itself with the greatest possibility for cathartic release, the guilt concealed in Fumihoro’s unconscious must speak out so as to be reconciled, and it does so as a new character is introduced to the narrative. Fumihoro

meets a young woman (age twenty-seven – the same as he, Kaori, and the narrator of *Child of Dirt*) named Kyōko at a bar and propositions her: 100,000 yen for a night of sex. She agrees and they go to a love hotel. After sex, Fumihiko takes a nap; according to Kyōko, he cries out in his sleep for forgiveness ““over and over again, like a child”” (169). Similar to when the image of the white bed in the cellar came to Fumihiko as a child, here his unconscious speaks its piece through dreams. Once again Nakamura’s understanding of subjectivity as dialogic is highlighted: only after Kyōko shares her own experience of Fumihiko with him does he begin to understand himself.

Two further details within this scene, connected to Fumihiko’s guilty (un)conscience, are vital to our understanding of the extent of his feelings of remorse. First is Kyōko describing the sleeping Fumihiko as childlike. Fumihiko is infantilized while he sleeps – when the “fundamental basis” of his existence is able to speak over and against his defensive conscious mind – so that it is suggested he does in fact feel guilty over killing his father in his childhood. Fumihiko never consciously acknowledges this, but the weight of the connection is unavoidable.

The second detail in the scene is also an externalization of internal, repressed emotion. On the television is a news broadcast showing a man weeping as his home burns – it has been bombed – while a woman in a veil holds an armless child wearing a Yankees baseball cap. The burning of the building and Fumihiko’s realization of his own guilt are described in parallel: the shelter Fumihiko has constructed around his unconscious – the cellar in which he tried in vain to deny his father and his lineage – crumbles and burns just as the man’s does. This is then complicated by the fact that the

people on the broadcast are victims of senseless military violence. Contextual evidence suggests that the news footage shows the destruction of a war in the Middle East or Africa, and we are reminded that the Kuki family is actively involved in those conflicts. This symbolic connection forces us to become uncomfortable with the position Fumihiko has been trying to inhabit, i.e., purely a victim of his father's machinations. Now, as his unconscious speaks out and his surroundings collude in agreement, he must also be positioned as a victimizer, a cold-blooded killer.

With this scene, the text forever closes off the possibility that Fumihiko's desire to extinguish his self in order to become an observer of life will be fulfilled. In its place is a construction of Fumihiko's self that describes an interiority replete with repressed guilt that bubbles to the surface and becomes external. Kyōko is instrumental in alerting Fumihiko to this "rising" action of remorse – there are several other scenes in which she does so. The guilt he feels for erasing his father's (and Yajima's) material existence is revealed as constitutive of his being when the murdered come back to haunt Fumihiko. If we can understand guilt as an affect based in loss (Shōzō is gone – Fumihiko caused him to be gone – Fumihiko feels guilt) then Fumihiko's being is built upon loss. Contra Shōzō's formulation of the unconscious as an entity created through biological lineage, we can describe Fumihiko's unconscious in *Evil and the Mask* in the Freudian sense as the ego's attempt to deny the loss of an object.

This object does not necessarily have to be a person – it can also be an ideal (Butler 1997, 172). In order for the ego to protect itself from the loss of its object – an object that it has some sort of affective attachment to – it sets up a copy of the object

within itself. This ego-created object has characteristics of the lost object as well as its own psychic agency. In effect, this splits the ego and is what makes possible the distinction between internal and external reality. As Judith Butler points out, Sigmund Freud thus formulated an ego that is first and foremost made possible by the experience of loss (1997, 168-71).

Fumihiko makes it clear in a conversation with his plastic surgeon that his lost ideal object is his past. He says that during the surgery, when he was unconscious, “it was like another me was trying to reason with me by tracing out my memories” of “a time when happiness and despair were all mixed up, and I had my everything” (56). With this admission, Fumihiko’s love for Kaori and his hate for Shōzō are revealed as conflated within his unconscious; the ideality of his childhood is constituted by both happiness and despair, with no imbalance of significance. We recall that after he murdered Shōzō, Fumihiko’s face began to transform, which then led to Kaori leaving the Kuki mansion. In this way, the loss of Shōzō is fused with the loss of Kaori that, combined and presented in a scene where Fumihiko is attempting to extinguish himself, powerfully represent the totality of his personal history. Following this chain of significance leads us to the conclusion that the object Fumihiko has lost – the object that his ego could not stand the loss of – is his past before he murdered his father.

This nostalgia signals to Fumihiko the irretrievability of any portion of his past, and, indeed, the logic of the text prohibits him from entering into a renewed relationship with Kaori. Nakamura is not a pessimist and so writes a sort of hope into *Evil and the Mask*, but if the past is lost – in fact loss itself – then what can take its

place?

Two mutually exclusive epistemes are introduced by way of Fumihiro's interactions with two secondary characters: Kuki Mikihiko, his elder brother and proponent of absolute evil; and a young man who goes by the name Itō, a member of the Japan-based anarchist group simply known as "JL" and cousin to Fumihiro. The two are equally extreme sides of the same nihilistic coin: Mikihiko is utterly selfish, and seeks profit driven by death, while Itō espouses his absurdist philosophy through domestic terrorism. Fumihiro's interactions with both take a similar form within the text: an initial meeting wherein both the secondary character and Fumihiro are positioned as literary devices who move the narrative forward, and a second meeting that contains a climactic conversation where the secondary character shows his true nature. In fine, each secondary character has two major functions: explicating an episteme, then displaying themselves as the quintessential representative of it.

Mikihiko describes the world as a well-regulated system of global war comprised of subsystems dependent upon the status quo for their own perpetuity. He tells Fumihiro "[i]t's for the sake of winning concessions that wars are undertaken. Over the course of human history, the world has always been at war – the concession economy is stimulated while human beings kill each other. And our Kuki family has been intimately involved with war for generations" (214). The Kuki's exploitation of never-ending wartime conditions around the world is thus systematic, with multiple points of articulation – munitions manufacturing, private security forces, reconstruction – all radiating outward from the family.

Mikihiko is described as being eerily similar to Shōzō: hidden in darkness, sitting in a luxuriant sofa, he drinks whiskey and tries to convince Fumihiko that his life will only hold meaning if he fully embraces his status as a Kuki family “cancer” and kills Kaori. “The only goal of your life right now is that moment of destruction,” Mikihiko tells him. “You are under the curse of the warmongering Kukis” (224). He suggests that Fumihiko join him in planning “Japan's 9/11” – provoking an attack from North Korea – and while he explains the magnitude of destruction he foresees, Mikihiko enters into an ecstatic trance. Fueled by his depression, boredom, and contempt for life, he presses Fumihiko to kill him:

“The time is now...this is it, I can see the terminus of depression. Death is not the end, it's an integral part, for me to become myself, an integral part, this utter and absolute evil, this feeling, give it to me, this depression, draw it out, I'll be fulfilled. I'll bathe in death, the pleasure of extinction, that moment, I will, inundate myself, and become me. I will become precisely me, will become death, will become the end itself, perfectly, perfectly, in an instant...it'll soak in, *everything will!* I will connect with all death. I will connect with the death and suffering of all peoples of all ages, I will taste it all” (292-93).

This madness is the true face of evil. Fumihiko is unable to kill his brother at this moment in the scene, yet he cannot articulate any refusal. Rather, it is an embodied denial: he is “unable to move” when offered a knife and his brother's neck, his eyes locked to his brother's rabid gaze because the man reminds him of his father (292). The terror of “seeing” Shōzō again paralyzes Fumihiko because it signals an eruption of the unconscious into waking life, and, since Fumihiko's unconscious is primarily constructed as an ego-created lost object, i.e., his personal history, the unthinkability of the moment is incapacitating. Mikihiko is released from his trance, disappointed, but his chance for death soon arrives. Fumihiko leaves a bomb in the room wherein the two were speaking

and gives Mikihiko the option to simply flip a switch if he wants to live; otherwise, the bomb will detonate in thirty minutes. Fumihiko leaves. Mikihiko does nothing.

Contra Mikihiko's tightly schematized world system, JL as explained by Itō exists to "suppress any and all value" held within the "popular imagination" (189). As he tells Fumihiko, "*Right now, there are so many people who want to scorn anything and everything.* They're unconsciously searching for an object for their contempt. What we're doing is actualizing that basic desire of the collective unconscious" (246). Here, once again, the reach of the text *qua* therapeutic technology extends. Although the group initially pulls what could be considered high-profile, absurdist pranks – threatening to kill politicians in order of baldness unless the Prime Minister imitates a J-pop artist on national television is a favorite – members within the group's splinter cells begin murdering the corrupt elite of society. Itō tells Fumihiko that they don't care about revolution – they just want to have fun watching the world crumble, and eventually the group's actions will cease to make any sense: common folk as well as political and cultural elites will become targets of terror attacks. Contempt is the only belief that the group holds – "contempt for the world, for love and value and everything in existence, and then, contempt for contempt itself" (248).

There are several formal differences in Fumihiko's interactions with Itō (youth, the possibility of change, futurity) than those with Mikihiko (old age clinging to its familiar ways). Whereas Fumihiko is terrified of Mikihiko, just as he was of his father Shōzō, he commiserates with Itō. When Mikihiko reveals his true nature in his ecstatic trance, he does all the talking – Fumihiko is silent, unable to respond. In contrast, Itō and

Fumihiko have productive dialogue wherein the latter positions himself as a caring mentor. And finally, Mikihiko is inextricable from his worldview, while Itō is eventually rehabilitated by Fumihiko.

Itō is also a product of the Kuki “cancer” custom, and was treated similarly to Fumihiko: without love, alienated by his parents, psychically buried under the weight of the past. When, in a meeting with Fumihiko, the latter tells him to give up on JL’s mission to damage human life, he becomes very upset, asking a series of impassioned rhetorical questions.

“Let’s say there’s this guy...from his infancy he’s been raised with beatings, living as if that’s the normal course of the world...let’s say that violence kept being visited upon him, the kind that’s done with no love or hate, just expressionless, as if even kicking him were a pain in the ass, let’s say he’s beaten *because he’s a nuisance* [...] A person who can’t sleep at night because of memories of that violence, the kind of person who’s cut his wrists over and over but can’t die...you can tell him to be considerate of others? You can tell him there are people worse off, think of the starving children in Africa, you have to understand other people’s sadness, like some privileged fuck lazing about on the floor? Those emotions had long since been extinguished in his heart, you can say that to a man like that? [...] You would dare tell that kind of person – one who is always in pain because no matter what he does, he can’t feel anything for others – *that he shouldn’t get in the way of their happiness*” (253-54)?

The anger that bursts out of Itō and into this scene threatens to drown out Fumihiko’s good will toward the young man. He has been betrayed since he was born by all traditional sources of comfort – family, community, humanity – and, unable to feel anything other than contempt, has turned his hate into an active nihilism, one that seeks to annihilate all meaning. Terrorist acts of an absurd quality are what he considers his only recourse to a reality that has treated him as if he were simply something that was in the way. In fine, the meaninglessness to which Itō himself has been reduced by



outside forces is what he desires for all existence: a level epistemological and ontological plane on which all is meaningless and sublime.

Whereas Mikihiro desires to become one with the past (all death of all generations), Itō seeks to become one with the future in which all existence becomes identically meaningless. Although both epistemes are apocalyptic, Nakamura displays his bias through Fumihiro's interactions with Itō. While talking with the young man, "without realizing it, [Fumihiro] sat next to him in the same position" (248) in a show of solidarity instigated by his unconscious; later, Fumihiro says that he can talk with Itō frankly – even about his real identity – because the young man is cut from the same cloth.

In the source language, Fumihiro describes Itō as his "*bunshin*" (336), which describes a single entity that has been split into two or more copies: an alter ego. The strength of the comparison goes beyond a poetic camaraderie: Itō is literally the same as Fumihiro, a textual clone who is simply younger than Fumihiro, and thus has not had the chance to ruminate fully on those things his mentor has already – though just recently – figured out. A secondary meaning of "*bunshin*" is an incarnation of a bodhisattva, that is to say, the form it takes when it appears to human beings in order to teach them the ways of the Buddha. Although this second religious valence of the term is not explicitly developed, it paints Fumihiro as a divine or fantastical being who has come to save people from their wretchedness. It is especially significant that Itō, his incarnation or instrument of his will, is a young man seeking out meaning in life – just like the "ideal reader" of *Evil and the Mask*.

After JL becomes the target of police raids, Fumihiko gives Itō five million yen so that he may escape Tokyo, as well as an email address through which they can stay in contact. Itō accepts, but says that he'll pay back the money eventually; in return, he gives Fumihiko his beanie to "hold on to until we meet again" (337). Fumihiko has become disconnected with every other character from his past, either through death or a refusal to continue on with the relationship, yet he fully expects he and Itō will meet again on friendly terms in the unspecified future.

As for Fumihiko, adherence to any single episteme is impossible. He leaves Japan on a plane with Kyōko, destination unknown, so that he might be able to figure out what he truly believes in. He hints that he might come back to Japan in a few years and turn himself in for murdering Yajima, but this is far from definitive. The narrative ends in a palimpsest of its beginning: Fumihiko starts to tell Kyōko all the facts of his life, starting with his dark childhood.

### *The Mentor Position*

*Evil and the Mask* presents an insistent unconscious similar to that seen in *Child of Dirt*, yet, for the former, its quality is characteristically negative. Fumihiko feels guilt, some of which he can acknowledge (murdering Yajima), but some is left in the realm of irreconcilability (murdering Shōzō). While he tells Kyōko that he may turn himself in for the former, he does not express any desire to somehow repent for killing his father. In this sense, *Evil and the Mask* continues to display Nakamura's aversion to the family unit as that which fails to nurture the next generation; the strength of his feeling is figured in the Kuki's exclusive involvement in war related business.

And yet Nakamura writes an ambivalence into the text concerning how we as readers should feel about Shōzō. There is a moment late in the narrative where Kaori tells Fumihiko that as a child, when she would be summoned to Shōzō's study, he would often weep in front of her (317). Fumihiko does not react to this new information, but how are we to react? Could it be that Shōzō privately struggled with his own status as a "cancer," or with the way he treated Fumihiko, and that he felt remorse?

Even if we are meant to feel some sort of pity for Shōzō, Nakamura does not want us to forgive the man. He, unlike Fumihiko and the narrator of *Child of Dirt*, does not have the existential wherewithal to break out of the structures that ostensibly constrain him. He cannot become a positive example within the therapeutic mode of the text of a character who inverts the terms in "essence precedes existence" in order to become an authentic existential being. In complete opposition to *Child of Dirt*, there is an attempt to reconcile the narrator's hate for the father figure by, in the last instance, recognizing that the father – no matter how abusive or evil – is, too, a human being with his own history. That does not mean we should respect him, but it does open up the possibility of forgiveness and the catharsis that follows.

Nakamura seems to be following advice from post-war literary giant Ōe Kenzaburō in *Evil and the Mask*. The occasion for this advice was a talk between the two authors after Ōe handpicked Nakamura's novel *The Thief (Suri)*, published 2009) for the Ōe Kenzaburō Prize. One aspect of *The Thief* that Ōe felt was well-constructed and had the possibility of "becoming a new theme" for Nakamura was the narrator's mentor-like relationship with a young boy (Ōe and Nakamura 2010, 63-64).

The same sort of relationship obtains between Fumihiro and Itō: the former teaches the latter, passes on knowledge about how to live. Whereas in *The Thief* the narrator teaches the boy how to steal without getting caught (a means of survival), Fumihiro tells Itō that “perhaps it’s exactly because I live this kind of life [the life of a “cancer,” the same as Itō] that I’ll keep going, at the very least just experiencing the world until I grow old and die” (336). This is less practical advice to be sure, but it works to open Itō’s mind to the possibility of change for the better. It is a guardedly optimistic message, but it is delivered by someone who has surpassed the pain of the past, and Itō seems to accept it. It’s quite possible that Nakamura will continue writing these sorts of relationships into his texts.

It is striking that Nakamura would make his narrator escape from Japan in order to deal with his problems. It would seem that it's impossible for Fumihiro to come to grips with the Kuki family, its support of regional and global war, and his own inherited ideological dispositions while in the country that initiated at least some of those conflicts. His double identity as victim and victimizer is indelibly linked to his Japanese heritage, yet he cannot solve the issues that make up his core if he is in Japan.

I doubt that Nakamura is suggesting that the problem of war guilt in Japan cannot be solved by the Japanese. Generations of authors, scholars, artists, politicians, musicians, and everyday people have contended with the meaning of the war vis-à-vis the nation, and continue to interrogate, question, or attend to its historical significance in varying degrees of intensity. At its core, *Evil and the Mask* is not a one-sided condemnation of the Japanese government or its citizens' role in the war, but rather a

negotiation between the brute existence of history as it is written into a national psyche, and the possibility of a reconciliation of guilt experienced at the level of the individual. Neither is the text meant to extend its handling of history to include in its domain all Japanese citizens – Nakamura writes in an existentialist mode that simply serves as one example of thematic engagement among a multitude of methods.

What's more, Nakamura as an author is not interested in what the nation or the citizenry can or cannot do. Instead, in *Evil and the Mask* he defines two extremes – an unadulterated continuation of extant structures, or the total destruction of them – in order to create a conceptual middle ground in which the individual might be able to escape from the dizzying heights of structure and ideology, and regain the embodied sense of existential importance accompanying action undertaken in mundane situations. For Fumihiro, that means leaving Japan, but that answer is his alone. The reader is first asked to weigh their own opinions and circumstances against those given in the text, and then make a decision on their own.

## CHAPTER IV

### SEXIST EXISTENTIALISM

Many of the characters across the two texts analyzed in this thesis share similar circumstances, habits, and relationships. Both narrators and their respective love interests are all victims of tragic childhoods with which they continue to struggle as adults. For the narrators, in order to displace the oppressive, abusive power being enacted through them as children, both drop lizards and other small living things off of cliffs (2005a, 41-42; 2010, 25-26). This gives them a semblance of control over their situations (they become wielders of godlike authority), but also, in a poignant sense, it helps them understand the kind of violent relationship they had with their caretakers: the narrators become the ones who arbitrarily sacrifice small, helpless creatures.

The narrators' relationships with Sayuko and Kyōko are both based on the women's need for financial support. The former has no job or savings, and essentially bums around random men's apartments until they get sick of her (2005a, 17). Early in the narrative she comments that if the narrator does not go to work and earn enough money to support them both, she'll have to find another place to stay (2005a, 19). Kyōko on the other hand has incurred substantial enough debt with unsavory people that she fears she will be killed (2010, 162). Fumihiro pays to have sex with her on the night that they meet, and Kyōko agrees because she figures she would have to work as a prostitute to pay off her debt anyway. When she receives the money from Fumihiro, she suggests that what he offers is "too much for a woman like me" (2010, 170). She begins staying at his apartment, becoming, like Sayuko, a kept woman; Fumihiro later gives her

enough money to pay off her debt.

In effect, both women begin their relationships with their respective narrators as prostitutes and only gradually become something more. For Kyōko in particular, there are no other options than prostitution, yet even then she does not value herself. In both texts the narrator is unconcerned about money – indeed, Fumihiko has such a large inheritance from his father’s death that he doesn’t even bat an eye at giving Kyōko a million yen (2010, 237). The women are subordinated on the basis of economic class with the male narrators wielding financial power over them.

Both Sayuko and Kyōko make operational the resolution of their respective narrator's primary existential problematic (existential suicide for the narrator of *Child of Dirt*, and an escape from obsession with Kaori for Fumihiko) by way of their love. More precisely, the love each narrator feels for his romantic interest in part creates the circumstances in which he faces his moment of narratological climax. But whereas Sayuko and the narrator of *Child of Dirt* gradually grow closer by way of a number of dialogue-driven scenes wherein they express their affection for each other, Fumihiko and Kyōko's relationship grows as a series of accidents.

At first, Fumihiko feels the need to hide his identity from Kyōko, and does not want her to be able to contact him after their first sex scene. But, drunk and horny, he calls her cell phone, allowing her to see his number; he thinks to himself that it's an “error” rather than his conscious decision to do so (2010, 192). He then takes her back to his apartment, which she considers strange – isn't he trying to hide? “It's true,” he thinks. “I've grown lax lately” (2010, 197). This series of mistakes or errors are made

unconsciously (and as we've seen in the previous chapter, Kyōko is also privy to Fumihiro's unconscious as it speaks out as he sleeps), which suggests that at his core, Fumihiro desires the comfort of an intimate relationship with her. Ultimately, however, the accidental quality of their relationship makes it comparatively blasé to that of the narrator of *Child of Dirt* and Sayuko since they both continually make conscious decisions to grow closer. It is that very quality that forestalls the possibility of performing an in-depth analysis of how Nakamura writes Fumihiro and Kyōko's relationship.

On the other hand, Sayuko is a somewhat more complicated character, and thus the narrator's engagement with her is similarly made to be more complex. Since Sayuko saw her dead baby after her miscarriage, she is unable to feel anything during sex, and thus does not participate in the act. When the narrator does have sex with her, he describes it as “my sex” (2005a, 18). Sayuko encourages him to think of her as a “thing” rather than a person when he does have “his” sex, saying that, “It's boring, right? Sleeping with a woman like this. Don't worry about it and just fuck me. Like a thing, just tell yourself I'm a thing” (2005a, 58).

What the narrator takes as Sayuko's sexual anesthesia is described as *fukanshō*, using ideographs that might be translated as “symptoms showing the inability to feel” (2005a, 18). Important to our understanding of her condition is that the middle ideograph, *kan*, is implicated in both sensual and emotional “feeling” – it is not just sex that Sayuko cannot feel, but also emotional engagement with the narrator in a more general sense. Her reckless drinking further indicates that she does not feel much of



anything for her world other than grief and aversion. The third ideograph, *shō*, indicates the appearance of symptoms while relegating the existence of the actual dis-ease to a stratum barely out of the signifying reach of *fukanshō*. That is to say, the core conflict(s) that drive Sayuko to alcoholism cannot be engaged with when the narrator uses the term to describe her circumstances: treating the symptoms does not treat the cause.

While *Child of Dirt* is, for the most part, a text that does not evolve its main topic very quickly, instead opting for a dramatic climax that escalates suddenly, the narrator's relationship with Sayuko changes gradually. During one scene of “his sex” the narrator stops and apologizes to Sayuko, saying that he “can't justify” what he's doing with her (2005a, 58). He is unable to explain himself very well, so the vagueness of his sentiment expands to include “his sex” with her, how he treats her otherwise, the lack of engagement he has with her well-being, et cetera. “I'm not doing anything for you,” he says, and she suggests that he is worrying about her, a novel experience for both of them (2005a, 59). The narrator's sense of guilt becomes one of duty once Sayuko is hospitalized after she drunkenly falls down a staircase. Visiting her at her sickbed, he says that he will “stay with [her] no matter where it leads [them],” and that he will take care of her hospital bills (2005a, 71-72). Thus he begins in earnest to work as a taxi driver and is attacked, signaling the text's climax. Indirectly, then, the narrator's revelation in the scene wherein he escapes from his attackers is indebted to his love for Sayuko, but it further cements his financial control of her life.

There is evidence that Sayuko, too, comes to love the narrator – or at the very least comes to see him as someone on whom she can rely, someone she can trust –

when she, still required to use crutches to walk, makes trips to a convenience store outside of the hospital in order to get things for him once he, too, is hospitalized after he crashes his taxi (2005a, 111-112). But the importance of that love is only found in how the narrator engages with it – after all, this is not a story about Sayuko, but instead how the narrator finds subjective meaning in his relationship with her.

The most loving moment between the two occurs at night when they are alone in his hospital room, and it demonstrates the salvific nature of the relationship. “Moon beams shone through the window, alighting on the crying face of Sayuko. From the adjacent sickroom, I can hear a child's playful voice. The moon was lovely, and so, too, the child's voice rose high and clear and echoed beautifully” (2005a, 110). The child's playful and echoing voice is an externalization of the narrator's own joy at putting to rest his tragic past (in which play and joy were impossible concepts). Importantly, the child is in another room, unseen and unknowable, so in more precise terminology the narrator is projecting upon it his fantasy of a childhood wherein play and joy were not only possible, but existed in such vibrancy so as to be unquenchable even in a hospital – a place of healing, yes, but also one of sickness, pain, and death that the narrator “abhors” (2005a, 32). Concomitantly, the narrator projects his feeling of escape from the past onto the joy of the child's voice. The qualitative equivalence made between the child's voice (which is itself equated with the moon) and the moonlight falling on Sayuko's impassioned face expresses how the narrator's emotional content reaches out to paint itself on her figure, making her an integral part of its existence. As the child's voice echoes, Sayuko tells the narrator that “they aren't here any more. The people who

attacked you, they aren't here any more" (2005a, 110). The narrator feels that "Sayuko's words were tender and echoed warmly, as if they held within them actual heat" (2005a, 110). By following the textual chain of significance, her heartfelt words of compassion echo so as to join the significance the narrator has projected onto the echo of the child's voice in the next room; the child's echo was previously equated with the moonlight, ergo Sayuko's echoing words are, too. What's more, the moonlight falls on Sayuko's impassioned face: moon – child's joy – narrator's joy – Sayuko's words – narrator's love. In this tightly knit scene, the tenderness contained in Sayuko's words cleanses the narrator's past of its inhumanity and absurdity, and elevates his present moment into a joyful, elated state that expresses the breadth of future possibility.

Nakamura further strengthens the salvific importance of the narrator's love for Sayuko in the last sentence of the text by having him plan to "visit the grave of Sayuko's child, who had been unable to make any decisions or requests" of its own (2005a, 116). It is possible that the narrator plans to give his respects to Sayuko's stillborn child so as to express his appreciation for Sayuko's role in "putting to rest" his own tragic childhood, but also to become a symbolic placeholder for the dead child: it could make no choices, but the narrator can; it could not live to love and be loved by its mother, but the narrator can. In fine, the narrator's love for Sayuko becomes the existential basis upon which he will build his future.

The manner in which Nakamura writes the narrator's relationship with Sayuko is far from unproblematic. For example, the causal connection created between Sayuko's miscarriage and her inability to feel was ridiculed by Akutagawa committee member

Yamada Emi. She writes, “Miscarriage is the cause of *fukanshō*. Sounds exactly like what a young man would think. It's probably that the protagonist is just terrible [at sex]” (Yamada 2005, 383). And indeed, as the narrator laments, “I made every effort to try to change her *fukanshō*, but the result was always the same” (2005a, 18). At this early point in the narrative “every effort” was undoubtedly contained within the physical realm, but the question of whether the narrator has the capability to turn on his lovers aside, the causal connection mentioned above posits a direct relationship between the reproductive power of the female body and its ability to become aroused. That is to say, female sexuality exists in subordination to a woman's ability to give birth: when the latter fails, so does the former. This reading collapses Sayuko as a biological creature (sex) into Sayuko as a female human (gender), so that she as a character is essentialized, made an object (“Like a thing, just tell yourself I'm a thing”) that either reproduces biologically or is vastly devalued, relegated to becoming parasite-like and totally unproductive in any sense – biologically, economically, culturally.

This paints Nakamura as a sexist, possibly even a misogynist, and there are many more problematic aspects of his texts when women are involved. The following quote from *Evil and the Mask*, though lengthy, deserves our attention. In it, Fumihiro has just recently undergone plastic surgery – his attempt to destroy his past self and create a new one – and steps outside of his apartment onto the sidewalk.

A thin dog tied to a leash approaches. Next to it a child walked, and a woman wearing a hat was there. The dog comes close to me with its tongue hanging out, and with a smile I crouch to scratch its neck. I smiled because that's what the dog desired. The child standing next to me pulled on my jeans. For some reason the child continues to hold on to my jeans. “Kai,” the woman said. “Kai, stop that. Jeez, I'm sorry.”

The woman swept her gaze to my face. The uncannily well-proportioned face of Shintani. Leaving the smile I gave the dog on my face, I look at the woman.

“Is this your boy?”

I said this, thinking that in truth the normal question would be about the dog.

“Yes. Come on Kai, I'm truly sorry.”

“You don't look like you'd have a child.”

As I stand up I look fixedly in the woman's eyes. Thinking that maybe women start to apologize often after having kids. The woman was slightly taken aback, and although the light of caution shone in her eyes, I didn't think she felt uncomfortable. The reason I said that was because just before, this woman in front of me had looked bored as she walked. “Those clothes, they're cute,” I said. “They suit you well. You're beautiful.”

Conscious of the fact that I was starting to get off topic, I waited for some agitation or regret to appear within me.

“Huh?”

“You don't look like you have children. You are truly beautiful. Particularly your eyes.”

The woman looked slightly afraid. There is no change within me whatsoever (2010, 85-87).

This entire scene is filled with disdain towards the woman and her child. The leashed dog is the first image to be described, followed by the child and finally the mother, connecting them all in a “chain” of significance that suggests bondage. The smile he gives the dog is the exact smile he gives to the woman, and for the same reason: he makes the presumption that they want him to smile at them, to show them attention. He presumes, with his stunning good looks, that he has the right to tell this woman, a total stranger, not only that she is beautiful and her clothes suit her, but that *exactly because* she is beautiful she doesn't seem the “type” to have children. The child (a boy, designated by how the mother attaches *-kun* to his name) immediately locks on to the narrator – perhaps suggesting that he is searching for affection from a male father figure, which would, under the prevailing episteme in Japan, mark the woman as

somehow failing to be a “good mother” – but he is without language, without expression, and thus without substance. The narrator asks about him as if he were a pet, then surmises that all women become apologetic after having children, as if they were in the wrong and thus socially subordinate to those around them – even a stranger on the street.

Even if we read this scene within the context of the entire narrative, i.e., Fumihiko is “born again” and attempts to create a new self that isn't really a self at all, but instead something that observes, making this the first time he is able to test his new identity; even in such a context, when we later learn that Fumihiko has not changed internally, he's the same old Fumihiko, and we can look back on this moment with the woman, child, and dog and perhaps assume that Nakamura wanted Fumihiko to do something antagonistic so as to later show that he is in fact *not* antagonistic; even if we allow those possibilities to obtain, the fact remains that Nakamura wrote his narrator in to a misogynistic scene wherein he aggressively asserts his perceived dominance over the woman, then feels nothing as she visibly reacts with fear.

Although I defended *Child of Dirt* for not having any well-developed Other as an effect of the narrator's tragic past, I do not do the same with *Evil and the Mask*. Nakamura has made the decision to erase the possibility of female subjectivity from his writing. Women are either idealized, stalked and obsessed over (Kaori), failed mothers (Sayuko), or prostitutes (Kyōko and Sayuko). Nakamura has an active disdain for women as he names them: Sayuko is written with ideographs that mean “lukewarm water girl,” while Kyōko's name means “deferential/reverential girl” (she shows deference, of

course, to Fumihiko for “saving” her from her debt collectors). In all cases, the women are not allowed room within the text to become anything other than objects that function always with respect to the narrator and his need for love. They are never independent or described as having anything resembling their own subjectivity. For example, at the end of *Evil and the Mask* as Fumihiko and Kyōko ascend on an airplane bound for some foreign country, the former begins to tell the latter his life story. Nakamura doesn't write Kyōko's (non)reaction to Fumihiko's tale because it is already written in to how she functions in the narrative as a source – but not a recipient – of comfort and intimacy. She is not a character. She is a conveyor belt used to move the plot forward. She is the vacuous space on which Fumihiko inscribes *his* narrative.

Both Fumihiko's and the *Child of Dirt* narrator's love are effectively the same phenomenon, defined by one term – exclusivity – that exists in three valences: monogamy, heterosexuality, and a overwhelming bias in power that favors the narrator. It may come as a surprise that Nakamura, who positions himself as a mentor for a generation of disaffected, alienated youth, falls back on the very conservative notion of a male-dominated, heteronormative romance being the key to happiness. In the article touched upon briefly in the introduction of this thesis (“Puerile Criminals”), Nakamura denigrates those who resort to wanton violence as a means of expression. We recall that Katō Tomohiro – the man who was responsible for the Akihabara Massacre of 2008 – stated that his lack of a girlfriend was one of the primary reasons for his violence; his copycats were similarly discontented.

Nakamura responded by suggesting a deeper engagement with high culture and

“pure literature” would show such criminals how vapid their opinions truly are. Indeed, his characters are fond of mentioning all the “dark” works of literature they read – in *Child of Dirt*, the narrator says that after reading those kinds of books, “I get stuck thinking about various things, at the very least that it's not just me who thinks it's hard getting by in this world” (2005b, 73); Fumihiro tells Kyōko that he feels like he should “widen the breadth” of his own thinking after reading good literature (“mostly foreign classics” in this case) (2010, 196). But the contents of those works are not described, and neither are the connections Nakamura believes exist between his texts and those. Does Nakamura assume his readers will go out and buy *Crime and Punishment* if his characters mention the title?

The big philosophical takeaway Nakamura wants his readers to grasp is that “existence precedes essence,” and that they, as agents with their own will, have the ability to make radical choices for the betterment of their own lives. And yet he, with no sign of irony, relies on something as dull as heteronormative romance to be that “necessary something” for his narrators to be happy. What’s more, the sexism leveled at and the overall disdain for women in the two texts analyzed here alienates half of his audience from the very therapy he offers!

While this might not be unexpected in patriarchal Japan at a time when the government seems to be doing as much as it can to boost fertility rates, in effect Nakamura reveals to us that he is not interested in an existentialist critique of Japanese society in its conception of sex and gender, despite his characters repeatedly bemoaning their existence within that society. Nakamura displays the horrid truth of child abuse



with some sophistication, yes, but glaringly absent from the two texts analyzed here is any indication of a future for any of the characters that contains a society that is not an oppressive patriarchy. The narrators simply use their love interests as vessels into which they pour their own existential grief, a vague transformation takes place, and then the narrators' primary problematic is solved, never the circumstances that allowed the problematic to come into existence in the first place.

In Chapter III, I gave an overview of how Nakamura in *Evil the Mask* explores different epistemes through his characters' conversations. When Fumihiro speaks with his cousin Itō, he gives the young man advice. Sayuko has the same advice for the narrator in *Child of Dirt*. If we are to read this advice as that which the author wants to impart to his readership, then it has the disappointing possibility of falling outstandingly flat: despite all of the terrible things that have happened, and despite no look to the future, "I suggest you live" (2010, 255).

Nakamura is still producing a book-length publication per year, so if he can continue this pace, he is yet in his early career. Further research into his more recent texts – *Cult X* (2014), a short story collection entitled *A* (2013), for example – will show how – and if – he has attempted to further extend the reach of his therapy. Perhaps those texts begin to treat women like human beings.

### *Concluding Remarks*

This thesis has sought to elucidate three major characteristics found within Nakamura Fuminori's early works: a therapeutic mode of reading, the elaboration of the

mind-body system known as “the human,” and the nascent sexism found in the two texts analyzed – *Child of Dirt*, and *Evil and the Mask*. The narrator in the former, his being defined through torturous child abuse, was influenced by his unconscious in a positive way, leading to his ecstatic and gripping decision to commit what I have called existential suicide. In the latter, Fumihiro found his unconscious to be suffused with guilt over killing his father and Yajima the drug addict, and thus his climactic moment in the narrative was grief-ridden. While the therapeutic possibilities of *Child of Dirt* are relatively contained to a certain population – adult survivors of child abuse – those parameters were expanded in *Evil and the Mask* to cover all of the disillusioned and downtrodden youth of Japan. It is unfortunate that women within the two texts are treated as secondary characters, at best, and objects of disdain, at worst, and it is my hope that Nakamura continues to sharpen his craft in order to provide female subjectivity an equal place in his texts. For if he truly desires to write literature that revitalizes within the downtrodden “the feeling that life goes on” (Nakamura 2012, 193), and if his position as a “defensive midfielder” (Jin’no 2012) in the literary field is to be maintained, he must write for everyone – not just men.

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