

Consumed Bodies and Unhinged Women. The dystopian worlds of Murata Sayaka's *Seimeishiki* (*Life Ceremony*, 2013) and Ono Miyuki's *Karada o uru koto* ("Selling the Body," 2020)

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Abstract This paper investigates the representation of bodies in two contemporary Japanese works, namely Murata Sayaka's *Seimeishiki* (生命式 *Life Ceremony*, 2013) and Ono Miyuki's *Karada o uru koto* (身体を売ること "Selling the Body," 2020). Both novellas are set in the future and share the trope of the 'uncanny,' heightened through the transgression of boundaries thanks to the presence of what I refer to as 'consumed bodies,' and female protagonists as an 'unhinged woman,' the anti-heroine interpreted as a feminist icon recently emblazoned in social networks. In *Life Ceremony*, the Japanese government has approved anthropophagy as a social practice; in "Selling the Body," healthy flesh bodies are sold to survive in polluted environments and replaced by robotic ones. Present anxieties concerning the control over bodies and their reproductivity, as well as the fear of objectification are expressed through the practices of cannibalism and cyberization. Consequently, readers are forced to rethink the human nature and ethics in a posthuman dialectic within a hyper-capitalistic society.

Keywords Murata Sayaka; Ono Miyuki; dystopian fiction; Posthuman; body

1. Introduction

It is becoming increasingly common for contemporary Japanese literature to portray societies in parallel or future worlds where people are coping with post-disaster issues such as depopulation or climate change, newly institutionalized sexual policies, including compulsory reproduction and control over citizens' bodies, larger social divides, and other unexpected trajectories that disrupt established frameworks. Due to the massive number of these kinds of narratives, Saitō Minako (2018: 222) refers to the 2010s as the 'era of dystopian novels,' the majority of which, as Ishida Hitoshi (2023: 43) notes, should be considered queer, post-disaster fictions that, borrowing Jordi Serrano-Muñoz's (2021: 1347) words, are "politically conscious of current challenges." These

correspond to what a large number of critics has called ‘critical dystopias,’ fictions that, alongside their utopian counterparts, are “always occasioned by and related to the historical, political, and cultural atmosphere in which a writer is living and working” (Baccolini 2012: 37).

As Mohr (2005: 31) explains, one of the major reservoirs from which dystopian novels draw is that of technological advances and their consequent impact on attitudes toward the state. She further argues that, among the classical features of this literary genre, it is possible to list “monotonous conformity, surveillance, denunciation, and the degradation of humans to object status,” which “might also extend to the artificial mass production of humans according to selective genetic criteria,” as well as to other sources of control (Mohr 2005: 33).

In Japan, the tradition of dystopian narrative seeks its roots in the Meiji period (Napier 1996: 179); after making its initial appearance, this type of fiction is outclassed by other genres, such as realism,¹ before experiencing a renaissance in the 1920s, which was aided and driven by the spread of the then-emerging mass literature as well as scientific and technological advancements. The ‘technological nightmare’ appears to be one of the major concerns of Japanese dystopias of the modern era, less oriented, at that time, to the crush of the individual will (Napier 1996: 184). Consequently, Japanese dystopias are best interrelated with science fiction, an “appropriate vehicle for dealing with both problems and potential of modernity” (Napier 1996: 185) for defamiliarizing the experience of the present.

Defamiliarization, side by side with representations of the uncanny (which, indeed, rises when familiar tropes merge with unfamiliar ones), fuel literary visions of new sites where the rules of the writer’s present are subverted and new orders are drawn, and serve “as a critique of and an alternative to the conventions of our own world” (De Fren 2009: 414). Specifically, defamiliarization and representations of the uncanny as literary techniques find their most fertile ground in the breakdown of hegemonic categories and cultural practices, and the blurring of fixed boundaries with their subsequent loss of the self, one hand, and serve questioning the possibility of new

¹ According to Susan J. Napier, one explanation for dystopian fiction, namely totalitarian dystopian narratives, disappearing in the prewar period might be censorship: “By the time the dystopian tradition was becoming established in the West [...], the Japanese government was becoming increasingly concerned with politically suspect fiction” (1996: 183). At the same time, she argues that “another possible reason for the absence of dystopian visions of a totalitarian government may have been the paradoxical influence of the *shishōsetsu* (“I”-novel) on formerly politically committed writers (1996: 184).

subjectivities and structures, on the other. In Japan, they have been investigated in literature, especially during the modern era. As Nakamura Miri contends,

The binary of the normal and the abnormal was constantly being undermined in modern Japan, the categories were continually reestablished and rewritten. It is the articulation of this anxiety – the uncertainty about whether or not the normative binary could be sustained – that lies at the crux of the uncanny. (Nakamura 2015: 6)

Nakamura's analysis focuses on the new anatomies crafted by modern sciences imported by the West which contributed to creating what she refers to as 'monsters,' namely abnormal bodies depicted in literary texts that materialized the fears and apprehensions of that precise historical context. "Through scientific discourses such as hygiene, reproductive science, and eugenics," argues Nakamura (2015: 1-2), Japanese modern citizens understood for the first time "their bodies as collectively constituting the nation, as something inseparable from the national body politic." Consequently, from that moment, binaries such as human/nonhuman, live/dead, visible/invisible, or biological/mechanical, and their becoming blurred, came to be widely explored in speculative fiction as body anxieties.

Taking the human body – in the specific, the female body – as the principal site of literary inspection, the late Meiji, Taishō and early Shōwa periods sought a fascination with dystopian, or sci-fi, narratives. "Meiji Japan was plagued by the invisibility of disease" (namely Colera), and the body became "more fluid and less knowable," so that people "engaged in the impossible attempt to draw stable borders around it" (Nakamura 2015: 19). Taishō Japan witnessed "the rise of what is now called 'doppelgänger literature' (*bunshin shōsetsu*)" (Nakamura 2015: 71), while the following era was obsessed with mechanical objects and bodies (Nakamura 2015: 102). At the same time, both eras were marked by "the equation of modern industrial life with an anti-human world" (Napier 1996: 185), and "the lack of control over one's fate, a sense of omnipresent powers, and the increasing awareness of technology's dehumanizing effects, achieved and intense encapsulation" (Napier 1996: 188).

Bodily apprehensions return in speculative fiction after World War II, when due to the presence of *hibakusha*, the atomic bomb survivors, the body "became the object of palpable contagion fears and reproductive anxieties," scarring and haunting which was supposed to be the "healthy imperial body" (Dumas 2018: 5).

Given this context, it is not surprising that speculative fiction dealing with body anxieties as a trope, and the defamiliarization and the uncanny as a motif, reemerged in the past decades with a new surge starting from Fukushima Daiichi incident, straightened by the Covid-19 pandemic. The declining birthrate, the subsequent reproductive policies endorsed by the government, the fears of nuclear contamination of the past decades, and the most recent uncertainty brought by virus and environment contamination, are still part of what is commonly referred to as ‘posthuman precarity’ (Halberstam & Livingston 1995), resonate through the dystopian writing of these years.²

Saitō Minako (2018) and Endō Toshiaki (2019) provide relatively exhaustive lists of the most recent Japanese dystopian works, each organizing them according to different criteria. However, both works suggest that in most cases the human body is the main area of investigation of the dystopian novels query, and that the themes that alternate within them are once again those of surveillance, control, power, conformity, and of war. Moreover, just as happened within other countries’ literatures, Japanese speculative fiction has witnessed an increasing number of women writers who use “the stock conventions of dystopia” to “expose their interrelation with questions of gender hierarchy, biological reproduction, and women’s rights; in short, with sexual policies” (Mohr 2005: 36).

Though bearing similarities to classical dystopias, works that emerged in the past decades do not show the canonical ending “with the victory of the totalitarian state over the individual” (Baccolini 2012: 39), but rather share a new feeling of hope offering new agencies to their protagonists (Serrano-Muñoz

² Dystopian, feminist, and speculative fiction writing’s recent success is also proven by the many articles or collections dealing with those topics published in these years. For instance, the spring 2021 number of the literature magazine *Bungei* has a special collection of essays and short novels entitled *yume no disutopia* (“Dystopian dream”). The same number contains Sakuraba Kazuki’s dystopian work *Bundan sarete iku sekai de – 2020 nen 1 gatsu – jūgatsu Higashi Tōkyō dystopia nikki* (“In the Dividing World – Higashi Tokyo Dystopian Diary from January to October of 2020”), prologue of the subsequent *Tōkyō dystopia nikki* (“Tokyo Dystopian Diary,” 2021). Sakuraba renewed her interest in the genre writing *Kanojo wa iwanakatta subete no koto* (“All that she didn’t say,” 2013), a work settled in a parallel, dystopian Japan. Among the post-Covid dystopian literature, however, the most cited novel seems to be Kanera Hitomi’s *Ansosharu disutansu* (“Unsocial Distance,” 2021). A collection that depicts Tokyo’s everyday dystopian life during the pandemic has also been published, in the form of a collective diary, under the title *Pandemikku nikki* (“Pandemic Diary,” 2021), written by Murata Sayaka, Ogawa Yōko, Kanai Mieko, Kakuta Mitsuyo, Matsuda Aoko, Kawakami Hiromi, Usami Rin, Tawada Yōko, Imamura Natsuko, and Yu Miri, just to name a few well known overseas. Further insights into the connections between the corona virus and Japanese literature are also collected in Qiao (2023).

2021: 1349) – for this reason called critical or ‘open-ended dystopias’ (Baccolini 2012: 39). Accordingly, Ishida (2023: 43) shares with Saitō the idea that most contemporary dystopian fiction is the result of the aftermath of the triple Fukushima disaster. He argues that it “contains almost all the problems of contemporary society,” and that the origin of the recent proliferation of ‘open-ended dystopias’ should be found in the fact that,

dystopia is a world we find abhorrent and unacceptable in reality, but ‘reality’ itself is now a dystopia. Contemporary dystopian fiction depicts a future where this abhorrent ‘reality’ is established as if it were a utopia. If so, could this be considered a form of queer literature? (Ishida 2023: 43)

Ishida additionally explains that it is not surprising that most of the writers who create queer, post-earthquake dystopias are women, as “it is necessary to practice ethics of care that recognize the existence of alternative voices” (Ishida 2023: 44). These queer, and/or feminist speculative fictions, use bodies, with their fragilities, as tools to dive into the queries of contemporaneity, challenging in particular the male-centered heterosexual (patriarchal) society.

This study proposes two close readings of the dystopian scenarios depicted in Murata Sayaka’s *Seimeishiki* (生命式 *Life Ceremony*, 2013) and Ono Miyuki’s *Karada o uru koto* (身体を売ること “Selling the Body,” 2020).³ Despite providing two completely different visions, both novellas share a serious concern with the future nourished by discontent and discomfort with present reality and use defamiliarization and normalization of the uncanny to criticize Japanese government’s policies. In Murata and Ono’s futures, human bodies embody two of the main fears of the human being engaged with the dismantling of bodily borders: anthropophagy and mechanization. For this reason, I refer them to as ‘consumed bodies:’ they are consumed in the sense of being eaten in the case of *Life Ceremony* and consumed as doomed to erosion by new ‘invisible monsters’ such as contamination or virus in the case of “Selling the Body.” Nevertheless, I argue that broadly speaking, these bodies are consumed by strictly hetero-cis-gender, patriarchal, and hyper-capitalistic society, the common denominator under most new speculative fiction written by women. Lastly, I shall consider that the female protagonists of these novellas are

³ Murata Sayaka’s English translations, including those quoted in this paper, are made by Jinny Tapley Takemori. Since for the moment, no English translation is available of Ono Miyuki’s works, all translations here are mine. The dates of publication that appear after each title here refer to their first publication in Japanese; in the case of Murata’s quotations, the year refers to the English translation’s publication.

reminiscent of the ‘unhinged woman’ trope present in several fictions, movies, and other products of popular culture all over the globe, a sort of anti-heroine who, far from reflecting a perfection, mirrors a new ideal of feminist icon.

2. Corpses that matter. Murata Sayaka’s *Life Ceremony*

Young women gripped by a strong skepticism towards the ethics that characterize their realities, questioning what is normal, or right, and what is not, is the recurring literary trope in the dystopian works written by Murata Sayaka. Despite her early novels such as *Junyū* (“Breastfeeding,” 2003), *Hakobune* (“The Arch,” 2010), or *Shiroiro no machi no, sono hone no taion no* (“Of Bones, of Body Heat, of Whitening City,” 2012) are set in present-day Japan and deal mainly with young girls in the coming-of-age who are in search of their identities, from the past ten years Murata has been portraying future scenarios where young women protagonists doubt their suitability within the reality they face. It is within this new trajectory that her dystopian works are born. The novella *Satsujin shussan* (“Birth Murder,” 2014), together with the long novels *Shōmetsu sekai* (“Vanishing World,” 2015) and *Chikyūseijin* (*Earthlings*, 2018), monopolized critic’s attention due to their prioritizing reproduction over bodies, depicting politics of care where children are share-mothered, strengthening asexual sexuality or dismantling the lives and the bodies of human beings, and, more generally, questioning which borders should be considered acceptable and which not (Endō 2019; Harada 2022a; 2022b; Iida 2020; Ishida 2023; Saitō 2018; Specchio 2018; 2020; 2022). At the same time, these works contained a feminist, and/or queer utopian element (Harada 2022a; Specchio 2018; 2020), confirming what Mohr (2005: 50) argued about feminist utopias and dystopias of the past twenty-five years, that is, their fluidity and thematic dialogue is such that classification under one genre or the other is obsolete.

Life Ceremony shares several features with the above-mentioned works. It first appeared in January 2013 in the monthly magazine *Shinchō* and was subsequently republished in Japan in the collection named after it in 2019, which means that it precedes them. Within the novella, we find concepts such as collective care, sexual intercourse deprived of any erotic tension or love, reversed societal ethics, and, above all, cannibalism, which would later appear in *Earthlings*. Referring to these two works, Harada (2022b: 74) argues that anthropophagy serves both “as a means of resisting the highly conforming

reproductive society,” and “a way for alienated individuals to fit in or cope with society with only minor resistance.”

Life Ceremony is narrated in first person by the female protagonist Miho and is set in an undefined time where the Japanese government has adopted a new ritual that has supplanted funerals, namely the ‘life ceremony.’ Guests at the ceremony eat the corpse, whose flesh is served in lavish banquets, and are later encouraged to engage in casual sexual intercourse called *jusei shiki* (fertilization or insemination ceremony) for reproductive purposes. Children born from a life ceremony are then raised in special centers, and do not grow up within families – another element that recurs in Murata’s dystopias and that threatens the heteronormative, nuclear family system’s status quo.

As Harada (2022b: 75) has argued, in this story “the uncommon practice of anthropophagy is transformed into a familiar and common practice,” creating “a visceral feeling for many readers.” In other words, Murata uses the literary techniques that frequently occur in dystopian fiction of defamiliarization and representation of the uncanny. The former is represented by familiar recipes rendered unfamiliar by the presence of human meat (Harada 2022b: 75-77), the latter by cannibalism being accepted as a social practice, even more than that of leaving children to the centers (Murata 2022: 80). Human flesh cooked with daily ingredients such as starch, onions, sake, daikon, or yuzu creates a sense of uncanny as it is reminiscent of both the ancient fear of the returning surmounted (the ‘primitive’ belief of anthropophagy), and the unexpected which raises doubt about the current reality (the corpse, the inanimate, ‘gets a new life’ being used as a cooking ingredient). This is particularly true for Miho, and (hopefully) for the readers.

The blurring of traditional borders and categories leads to an uncanny effect that destabilizes the reader’s sense of identity. This provokes what Julia Kristeva (1982) defines ‘abjection,’ that is, a form of abhorrence that derives from an element that disturbs our system, or order. Kristeva (1982: 2) contends that food loathing is “perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection.” Extending this idea, Barbara Creed (1993: 55) suggests that the consumption of human flesh represents its ultimate expression. In Murata’s novel, while the other characters seem to positively accept the idea of a corpse becoming a delicious meat, Miho is initially reluctant to stomach the idea of cannibalism as a socially accepted practice. This notion should border on horror for contemporary readers, who are presumably born into an era characterized by a diametrically opposed common sense.

As previously noted, the novel's setting is ambiguous. It could be in present-day or future Japan, with the only hint being the drastic societal changes that have occurred over the last thirty years. These changes, driven by a significant population decline and a looming fear of extinction, have led to the establishment of new social practices like the 'life ceremony' and an obsession with insemination. Miho was born in a time where these practices were not just rare or unconventional, but completely unthinkable. She recalls an incident from her past when, driven by extreme hunger, she claimed she would eat a human. This statement horrified her schoolmates and teachers. This memory haunts Miho, leading her to continually question how society has reached a point where consuming corpses has become acceptable.

Serrano-Muñoz (2021: 1348-1349) argues that "memory becomes a powerful tool for the critical analysis of our present and different futures," and distinguishes three different types of dystopias according to the conflicts between memory and history: dystopias of the immediate future, dystopias of the middle-term future, dystopias of the long-term future. The firsts tend to depict an entire generation that has memories of the time before the changes, and the trauma is strong; the seconds usually show a generational conflict among those who have lived before the changes and those born later, creating a tension between adaptation and nostalgia; the thirds are those novels set in a so far future that old memories have turned into history, but that history is frequently rewritten or manipulated.

Life Ceremony's temporal uncertainty creates a sort of tension between Miho's memory, and the other character's apparent amnesia. The past episode that affects Miho's present, however, rather than creating a form of nostalgia, makes her doubt what is normal and what is not, and question the absurdity temporarily of common sense.⁴ The strategy of not providing a precise temporal reference serves Murata Sayaka to allow readers to identify with the past time remembered by Miho when the boundaries of the human body and the acceptable do not correspond to those described in the present of the novel. Unless social norms radically change in reality, the novel's past will continuously be the reader's present.

⁴ Memories affecting the protagonists' present, making them doubt the reliability of what surrounds them, are a recurrent trope in Murata's works. These memories frequently refer to episodes in which something considered 'out of common sense' happens. As Nakazawa Tadayuki (2018) has noted, Murata's tales frequently adopt the form of past recollections that focus on the changes the protagonists face to environmental adaptation and deviation in each situation.

In the novel's present, the human body, and the human being in general, transposed beyond its borders, is completely redefined in a posthuman perspective. "Death," argues Braidotti (2013: 131), "is the inhuman conceptual in excess: the unrepresentable, the unthinkable, and the unproductive black hole that we all fear." Nevertheless, corpses in the form of delicious meats are ubiquitous within *Life Ceremony* and represent the human body's ultimate stage of becoming: inanimate, still able to gather people ready to generate new lives. Consequently, they are representable, thinkable, and productive. At the same time, boiled or steamed human flesh recollects the people attending the banquet of their new reality. It is true that "being mortal, we are all 'have beers'" (132), but rather than 'corpses-to-come' (113), human bodies in *Life Ceremony* are all 'edible-meat-to-come.'

Consuming bodies as a social practice serves to bring "the domestic and public spaces together" (Harada 2022b: 76), since guests enter the deceased's house to eat its meat. This causes another inversion of fixed borders: taking the novel's past as the readers' present, funerals should occur in public spaces and sexual intercourses in the domestic ones. In the novel, however, the order is subverted (insemination occurs everywhere) and relates to the idea of the human being becoming posthuman. Inhuman as it becomes edible material, and nonhuman as it resembles non-human animals.

Recently I'd been getting the feeling that humans had begun to resemble cockroaches in their habits. Cockroaches would apparently all gather to eat a deceased one of their number, and I'd also heard that a cockroach about to die would lay a large number of eggs. (Murata 2022: 73)

Anthropophagy is legitimized to the extent that we stop considering human beings as creatures endowed with ontological superiority and rethink it in a posthuman economy where all living creatures, including nonhuman animals and plants, enjoy the same status quo. At first, Miho seems skeptical about this shift, and she thinks she has internalized old customs to the point she is not even aware of that:

"I'd heard that in the old days, sex was considered dirty, and it was normal to do it out of sigh. I'd never been inseminated at a life ceremony, but it was true that whenever I'd done it with a lover, we'd always used a bedroom or some other place we wouldn't be seen. The old customs were probably still left in my body, even if I wasn't aware of them." [...] I had the feeling that humans were becoming more and more like animals. (Murata 2022: 80)

The turning point in Miho's attitude toward her reality is her participation in her coworker Yamamoto's life ceremony. There she helps Yamamoto's mother and sister cook his flesh/meat, and her closeness with the deceased allows her to integrate with the system (Harada 2022: 78-79). Indeed, in this novel, intimacy is achieved more through the process of consuming human flesh rather than that of consuming sexual intercourse.

In the last scene, Miho goes to the seaside and meets a 24-year-old gay man with whom she shares Yamamoto's meat. After explaining his being gay won't allow him to take active part in the insemination process, the young man offers Miho his sperm in a small bottle, with which she goes into the sea and tries to fertilize herself.⁵ As she walks on the beach, she realizes that people around her are having sexual intercourses. The idea of Yamamoto's life flowing into the world makes her think about human beings becoming like plants, and the idea of human bodies increasingly becoming nonhuman is well rendered at the end of the novel:

“Put like that, it kind of makes us sound like plants sending out pollen, doesn't it? When a life ends, it flies far away and fertilizes new life” (Murata 2022: 102).

The beach was full of people engaged in insemination, their white arms dimly flickering as they writhed on the sand. It was like a scene from antiquity, ancient life-forms coming out of the sea onto the land. I hadn't witnessed such a thing, but what was what happening that night felt like a nostalgic, important memory, and I watched the white shapes and black waves unblinkingly. [...] The entangled bodies resembled plants in the moonlight. I carried on through the numerous white trees, a whole forest immersed in water (Murata 2022: 109).

Human bodies entangled for insemination that remembers plants should be interpreted as a metaphor for the environmental disasters that are haunting our present. The invisible monster of radiation might have been (one of) the cause(s) of the low birthrate that led the Japanese government to take new countermeasures. Because of nuclear contamination (in this case, supposedly

⁵ This episode has a twofold significance: on the one hand it emphasizes how the ritual of the life ceremony is still part of a rigidly heterosexual system, and on the other, through the contrivance of sperm in a bottle, it winks at the possibility of circumventing the rules. Nevertheless, it highlights the impossibility for homosexual, transgender, and nonbinary people to *actively* participate in reproductive society, which will become a recurrent trope in Murata's literature.

Fukushima's incident, that happened only two years before this novella's publication), every living creature is haunted by the fear of extinction: human beings, animals, and plants. I agree with Harada (2022b) that anthropophagy in *Life Ceremony* should be interpreted as a means to cope with highly conforming reproductive society, but I would also suggest that it calls into question another hegemonic power, that of human beings and their cultural constructions over other living creatures.

For there to be a possibility of a future after catastrophes, rather than intensifying reproduction or hegemonic structures controlling citizens' bodies, it is necessary to redefine boundaries, rethink existing categories, and demystify human beings from their superiority. To achieve these goals, it becomes essential to reconsider all existing criteria.

Which boundaries do we accept, and which ones do we not? If common sense is influenced by the cultural norms that a person has internalized, then common opinion must first be reshaped. Within this novella, the uncanny becoming knowable, namely, drawing upon Butler, the idea of 'corpses that matter,' should be considered the first example of Murata's movement towards a new posthuman ethic.⁶

3. The mechanical body and its flesh double. Ono Miyuki's "Selling the Body"

Ono Miyuki's novella *Karada o uru koto* ("Selling the Body"), was published in 2020 simultaneously in SF Magazine⁷ and on the online blog Note of the publishing house Hayakawa Books & Magazines, following the success of the previous work *Pyua* ("Pure") that in 2019 circulated with the same strategy and soon became the most accessed page of Note's history.⁸ Ono Miyuki's works

⁶ Just as within this novella cannibalism is legitimized because human beings are considered equal to nonhuman animals, so in the later *Sutekina sozai* (*A First-Rate Material*, 2016) the bones and skin of the deceased are reused and considered valuable materials. Necklaces, furniture, clothing, etc. are created from the human body's parts, just as in the reader's present leather shoes, wool sweaters, ivory jewelry, and other animal-derived products are used.

⁷ Even though the publishing year is 2020, in the paper magazine the indicated date is January 2021, as monthly magazines in Japan are published one month before the issue number.

⁸ See the full article published on <https://note.com/info/n/n9e355a1069ff> [last accessed on 09/09/2023]. For the quotes from "Selling the Body," I have used the online reference, thus no page number is given. The full novella can be read here: <https://www.hayakawabooks.com/n/n7828d7d03c07> [last accessed on 09/09/2023].

haven't been translated yet in foreign languages other than Italian, and she is consequently less known overseas than Murata Sayaka is, but Iida Yūko (2020) and Kazue Harada (2022b) have already written about "Pure," that likewise the above mentioned *Life Ceremony* deals with cannibalism associated with reproductive society. The human body, especially the woman's body and its possibilities or limits, is central in Ono's speculative fiction, and so is it within the novella "Selling the Body." Written in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, it incorporates the anxieties deriving from invisible contamination, similarly to what happened in the modern era when Colera first threatened Japanese society, including the possibility of human bodies becoming ill at a young age and larger social inequalities. At the same time, the power dynamics depicted in the story represent a strong critique of male-centered society.

In this story, the binary of 'normal' and 'abnormal' is undermined by the blurring of several opposite categories, such as human/artificial, self/other, life/death, nature/culture, original/double, contaminated/immaculate. Nonetheless, within the novel, it emerges that the most archaic dualism is maintained, namely that between the body and the mind.

In a future where global air pollution, infectious diseases, recurring pandemics, and strong ultraviolet rays threaten human being's existence, maintaining the organic body one is born with represents a challenge. The survival strategy within this new reality is gaining full body prosthesis where to implant one's brain and continue to work to pay for its maintenance until the brain deceases. This is particularly true for the dwellers of the polluted shantytown, as privileged, ultra-rich people can live in organic bodies within the GDF (Green Financial District), a sterilized, clean-air environment protected by a giant glass couple. Nina is a sixteen-year-old prostitute who, like many other girls from the shantytown, only knows one way of living: selling her body. Nina and the other prostitutes suffer repeated daily violence on their organic bodies, which, consumed by male violence, and environmental contaminations soon become unusable. Despite her living conditions, Nina strangely enjoys excellent health. One day bio-police rings at her door and offers to buy her body at a high price as it is requested by a very rich but ill young girl. Nina accepts and gets an artificial body, without advanced artificial intelligence but equipped with a built-in camera. One morning she sees her old organic body in a luxury car and decides to discover the identity of its new owner. She then manages to get hired as a maid of the young girl who inhabits her old body and begins a strange relationship with her.

Donna Haraway's cyborg concept engages with the challenges of the natural vs. artificial dichotomy, expressed by the transgressive combination of the organic body and mechanical prosthesis. Haraway explains the three boundaries that have inspired her 'cyborg:' the human/animal, the human-animal/machine, the physical/non-physical (1991: 151-155). "Cyborg imagery," Haraway (1991: 181) explains, "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tolls to ourselves. [...] It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories." Despite the potential contained in the 'cyborg,' one of the most used depictions in SF or dystopian literature is that of the cyborg body in those works associated with the term 'cyberpunk,' the subgenre emerged in the same years Haraway expressed her theory. According to Brown, cyberpunk offers "a defamiliarization of contemporary society (both Japanese and non-Japanese) and its most acute cultural anxieties and sociopolitical problems" (Brown 2010: 9), and destabilizes "our assumptions about what it means to be human in a posthuman world" (35). Reading the plot of Ono's "Selling the Body," echoes of two elements of the traditional cyberpunk visual narrative immediately emerge, that of the polluted city without nature and of the cyborg body. Simultaneously, one of the possible analogies that shall come into the reader's mind, is that of the worldwide known franchise of *Ghost in the Shell*, which shows the uncanny blurring of the human and mechanical border engaging with the issue of identity.

Nevertheless, while *Ghost in the Shell* and its sequel *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* focus on the existential crisis of two gendered cyborg protagonists, namely Kusanagi and Batou, "Selling the Body" focuses on Nina's self and her attempt to save her old organic body from further forms of consumption. Of relevance in this novella is the depiction of mechanical or prosthetic bodies. As pointed out by Anne Balsamo, gender as a boundary concept remains one of the more resilient markers of difference when it comes to the portrayal of technologized bodies:

As is often the case when seemingly stable boundaries are displaced by technological innovation (human/artificial, life/death, nature/culture), other boundaries are more vigilantly guarded. Indeed, the gendered boundary between male and female is one border that remains heavily guarded despite new technologized ways to rewrite the physical body in the flesh. (Balsamo 1996: 9)

However, mechanical bodies portrayed in “Selling the Body,” are far from being marked by sexual difference. Prostitutes like Nina who sell their fleshy bodies neither become sex robots, whose representations abound in SF literature (Endō 2019: 261), nor ‘gynoids,’ whose most famous depiction is perhaps that of Sorayama Hajime. Prosthetic bodies in “Selling the Body” are a-gendered and, as Nina explains as she is charging her body over the street, it is impossible to define whether a person is a man or women by its appearance.

“Gee, what a car! Where the hell did it come from?” exclaimed a man at my side with the charging cable attached to his back (I think it was a man, but I don’t know for sure: now that everyone can buy the body they want, it’s hard to guess a person’s gender from its external features). (Ono 2020)

Therefore, by the act of selling her biological body, consumed by male violence, Nina shifts from being an object (a woman in a female organic body, penetrable by her clients), to a subject (a mechanical, a-gendered body, with no sexual organs and impenetrable) – she now has a body that “rejects violence, domination and misery” (Ono 2020). As an android, she is not the object of the male gaze anymore – and she celebrates the event posting by on her social networks a goodbye photo with the status: “Bye, bye, fucking small-dicks!” (Ono 2020). The fear of cyborg bodies’ objectification, also expressed by Donna Haraway, here is surmounted. Nina’s technology-enhanced body, however, doesn’t have the improved muscle capacity or augmented sensory perception that distinguishes, for instance, Kusanagi or Batou’s bodies. Nina only has direct access to Internet data thanks to a special panel that opens before her eyes, but she can’t communicate telepathically with other cyborgs, nor she can smile or express feelings.

The mechanical bodies one buys to survive in the polluted future of “Selling the Body” do not represent a threat or a fear. They certainly materialize the anxieties of the readers’ present, and a sort of nostalgia for the lost, healthy, body emerges as Nina’s grandmother tells her about the forgotten past when people with healthy bodies competed in the Olympics. This novella portrays a generational conflict between those who remember the world before the crises, and those who are born in the new reality and can be listed under the ‘middle-term dystopia’ described by Serrano-Muñoz (2021). For girls like Nina who

have no memory of healthy, organic bodies, mechanical, a-gendered ones epitomize the realization of a dream, a liberation, a form of emancipation.⁹

On the other hand, a-gendered cyber bodies align with most dystopian narratives where the state treats its citizens as if they were “interchangeable numbers,” and male/female difference becomes inconvenient (Endō 2019: 292). In “Selling the Body” the major divide is that between rich and poor people, the poor are doomed to body erosion faster than the rich. Healthy bodies represent a status quo. When Nina becomes the maid of her old body’s new owner, the brother of the latter (the boss of a big company who metaphorically symbolizes the male-centered, capitalistic society) treats her as if she were one of the many maids in his service, with no interests in her individuality.

In the same way that the fusion between human and non-human in this novella does not represent a threat, neither does the presence of Nina’s ‘doppelgänger.’ The uncanny within narratives of the doppelgänger is usually evoked when the human subject meets its non-human double, being it an alter-ego, a hallucination, a cyborg, a zombie, or another inhuman creature. Byron Tensor Posadas notes that

as a figure that simultaneously occupies the position of self and other, what is most noteworthy about the doppelgänger (in its myriad manifestations) is how it brings to attention the structural limits of oppositions between such categorical terms as original and imitation, or difference and repetition. The doppelgänger is simultaneously subject and object; it is an enactment of the mirror stage of subject formation on one hand, and on the other hand it is the embodiment of the return of the repressed (Tensor Posadas 2018: 17).

⁹ Within the novella, an important issue related to the buying of prosthetic bodies is touched, namely the economical one. As Nina gets her new body, she narrates that people must pay for the maintenance of those mechanical bodies, which lasts until one’s death. She wonders whether she has to live for working or work for living, a very sensitive issue that people thought a lot about in the Covid era, when the pandemic brought the world to a halt, causing many citizens to rethink work ethics. Even in Japan, where no real restrictions such as lockdown have been enforced, work methods have changed, and many companies have begun to implement ‘smart working’ – in the form of either ‘*zaitaku kinmu*’ or ‘*zaitaku wāku*’ (“Work at Home”) and ‘*rimōto wāku*’ (“Remote work”) or “*terewāku*” (“Telework”). These new working strategies guarantee more balance between private and working life. For further information see the homepage of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare at <https://telework.mhlw.go.jp/telework/about/> [last accessed on 9/09/2023].

When Nina first sets foot in the giant tower where the young girl now owning her biological body lives with her older brother José, the president of the biggest mechanical body manufacturer Human Tech, Nina discovers that the new owner of her old body lives at her brother's mercy. Her first meeting with her 'double' destabilizes her: by a curious coincidence, the young girl is called Nina as well, thus Nina is forced to change her name and introduces herself as Rita. Although this strategy serves the protagonist not to reveal her identity, the name change could be interpreted as an attempt by Nina (now Rita) to detach herself from the past. Her old body, for her, was a container of violence and rape – but before being sold to the rich young woman it was restored to its original state (they rebuilt her hymen).

From the moment Rita becomes Nina's maid, she starts taking care of her (and her old body). What at first was an act driven by curiosity, turns out to be an act of (self)caring. The 'original' self, included in the 'other' body, takes care of the 'other' in the 'original' body. She showers her hair, talks to her, and treats her gently. However, the anxiety that derives from the "return of the repressed," rises as Rita and Nina go outside and some old clients of Nina's (Nina as a prostitute) recognize her body. They by no means can imagine that the new owner of that body is now a high-class girl and try to exert violence on her. Nina, who until that moment had never gone outside her protected environment, for the first time experiences the male's gaze and the fear of objectification. Rita, on the other hand, knows those feelings well: she helps Nina run away, and the two girls end up finding a safe place in a love hotel. There, Nina asks Rita what having sex means, and Rita decides to blur another boundary: even though her mechanical body is not a sex robot, Rita decides to gently touch Nina until she reaches the orgasm – she knows very well which parts of her old body are particularly sensitive.

Even though this scene might be reminiscent of lesbian narratives, I argue it should rather be interpreted as Rita's ultimate act of (self)care. In their room, there is a mirror over the bed: love hotels' customers use it to see themselves while having sexual intercourse and get excited, but within this novella, the mirror assumes another meaning. It is the mirror of the self, that reflects the mirrored other – Nina's organic body. It represents the "mirror stage." Rita's trying to gently help Nina reach the orgasm is the external projection of her internal desire to receive love and care. Her old body had always been penetrated and consumed. Rita's service to Nina is a partially narcissistic act.

This scene of the mirrored 'double,' and the further development of the novella, are reminiscent of what Haraway wrote on dualisms. She argued that

certain dualisms [...] have been systemic to the logics and practices of domination [...] of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. [...] The self is the One who is not dominated, who knows by the service of the other, the other is the One who holds the future, who knows that by the experience of domination, which gives the lie to the autonomy of the self. To be the One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be the One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be the other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many. (Haraway 1991: 177).

Rita doesn't try to dominate Nina. She is already the other. As the two come back home, José punishes them by closing Nina in her room and moving Rita to kitchen duties so that the two can never meet again. José, the man in the highest position in that hyper-capitalistic society, tries to control their selves and their bodies. Rita is now the unwanted other, the disturbing cyborg who could lead Nina to rebel against him. However, her 'self' is not dominated by José: when she discovers that José abuses Nina, she tries to save her. At the same time, having Rita gained a body projected by Human Tech, by rebelling against its CEO she transforms into the monster who rejects its creator's authority. Nevertheless, as if she were conscious that her taking care of Nina would end in an illusion, and that only Nina would have all the possibilities to hold the future, Rita takes her last action as a cyborg and breaks the last barrier. She decides to throw herself into the void, but before falling to the ground she posts a photo taken through her camera of José raping his younger sister and posts it on her social profiles. Since José is Human Tech's top leader, Rita is certain that the news will have resonance and she can die in peace, aware of having deprived José of all his power. "Bye, bye, Nina!" she says before crashing to the ground. It's her goodbye to both her old self and the new owner of her old body.

4. Unhinged women, idols of uncertainty

Most critics have argued that another recurring feature in classical dystopias is the passive and silent attitude of the female protagonists. "Women," notes Baccolini (2013: 39), "seem generally indifferent to, and at times even content with, the restrictions the regime has imposed on individual freedom." In contrast, women protagonists in 'critical dystopias,' due to their maintaining room for opposition to the regime, have more agency and embrace the desire

for a change. At the same time, Serrano-Muñoz (2021: 1348) embraces Carmen Méndez-García's definition of 'hopeful dystopias' to explain how recent "dystopian fiction has turned toward embracing the power of a politics of care, community solutions, and it even proposes auspicious futures." Among these works, Serrano-Muñoz (2021: 1356) lists, for instance, Tawada Yōko's *Kentōshi* (translated as both *The Emissary* and *The Last Children of Tokyo*, 2014) arguing that it "shares with previous critical dystopias a bestowing of agency to characters that wish to change an unfair status quo."

The protagonists of Murata Sayaka's *Life Ceremony* and Ono Miyuki's "Selling the Body" share, in a certain sense, the desire "to change an unfair status quo." At least, they try to challenge it. When at the end of the story Miho goes into the sea and pours the young gay man's sperm into her hand to insert it on her body, she is trying to trigger the heteronormative status quo. "Maybe a miracle would occur, and I would conceive" (Murata 2022: 110) she says, aware that the insemination outside the heterosexual matrix represents a hope and a miracle. She is aware that the gender binary system is the standard, and that reproduction is made possible by the union of male sperm and female eggs, but she personally felt she "dissolved into this normality" (Murata 2022: 110) through a counter hegemonic act. Similarly, Rita challenges patriarchal hegemony refusing her being objectified as a woman by her male clients first, and her being controlled by José later. As a cyborg, she escapes all hierarchies of power. She ends up posting on the social network a revenge photo, that of José raping his sister. She hopes that, spreading the information on what happened, he will be arrested, and people will become more sensible to male violence and craving for control over women and their bodies.

Nevertheless, the protagonists of these novellas are also reminiscent of another literary trope recently emblazoned on social networks thanks to the so-called 'Booktokers,' that of the 'unhinged woman.' 'Booktokers' are influencers who use TikTok and other platforms to share contents about books and reading in general. Among the categories they created that of the 'unhinged woman' fascinates readers, especially those of Gen Z (Shunyata 2023). The definition of 'unhinged woman' is still debated. Some refer to those women as unstable, mad, emotionally charged, immoral, insecure. Milan Hall (2022) contends that "people are tired of the typical success stories. They want to see someone completely fall and slowly recover with visible scars from the fall." She further explains that the 'career woman' trope is overdone: "a lot of women view the unhinged woman as being similar to the voice in the back of their head. She

explores the things that one may keep hidden such as weird hobbies and interests.”

‘Unhinged women’ stand in stark contrast to the women of the 1990s and early 2000s who achieved success via hard work. They owe their significant resonance with contemporary female readers and their lifestyles, as well as the influence of the fourth wave of feminism, which emphasizes the value of sisterhood and individual independence. Under pressure to balance having a career, marry, have children, and answering all the expectations contemporary society is putting on women, it is not surprising that a lot of contemporary women readers identify themselves more to the ‘unhinged woman’ than to the ‘career’ one. The ‘unhinged woman’ is also “the antithesis to the trend of waking early, working out, and being the best version of oneself” (Shunyata 2023). ‘Unhinged women’ are symbols of uncertainty in an uncertain world. The platform Goodreads has a long list of novels (1,727 titles)¹⁰ under the label of ‘unhinged woman:’ at the top stands Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), immediately followed by Mona Awad’s *Bunny* (2019), Eliza Clark’s *Boy Parts* (2020) and Chelsea G. Summers’s *A Certain Hunger* (2019). Among the numerous titles, there are also the other two novels of Murata Sayaka translated into English, namely *Convenience Store Woman* and *Earthlings*.¹¹ Yet, Murata’s women protagonists articulate one of the major features of the ‘unhinged woman,’ the difficulty of fitting with their realities. As Nakazawa (2018) and Endō (2019) have noted, and as I previously wrote, Murata’s female characters exhibit deviant behaviors and try to adapt the environment they inhabit, but they end up deviate again; they question what is normal and what is not and are frequently led to think that either they are on the wrong side, or they do not understand why people around them think differently (conforming to norms without doubting them). A similar pattern recurs in *Life Ceremony* too, with Miho wondering why people around her do

¹⁰ The list can be found here: <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/unhinged-women> [last accessed on 14/01/2024].

¹¹ Recently, readers and scholars have started to rethink *Convenience Store Woman*’s protagonist Furukura Keiko more as a person with ASD. Considering the several features that characterize an ‘unhinged woman,’ it won’t be surprising if a person considered as such articulates behaviors in the spectrum. That said, only a few openly mentioned Furukura Keiko as a person within the ASD. On the Hayakawa page Note, the Japanese critic Yano Yoshihiro list Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman* and Imamura Natsuko’s *Kochira Amiko* (2010; *This is Amiko, Do You Copy?*, translated in English by Yoshio Hitomi in 2023) as two ASD novels [see: <https://note.com/yanotoshihiro/n/ne53702b7e9be> last access on 9/09/2023]; similarly, the writer Horikoshi Hidemi analyses this aspect on Ohtabookstand [see: <https://ohtabookstand.com/2022/07/careculture-07/> last access on 9/09/2023].

not remember things in the past were different, or do not question why, and how, social norms have changed so fast. Miho is emotionally charged and insecure, continually changing social norms mirror society's uncertainty. She momentarily finds stability in the act of eating Yamamoto's flesh-derived meatballs, a grotesque but comedic situation. Maybe the readers will not entirely relate to her, but they would to her 'living day by day' due to uncertainty.

Ono Miyuki's protagonist Rita, on the other hand, reminds of an 'unhinged woman' in that she is neither a privileged one nor a 'successful woman,' but she is emotionally charged and ends up destroying herself. Rita has been subjected to male violence, and she has a disregard for the well-being of people living in the GDF. She does not aspire to be a better version of herself, and as discussed in the third paragraph her act of care is primarily driven by curiosity – having sold her flesh body, she is now an unemployed girl with a lot of spare time. She destabilizes hegemonic powers. She has sold her body several times: as a woman, she prostituted, selling her body, to make a living; as a human being, she has sold her organic body to have a cybernetic body. As a cyborg, she challenged several barriers: woman/man, human/nonhuman, object/subject. Rita's final decision to destroy herself for Nina's sake leads her to break two last barriers: the glass one that separates the GDF from the external, polluted world, contaminating it, and the space-temporal one, as posting her last photo on the social network will make her be remembered as the person who denounced the boss of a big company. She turns into a new feminist icon, and self-destruction might be the ultimate act of an 'unhinged woman.'

Both Miho and Rita live an uncertain life: socioeconomic, political, or environmental changes that precarious their realities, do not promise stability. They cannot dream of a perfect life, in their experiences there is no room for imagining what the future will be. They live day by day and are representative of present uncertainty.

4. Conclusion

Life Ceremony and "Selling the Body" depict different future scenarios where the human being as we know it ceases to be as it is. Both novellas can be read through different approaches: generational struggle, postapocalyptic, socio-economic, political, psychoanalytic, revolutionary, or evolutionary. They are speculative fictions that answer to multiple contemporary crises, confirming the

idea that dystopias are “politically conscious of current challenges” (Serrano-Muñoz 2021: 1347).

Defamiliarizing familiar tropes, they mirror present precarity and lead the readers to experience the uncanny. In both novellas, the uncanny rises from the uncertainty about whether the future developments and the issues regarding the human being and its ontology would concretize. They can be read as text belonging to the ‘literature of abjection,’ that according to Kristeva (1982: 208) represents “the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses.”

The ‘consumed bodies’ described within these narratives materialize the anxieties of the present. Is the human being really at risk of extinction?

Will it reproduce itself through government programs that incite insemination, or will it see a duplication of itself through a fusion with the mechanical other? And in that case, who will be the ‘original,’ and who the ‘double’? The disassociation of the self from the body seems to unite both narratives: in *Life Ceremony*, all people are ‘meat-to-be,’ therefore they are obliged to see their bodies as objects intended for food consumption and must distance themselves from them; in “Selling the Body” all bodies, whether flesh or mechanical, are merely temporary and interchangeable cocoons doomed to be consumed, and interrupt the continuity among gender, heterosexual norms, and female sexuality.

The bodies described in these texts are as monstrous as those questioned by Nakamura – nowadays, the healthy body of Japan is haunted by depopulation and contamination. The ‘consumed bodies’ collectively constitute “the nation, as something inseparable from the national body politic” (Nakamura 2015: 2).

Picking up on Napier’s statement quoted in the introduction that modern Japan was marked by “the equation of modern industrial life with an anti-human world” (1996: 185), it is possible to argue that contemporary Japan is marked by the equation of hyper capitalistic life (and its consequences) with a posthuman world. As the citizens of modern Japan witnessed “the lack of control over one’s fate, a sense of omnipresent powers, and the increasing awareness of technology’s dehumanizing effects” (1996: 188), so do the citizens of the new millennium Japan. As Halberstam and Livingstone (1995: 4) contend, “posthuman bodies do not belong to linear history. They are of the past and future lived as present crisis.” A hundred years have passed since the period Napier refers to, but the anxieties people feel remain the same, and the human body remains the primary ground of investigation.

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