Spring 2019

Isolation in Excess Communication: Social Media in the Writing of Sequoia Nagamatsu

Sadie Kurtzman

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/first-class

ISOLATION IN EXCESS COMMUNICATION:
SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE WRITING OF SEQUOIA NAGAMATSU

By Sadie Kurtzman, McAnulty College of Liberal Arts
Instructor: Dr. Erin Speese

Aristotle theorized that "Man is by nature a social animal...Society is something that precedes the individual" (Mudra). Human beings live with the psychological need to be accepted. With the world in a heightened state of technological advancement and mass communication, propelled by the overpowering existence of media, human beings are more connected than ever before. Sequoia Nagamatsu's story, "Melancholy Nights in a Tokyo Cyber Cafe," dissects the cyber networking culture of urban Tokyo and the issues involving the influx of social networking as linked to mental health, anxiety, and feelings of isolation through the characters in his story. Akira is a homeless man, out of work and without a sense of purpose. He joins an online chat room for individuals contemplating suicide. There, he finds solace with a mother named Yoshiko. Akira conjures a life for him and Yoshiko in his head, but fails to approach her when he sees her in person. Ultimately, Akira's tangible contact with another person comes in the form of Seiji, Akira's new boss after he is hired to run a printing press. The companionship that Akira finds with Seiji pulls him from his isolation, while Yoshiko's lack of human connection drives her toward her fate. I argue that "Melancholy Nights in a Tokyo Cyber Cafe" is a testament that, though their proximity and accessibility has become expected, communication devices and medias fail to grant the level of interpersonal communication, connection, and emotional support that human beings naturally crave. Through the characters and language, Nagamatsu shows that susceptibility to depression, isolation, and suicidal tendencies can not be eradicated by online social discourse, but can be aided with real, human companionship and finding purpose in one's own life.

Nagamatsu's story examines isolation and the issues of mental health in a highly industrialized and connected society. In Tokyo, cyber cafes serve as both a hub for online users and a sanctuary for the homeless. Sakura Murakami evaluates a survey of individuals utilizing the cyber cafes and discusses the influx of cafe "refugees" when she states, "25.8 percent confirmed that they did not have a stable residence and were using the cafes as a housing option" (Murakami). The majority of these individuals are temporary workers without sufficient income or a formal residence who use the cyber cafes as a place to sleep. Sequoia Nagamatsu's story follows the plight of one of these individuals, Akira, who spends his days searching for work and his nights online in the cyber cafes. The cafes themselves are a hallmark of the rapid computerization in the modern world. The accessibility of the internet and social networking outlets has opened avenues for connecting individuals around the world and allows the sharing of personal information and online personas created by users. Although the internet and social networking sites allow people to communicate from around the globe, these connections lack the emotional support and stability available through in-person relationships. Erin O. Whaite et al. concluded in their study that there is a correlation between social media usage and social isolation, writing "This study found SMU and SI are strongly and linearly associated, regardless of personality characteristics" (Whaite et. al). There is a positive relationship between the use of social media as a gateway to the social world and deep feelings of social isolation. In Nagamatsu's story, Akira attempts to find refuge within online chat-rooms. He is

depressed from his lack of work and the shame it brings to him and his family, as well as his human desire for connection. The chat rooms and his online camrade, Yoshiko, ultimately do not offer him the emotional support he needs, nor does Akira's online presence aid Yoshiko. She commits suicide as a result her depression and lack of human relationship. Nagamatsu uses the relationships of his characters and their fates to insist that, though social media and relationships online are easy and readily accessible to everyone, even those who lack a permanent residence, they do not offer the emotional support and connection of an in-person relationship.

As a temporary working, Japanese man, Akira is immersed in the cultural expectations of honor and duty that are present in traditional Japanese structures. He is homeless and working part-time jobs to survive. Akira reaches out to no one concerning his situation, not even his own mother. Nagamatsu write, "Not wanting to burden or worry his ailing mother, he has never told her the truth about his life" (Nagamatsu 95). Akira feels as though his life would "burden" his mother. This fear of "burdening" his family with his struggles comes from the social constructs that personal failure, in turn, will dishonor one's family. Nagamatsu reiterates Akira's thoughts of dishonor with his failure to connect with Yoshiko in real-life, as "part of him is still ashamed that he is homeless" (Nagamatsu 97). The "shame" that Akira feels keeps him from reaching out to others and deepens his isolation. His isolation, consequently, pushes him toward thoughts of suicide. However, suicide in Japan has radically different connotations than suicide in other countries, like the United States. Yoshimoto Takahashi writes,

> "It is a fact that Japan is popularly held to be a country in which suicide is permissible to some extent. It is often reported to the world that the Japanese regard suicide as an honorable way to take responsibility, similar to hara-kiri, the traditional form of suicide committed by warriors in the feudal era" (Takahashi).

Hara-kiri is a form of suicide that the samurai once used as an escape from dishonor and has bled into the social constructs of suicide in Japan over the years (Varley, 323). The Japanese construct of suicide as an honorable way for Akira to take responsibility and control his life changes the way in which the reader views Akira' struggles. His suicidal behaviors do not necessarily trace to mental health issues as American readers would interpret from our own predilections of suicide and the individuals who commit it. Akira is not mentally ill. Rather, he is simply looking for a way in which to give his life purpose. Suicide, to some degree, would give his life more purpose than he now has, for it would allow him to die more honorably. However, Akira ultimately finds a purpose, not from the online chat rooms and conversations with Yoshiko, but from Seiji and the promise of a stable life.

Modern Japan, surrounded by a intense cyber structure, has procured a generation of individuals who struggle to facilitate a social life without their phones. In the words of Nannette Gottlieb and Mark J. McLelland,

> "The students in his survey express incredulity at how people could ever have organized their social lives before the advent of the mobile phone. Many express their dependency on the technology: from waking them up in the morning, giving them something to do while killing time commuting (or sitting in the lecture hall) and helping them to rendezvous with friends" (Gottlieb and McLelland).

Like many individuals in Japan and the rest of the world, Nagamatsu's character, Akira, has developed issues pursuing human contact and resorts to interactions in online chat rooms. Nagamatsu writes, "He entered chat rooms and began talking to people, telling strangers how it felt to be forgotten" (Nagamatsu 96). Nagamatsu chooses to show immediately from the moment Akira enters the chat rooms, that the people he is interacting with are "strangers" and are therefore not his friends. Though he shares his most personal struggles and thoughts of ending his life, these online entities are unknown to him. There is no

personal connection to the individuals he chats with online, besides their communal sorrow. Through the chat rooms, Akira begins messaging a woman who feels the same isolation and temptation of suicide. Nagamatsu writes, "Akira established a routine with Yoshiko, chatting every night after she returned home and tucked in her daughter" (Nagamatsu 97). The language in this particular passage is extremely revealing about the relationship between Akira and Yoshiko. Nagamatsu writes that the two "established a routine" -- not that they became friends or even that they became familiar with one another. The phrase "establish a routine" highlights how distant Akira and Yoshiko's relationship truly is, as it fails to voice any intimacy within their contact. Nagamatsu also chooses to write "daughter" instead of giving Yoshiko's child a name to show how unfamiliar Akira is with Yoshiko's life. Akira does not know the most important details of Yoshiko's life, specifically her "daughter's" name. Akira found someone to "chat" with, but not a true connection. Akira has seen Yoshiko in person, working as a street vendor, but he fails to approach her out of embarrassment of his homelessness -- something Yoshiko would know about Akira if their online conversations shared the more intimate realities of their lives. On one of the occasions that Akira goes to see Yoshiko, Nagamatsu writes "Akira goes to the Ameyokocho market as he always does to be with Yoshiko" (Nagamatsu 102). Nagamatsu chooses to say that Akira goes to "be with Yoshiko" to imply that "being with" someone is something that can only be done in person, even if they do not speak. Through his language, Nagamatsu is showing that one cannot truly "be" with another via a chat room. The real connection is developed in person and, though Akira shares his woes online with Yoshiko, he desires a deeper, more valid connection with her. He discovers where she works and goes to see her because, even if they do not speak, the value of physically being near Yoshiko is a greater pleasure for Akira than speaking intimate words through a chat room. The chat room, however, is not the only mode of communication that Nagamatsu chooses to highlight in this story.

Throughout the story, Sequoia Nagamatsu uses communication devices to highlight both the proximity of these tools to the characters and the overall failure of these devices to convey the characters' desires for human connection, regardless of how accessible the instruments are to the characters. When the reader is first introduced to Yoshiko, she is selling calligraphy prints. Nagamatsu chooses to associate her with caligraphy to show how near modes of communication -- the calligraphy prints -- are to her; Yoshiko is literally selling writing utensils. Akira has a habit of buying pens from other vendors when he is too afraid to introduce himself to Yoshiko when he sees her at the market. Nagamatsu illustrates Akira's defeat when he writes "An assortment of pens build up on the computer desk of Akira's cubicle at the cyber cafe...each one a reminder of another day that Akira could not walk a few feet further and cease being invisible" (Nagamatsu 97-98). The "build up" of pens and the calligraphy prints at Yoshiko's vending stall are used to show how near and unused these communication devices are and how little help they are in solving Akira and Yoshiko's issues. Though they share intimate life struggles over their cyber chats, Akira is "invisible" to Yoshiko. He has no face and no conscious presence in Yoshiko's mind. Akira's employer, Seiji, is also primarily associated with a form of communication -- a printing press. Nagamatsu writes, "He says that he wants to save people. He takes a stack of papers from the printing press and hands them to Akira" (Nagamatsu, 100). Akira is desperate for communication and acceptance, so much so that he is considering death as an alternative to his present state of isolation. Seiji, who has deep feelings of loneliness himself, wants to save him. He physically gives Akira a mode of communication - the paper and printing press - and a purpose. Akira is saved by the possibility of a life he could have and the connection he has found with Seiji. As Akira and Seiji get to know one another, Akira's sorrow and isolation seem to dissipate.

When Akira goes to work for Seiji, the two find comradery in their shared struggles. Seiji, who lost his wife in the 1995 Sarin gas attacks in Tokyo, has fallen out of contact with his daughter as a result. He discusses his own isolation and Nagamatsu writes, "Seiji confesses to Akira his abandoned plans to take

his own life" (Nagamatsu, 103). The reader is unaware of when Seiji "abandoned" his plans, but it can be assumed that it was soon after he and Akira aided one another with their companionship when Seiji says "the isolation pulls at me... it saddens me that only tragedy can bring these people together. The bonds... are erased so easily like chalk on a blackboard" (Nagamatsu, 104). Seiji is alluding to individuals who bonded after the terror attacks, but his message translates to Akira's situation and his relationship with Yoshiko. The two "bonded" over the "tragedy" of their lives, but their bond had no real connection. The pieces they shared were not in person connections and they could easily forget one another, "erasing" their connection. Akira's isolation and suicidal thoughts had not been diminished by his relationship with Yoshiko; Akira still logs in to chat rooms for individuals who want to commit suicide. Rather, Akira's in person connection with Seiji and his job allowed him to restore the man he once was. However, as Akira's life shifts in a positive direction, Yoshiko's struggles and lack of human connection ultimately seal her fate.

The reader is only aware of Yoshiko's life from the information Akira gathers from their online chats and what he imagines as he watches her in the market. The extent of Yoshiko's struggles, however, can be inferred from the deep isolation revealed in the brief revelations about her background. Through their chats, Yoshiko reveals that her husband works far away and that she has to maintain her house and tend to her autistic daughter on her own. Nagamatsu writes "She knows no one in the city...and doesn't have the luxury of making friends" (Nagamatsu, 97). This quote reveals that not only is Yoshiko extremely lonely and isolated, but that she does not consider talking to Akira online as "making friends." Akira lives in the city and has even seen Yoshiko in person, yet she says she does not know anyone. Nagamatsu is implying that even though Yoshiko discusses her hardships with Akira online, she does not consider him her friend, as she does not have this "luxury." In Yoshiko's world, Akira is nothing but an online entity. He never approaches her in reality and thus cannot supply the comfort and support of an in-person connection. While Akira finds an in-person relationship with Seiji, Yoshiko ultimately succumbs to her struggle with isolation, killing herself and her daughter. Akira and Yoshiko begin the story in similar positions, but it is the presence or lack of human companionship that determines the outcome of each. Yoshiko is overcome by her loneliness, while Akira and Seiji are both saved by the connection they find in one another. Nagamatsu ends his story with a final commentary of the force of in person relation, stating that after Yoshiko's death, Akira "looks upon the faces of the people around him, vastly different in their own ways, but each having a story not unlike the other, connecting them together in our most human and fragile moments" (Nagamatsu 104). Nagamatsu chooses to end the story by enhancing the idea that human connection is something that is found in person, by seeing the individuals around them and understanding their relation to the world, not to a computer screen. Akira looks at the "people around him" and feels "connected" to them without knowing their stories. It it the proximity to others that allows Akira to understand the similarities and differences and the ways in which humanity binds them. They all have stories and tragedies, but the relationship to other human beings is what ultimately destroys the isolation each of them can suffer.

Sequoia Nagamatsu's story "Melancholy Nights in a Tokyo Cyber Cafe" highlights the struggle for true human relationships in a world of technoculture. Akira and Yoshiko become allies in their misery, as they discuss their lives and thoughts of suicide through online chat rooms. Akira, however, never approaches Yoshiko in real life. Their relationship cannot be translated into reality and does not bare the emotional support that either of them require to overcome their struggles. Akira finds human connection and a purpose from Seiji and together, the two men set aside the suicidal thoughts that overwhelm Yoshiko. Nagamatsu uses the nearness of communication tools -- chat rooms, calligraphy sets, and printing press -- to show that, although globalization has allowed people to connect in platforms from all around the globe, the cyber world does not give individuals the sense of companionship and emotional availabili-

ty that people can experience face to face. Nagamatsu emphasizes, through his story, that while the world may be connected online, the feelings of isolation and lack of human connection remain detrimental to individuals who struggle with these issues and that the "bonds" humans find with others online cannot compare with the connections formed together, human to human.

Works Cited

Gottlieb, Nanette, and Mark J. McLelland. *Japanese Cybercultures*. Routledge, 2003.
    EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=93148&site=eds-live.

Mudra, Amit. "Man as a Social Animal." *Sociology Discussion - Discuss Anything About Sociology*,
    23 Apr. 2015,

Murakami, Sakura. "Tokyo's Internet Cafe 'Refugees' Number 4,000, Survey Says." *The Japan
    Times*, 29 Jan. 2018,

Nagamatsu, Sequoia. "Melancholy Nights in a Tokyo Cyber Cafe." *One World: A Global Anthology
    of Short Stories. Amazon*, Amazon

Takahashi, Y. "Culture and Suicide: From a Japanese Psychiatrist's Perspective." *Suicide &
    Life-Threatening Behavior*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1997, pp. 137–145.

Varley, H.Paul. *Japanese Culture*. Vol. 4th ed. updated and expanded, University of Hawaii
    Press, 2000.

Whaite, Erin O., et al. "Social Media Use, Personality Characteristics, and Social Isolation
    among Young Adults in the United States." *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 124, Apr. 2018, pp.
    45–50. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1016/j.paid.2017.10.030.