Domesticity, Criminality, and Part-Time Work: The Laboring Body in Kirino Natsuo's Auto

Raechel Lynn Dumas
University of Colorado at Boulder, raechel.dumas@colorado.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.colorado.edu/asia_gradetds

Part of the Japanese Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
DOMESTICITY, CRIMINALLY, AND PART-TIME WORK: THE LABORING
BODY IN KIRINO NATSUO’S AUTO

by

RAECHEL LYNN DUMAS

B.A., Florida State University, 2004
M.A., Florida State University, 2008

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Masters of Japanese
Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations

2011
This thesis entitled:
Domesticity, Criminality, and Part-Time Work: The Laboring Body in Kirino Natsuo’s
Auto
written by Raechel Dumas
has been approved for the Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations

__________________________________________
Janice C. Brown

__________________________________________
Faye Kleeman

__________________________________________
Satoko Shimazaki

Date___________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Dumas, Raechel Lynn (M.A., Japanese, Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations)

Domesticity, Criminality, and Part-Time Work: The Laboring Body in Kirino Natsuo’s *Auto*

Thesis directed by Professor Janice C. Brown

This thesis examines the ways in which Kirino Natsuo’s 1997 psychological crime thriller *Auto* (Out), a shocking story of four Japanese housewives-turned-criminals, underscores the relationships between recent economic trends and persisting social inequalities in contemporary Japan. In *Auto*, Kirino underscores the ways in which late capitalist employment trends—and specifically the expansion of wage relations and flexibilization of employment—have served to solidify, rather than dismantle, the problematic relationship between Japanese labor practices and modern identity politics. Diverging from conventional readings of the novel—which perceive its principle concerns to be domesticity and the Japanese female experience of urbanity—this thesis examines Kirino’s portrayals of laboring bodies, both male and female, Japanese and non-Japanese, within the text, underscoring her eminent concern with production and consumption not only as economic activities but also as oppressive ideologies to which her characters are subject both within and outside of the productive labor sphere. Moreover, this analysis considers the implications of the protagonist Masako’s triumph over her rapist, as well as her decision to extricate herself from the defining work and relationships in which she participates, beyond the scope of conventional discourse regarding rape. In doing so, it argues that the novel’s conclusion, while situated around
an ostensibly private encounter, seeks to undermine justifications for the very public problem of labor inequality in contemporary Japan. Ultimately, this thesis aims to illustrate that the popularity of Japanese crime fiction does not rely on the reproduction of historical genre conventions, but rather stems from the genre’s capacity to offer readers a critical lens through which to examine a vast array of ever-evolving and inextricably related socio-economic realities.
# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER

### INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1

#### I. CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE WAGE RELATIONS, PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT, AND THE LABORING BODY IN AUTO ............................................. 10

- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 10
- Toward an Understanding of Labor in Contemporary Japan ........................................ 11
- Factory Work and the Laboring Body in Auto ............................................................. 21

#### II. THE ECONOMY OF ETHNICITY: KIRINO’S PORTRAITS OF IMMIGRANT LABOR ........................................................................................................ 27

- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 27
- Ri Anna ......................................................................................................................... 31
- Miyamori Kazuo ....................................................................................................... 39
- Summary ...................................................................................................................... 46

#### III. DOMESTICITY, CRIMINALEITY, AND THE POLITICS OF PART-TIME LABOR ............................................................................................................ 48

- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 48
- Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie: Auto’s Criminal Housewives ........................................... 50
- Jumonji Akira: Part-Time Mobster ............................................................................... 69
- Summary ...................................................................................................................... 74

#### IV. BODIES OF DESTRUCTION AND DESIRE ................................................................ 76

- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 76
- Katori Masako ............................................................................................................ 78
- Satake Mitsuyoshi ..................................................................................................... 87
- *Auto* and the Rhetoric of Rape ................................................................................. 93

### CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................ 106

### BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................... 110
INTRODUCTION

In Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture, Sari Kawana traces Japanese crime fiction from the Meiji period to the present, exploring the ways in which the genre has reconfigured itself to engage with evolving discourses of modernity and changing perceptions of the relationship between fictional narratives and everyday life. The second chapter of her book focuses on the emergence of women as victims and killers in interwar Japanese detective fiction—a trend, she explains, that initially drew on nineteenth century pseudoscientific notions of female abnormality and came to inform perceptions of female psychology and behavior among a new generation of social scientists:

Faced with the gloomy outlook of urban life, the experts on criminal science, criminologists in particular, were asked to act as detectives who could answer not only the old question of whodunit but also the more complicated question of whydunit. In an attempt to solve the riddle, many criminologists revisited older Western as well as Japanese theories of deviancy and ended up focusing their theories upon female offenders and abnormalizing their sexuality.¹

Kawana goes on to describe a drastic shift in the politics of Japanese crime fiction, a trend whose origins she locates primarily in the works of Edogawa Ranpo 江戸川乱歩 (1894-1965), whose popularity she attributes to both his subversive fictional representations of the female body and, more broadly, his persistent interrogation of Japanese social realities during the interwar period:

The images of female corpses in Ranpo’s works highlight the danger of not being

¹ Sari Kawana, “Eyeing the Privates: Sexuality as Motive,” in Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 78.
able to control one’s own image in the city, where sometimes appearance is the only facet of identity that can be recognized. The grisly tales of dismemberment work as a sort of x-ray view of the fanciful advertisements featuring the moga:¹ they are designed to function as metaphors that reflect larger social trends, hidden cultural dynamics, and reality.²

From dismembered women placed on public display to women who kill in order to punish a society that perceives only outer beauty, the bodies of Ranpo’s female characters—both dead and alive—offer a window into some of the more problematic cultural politics of interwar Japan. Following Ranpo’s emergence onto the literary scene, crime fiction, and particularly detective fiction, would become an increasingly popular literary genre in Japan. Some writers, heavily guided by the formulae of American and European detective stories, clung to the very conventions that Ranpo’s works attempted to subvert. Others, such as Hamao Shirō 濱尾四郎 (1896-1935), Matsumoto Seichō 松本清張 (1909-1992), Takagi Akimitsu 高木彬光 (1920-1995), and Iiboshi Kōichi 飯千晃一 (1927-1996), followed in Ranpo’s footsteps, utilizing the crime narrative as a microscope through which to examine and interrogate Japanese socio-political realities.

In recent decades, Japan has witnessed a significant boom in female-centric crime fiction as writers such as Kirino Natsuo 桐野夏生 (1951-), Miyabe Miyuki 宮部みゆき (1960-), and Nonami Asa 乃南アサ (1960-) have ascended to international acclaim with their portrayals of female victims and killers in contemporary Japan. Kirino’s work is of particular interest, for much of her writing, like that of Ranpo, employs the body both as an object of figurative and literal destruction and as a metaphor for the broader

¹ “modern girl”

implications of contemporary Japanese cultural trends. In truth, Kirino has played no small part in the global popularization of contemporary Japanese crime fiction. She began her career as a romance novelist in the mid-1980s but turned her attention to crime writing in the early 1990s, wherein she rose to prominence following the 1993 publication of her Edogawa Ranpo Prize-winning debut novel Kao ni furikakaru ame 颜に降りかかる雨 (Rain Falling on My Face). Her third novel, the dark psychological thriller Auto オート (Out), was released in 1997, winning her France’s prestigious Grand Prix for Crime Fiction award and propelling her into the international literary spotlight. In 1999 her second novel Yawaraka na hoho 柔らかな頬 (Soft Cheeks) was released, receiving the distinguished Naoki Prize for popular literature, and in 2003 the English translation of Auto was nominated by the Mystery Writers of America for the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best book of the year. In the past three years three more of her novels—Gurotesuku グロテスク (Grotesque, 2003), Riaru Warudo リアルワールド (Real World, 2003), and Zangyakuki 殮虐記 (What Remains, 2004)—have been translated into English. Kirino’s status as a writer of genre fiction notwithstanding, her works, which are among an ever-growing number of crime novels authored by Japanese women, paint a complex and decidedly literary picture of contemporary Japanese urbanity. Her portraits of the modern Japanese city are gritty, her explorations of the criminal mind compelling, and her depictions of the social realities of contemporary Japan unnerving, and often unequivocally bleak. However, Kirino’s crime fiction does not merely paint a pessimistic picture of humanity—rather, it engages with a number of the largely invisible social realities of late capitalist Japan, often via the voices of
characters representing social groups that remain institutionally silenced by the cultural politics of mainstream Japanese society.

One such work is Kirino’s most internationally acclaimed novel, *Auto*, a story of four Japanese housewives who are thrust by dire financial circumstances into the realm of criminality. The text intimately explores the lives of the women—Masako, Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie—who are housewives by day and *bento* factory workers by night, as well as the experiences of a number of other figures—entertainment workers, immigrants, and criminals—representing marginalized social groups in modern day Japan. The women of *Auto* are drawn to one another by their mutual experiences as part-time laborers, their frustrations with their increasingly tumultuous domestic lives, and the financial obligations with which they are perpetually plagued. When Yayoi murders her abusive husband Kenji, her three friends take on the responsibility of dismembering and disposing of his corpse; however, Kuniko’s failure to properly dispose of several bags of body parts initiates a police investigation of the murder. When a local *yakuza* named Satake is falsely imprisoned for the crime, he loses everything, and, after his eventual release, vows to take revenge upon the four women. In the meantime, Masako is approached by a fledgling gangster name Jumonji, for whom she agrees to dismember corpses of victims of the *yakuza*—with Yoshie’s assistance—for a considerable fee. Masako’s bold approach to criminality is perceived by Satake to be a threat, and in the final pages of the narrative he kidnaps, brutalizes, and rapes her, only to be murdered by her in the end. As the plot of *Auto* unfolds and the psychologies of Kirino’s characters are revealed, the seemingly oppositional forces of female and male, housewife and *yakuza*,
converge in a complex exploration of the shared experiences of those who inhabit the gloomy peripheries of urban Japan.

Few Kirino scholars offer readings of *Auto*; however, existing analyses exhibit one predominant tendency: to view the work as one concerned first and foremost with domesticity and the immediate financial problems with which housewives in contemporary Japan are faced. Amanda C. Seaman, in her essay “Inside *OUT*: Space, Gender, and Power in Kirino Natsuo,” writes that the novel offers a “troubling portrait of gender, class, and economic divisions in contemporary urban Japan.”\(^1\) However, her analysis offers little insight into the novel’s broader engagement with economy, instead focusing on what she feels to be the intractable situations of its female characters and, ultimately, what she argues to be the exclusively private victory of Masako over her rapist. Similarly, in “Economies of Desperation: The Logic of Murderous Wives in Western Tokyo,” Linda E. White underscores Kirino’s concern with a reality shaped by male privilege, arguing that the text offers an “ethnography-like portrayal of the lives of part-time working mothers in the 1990s,” as well as “important sociological insights into the gender dynamics of contemporary middle-class families.”\(^2\) Likewise, in “*Out ni Miru ‘Kane’ to ‘Kawaki’ no Hate: Shufutachi no Beruto Konbeya*,” Obayashi Mieko considers three “keywords”—money [金 kane], housewives [主婦 shūfu], and family [家族

---


— to represent the primary ideological concepts around which Auto is situated, writing that the text confronts the question of to what extent the bleak horizons of housewives can be realistically elevated. The troubles in question largely revolve around self-consciousness caused by money problems; however, in truth these problems bring with them the deterioration of human relationships.¹

All of these observations are significant, for Kirino’s vivid portrayals of female psychologies and family dynamics undoubtedly constitute some of Auto’s most prevalent concerns. However, largely absent from these scholars’ analyses, which privilege the domestic sphere over any others represented in the novel, are discussions of the broader socio-economic conditions that inform Kirino’s depictions of contemporary Japanese cultural politics. In Auto, Kirino engages with a number of issues pertaining to the evolving topography of labor relations in contemporary Japan. The narrative attempts to underscore the ways in which recent economic trends have served to solidify, rather than dismantle, the problematic relationship between Japanese labor practices and modern identity politics. More specifically, Auto is concerned with the realities occupied by Japan’s growing population of precarious laborers, a group comprised largely of both Japanese women and male and female immigrant workers. Japan’s late capitalist efforts to both integrate women into the workforce and take advantage of the cheap labor made available by globalization, Kirino suggests, have served to complexify, rather than alleviate, the nation’s longstanding socio-economic inequalities. Kirino tackles these problems via her visceral depictions of the labor in which her characters participate, devoting particular attention to the consuming nature of the bentō factory in which Auto’s

---

housewives are employed. Throughout the course of the narrative, the factory comes to function as a potent ideological force as the harsh conditions under which its laborers are made to work are persistently juxtaposed with Kirino’s bleak depictions of both the domestic spaces inhabited by Auto’s four main women and, more broadly, the cityscape of urban Tokyo, wherein each of the text’s diverse array of characters is forced to negotiate his or her own identity vis-à-vis the suffocating weight of modern day capitalism. Moreover, Kirino is particularly concerned with bodies as sites of production and consumption both within and outside of the workplace, a notion that is taken to its literal extreme as the novel’s housewives are thrust into a web of criminality wherein their occupation—the dismemberment of bodies—is persistently juxtaposed with the factory and domestic labor around which their lives are situated. As Auto’s housewives one-by-one fall victim to the consuming nature of the familial and social dynamics reflected by their labor, the anxieties that arise throughout the course of the narrative come to be manifest in the sexual desire of the novel’s two main characters—Masako and Satake—and in the final pages of the text, the power dynamics that lie at the crux of Auto are played out in a brutal bentō factory face-off wherein Satake tortures and rapes Masako, and Masako, in turn, murders him.

This analysis of Auto examines Kirino’s portrayals of laboring bodies with the aim of underscoring her eminent concern with production and consumption not only as economic activities, but also as oppressive ideologies to which her characters are subject both within and outside of the productive labor sphere. Moreover, in considering the novel’s conclusion beyond the scope of conventional feminist discourse regarding rape, it will argue that Masako’s triumph over Satake does not, as Seaman suggests, constitute an
exclusively private victory, but rather signifies both a rejection of the disempowering cultural discourse of otherness and the beginning of a journey toward the production of a new narrative. In Chapter One, entitled “Contemporary Japanese Wage Relations, Precarious Employment, and the Laboring Body in Auto,” I consider the question “What is labor?” as it pertains to contemporary Japan with the aim of establishing a relationship between Kirino’s depictions of labor in Auto and real-world Japanese employment practices. Subsequently, I illustrate the ways in which the bentō factory around which the narrative is situated functions as a microcosmic model of the stifling capitalist cultural politics of contemporary Japan, and as such thrusts the problem of labor to the forefront of the novel’s thematic concerns. In Chapter Two, “The Economy of Ethnicity: Kirino’s Portraits of Immigrant Labor,” I examine Kirino’s depictions of two immigrant characters—a Chinese entertainment worker named Anna and a Japanese-Brazilian factory laborer named Kazuo—with the aim of establishing the novel’s concern with the implications of late capitalism in Japan across genders, ethnicities, and nationalities. In Chapter Three, “Domesticity, Criminality, and the Politics of Part-Time Labor,” I explore Kirino’s portrayals of Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie, as well as the gangster Jumonji, highlighting the ways in which the struggles of these characters reflect real-life sociological issues in contemporary Japan. By devoting particular attention to the ways in which the body plays into Kirino’s constructions of these characters, I seek to underscore the novel’s concern with production and consumption as constitutive practices in all of their realities. In Chapter Four, “Bodies of Destruction and Desire,” I continue my investigation of the relationship between labor and identity in Auto, this time focusing on the novel’s two main characters—Masako and Satake—who function as manifestations...
of the various ideological struggles that surface throughout the course of the narrative. Subsequently, I offer a detailed analysis of Satake’s rape of Masako, arguing that the rape does not, as Seaman has suggested, signify a “personal” struggle, but rather constitutes yet another example of the text’s body-centric interrogation of Japanese identity politics. Finally, I examine the final pages of the narrative, wherein Masako murders her rapist and chooses to pursue a future dictated by her own terms, within the context of Carine M. Mardorossian’s discussion of rape survivorship and recovery in her article “Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape.” In doing so, I will argue that *Auto* is in fact a subversive text that not only underscores society’s problems but also calls for the dismantling of the very identity constructs around which socio-economic activities in contemporary Japan are situated.
CHAPTER I
Contemporary Japanese Wage Relations, Precarious Employment, and the Laboring Body in Auto

Introduction

The bentō factory in which many of Auto’s characters are employed functions as a potent ideological force throughout the narrative. While the novel’s characters participate in multiple spheres of labor, the factory itself comes to represent the larger socio-economic conditions under which the text’s varied individuals are forced to negotiate their own identities vis-à-vis the socially constructed roles they are expected to fulfill. The attention Kirino devotes to both the conditions under which Auto’s factory workers are employed and the ways in which these same conditions are continually reproduced outside of the factory situates the problem of labor at the crux of the novel. Although most of Auto’s characters are part-time or otherwise non-career oriented workers, the labor in which they participate is revealed to be one of the most constitutive practices within each of their realities. A reading of Auto thus demands that we consider first a number of questions pertaining to the notion of labor, particularly as it has come to be perceived in contemporary Japan. What constitutes “work”? From both legal and social standpoints, what categories of work have been included within (and excluded from) evolving definitions of labor? Finally, how are labor practices in contemporary Japan informed by modern identity politics, and vice-versa? In order to ascertain the depth of Auto’s engagement with the problem of labor in contemporary Japan, this chapter considers these and other questions pertaining to the nature of Japan’s current labor practices with the aim of underscor
Kirino’s depictions of labor and laborers engage. Subsequently, this chapter explores also the ways in which the novel’s bentō factory comes to constitute a microcosmical reflection of contemporary Japan’s consumerist cultural politics and as such demonstrates Kirino’s eminent concern with production and consumption as oppressive ideologies to which the novel’s characters are subject both within and outside of the productive labor sphere.

**Toward an Understanding of Labor in Contemporary Japan**

The question “What is labor?” has become increasingly vital, and its answer increasingly elusive, as capitalist nations across the globe have witnessed in the postwar period both a significant increase in wage relations and the flexibilizing of employment. The right to work, once largely exclusive to the patriarchal majority, has in the decades since World War II been expanded to include a multitude of disenfranchised social groups, and that which has historically constituted labor from both economic and social perspectives has in many ways evolved considerably. Furthermore, industry as the former stronghold of capitalist economy has to a large extent been replaced by an increasing demand for information, resulting in drastic changes to the configuration of the capitalist workforce and consequentially, both legal and popular conceptions of that which constitutes, and does not constitute, labor. At the forefront of advancement in information technologies, Japan has become one of the models by which contemporary capitalism and its future possibilities are evaluated. However, recent economic, legal, and social discourses exhibit a number of inconsistencies regarding issues pertaining to labor and labor-value in Japan and elsewhere. Thus, to move toward an understanding of labor in
Japan, we must consider the ways in which recent economic trends have led, on the one hand, to the creation of a vast number of new categories of labor and, on the other, to the exclusion of several other categories of labor from contemporary economic discourse.

The term wage relations, whose origins lie in the French regulationist school of economics, is defined by regulation theorist Robert Boyer as “the whole of juridical and institutional conditions that rule the uses of wage labor as well as the reproduction of the conditions of existence of workers.” This understanding of wage relations, informed by structural Marxism and closely linked with the broader neo-Marxist school of economic philosophy, emerges as part of the post-Fordist movement, which views late twentieth century capitalist nations—particularly Japan and Third Italy—as knowledge economies, in contrast to Fordist economies, the latter of which depend heavily upon industry and manufacturing. As economist Daniel Cataife notes, however, the aforementioned definition of wage labor is problematic:

The two social dimensions included in the above definition of wage relations—social conditions of productive consumption, and reproduction of workers as labor power—are thought of as being separable from, indeed external to, capital. The real significance of social classes is thus reduced by substituting the notion of capital as a social relation with that of technology and institutions. 

Cataife goes on to discuss an oppositional school of economics, the Groupe de Recherche sur la Régulation d’Économie Capataliste (GRREC), a French school of regulation whose perspective is laid forth in Gérard Destanne de Bernis's *Relations Économique*

---


2 Cataife, “‘Fordism’ and the French Regulationist School.”
Internationales, wherein, according to Cataife, social classes are reinserted into a discussion of the intricate workings of modern day capitalism:

Crises are more than the result of "social procedures" that do not work efficiently. They distinguish between the determinants of the origins of the crisis (a rupture in the structure of the accumulation process) and the course of the crisis. The latter gives ground to what De Bernis calls the "labor of crisis," i.e., a whole set of new relationships between the economic process and social classes, which in turn determine the capitalist or noncapitalist way out of the crisis.¹

In its placement of social classes, as opposed to consumerism, at the crux of economic shift, the GRREC’s perspective is to a considerable extent rooted in Fordian economic philosophy. Simultaneously, however, the organization’s acknowledgment of the significance of social class challenges Post-Fordism on several fronts. Most importantly, the GRREC’s concern with social class begs us to reconsider the notion of a “postindustrial” society altogether. Post-Fordists argue that in the here and now, it is knowledge, rather than labor, that yields profit. But the suggestion that social class remains an integral force in contemporary capitalism propels the largely invisible topic of the very real laboring class to the forefront of this discussion. What constitutes labor? Of whom is the laboring class comprised? What is its function within an ostensibly postindustrial society? According to Post-Fordists, the capitalist workforce has in recent decades become subject to “feminization,” “ethnicization,” and other types of “diversification” in response to growing pressures from feminists, minority and immigrant rights advocates, and others demanding the “right to work” in a hegemonic and predominately male-oriented workforce. The consequences of this diversification, they claim, include a boom in socially interactive work requiring its employees to display

¹ Cataife, “‘Fordism’ and the French Regulationist School.”
empathy, subdue confrontational urges, and engage in other distinctly “feminine” behaviors. The plethora of critiques that this notion has received are the subject of another discussion altogether; however, the Post-Fordists’ conclusion that the diversification of the workforce signifies the breakdown of an unequal division of labor is extremely relevant here, for the counterargument—that workforce diversification has encouraged, rather than eliminated, the reconfiguration and reproduction of a historically unequal labor division—is key to answering the questions above.

Employment flexibilization is likewise a stronghold of the Post-Fordian understanding of contemporary capitalist economy. In essence, this flexibilization, or casualization, refers to the global business strategy of reducing labor costs by replacing permanent employer-employee relationships with contractual, temporary, and casual workers. Post-Fordists view this shift as a necessary consequence of the replacement of mass marketing with flexible specialization and the rise of individualism and entrepreneurialism. As the International Labor Rights Forum notes, however, this shift in employment practices has yet to be adequately addressed from a legal standpoint:

To understand what is at the core of this employer strategy, it is important to understand that the entire framework of labor law, including international labor law, is based on the permanent employer/employee relationship. "Precarious work" is not a mere short-term tactic to reduce costs or to defeat a union organizing drive, but a long-term strategy for shedding all obligations to workers and eliminating all employee rights based on the existence of an employment relationship […] Contract, temporary or casual workers without union representation have no bargaining power to negotiate for severance pay or other safeguards when layoffs occur.¹

Again, a number of questions arise. What constitutes precarious work? Who are the precarious workers? What role does precarious work play in contemporary capitalist economies? The answers to these questions, we find, are complex and require us to move beyond economic theory and into a discussion of the realities of labor practices under contemporary capitalism.

In “Beyond the Myth of Woman: Becoming the Trans-Feminist of (Post-)Marxism,” Antonella Corsani tackles some of the questions at hand, suggesting that employment flexibilization and the expansion of wage relations have served to exclude a plethora of “economic abnormals” from the normative scope of labor:

the unemployable, welfare recipients [assistées], non-workers [inactifs], the handicapped, those without qualifications or professional credentials, the inept, the old, the sick, the unemployed, precarious workers, students, researchers who cannot find knowledges to sell on the knowledge market, bastard artists or artists without credentials, documented or undocumented immigrants, sex workers. This mass does not constitute a smooth space, but rather a striated space—one fashioned by complex relations of gender, sex, race, ethnicity and age.¹

Although Corsani references a European social model, the striated space she conceptualizes here is perceptible also within Japan. In 1997, the Japanese employed between half a million and seven hundred thousand immigrant workers, approximately 285,000 of who were illegal workers.² In 2006 one third of Japan’s workforce (approximately sixteen million people) was comprised of low-wage earning precarious

---


² Amy Gurowitz, “Mobilizing International Norms: Domestic Actors, Immigrants, and the Japanese State,” World Politics 51.3 (1999): 413-445. This estimate does not include permanent legal residents. The estimated range varies due to inconsistencies between official and non-official figures.
workers, and an estimated ten million workers earned less than the poverty line of two million yen per annum.\footnote{Florian Kohlbacher and Carola Hommerich, “Japans 'freie Arbeiter': individueller Lebensstil oder aufgedrängtes Prekariat?,” Japanmarkt (October 2007): 16-19.} According to the Health, Welfare and Labor Ministry, in 2009 Japanese women comprised over thirteen percent of Japan’s working poor and sixty-two percent of the nation’s 610,000 part-time laborers, earning an average of thirty percent less than their male counterparts.\footnote{Suvendrini Kakuchi, “Japanese Women Struggle in the Recession,” Online Asia Times, 9 August, 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Japan/LH19Dh01.html.} Beyond merely confirming the existence of a marginalized laboring class in Japan, these statistics illustrate the similarities between Japan’s current socio-economic conditions and those of other ostensibly postindustrial nations. On a microcosmic level, however, the persistence, as well as the invisibility, of these issues in Japan is closely tied to official and unofficial policymaking informed by complex historical perceptions of gender, race, ethnicity, and nation that are distinct to Japan. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to attempt to account for either the entire spectrum of Japan’s non-professional laboring class or the full complexities of the discriminatory social and legal constructs that perpetuate Japan’s persisting unequal labor division. However, for the purposes of this analysis it is important to understand the various historical conditions and economic processes by which two major forces within modern Japan’s economy—Japanese women and immigrant workers—have come to constitute a significant percentage of the nation’s marginalized laborers.

Out of the topic of Japanese women’s labor emerge a number of debates surrounding the extent to which recent economic trends have served both to improve
upon and complexify the longstanding problem of Japan’s gendered division of labor.

On the one hand, Japan has made significant strides toward the inclusion of women in the professional world. Rates of higher education completion and permanent job placement among Japanese women have risen considerably in recent decades, and the number of women who choose to remain single or childless continues to increase. However, in Japan domesticity\(^1\) and career work remain to a large extent mutually exclusive, a trend that Tomiko Yoda assesses in her discussion of Japan’s “maternalization,” a notion that corresponds largely to the European notion of workforce “feminization”:

> A vast array of ideological and institutional pressures that engender women through their association with domesticity has not shown much sign of abating. Even women’s return to work after marriage and childbirth has been recuperated into the domestic logic. Mother’s paid labor is perceived to be an extension of her maternal function, since it typically supplements the household budget to acquire better housing for the family and better education for children. The persistent maternalization of home and woman has been a major ideological support for society’s preservation of the gender division of labor and the heterosexist family organization.\(^2\)

---

\(^1\) Concerning domesticity in Japan, it is important to understand the role of the *shufu* 主婦, or housewife, within the context of the nation’s discourse on labor. As Maria Asano Tamanoi notes, from a sociological perspective the urban middle-class housewife has, since the number of urban wage earners and their families began to grow in the late nineteenth century, come to be considered representative of the Japanese woman. Japan’s sexual division of labor, she explains, gives women almost total autonomy within the family domain, and marriage in Japan, whether or not it is a romantic union, in many respects continues to be perceived as a “socially valued female career in which a woman finds self-fulfillment (*ikigai*).” Mariko Asano Tamanoi, “Women’s Voices: Their Critique of the Anthropology of Japan,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 19-20.

The global economic downturn of late has had a significant impact on permanent job opportunities for Japanese women and men alike. However, those women who have chosen to raise families, according to Kakuchi, have suffered the most:

Japan's male-dominated labor culture—consisting of working hours and regular transfers from head offices to other locations—has squeezed out many opportunities for women to hold on to their jobs after getting married and having children. When coupled with the current unemployment rate of 5.3%—and 4.9% for women—this tradition translates into an environment that is stacked against stable professional careers for women.¹

The recent recession has necessitated that Japanese wives, mothers, and other previously unemployed or precariously employed women seek out any available job opportunities. Yet in tandem with the recession, the increasing demand for highly specialized workers and the domestic logic described by Yoda and Kakuchi have made it impossible for many women to establish first-time or post-family careers. Thus, vast numbers of Japanese women, powerless to negotiate the terms of their employment, are relegated to contractual, part-time, and other forms of inadequately regulated labor in order to survive.

Likewise, the precarious employment status of both illegal and legal immigrant laborers in Japan remains heavily informed by particular historical perspectives regarding gender and nation. Japan’s postwar immigration laws, shaped by cold war mentality and strongly influenced by US models, led to the revocation of Japanese nationality of Korean and Taiwanese former subjects and the tightening of immigration laws. However, as Tessa Morris-Suzuki notes

In practice, the very harshness of the official policy made it impossible for the letter of the law to be strictly enforced […] In tacit recognition of this fact, the Japanese

¹ Kakuchi, “Japanese Women Struggle in the Recession.”
authorities therefore developed a system in which a highly restrictive official policy on immigration went hand in hand with a great deal of administrative discretion. Officials quietly accepted the presence of tens of thousands of undocumented migrants and developed informal channels through which at least some could eventually acquire legal residence rights. In this way, the events of the postwar decades laid the basis for Japan's contemporary “illegal immigration policy”: a policy under which official entry requirements remain highly restrictive, while the government selectively turns a blind eye to the entry of hundreds of thousands of illegal migrants whose presence serves economic or other purposes.\(^1\)

In what types of labor are illegal immigrants in Japan engaged? Keiko Yamanaka writes that illegal males are employed predominantly as factory and construction workers. Illegal females, likewise, tend to work in factories, but many also work as entertainers—bar hostesses, singers, dancers, and prostitutes.\(^2\) Regarding legal immigration, Japan maintains an official policy whereby Nikkeijin —a group of descendants of Japanese emigrants comprised predominantly of Brazilians and Peruvians—are legally permitted to work in the country for up to three years. Despite the legality of their presence, however, these workers, too, are largely relegated to precarious jobs. “The Nikkeijin,” writes Yamanaka,

are employed primarily in the crafts and manufacturing, including assembly, repair, and machinery operation. Some 80 percent of both genders of Brazilian and Peruvian workers have jobs in these categories; the rest perform clerical jobs or manual labor such as longshoring, loading and janitorial work.\(^3\)

Although these various categories of immigrant labor differ in terms of their social and legal standings, they are uniformly exploited and discriminated against. As the statistics


\(^3\) Yamanaka, “New Immigration Policy,” 79.
above illustrate, immigrant laborers make up a significant portion of Japan’s working class, and, as is the case in many late capitalist nations, fulfill economic demands that domestic populations are unwilling to fulfill. Under Japanese labor laws, immigrant workers are, in theory, guaranteed equality. Yet due to the temporary nature of their employment, in addition to their lack of familiarity with local labor laws and customs, they are largely unable to negotiate the terms of their labor. Furthermore, as Yamanaka notes, these workers are subject to longstanding racial and ethnic prejudices.¹ They are expected to transition seamlessly into Japanese society, yet remain susceptible to unfair employment practices and social isolation due to intrinsic linguistic and cultural differences.

I have attempted thus far to account for some of the ways in which evolving postwar economic trends have contributed to the production of new categories of labor, the exclusion of others, and the reproduction of historical labor inequalities in contemporary Japan. In doing so, I hope not so much to have definitively answered the question “What is labor?” but rather to have highlighted the complexities that answering such a question entails. In the case of Japan, discrepancies between theory and reality, policy and practice, have perpetuated the marginalization of a sizeable and extremely diverse laboring class whose collective voices have been systematically stifled. Corsani succinctly describes the significance of the issues that have arisen here:

The category of labor is problematic and has been so from the moment when, in Marx, labor became what Maurizio Lazzarato calls that “activity that is constitutive of the world.” Labor is not a simple, determinate economic activity, but rather praxis—that is, the production of the world and the self, a generic activity not merely

---

¹ Yamanaka, “New Immigration Policy,” 84.
of the worker but of human beings in general.¹

It is with this notion in mind that I turn to a discussion of Auto’s bentō factory, which comes to represent the broader socio-economic conditions that inform the various subjectivities and relationships depicted in the novel. Via her depictions of the factory, I suggest, Kirino critically engages with contemporary capitalist cultural politics and in doing so explores the interconnectedness of labor, societal conceptualizations of gender, race, and ethnicity, and subjectivity in modern day Japan.

**Factory Work and the Laboring Body in Auto**

One of the most prominently featured locations in Auto is the bentō factory in which Yayoi, Kuniko, Yoshie, and Masako, along with Kazuo, are employed. The text is riddled with visceral descriptions of the factory and the exhausting, repetitive labor in which Auto’s women are engaged therein. It is a filthy, depressing space whose sole function is the mass production of boxed-lunches for as little money as possible. While the factory is advertised as a financial opportunity—a space wherein the otherwise unemployable may be legitimately and gainfully employed—it is quickly revealed to be a prime example of the ways in which the expansion of wage relations in contemporary Japan has served to exacerbate the nation’s longstanding social and economic inequalities. The factory, we find, is an apparatus whose maximum-profit design depends upon a rigid division of labor according to both gender and ethnicity. In turn, its employees are relegated to work for which their gender and ethnic identities are perceived to be predisposed. Although the factory is just one of many spheres of labor

---

depicted in *Auto*, throughout the course of the novel it comes to constitute far more than an unpleasant part-time job. Kirino’s portrayals of both the housewives’ domestic struggles and Kazuo’s persistent failure to integrate into Japanese society are seamlessly intertwined with depictions of factory work and the production and consumption that it perpetuates. In turn, the factory, which is both the women and Kazuo’s only means of subsistence, is revealed to be the nucleus around which all of their lives are situated. Furthermore, a number of *Auto*’s other characters, too, are shown to be subject to the ideologies represented by the factory. Like *Auto*’s housewives, who work the night shift in order to both procure a higher wage and allow them to spend the daytime hours fulfilling their domestic duties, Anna, Jumonji, and Satake necessarily work in the shadows, where the most precarious—but most lucrative—labor available to individuals in their positions may be located. The factory thus comes functions as a mirror image of the domestic and criminal spheres depicted in *Auto* and, as the novel’s women find themselves inevitably thrust into the latter, serves to underscore the interconnectedness of the capitalist cycle of production and consumption and the inequitable cultural politics of contemporary Japan.

Kirino dedicates a number of *Auto*’s early pages to descriptions of the bentō factory and the work in which the novel’s women participate therein. The text opens with Masako’s arrival at the factory’s parking lot, whereupon the profound bleakness surrounding both the factory and the lives of those who work there is disclosed:

車を降りると、湿気を多く含んだ七月の濃い闇に包まれた。蒸し暑いせいか、闇が黒々と重く感じられる[...] 新青梅街道から流れてくる排気ガスに混じって、揚げ物の油臭い匂いが微かに漂っていた。これから、雅子が出勤する弁当工場から来る匂いだ。
「帰りたい」
As she stepped out of her car, she was enveloped by the humid July darkness. Maybe it was the muggy heat, but the darkness seemed incredibly black and heavy. Mixed in with the smell of gasoline fumes coming from the Shin-Oume Express, the stinking odor of deep-fried food hung faintly in the air. It was a smell that emanated from the bentō factory where she was headed for work.

“I want to go home.” The moment she smelled it, the words entered her mind. Where she wanted to return to she didn’t know. It certainly wasn’t the house that she had just left. Why didn’t she want to go back there? Where else would she go? Masako was bewildered, feeling she had lost her way.  

In subsequent passages, Kirino further underscores the profound melancholy that, like the heavy darkness depicted here, “envelopes” [包まれる tsutsumareru] the factory and its laborers. Shortly after Masako exits her car, she meets up with Kuniko so that they may walk to work together. The company that owns the factory, we discover, had recently suggested that the female employees walk to work in groups following several incidents wherein workers were assaulted by an unknown attacker while traversing the ill-lit path from the parking lot, past a defunct bentō factory, and to the operative factory:

“Everyone is saying the pervert’s a Brazilian,” Kuniko said, knitting her eyebrows in the dark. Masako walked on in silence. It didn’t matter where the man had come from,
she thought. For the people who worked in the factory, the gloom that accumulated in the mind and body couldn’t be cured.¹

The “incurable gloominess” [鬱屈は何をしても癒されはしない ukkutsu wa nani o shitemo iyasare wa shinai] referenced here becomes even more apparent in subsequent descriptions of the conditions under which the factory’s employees work. As Auto’s housewives prepare to begin their first task of the day—the assembly of 1,200 curry boxed-lunches—the consuming effects of factory labor on the workers who man the production line are brought to light:

「ご飯均し」がいかにきつい仕事かはベテランなら皆知っている。白飯は炊き立てではないから冷たく固まっている。四角く固まった白飯を一瞬のうちに平たくするには、手首と指の力が必要であり、さらに中腰でその作業を続けるために腰まで痛みだすのだ。一時間もやれば、背中から上腕まで痛みが走り、しばらくは腕も上がらなくなる。だから、何も知らない新人にまわす。

All of the veterans knew that smoothing the rice was a tough job. Because it wasn’t freshly cooked, it turned into a solidified mass as it cooled. To flatten the cold, solid squares of rice in such a brief moment required a great degree of strength in the wrists and fingers, and moreover, the stooped posture was hard on the lower back. After an hour of this, pain would shoot from the spine through the shoulders, and it became impossible to lift one’s arms. Because of this, the task was passed off to the new employees.²

The attention Kirino devotes here to the physically demanding aspects of the workers’ labor thrusts the body itself to the forefront of this scene. Her explication of the “wrist and finger strength” [手首と指の力 tekubi to yubi no chikara] required to flatten the rice, visceral descriptions of the “shooting back and shoulder pain” [背中から上腕まで痛みが走り senaka kara jyōnen made itami ga hashiri] that result from such labor, and

¹ Kirino, Auto (上), 10. My translation.

depiction of the loss of one’s inability to control her own body [腕も上がらなくなる ude mo agaranaku naru] within the factory highlight the ways in which the process of manufacturing boxed-lunches for others’ consumption ultimately devours the laborers themselves. As Auto progresses, such imagery becomes increasingly prominent, as do the ideological ties between the production and consumption that take place within the factory and the objectification of Auto’s characters outside of this productive labor sphere. Just as the steady speed of the conveyor belt determines the women’s output within the factory, their autonomy is mitigated by powerful socio-economic factors outside of the workplace. Yayoi, Yoshie, and Masako return home from their hard, repetitive factory labor each morning only to diligently fulfill their mundane domestic duties and attempt to reassemble their fragmented family units, just as they do the factory’s boxed-lunches, in the face of persistent neglect and abuse. Kuniko attempts to distance herself from the work in which she engages by rampantly consuming—and being consumed by—the very commodities that the labor of individuals like herself produces. Likewise Kazuo, whose physical features are perceived to predispose him to one of the more strenuous physical jobs at the factory, is marginalized also outside of the workplace, where his foreignness prevents him from participating in the local community.

As the narrative progresses, these parallels are taken to the extreme as Auto’s factory workers are one-by-one devoured by the circumstances into which they have been thrust. Auto’s housewives, along with the naïve Kazuo, are propelled into the sphere of criminality that is occupied by Anna, Jumonji, and Satake, and which, they soon discover, is pervaded by the same oppressive gloom that encompasses the night shift at the factory. The individual struggles of all of Auto’s characters within this shadowy realm
come to mirror the text’s depictions of grueling factory work and in doing so again thrust the body itself to the forefront of Kirino’s portrayals of labor. Ultimately, the endeavors of Auto’s characters to attain autonomy come to be manifest, on the one hand, in their attempts to reclaim their own bodies and, on the other, in their brutal destruction of the bodies of others. In this way, Kirino’s bentō factory comes to function as a symbol of the late capitalist mechanisms out of which have emerged the inflexible cultural politics against and within which Auto’s characters struggle to negotiate their identities.
CHAPTER II

The Economy of Ethnicity: Kirino’s Portraits of Immigrant Labor

Introduction

In “Inside OUT: Space, Gender, and Power in Kirino Natsuo,” Amanda Seaman writes that Kirino has compared Auto to Kobayashi Takiji’s 小林多喜二 1929 novel Kanikōsen 蟹工船 (The Crab Ship), which constitutes one of the most well-known works to have emerged from Japan’s proletarian literary movement of the interwar period.¹ To be sure, Auto shares at least one significant characteristic with Kobayashi’s novel: both works are centered around physical spaces—a ship in Kanikōsen and a bentō factory in Auto—wherein issues surrounding precarious labor come to dominate the authors’ depictions of the socio-economic realities of modern Japan. “Kirino, like Kobayashi, uses the landscape to symbolize the struggles of her characters,” writes Seaman. “That is to say, she employs the urban landscape of modern Japan not only to situate but also to emblematize the plight of those on the margins of Japanese society.”² This similarity notwithstanding, a comparison of Auto and Kobayashi’s novel is limited by a number of textual and historical factors. Firstly, while, as Seaman notes, the setting of Kanikōsen conveniently allows for the stripping away of “extraneous relationships” such as family and society and consequently the thrusting of workers’ struggles to the forefront of Kobayashi’s plot,³ Kirino’s bentō factory constitutes just one of many spaces within

¹ Seaman, “Inside OUT,” 199.
³ Seaman, “Inside OUT,” 199.
which *Auto*'s diverse cast of characters must persistently juggle their perceived workplace, domestic, and social roles.\(^1\) Furthermore, while both Kobayashi and Kirino are responding to the harsh socio-economic conditions imposed upon precarious workers by Japan’s heavy reliance on wage labor, these two novels arise out of very different historical contexts. *Kanikōsen*, like much interwar Japanese literature, depicts a society characterized by the rigid socio-economic structure with which Marx was concerned. By contrast, Kirino’s portraits of labor and laborers are considerably more flexible and together form a vision of the striated space, inhabited by the various subjects who have been excluded from the scope of normative labor by recent economic trends, to which Corsani refers. In her own assessment of the comparability of *Auto* with proletarian literature, Seaman writes:

> To be sure, the parallels with proletarian literature are limited in scope. Kirino is not looking to change the way that the factory treats its employees, but rather to highlight the women’s intractable situation. Moreover, a strict proletarian reading of the novel is defeated by Masako’s desire to escape Japan and avoid confronting the conditions of production that oppress her.\(^2\)

The constraints noted here are significant; however, Seaman’s assessment of *Auto* entails a number of problematic contentions. For one, what is meant by her notion of a “proletarian reading” is entirely unclear. Her analysis of *Auto* references only Kobayashi’s *Kanikōsen*, and even then only briefly. Moreover, she offers a rather narrow definition of proletarian literature as writing which aims to change the conditions under

\(^1\) This is not to say that Japan’s proletarian writers were not concerned with the complex relationships between wage labor, cultural politics, and individual struggles; many of them were. However, overall the movement stuck closely to Soviet Union literary guidelines, which discouraged individualism in literature.

\(^2\) Seaman, “Inside OUT,” 199.
which laborers are employed, yet she pays no regard to one of the most fundamental objectives of the movement itself: to transform the laborer into the subject of history. In turn, she suggests that *Auto* is not about labor and laborers, but rather about the irremediable suffering of women. Seaman claims that *Auto* defies a conventional feminist reading, yet her preoccupation with gender leads her to overlook the extent to which the problem of labor informs Kirino’s explorations of identity formation in contemporary Japan. Thus, Seaman is led to the rather conventional conclusion that *Auto*’s ending, wherein Masako achieves victory over her rapist, constitutes an exclusively private victory rather than a public one because, unlike Kobayashi’s characters, she has merely escaped society’s ills rather than confronted them. Ultimately, I will argue that this is not the case, and that Masako’s triumph signifies much more than a personal victory. In order to do so, it is first necessary to move toward an understanding of *Auto*’s engagement with the complexities of modern wage labor. Thus, I begin here with what I consider to be some of the strongest evidence of Kirino’s concern with the relationship between the capitalist cultural politics of and identity formation in contemporary Japan: portrayals of immigrant labor in *Auto*.

The cast of *Auto* consists of a number of non-Japanese characters whose otherness is inextricably bound to the limited professional opportunities available to foreigners residing in Japan. On the one hand, the characters in question are unique individuals representing diverse ethnicities, personal and cultural histories, and worldviews. On the other, however, the social spaces they occupy are similar in that their collective marginalization is firmly rooted in their perceived economic value as non-Japanese working and living in Japan. This category of characters in *Auto* includes a number of
entertainment and factory workers, most of who make only fleeting appearances throughout the course of the novel. However, among these figures are two individuals whose lives are tightly intertwined with those of Auto’s main characters—Masako and Satake—and whose presence in the novel evidences Kirino’s desire to highlight a number of the largely invisible socio-economic realities of modern Japan. The first of these two characters who, it would seem, are in many aspects diametrically opposed, is Ri Anna, the top hostess at Satake’s club Mika and the personal plaything of Satake himself. The second is Miyamori Kazuo, a nightshift employee at the bentō factory. Anna, who is Chinese, and Kazuo, who is half Japanese, half Brazilian, are relegated both to the realm of precarious labor and the peripheries of “normal” society due to their foreign status, which not only prevents them from participating in the ordinary public realm, but also informs perceptions of their respective labor values. Ultimately, Anna and Kazuo come to represent an array of working foreigners mentioned in the text, and Kirino’s intimate depictions of their attempts to negotiate their autonomies vis-à-vis a society in which they are persistently othered serve to establish many of the themes that will arise time and again throughout the course of the novel. Moreover, I suggest, the attention they are given evidences the necessity of moving away from an exclusively feminist reading of the text and toward an understanding of the ways in which labor plays into Kirino’s portraits of contemporary Japanese identity politics. Thus, this analysis of Auto begins with a discussion of these largely overlooked characters with the aim of underscoring Kirino’s concern with the complex relationships between economy, societal perceptions of identity, and individual self-conceptualization.
In *Auto*, the Chinese student-turned-hostess Ri Anna comes to represent a vast number of non-Japanese women who have been relegated to the fringe of urban society by the limited employment options available to foreign women living and working in Japan. Interestingly, in spite of their receipt of a significant degree of mass media attention, the precarious employment and living conditions of foreign female entertainers in Japan have yet to be adequately addressed by policymakers, a phenomenon that Yamanaka suggests may be tied to popular perceptions of women’s work in the entertainment industry “not as proper employment but as immoral activity akin to crime”\(^1\) and which Kaoru Aoyama attributes to the fact that recent trends toward more stringent policing of sex work in Japan have, contrary to their aims, served to exacerbate many of the problems associated with the nation’s entertainment trade. Japan’s recent immigration policies have, according to Aoyama, served both to reduce the number of illegal overstayers working in the sex industry and to alleviate some of the country’s longstanding problems with sex trafficking. However, she notes,

> Those who still work in the industry tend to no longer have illegal status, i.e. they tend to have spouse visas; and those who still have illegal status have disappeared from the researchers’ and/or outreach-workers’ sight, i.e. they have possibly gone more underground or to a more dangerous situation than before the year 2005.\(^2\)

Furthermore, I suggest, Japan’s persisting ambivalence regarding the conditions under which foreign sex workers are employed has no small relationship to the fact that Japan’s

---

1 Yamanaka, “New Immigration Policy,” 82.

entertainment trade, as previously noted, brings in a considerable annual sum. Aoyama writes:

The poverty rate among women in the world became clearly higher in the 1980s after two decades of development planning at an international level, with one probable reason being development policies and local cultural conditions being ‘gender blind’ against women […] Women’s resulting poverty made them more in need of cash income. It also made them migrate more as mobile labor forces because women had already become, broadly speaking, wage labourers in the setting of modernisation, and over long distances because the already industrialized countries had more demand for labour as well as supply of money. Arlie Hochschild, the American sociologist who coined the term ‘emotional labour,’ called this phenomenon ‘new gold,’ that is, women’s labour being extracted from developing countries by developed countries. This new gold is extracted from various countries including China, Thailand and the Philippines to the sex industry, one of the largest sections of the informal economy in Japan.¹

Likewise, in his own discussion of Japan’s entertainment trade, Yamanaka succinctly outlines the relationship between Japan’s thriving underground entertainment industry and current economic conditions both within and outside of Japan:

[Female entertainers] should be regarded as a form of disguised cheap labor because it provides workers for positions viewed unattractive by Japanese women: singers, dancers, bar hostesses, and prostitutes—all at the lower rungs. These activities also happen to be important sources of revenue for yakuza (gang)-affiliated employers […] The public perceives Japa-yuki-san² less as persons and more as sex objects, and associates them with their male clients and underworld exploiters. Little attention is devoted to the prevailing poverty and high unemployment in their home countries that have pushed these women into these degrading trades.³

In her portrayal of Anna, Kirino explores these and other problems pertaining to foreign women’s labor within Japan’s entertainment trade, ultimately highlighting the

¹ Aoyama, “Migrants Sexworkers in Japan,” 203.

² Non-Japanese Asian women working in the entertainment industry in Japan.

relationships between contemporary economic trends, popular discourses on gender, ethnicity, and nation, and identity formation.

The urban underbelly depicted in Auto is one wherein foreignness is popularly perceived to be a positive—and often lucrative—attribute for a woman to possess. Initially, Anna ranks highly among a considerable number of foreign women working within her neighborhood’s underground entertainment industry, and her exoticism, which is manifest in both her physical beauty and naïve worldview, determines her place not only as the top attraction at Satake’s club Mika, but also as the object of Satake’s non-sexual fetishization. Satake fulfills Anna’s everyday material needs and demands, and her life is one of leisure, particularly in comparison to that of other female workers in her trade. However, although Anna is afforded a far more comfortable life than her co-workers, her comfort, we find, hinges solely upon her value to Satake, who views her as property. As the novel progresses, this notion becomes increasingly apparent, as does the fact that Anna’s profession severely limits her capacity to develop meaningful relationships either within or outside of the sphere of labor in which she is employed. These issues come to light when Anna attempts to convince Satake, for whom she harbors deep feelings, to have sex with her:

「駄目だ。安娜ちゃんは大事な商品だからさ」
「あたし、モノなの？」
「うん。美しい夢のような玩具だな」玩具という言葉を口にした時に、またあの女の顔が目に浮かんだが、前の車のテールランプに気を取られているうちにすぐさま消えた。「金持っている男にしか手に入らない、すごく高い玩具だよ」
「でも、恋をしたら手に入るよ」
「安娜ちゃんがする訳ないよ」佐竹はしたたか者の安娜の顔を見る。
「するよ」
“That won’t do. You’re a highly valuable commodity,” he said.
“Am I a thing?”
“Yes. A beautiful, dreamlike plaything.” The moment he uttered the word
“plaything,” the face of that woman again entered his mind, but he was distracted by
the tail lamps of the car ahead, and the thought immediately vanished. “A very
expensive toy that only rich guys can have.”
“But if I fall in love, then someone else might take me.”
“There’s no way that’ll happen,” said Satake, looking over at this new, more assertive
Anna.
“I will,” she firmly replied.1

Although for a brief moment at the end of this passage Anna’s determination shines
through, Satake’s notion that she is nothing more than a “commodity” [商品 shōhin], a
“plaything” [玩具 gangu] for wealthy men, proves to be a powerful force in the gradual
diminishing of her sense of self-worth. As Anna becomes increasingly frustrated with
Satake’s inability to respond to her desire for meaningful affection, his perception of her
as being “just like a child” [まるで子供だ marude kodomo da] persists.2 When he does
attempt to mitigate Anna’s intense feelings of rejection, he does so out of a desire to
convince her to remain under his employ rather than out of any significant concern for
her emotional wellbeing.

Although these issues begin to emerge early in the novel, it is not until much later
in Auto that the narrative examines Anna’s situation from a considerably more intimate
perspective. While earlier depictions of Anna reinforce Satake’s vision of a whimsical
and somewhat petulant young woman reaping all of the benefits of her exotic charm, a
later chapter of the novel explores Anna’s psychology on a much more visceral level. The
effect of Kirino’s decision to withhold Anna’s perspective for so long is powerful. The

1 Kirino, Auto (上), 75. My translation.

2 Kirino, Auto (上), 325. My translation.
slow unraveling of her story places the reader first in a position of understanding Anna as Satake and her customers do—that is, exclusively in terms of the economic value ascribed to her body—only to later undermine this view with a narrative that is at once intensely personal and, as Aoyama and Tamanaka’s discussions of sex work in Japan exhibit, relatively common. We find that while Anna had initially entered Japan on a student visa, it had never been her intent to study. “Anna had come with the sole aim of making money,” writes the narrator,

and the only tools she’d brought with her were her youth and beauty. She’d come with great expectations, attracted by the ease of it all, spurred on by the broker’s promises of the riches to be earned in Japan; and in the end, it had been this love of ease that had undermined a bright, sensible girl like her. […] She knew there was something sleazy about the whole business, but she couldn’t help herself.¹

We soon learn that the realities of Anna’s coming to Japan entailed quite the opposite of what she had expected. The “tools”—or, more literally, “weapons” [武器 buki]²—of youth and beauty with which she had entered the country had served only to circumscribe her worth both as a laborer and as a human being to the parameters of her perceived bodily economy. For a while she had attended language school during the day and worked in a Yotsuya club at night, barely making enough to survive let alone amass enough money to return to Shanghai and fulfill her dream of opening a fashion boutique. It was only upon meeting Satake, and agreeing to work as a hostess at Mika, that Anna’s financial situation had begun to improve. Yet Anna’s rise to the top rungs of the neighborhood’s underground entertainment industry did little to confirm her former


² Kirino, Auto (上), 351. My translation.
vision of Japan as a land of opportunity for women like herself, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

Her father was a taxi driver, and her mother sold vegetables at the market. Every evening, they came home to tell each other about the day’s successes, about the money they’d made by cunning and grit. That was the way of the Shanghai wage earner. But Anna felt that she could never report her own successes to her serious, hardworking parents. And here in Tokyo, though she took a secret pride in her Shanghai heritage and her own looks, she usually felt intimidated by the self-confidence of the rich young Japanese women. Self-confidence was something she lacked. It all seemed so unfair.¹

This and subsequent passages suggest a number of things concerning the ways in which labor has informed Anna’s self-conceptualization. For one, the wage labor that she had once hoped to escape by coming to Japan has, via her own precarious trade, come to constitute a legitimate, and perhaps even desirable, form of employment. In turn, her Shanghai heritage, while functioning as a point of personal pride, simultaneously embodies a strong sense of guilt. “Satake had taught her a great many things about older Japanese men,” the narrator writes,

That it was often better to make them think you didn’t speak much Japanese. That they preferred quiet, conservative girls with nice manners [...] Above all, try to give the impression that you come from a good family in Shanghai. This they find reassuring. Satake also gave her explicit instructions about the sort of clothes and makeup that would appeal to them. In Shanghai, men might appreciate a woman who insisted on equal rights, but not here.²

Thus, via the labor in which she is engaged Anna is forced to extricate herself from both her family and her cultural heritage. Moreover, her body, which she had once proudly viewed as a symbol of her Chinese ancestry as well her only “weapon” upon entering

---

¹ Kirino, *Out*, 188.

² Kirino, *Out*, 192.
Japan, has been reduced to a non-autonomous entity, a commodity to be bought and sold so long as it remains in demand.

When Satake is taken into police custody under suspicion of murder, Anna’s life is temporarily disrupted. Satake’s club is shut down, and the nearly thirty Chinese hostesses employed there, unwilling to get involved with the police due to their precarious worker status, are forced either to seek out employment elsewhere or return to their home countries. Naturally, Anna is able to secure a job at a nearby Chinese-owned club called Mato, where she adopts the name Meiran and soon becomes one of the top hostesses. However, although her employer and name have changed, the reality of her lonely existence remains the same. When Satake is released from prison and seeks out Anna, who has by this time been made aware of Satake’s brutal murder of a woman he once knew, the narrative again explores the extent of Anna’s palpable feelings of isolation: “You say I’m pretty,” [「おにいちゃんは安娜のこと可愛いて言うけど」], Anna tells Satake,

But in truth, that’s all you think of me. When I first heard about what you did to that woman, I pitied her. But then I realized that I’m just as pathetic. Do you know why, sweetie? Because even though you scolded me at work, you don’t hate me enough to kill me like you did her. If you did, I would at least have a place in your heart. But no matter what, you can’t do it. If you could, I wouldn’t mind being killed by you. But
because you killed her, all you had left for me was affection. But affection is all, and it’s boring. And I’m sad. So Anna’s also pathetic. Do you understand that, sweetie?¹

These are Anna’s final words, and the final scene in which she appears, in Auto. Ignoring Anna’s question, Satake instructs her to return to work and forget all about their talk, and for the last time he abandons her to the seedy periphery of urban Tokyo. In this scene, Kirino again points to the ways in which the labor in which Anna is engaged has informed her sense of self-worth. Already alienated from both her family and her cultural heritage, she now realizes that the only man for whom she truly cares, her former pimp, regards her with utter indifference. Although this realization marks a moment of clarity for Anna, her words here lack the confidence with which she earlier asserted that she would one day fall in love. Her identity has become so closely intertwined with Satake’s perception of her bodily value that she cannot fathom what it means to be truly cared for. Furthermore, she has succumbed to his worldview, wherein only hatred evokes desire. “Because you killed her, all you had left for me was affection” [おにいちゃんはその女の人生を壊したから、代わりに安娜のこと優しくしたね], she tells him, suggesting that Satake’s victim took with her into death his capacity to experience any significant degree of emotion—be it hatred or love—ever again. Thus, Anna concludes, she would rather die by Satake’s hand than continue to be treated as his pet. Satake promises never to bother Anna again, and we are left with the impression that she is virtually powerless to change her situation. Her survival in modern day Tokyo depends upon her participation in a type of labor that thrives only at the periphery of society, where her value is located above all else in her exotic beauty and willingness to fulfill expectations attached to her

¹ Kirino, Auto (上), 443-444. My translation.
perceived otherness. Thus, either to reclaim her body or engage in any meaningful relationships would be to abandon what little financial stability her precarious employment affords. It is in this way that labor comes to signify the constitutive practice by which Anna’s reality is defined.

**Miyamori Kazuo**

Like Anna, the half-Brazilian, half-Japanese immigrant Miyamori Kazuo comes to represent within *Auto* a significant portion of Japan’s precarious workforce. However, while the labor in which Anna participates is largely exclusive to foreign women and is, at least officially, discouraged by policymakers, the labor in which Kazuo participates is sanctioned, and furthermore encouraged, by the Japanese government. As noted earlier, Japan maintains an official policy whereby *Nikkeijin*—that is, descendants of Japanese emigrants—are legally permitted to work in the country for up to three years. Yamanaka writes that this policy, which was initiated in 1989 in order to ameliorate Japan’s labor shortage, has permitted thousands of unskilled workers, a population comprised largely of Brazilian and Peruvian nationals, to work in Japan as long-term residents with few restrictions. Consequently, several areas in Japan’s industry-based regions such as Aichi Prefecture, Shizuoka Prefecture, and Gunma Prefecture have in recent decades attracted high populations of subcontracted immigrant workers.¹ The *Nikkeijin* are employed predominately as factory and construction workers, and according to Yamanaka

are likely targets of exploitation and mistreatment by employers and brokers, notwithstanding their legal resident status. Their passports are frequently held by the employer to prevent them from changing jobs, and large portions of their wages are

¹ Yamanaka, “New Immigration Policy,” 76.
commonly deducted to cover commission fees and travel expenses to Japan. Moreover, the Nikkeijin are expected to speak Japanese and behave like Japanese, even though they are culturally and linguistically Brazilians and Peruvians.¹

Via her portrayal of Kazuo, Kirino explores the ways in which Nikkeijin have come to constitute a significant part of Japan’s precarious workforce while simultaneously remaining alienated from the sphere of normative social interaction. In doing so, she further establishes Auto’s fundamental concern with economy’s role in determining the nature of social relations and the course of identity formation in contemporary Japan.

Kazuo is one of many Brazilian laborers at the bentō factory wherein the relationships of Auto’s characters develop and the ideological struggles presented in the text are played out. Kirino approaches her portrayal of Kazuo much like she does that of Anna; throughout the first quarter of the novel, the reader views him almost exclusively through the eyes of Auto’s other characters—primarily Masako—and it is only after we have come to understand him as an other that his own narrative is revealed. The reader is first introduced to Kazuo in the early pages of the novel, upon Masako’s arrival at the bentō factory:

残っているのは、数人のブラジル人の男たちだけだ。つかれた様子で骨がの足を前に投げ出し、壁に寄りかかったまま煙草を吹かしている。
「おはよう」
中の一人が短くなった煙草を持った手を上げ、声をかけてきた。雅子は小さく微笑みながら頷いた。胸の名札に「宮森カズオ」とあるが、色が浅黒く、
眉のせりだした中高な顔は外国人にしか見えなかった。カズオは確かに、白飯
を台車で運んではオートメーションの機械に入れる力仕事をしているはずだ。
「おはよう」
カズオは弾弓にも声をかけた。放心している弾弓は振り向きもしない。カズ
オの顔に失望が刻まれた。ぎずぎずしたの工場で、こんなことはしょっちゅうだった。

The only remaining employees were several Brazilian men. Looking exhausted, they were leaning against the wall, their legs thrust out in front of them, smoking cigarettes. “Good morning,” one of them called out, raising his hand, which was still holding a cigarette butt. Masako nodded while giving him a weak smile. The nametag on his chest said “Kazuo Miyamori,” but with his dark skin, protruding brow, and convex face, he looked like a foreigner. He undoubtedly did one of the more physical jobs, like transporting the cooked rice to the automated feeder. "Good morning," he said again, this time to the distracted Yayoi, who didn’t turn to look at him. His face displayed his disappointment, but this kind of thing happened frequently in this strained factory.¹

This initial glimpse of Kazuo is striking. That he is perceived by his peers to be Japanese in name alone (外国人にしか見えなかった gaikokujin ni shika mienakatta), and that his features are so naturally understood to predispose him to manual labor (力仕事をしているはずだ chikarashigoto o shiteiru hazu da), are made immediately evident to the reader. Furthermore, although we do not encounter Kazuo again for some time, when he does reappear in the text he does so under circumstances that serve only to exacerbate his exclusion from his host community. As Masako makes her way from the parking lot to the factory early one morning, Kazuo appears, intent on sexually assaulting her. However, he is easily convinced to leave her alone when she promises to meet up with him for a consensual encounter the following night. Even more compelling than Kazuo’s naivety here is the fact that although Masako is not entirely forgiving of him, in the aftermath of the attempted rape even she is struck by the extent of his loneliness: “Masako could sense that he was taken aback. She remembered the hurt look on his face two nights ago when Yayoi ignored his greeting. He’s just a baby, she thought.”² As the

¹ Kirino, Auto (上), 16. My translation.
² Kirino, Out, 65.
novel progresses, Kazuo, sickened by his own behavior but convinced that Masako’s willingness to keep quiet about the incident signifies her understanding of him, is motivated by his new goal of earning her forgiveness. Having virtually abandoned his impossible dream of earning enough money to purchase a car and house upon his return to Brazil, he rigorously applies himself to his Japanese studies with the hope of expressing to Masako his feelings and regaining the sense of belonging that he unknowingly abandoned when he left his homeland.

It is not until much later in *Auto* that the narrator relays to the reader Kazuo’s own story, wherein we learn that his experience of Japan has entailed a reality very different than that which he was led to believe existed. Having grown up in São Paulo as the son of a poor Japanese emigrant, Kazuo, like Anna, had been attracted to Japan by the prospect of ample job opportunities and leisurely living:

One day he noticed a poster that read “Workers Wanted for Jobs in Japan. Great Opportunity!” He’d heard that Brazilians of Japanese descent who had Japanese citizenship didn’t even need a visa and could choose how long they wanted to stay. It was said that the economy was so good and workers in such short supply that you could find a job anywhere.¹ After running into an old acquaintance who, having just returned from working in a Japanese car factory, was driving a brand new car, Kazuo had decided that he had nothing to lose: “The economic situation in Brazil was bad, with no prospects of improving, and he could only dream of owning a car on the little he made at the print shop. He decided then and there than he, too, would go to work in Japan.”² However,

---


upon his arrival Kazuo had quickly discovered that the reality of being a foreigner in Japan was anything but the golden opportunity he had expected:

But the land of Kazuo’s ancestors didn’t pay much attention to what was in his blood. At the airport and in the streets, he was seen as a foreigner, and every time, it made him want to cry out. “I’m half-Japanese! I’m a Japanese citizen!” But for the Japanese, anyone who had a different face, who wasn’t fluent in their language, wasn’t recognized as one of them. Ultimately, he decided, the Japanese were people who judged most things by their appearance, and who had no notion of brotherhood.¹

Kazuo’s experience of Japan, like Anna’s, is a familiar one, as his body, too, comes to constitute the locus of his dehumanization as his own face betrays his non-Japaneseness (日本人は自分たちと顔つきが違ったり nihonjin wa jibuntachi to kao tsugi ga chigattari). Furthermore, just as Anna occupies two realities—her real life and the fantasy life about which she tells her family in China—Kazuo, too, mitigates his situation by latching on to an impossible fantasy:

He had decided to think of his time in Japan as a spiritual test—a two-year test to see whether he could save up money for a car. Kazuo’s mother was a devout Catholic, but his was a different kind of spiritual discipline. Not God but his own willpower would give him the strength, the self-control to reach his goal. But last night, for the first time in a long while, he had let his self-control slip.²

Kazuo’s worldview as described here is noteworthy, for in some respects it differs drastically from that of Anna and the housewives of Auto. His ardent faith in his own

¹ Kirino, Auto (上), 221. My translation.

² Kirino, Out, 120.
willpower, I suggest, offers an insight into male psychology and in doing so underscores Kirino’s concern with the ways in which individuals across genders must negotiate their identities in order to cope with the oppressive realities of modern existence. Furthermore, the passages above offer a critical lens through which to view Kazuo’s attempted rape of Masako, which until this chapter has constituted his most defining act. Although I do not wish to claim here that his loneliness excuses his behavior, there is strong textual evidence that his actions are intended to be understood as a manifestation of the intense feelings of alienation made evident in the passages above. In the narrator’s disclosure of Kazuo’s own perspective regarding his attack on Masako, we discover that the incident in question occurs immediately after Kazuo awakens to hear his roommate Alberto having sex with his girlfriend:

   It had been a long time since Kazuo had heard a woman in the throes of passion, and by the time he’d covered his ears, it was already too late—somewhere inside him the fuse had been lit. For all that he’d tried to keep the gunpowder away from sparks, he’d never been able to get rid of the fuse. And once it was lit, the powder was sure to explode. He lay writhing silently on the upper bunk, his hands trying desperately to cover his mouth, to plug his ears.¹

As Kazuo replays the attack in his head, the narrator writes:

   Would he be lying if he said that he had no intention of raping her? He only wanted her to hold him, so that he could feel her softness next to his body. But when she began to resist, he suddenly wanted to force her down, to pin her there.²

This passage introduces into the novel the theme of sexual frustration, which will ultimately become one of the text’s primary concerns. Here the narrator delves into an aspect of human psychology that encompasses strong associations with the notions of

---

¹ Kirino, Out, 121.

² Kirino, Out, 121.
power and control, particularly where male sexual desire is concerned. As such, I suggest, Kirino’s depiction of Kazuo establishes what she perceives to be a substantial relationship between his perceived economic value as a foreign male in Japan and his declining sense of control over even the most basic aspects of his being. Kazuo has been stripped of his heritage and his community and his value reduced to that of the labor in which he is engaged. Accordingly, his attempted rape of Masako may be understood as a desperate struggle to reclaim some sense of power through the use of that which has led to his devaluation: his body. Thus, just as Anna’s alienation both diminishes her sense of self worth and fuels her misguided attempts to earn Satake’s affections, Kazuo’s impulsive attack on Masako, as well as his persistent obsession with obtaining her forgiveness, can be understood in terms of his intense longing for companionship.

As Kazuo becomes convinced of the impossibility of ever gaining Masako’s trust, the question of whether he should remain in Japan any longer begins to weigh increasingly heavily on his mind:

Was this really his father’s country? He looked out over the neighborhood once more. The landscape was gradually growing dim, so all that was visible were the lamps in the homes of the strangers living around him. A bit further away, the bluish white fluorescent lights flickering through the window of the bentō factory could also be seen. Could this place ever be his home?¹

In this passage, Kazuo’s intense feelings of alienation are projected onto the space in which he resides. The “growing darkness” [薄暗くなっていく usugurakunatte iku]

¹Kirino, Auto (下), 210. My translation.
around him, which enshrouds all but the lamp-lit homes of the “strangers” [見知らぬ人 mishiranu hito] in his neighborhood and the institutional lights of the dreary factory in the distance, comes to represent for Kazuo the oppressive darkness of urban Japan. He subsequently resolves to give up on Masako and return to São Paulo as soon as possible, but just as this thought enters his mind, Masako appears in front of him, desperate for help and having no one else to turn to. “Why had she come?” he thinks. “To hurt him again? But her sudden arrival had already rekindled his interest in completing his task, as though someone had thrown kindling on a smoldering fire. He stopped, confused by the rush of emotion.”¹ That Kazuo recognizes his wrongdoing toward Masako yet feels as though she has hurt him demonstrates that he has succumbed to a distorted view of reality. The hostile conditions under which his daily activities are carried out have made it impossible for him to imagine a relationship that does not encompass suffering, and his aversion to experiencing such feelings are here projected onto Masako. However, this depiction is far from unsympathetic. While the narrator makes no attempt to normalize Kazuo’s obsessive feelings toward Masako, neither does the text comment upon the queerness of the latter’s resolve to place her trust in a man who only recently assaulted her. As will become increasingly evident in subsequent chapters of this analysis, however, these two characters’ unspoken bond is rooted in their mutual experiences as individuals whose relationships with others are defined by the labor in which they are engaged.

Summary

¹ Kirino, Out, 341.
Kirino’s portraits of immigrant labor in Auto represent a multitude of individuals whose voices have been bureaucratically silenced and whose survival depends upon their persistent negotiation of their own identities. Auto is not, as other analyses have suggested, a text concerned exclusively with women, nor does it explore the problem of labor independently of social and private phenomenon. Furthermore, as evidenced in this chapter, the scope of issues with which Kirino is concerned problematizes a textual analysis whose conclusions hinge upon either the privileging of gender over any other aspect of identity presented in the novel or the actions of any one of its many compelling characters. To suggest, as Seaman does, that Kirino does not confront the conditions of production that oppress her characters does not do the author justice, for Auto does not merely delineate the problems associated with labor in Japan—it also interrogates them. In her depictions of Anna and Kazuo’s bodies as sites of oppression, Kirino exposes the economic justifications for, and undermines the legitimacy of, the systematic cultural devaluing of non-dominant social groups in Japan. In doing so, she underscores the true disposition of modern day capitalism, wherein labor functions as the essential praxis around which perceptions of gender, ethnicity, and national identity are situated.
CHAPTER III
Domesticity, Criminality, and the Politics of Part-Time Labor

Introduction

As noted in the introduction, existing scholarship on *Auto* relies heavily on the assumption that the novel is concerned first and foremost with the difficulties faced by women in contemporary Japan. Kirino’s interest in the everyday lives of Japanese women, and particularly the implications of domestic logic for female job-seekers in Japan, undeniably shines through in this text. However, *Auto*’s concerns extend far beyond the domestic sphere, for the realities of the novel’s women encompass far more than performing as wives, mothers, and caretakers. They are also part-time laborers, and, as the novel progresses, they become criminals, as well. Moreover, the women’s entrance into the realm of criminality does not occur extemporaneously. They are propelled by dire financial circumstances and their reliance on one another, and they are guided by other figures whose precarious existences at the fringes of urban society parallel their own. They are drawn to the financial possibilities offered by criminal work in which only men are perceived to participate and thus find themselves straddling the boundaries of the heavily gendered domestic and criminal spheres of urban Tokyo.

The group of characters discussed in this chapter is comprised of three women—Yamamoto Yayoi, Jonouchi Kuniko, and Azuma Yoshie—and the gangster Jumonji Akira, all of who continually traverse the borders of multiple social spheres. The women, who along with Masako and Kazuo work overnight shifts at the *bentō* factory, are unified by their shared marginalization under a gendered socio-economic system in which they are expected to both fulfill domestic roles and work menial part-time jobs in order to
support themselves and/or their families. Kirino’s portrayals of these women’s struggles reflect the current conditions under which a vast number of urban Japanese women are employed, for as Tamanoi notes,

Japanese women participate in the labor force at rates similar to those among women in Western societies, but the nature of that participation differs significantly from that in the other industrialized nations […] Women remain poorly paid; few single women working in large corporations can climb the career ladder; there is little or no job training for women; most married women work in medium-or small-scale enterprises, and many work in so-called part-time jobs that are in fact full-time or over-time […] a variety of labor-related laws have protected not so much individual women as the role of women as wives and mothers, thereby assuring fulfillment of their obligations at home.¹

Kirino’s depictions of Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie aim to underscore the socio-economic conditions out of which some of the most predominant women’s issues in Japan have arisen. Furthermore, these housewives’ embrace of criminal labor as a means by which to liberate themselves from the conditions imposed upon them by Japan’s capitalist cultural politics altogether undermines conventional justifications for the sexual division of labor. Finally, the trajectories of their relationships serve to interrogate the very nature of social relations in contemporary Japan. Likewise, Jumonji, whose fly-by-night endeavors are at best shady and at worst criminal, occupies a peripheral and dangerous sphere wherein the exchange of goods and services is largely unregulated and even short-term financial stability is uncertain. He is, I suggest, an example of what happens when members of even the most privileged social classes fail to adhere to normative expectations. Furthermore, Jumonji functions largely as a foil to the novel’s housewives. He is everything that these women are not, yet the course of his life parallels those of theirs, and in turn affirms Kirino’s concern with labor as the praxis of reality. Ultimately,

I suggest, the function of these characters in *Auto* is twofold. Their varied circumstances represent the diverse array of individual human experience that exists within what others might perceive to be relatively homogenous social spheres. Moreover, they serve to interrogate the extent to which human identities and relations in contemporary Japan are informed by economy. While the housewives and criminals of *Auto* appear to occupy vastly different peripheral spaces due to their perceived value (or lack thereof) within the “ordinary” social realm, Kirino suggests that the economic roots of their subjugation are firmly intertwined. Thus, this chapter examines Kirino’s engagement with the relationship between perceptions of labor value, subjectivity, and social relations in contemporary Japan by exploring her portrayals of factory work, domesticity, and criminality as the interconnected labor practices around which the lives of *Auto*’s characters are situated.

**Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie: *Auto*’s Criminal Housewives**

Via her depictions of Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie, Kirino tackles a number of prominent issues associated with perceptions of women’s labor value in Japan. The issues Kirino addresses are complex and encompass a wide array of highly personal struggles encountered by her female characters. Simultaneously, however, they engage with a number of real-world problems faced by Japanese women, and particularly those women who by virtue of being married, having children, or being middle-aged have been excluded from the normative workforce and thus rendered unable to achieve financial independence. Kirino’s portraits of domesticity are grim. She delves into the psychologies of these three women in order to bring to light the ways in which the labor
in which they are engaged has come to constitute the single most substantive force in
the formation of both their own subjectivities and their relationships with others. In doing
so, she attempts to undermine the legitimacy of Japan’s gendered socio-economic schema
by pointing to the potential consequences of the societal expectations to which Auto’s
characters, along with many of its real-world readers, are held accountable.

Yamamoto Yayoi

Auto’s plot is set into motion by the abrupt transformation of the timid wife,
mother, and part-time factory worker Yamamoto Yayoi into a violent spouse murderer.
Among Auto’s characters, Yayoi is perhaps the most likely to provoke within the reader a
strong sense of ambivalence. Although her gruesome murder of Kenji occurs in the wake
of a considerable history of emotional and physical abuse, her means of killing Kenji is
brutal, and following his death she experiences heavily conflicting emotions regarding
her actions. Furthermore, she lies persistently, plays on the sympathies of others, and
relies upon her friends to engage in the dirty work of disposing of Kenji’s corpse. As
Kirino herself notes, Yayoi’s murder of her husband has been a difficult concept for
Auto’s readers—and male ones in particular—to come to terms with: “Men were very
shocked that a wife could kill her husband,” she claims. “That was really a provocative
idea.”1 However, Yayoi’s situation is likely to be familiar to Auto’s readers, for as a
victim of domestic abuse, she represents an all-too-common reality for many Japanese
women. In 1997—the year that Auto was published—the Tokyo Metropolitan

bound.org/author-interviews/kirinonatsuo/.
Government polled 4,500 men and women, asking all respondents for their opinions on violence against women and asking all women whether they had ever been victims of violence. According to the report,

25% of the respondents had been victims of physical, sexual and/or psychological abuse. More than half of the women experienced psychological abuse in the form of being ignored or patronized by their partners. Twenty per cent reported sexual abuse, and 1% reported being beaten so badly that they could not stand up […] In addition, two-thirds of the sample chose not to respond to the survey at all. In their report, the researchers expressed concern about the non-responders and postulated that actual violence against Japanese women may be higher than reported.¹

In her portrayal of Yayoi, Kirino offers an intimate depiction of the psychology of an abused woman whose voice has been systematically and violently silenced. Moreover, she establishes a thematic framework wherein the human body will come to function time and again as a representation of both the unyielding cycle of production and consumption under which the bentō factory operates and, by extension, the suffocating cultural conditions within which Auto’s characters exist. Ultimately, I suggest, Kirino’s depiction of Yayoi underscores the notion that labor functions as the single most vital practice around which human identities and relationships are arranged.

Yayoi’s suffering at the hands of Kenji is manifest in the form of an abdominal bruise which comes to signify her tortured psychological state at multiple points in the narrative. Moreover, although the bruise, like Yayoi’s domestic conflicts, remains concealed from all but her co-workers, the mark comes to be associated with a stain on her work uniform, a reminder of the often violent conditions under which she is employed in the factory. That Yayoi is a victim of domestic abuse is apparent upon her

initial appearance in the text, wherein she slips on the greasy, sauce-covered factory floor, and Masako, while helping her up, notices the mark:

雅子は、弥生のめくれた作業衣の下、鳩尾の辺りに青黒い大きな痣があるのを見た。これが弥生の元気のない原因だったのか。神様が不吉な印を押したように、白い腹にそれはくっきりと目立った。

Underneath Yayoi’s turned up work uniform, Masako noticed a large, blue-black bruise on her abdomen. Was this the reason she was so lifeless? The mark was conspicuous on her white belly, like an ominous mark impressed upon her body by a god.¹

Stephen Snyder translates “神様が不吉な印を押したように kamisama ga fukitsu na shirushi o oshitayouni” as “like a mark of Cain,”² an image derived from a Judeo-Christian myth wherein Cain, the son of Adam and Eve and murderer of his brother Abel, is first cursed as a punishment for his transgression and then marked by God as a warning that anyone who kills Cain will be punished seven times over. I have chosen to translate this excerpt instead as “like an ominous mark impressed upon her body by a god” given that Snyder’s translation obfuscates the potential implications of Kirino’s original text. While the mark described by Kirino embodies a sense of inauspiciousness, the mark placed upon Cain is one of divine protection—a luxury that Yayoi does not possess. Moreover, Yayoi’s bruise is not, as Snyder’s translation suggests, a consequence of her transgression; rather, it is diabolically stamped upon her and in turn becomes the catalyst for her crime. Finally, unlike the mark of Cain, which offers its bearer peace of mind, Yayoi’s bruise is revealed to be an increasingly consuming force as her struggles to extricate herself from the omnipotent socio-economic forces that it represents are time

¹ Kirino, Auto (上), 23. My translation.

² Kirino, Out, 12.
and again suppressed. Forced to work the remainder of her shift wearing a sauce-covered smock, Yayoi, already distracted by her husband’s abuse the night before, is now further humiliated and returns home from the factory in a more fragile state than the one in which she had arrived. It is on this same night that she murders Kenji in a fit of rage.

Immediately prior to the killing, the bruise is referenced once again:

憎しみだ。この感情を、憎しみというのだ。山本弥生は姿見に映る自分の全 身を眺めながら思った。三十四歳の白い裸体のほぼ中央、亀尾に際立った黒 黒い、ほぼ円形の痣がある。昨夜、夫、健司の拳固をここで受けたのだ。そ れは、弥生の内部にはっきりと、ある感情を誕生させた。いや、以前からあ った[...] 憎しみという名前を持った途端にそれは黒い雨雲のように広がり、 瞬く間に心を占領した。だから今、弥生の心の中には憎しみ意外、何もない。 Hatred. That’s what you call this feeling, thought Yayoi Yamamoto as she gazed at her body’s reflection in the full-length mirror. Near the center of her thirty-four year old naked body, right in the pit of her stomach, was a conspicuous, blue-black, circular bruise. Her husband Kenji had punched her there last night, and within her a strong feeling had been born. No, it had been there before [...] At the moment she had realized it was “hatred,” it had spread like a black rain cloud and possessed her. Now, it was the only thing inside her heart.\(^1\)

It is suggested here that Yayoi’s bruise, as a physical manifestation of the pain she has endured, provides the motivation she needs to finally extricate herself from her unhappy marriage. However, the relief she experiences upon Kenji’s death is temporary, for as the novel progresses, the “ominous mark” [不吉な印 fukitsu na shirushi] on her abdomen, like the stain on her work uniform, comes to function not only as a perpetual reminder of her feelings of “hatred” [憎しみ nikushimi] toward Kenji, but also as a signifier of the brutal silencing that has been imposed upon her within both the domestic sphere and her workplace.

\(^1\) Kirino, Auto (上), 83. My translation.
After Kenji’s death, Yayoi’s state of mind becomes increasingly fragile as she struggles with, on the one hand, her growing desire to share her pain, and, on the other, her fear that the bruise, if seen, will affirm her guilt. As the women prepare to begin working on the day after Kenji’s death, the narrator further parallels Yayoi’s bruise to the stain on her uniform, as Masako notices that Yoshie is unable to stop staring down the line:

She followed Yoshie’s gaze to see Yayoi standing there absentmindedly. Her white work frock still bore the pork sauce that had spilled on it during her fall the night before. It had dried up, but the large, brown stain was conspicuous, covering her lower and upper back.¹

Here the conspicuous stain incrusted upon the back of Yayoi’s smock once again stands in for her bruise, signifying the violence that she must silently endure. Furthermore, the extreme visibility of the stain comes to represent Yayoi’s deepest fear: that the mark on her stomach will be her downfall:

And yet, when she was under the watch of suspicious eyes, Yayoi couldn’t help but to think that they could see through to the bruise on the pit of her stomach. The pain gave her the desire to strip off her clothes and expose her bruise for everyone to see, but to do so would be extremely dangerous.²

¹ Kirino, Auto (上), 111. My translation.

² Kirino, Auto (上), 309. My translation
As Yayoi’s bruise fades she becomes increasingly uncertain that killing Kenji has solved her problems. One day, recalling the early days of their relationship, she is suddenly overwhelmed with sadness and regret. However, her regret subsides as she is once again overcome by anger, removes her wedding ring, and hurls it into the garden. In this scene, the narrator again underscores Yayoi’s body, this time honing in on the pale mark imprinted upon her finger by her wedding band:

弥生は、十一月の、白さを感じさせる真昼の太陽の光で、ずっくりしてしまった左手の薬指を眺めた。八年間、一度も外したことのない指輪の痕が薬指に白く残っているのを切ない想いでじっと見入る。欠落感があった。しかし解放もされていた。とうとう、あらゆることが終わりを告げる。

Yayoi gazed at the empty ring finger of her left hand, the November afternoon sunlight emphasizing its whiteness. The pale band left by the ring that had not been removed once in eight years brought about a suffocating feeling. It was a feeling of loss. However, it was also liberating. At last, a sign that it was all over.  

Here the narrator suggests that although Yayoi’s bruise has disappeared, the abuse she has endured has left a long-lasting impression on her psyche. The suffering she has undergone once again comes to be manifest corporeally, this time in the form of the “suffocating” [切ない setsunai] imprint left upon her finger by her wedding ring. However, this passage points also to the possibility of recovery as the darkness of Yayoi’s bruise and the pain it represents come to be starkly juxtaposed to the pale band of skin on her finger, a symbol of her newfound “liberation” [解放 kaihō] from the socio-economic constraints represented by the ring. Her bruise having finally vanished, Yayoi casts away her hatred, along with her fear of being found out. She is determined to start anew with the help of the fifty million yen in insurance money that she is awarded in the

---

1 Kirino, Auto (下), 221. My translation.
wake of Kenji’s death. However, the possibility of her recovery is subsequently stifled when Satake demands that she hand over the money lest he report her deeds to the police. Thus, Kenji’s post-mortem “gift” becomes yet another signifier of her dependence on others for financial stability and in turn, for her own sense of personal identity:

The money was gone, she’d quit her job, and she’d quarreled with her friends at work […] As she shuffled along it occurred to her that, for better or for worse, it was Kenji who had provided her life with a direction: Kenji’s moods, Kenji’s health, Kenji’s job, Kenji’s salary.¹

In her final scene in Auto, Yayoi replaces her wedding band, covering the pale mark she earlier perceived as a sign of freedom and signifying once again the cultural stifling of her voice. Remembering something Masako had earlier said to her—“I don’t see how it will ever be over for you”²—Yayoi now believes these words to be all too true, for she is unable to dissociate her self-conceptualization from either the domestic role that afforded her some sense of economic stability and purpose or the criminal realm within which that which granted her temporary freedom is transformed into the cause of her downfall.

Jonouchi Kuniko

Among Auto’s characters, Jonouchi Kuniko is perhaps the most lacking in personal history. While Kirino provides historical frameworks through which we may come to understand the various subjectivities portrayed in Auto, she reveals very little regarding Kuniko’s own past, demanding that the reader attempt to understand Kuniko based entirely on her present existence. Kuniko, who is twenty-nine years old, is characterized by vapidity and rampant consumerism. She spends far beyond the means

¹ Kirino, Out, 352.

² Kirino, Out, 353.
provided by her meager salary at the bentō factory and survives only on the mercy of her many creditors, who become increasingly insistent on being repaid as the narrative progresses. She is obsessed with her own appearance and the appearances of other women, and compensates for her insecurities by going deeper and deeper into debt. However, beneath Kuniko’s lavish spending habits, obsession with looks, and irresponsibility exists a woman whose self-worth, Auto’s narrator reminds us, is tenaciously bound to her perceived labor value. In truth, Kuniko is in fact rather non-domestic. Her husband Tetsuya abandons her early in the novel, and, being childless, she is left with no family to speak of. However, she is not, as one might expect, liberated by her newfound lack of domestic responsibility. Kuniko possesses neither the education needed to enter the professional workforce nor the youthful looks required by the proprietors of entertainment establishments. Thus, she is relegated to the sphere of precarious labor, which comes to constitute the most defining aspect of her existence.

Regarding Kuniko, who among Auto’s housewives is the most determined to isolate the labor in which she participates from the defining aspects of her being, the narrator writes: “In general, when she said good-bye to her friends at the factory, it was as if a heavy veil fell away, letting the real Kuniko show through.”\(^1\) However, the real Kuniko is revealed to be a woman whose sense of self is in fact firmly rooted in her perceived labor value. Early in the novel, Kuniko, eager to leave her low-paying job at the factory, inquires about an advertisement for a hostess job at a local pub. “The minute the ad came out we had six girls, all about nineteen, show up,” the pub manager tells her.

---

\(^1\) Kirino, *Out*, 14.
“We like them fresh like that; seems to be what the customers want.” The narrator continues: “But it’s not just age, Kuniko thought, her spirits falling like an elevator. If she were pretty and stylish her age probably wouldn’t matter. Age probably wasn’t the problem at all, she thought, her insecurities now in the ascendant.”¹ In this and subsequent dark and introspective moments, the narrative reveals the ties between Kuniko’s internalization of others’ perceptions of her value as a woman and her diminishing sense of self worth. In turn, although Kuniko’s actions are ostensibly self-serving, they are ultimately revealed to be self-destructive.

Kuniko’s over-consumption of material goods drives her into debt (and into the hands of loan sharks), and this same over-consumption is reflected in her relationship with food, which at times functions as Kuniko’s only source of comfort. The attention the narrator devotes to describing Kuniko’s eating habits is significant. While the other women of Auto go to great lengths to ensure that their families are well fed, Kuniko possesses no domestic responsibilities and is depicted time and again devouring hot dogs, cake, and soda, in addition to bentō lunches produced at the very factory for which she works: “She knew how things worked,” the narrator writes.

A woman who wasn’t attractive could not expect to get a high-paying job. Why else would she be working the night shift in a factory like this? But the stress of the job made her eat more. And the more she ate, the fatter she got.²

While Kuniko’s troubled relationship with food is in one respect a highly personal issue, in this excerpt Kirino underscores the explicit relationship between individual identity

---

¹ Kirino, Out, 20-21.
² Kirino, Out, 15.
formation and the cultural politics of late capitalism. In their discussion of the rise of disordered eating among Japanese women, Kathleen Pike and Amy Borovoy explicate this relationship, suggesting that eating disorders in Japan might be understood in terms of broader workforce and social politics:

Reflecting divergent notions of marriage and motherhood, autonomy for middle-class Japanese women has historically been viewed as something accessible within the confines of marriage and family, rather than outside of them. Nor is employment in the commercial sector necessarily a path to self-sufficiency for Japanese women. Japanese notions of marriage, love, and adulthood create a social context in which the same life paths which offer women economic stability and social independence simultaneously confine them to relatively limited social and emotional lives [...] we suggest that eating disorders in Japan may be a reflection not of the tension resulting from the striving for achievement, careerism, and autonomy described in the West, but rather a reflection of the questioning and negotiation of a set of constraints and silences imposed by a system which has in fact historically valued the work of nurturance and domesticity, making it a key avenue for women’s economic stability and social participation.  

In light of this discussion, Kuniko’s relationships with both food and material goods, I suggest, might be understood as a projection of a deep sense of personal inadequacy that stems from her non-participation in either the ordinary domestic or professional spheres. On the one hand, her lack of family severely limits her opportunities for developing relationships outside of the workplace. On the other, her lack of career skills precludes her from achieving financial stability. She is, in a sense, doubly-silenced, and her body becomes a site of negotiation, functioning as her only means of participating in the consumption of that which her labor produces:

Kuniko got up around noon and turned on the TV. After that, she had a boxed-lunch—one made in the factory where the women worked—that she’d bought from the nearby convenience store. It had probably been made on the next line over from hers. She was pleased to see that the beef lunch had been assembled by some of the newer workers. Because the new ones couldn’t keep up with the speed of the conveyor belt, they didn’t have time to spread the meat properly, so there were far more twisted chunks of beef than usual. This kind of lunch was a lucky sign, she thought. It was going to be a good day.¹

Although Kuniko experiences exhilaration upon devouring her meal, her reality, like the boxed-lunch’s bloated portion of “twisted beef” [よじれた牛肉 yojireta gyūniku], is a reflection of the vicious cycle of production and consumption upon which the financial success of the bentō factory depends. Just as the factory figuratively consumes its workers, demanding the entirety of their physical strength in order to maintain the highest possible profit, Kuniko consumes in order sustain her perception of her own value:

欲望を満足させるために商品を買い、その商品のためにまた新たな物欲が生まれる。次第にエスカレートしていく。きりのない追いっかけっこをしているのが、邦子の生き甲斐だった。というより、邦子自身だった。

She bought things to satisfy her desires, and out of these new things more desires were born. It was a gradually escalating cycle. In the end, this chase was the reason for Kuniko’s existence. More than this, it was the entirety of her existence.²

It is made evident here that Kuniko’s desire to divorce herself from her labor leads only to her participation in the same rampant consumerism that is sustained by the work that she and other precarious labors perform. Furthermore, her desire, or “appetite” [欲望 yokubō], is revealed to be her downfall. In a sense, she simultaneously devours and is

---

¹ Kirino, Auto (下), 129. My translation.

² Kirino, Auto (下), 131. My translation.
devoured by her labor—a notion that is taken to an extreme as Kuniko’s story comes to an end.

Kuniko’s quest for autonomy, or at least temporary monetary gain, drives her to participate in the disposal of Kenji’s body and thus enter into the sphere of criminal labor wherein the friendships of Auto’s women ultimately break down. Initially, in an attempt to distance herself from the task that she has agreed to carry out, and for which she is being paid, Kuniko strikes out against Masako, who time and again suggests that their gruesome endeavor is just another job. However, in spite of her initial hesitancy to embrace Masako’s businesslike approach to the task at hand, Kuniko soon finds herself quite comfortable with her role as a criminal and, in fact, embraces it. Taking full advantage of Yayoi’s susceptibility, Kuniko attempts to blackmail her for a large amount of money and furthermore coerces her into signing as the guarantor on a loan. Later, unable to pay back a loan earlier extended to her by Jumonji, she confesses to him the details of Yayoi’s crime and the women’s disposal of the body, all the while claiming that she had been forced to get involved. In turn, Jumonji forgives her debt to him. It is in this way that labor comes to inform the breakdown of the few relationships in which Kuniko is engaged and, ultimately, leads to her own death. Thinking that she has finally attained the freedom for which she has been striving for so long, Kuniko goes to the apartment of the kindly factory security guard, Sato—who, unbeknownst to her, is Satake in disguise—in order to attempt to seduce him. He ties her to his bed and interrogates her, then reveals to her that the other women have been working for Jumonji, telling her,
“They don’t trust you. They no longer need you.” He then strangles her with a belt in the very same way that Yayoi had murdered Kenji. Kuniko’s death is deeply symbolic. Having destroyed her relationships with everyone else in her life, she goes running back to, quite literally, the security of the bentō factory, whereupon she is murdered. Satake sends Kuniko’s body to her former co-workers and Jumonji, who discover a corpse not unlike the twisted hunks of beef in the boxed-lunch Kuniko had earlier consumed:

Two fat, white legs, their ankles unbound, with bruising on the backs of them. Yoshie screamed and hid behind Masako. Next came a flabby torso that showed no signs of having been wounded. Two blubbery breasts hung at either side. She was fat, but it was the body of one at the peak of womanhood.

Subsequently, Kuniko’s former co-workers undertake the task of chopping up her body and packaging it for shipment, just as the women had previously sliced, portioned, and tidily packed strips of meat into boxed-lunches at the factory. “Skipper,” Masako says to Yoshie as they prepare to begin their gruesome task, “set the line to eighteen.” In this way, Kuniko’s short-lived sense of freedom is transformed into her ultimate denial of autonomy.

Azuma Yoshie

---

1 Kirino, Out, 325.

2 Kirino, Auto (下), 200. My translation.

3 Kirino, Out, 339.
While Kuniko’s problems stem largely from her relegation to the outer fringes of the domestic sphere in which women her age are expected to participate, Azuma Yoshie’s compulsory participation in domestic labor is one of the greatest causes of both her financial instability and her steadily decaying morality and psychological state. “She was willing to put herself out for others,” writes Auto’s narrator, “but when it was just for her, it hardly mattered.”¹ A widow, mother of two children (including a delinquent teenage daughter who has a son of her own), and the caretaker of her senile mother-in-law, Yoshie spends her days fulfilling her various domestic roles and her nights working at the bentō factory—where she is known as “Skipper” for her take-charge attitude and skills—barely making enough money to survive. Interestingly, in some respects Yoshie represents an increasingly rare type of woman in contemporary Japanese society. Despite the growing trend in Japan of placing the responsibility for elder care in the hands of medical professionals, Yoshie, who is in her late fifties, assumes full responsibility for the care of her sickly mother-in-law. Moreover, she is far less resistant to societal perceptions of gender roles than her younger co-workers, having become inured to both her domestic responsibilities and her necessary participation in precarious labor in order to support first her ailing husband and, now that he is dead, her entire family. However, Yoshie, like Yayoi and Kuniko, represents a kind of doubly marginalized figure in Japanese society: a housewife without a husband. Tamanoi writes:

Indeed, by the late 1960s, the growth of the Japanese economy had already forced many housewives to become wage earners in support of their families’ middle-class

¹ Kirino, Out, 22.
standard of living. Meanwhile, women who did not marry or who lost their
husbands were considered deviant and labeled as social anomalies.¹

In her portrayal of Yoshie, Kirino depicts a woman whose own livelihood, as well as that
of her family, depends solely upon her labor both within and outside of the domestic
sphere. Accordingly, Yoshie’s self-perception is firmly rooted in her roles as mother and
wage earner. However, as her family becomes an increasingly burdensome impediment
to her desperate struggles for financial autonomy, Yoshie is left with no option but to
extricate herself from her identity as homemaker by entering into the realm of criminality
and, ultimately, destroying the consuming family around which her reality revolves.

Throughout the course of *Auto*, Kirino employs deeply visceral imagery in order
to juxtapose the domestic and peripheral spheres of labor in which Yoshie participates.
Such images begin to emerge early in the narrative, wherein Yoshie arrives home after a
night at the factory and is confronted by the odor of her own house:

As she noiselessly opened the door, Yayoi immediately noticed the faint smell of
disinfectant mixed with excrement. No matter how often she aired the house or
mopped and hung the floor mat, she could never banish the odor.²

The revolting “smell of disinfectant mixed with excrement” [クレゾールと糞尿の臭い] described here alludes to an earlier scene in *Auto*, wherein Masako, standing in the
factory’s parking lot, finds herself enveloped by the “stinking odor” [臭い匂い kusai

---


nioi] emanating from the factory. Subsequently, Yoshie is forced to change her ill-tempered mother-in-law’s diaper while simultaneously dealing with her resentful teenage daughter Miki. As Yoshie realizes how embarrassed her daughter is of the family’s financial predicament, she finds herself unable to scold Miki for her attitude, thinking to herself:

I’m the most ashamed, the most miserable of all. But there’s no way out. Who else would save them? They had to stay alive. And even if she felt like a slave, even if she always had to do the low work, she thought, she couldn’t quit. There was no other way.

The notion that Yoshie is a “slave” [奴隷 dorei] becomes increasingly powerful throughout the remainder of the text. For some time, Yoshie, in spite of the unpleasantness of her various duties at home, diligently fulfills her domestic responsibilities with the same experienced efficiency with which she performs her job at the factory. However, as these responsibilities begin to weigh increasingly heavily both on her body and mind, her family, much like the factory, comes to represent a suffocating force:

“I need money.” The thought had become something of an obsession. She had used up the modest insurance settlement from her husband’s death taking care of her mother-in-law, and now their savings were all but gone, too. She had only graduated from middle school herself and was determined to send Miki at least to a junior college, but she couldn’t see how she’d manage. Saving for retirement—that was

---

1 Kirino, Auto (上), 7. My translation.

2 Kirino, Auto (上), 48-49. My translation.
completely out of the question. Though the night shift at the factory was hard, quitting was never an option. In fact, she had just about decided to look for a second job during the day, but that left the problem of finding someone to take care of the old woman. She was usually good at coming up with a solution, but the more she thought about it the more stymied she became.¹

Yoshie’s conflicting desires to both provide for her family and extricate herself from her domestic responsibilities are persistently alluded to throughout the course of Auto’s plot. Just as she is consumed by her work on the factory’s production line, the family for whom her labor provides consumes her also. Thus, Yoshie, like Auto’s other housewives, finds herself propelled by financial desperation into the sphere of criminality, and it is only in embracing her role therein that she is finally able to achieve some degree of autonomy.

Yoshie’s implication first in the mutilation and disposal of Kenji’s body and later in Jumonji’s business of corpse disposal, like Kuniko’s ties with Tokyo’s criminal underbelly, are borne out of financial desperation. When given the choice of immediately repaying a loan to Masako or helping her to get rid of Kenji’s corpse, Yoshie requires only a brief moment to make her decision. When, confronted with the corpse, she finds herself too frightened to touch it, the promise of a large sum of money easily qualms her fears: “Now that it was categorized as a job, Yoshie began barking orders as if she were at the head of the factory assembly line” [仕事だと割り切ったらヨシエは、工場のラインの先頭にいるように急に采配を振るいだした].² As the plot thickens, Yoshie is convinced with comparable ease to participate in Jumonji’s new business venture, and

¹ Kirino, Out, 23.
² Kirino, Auto (上), 144. My translation.
in this endeavor, too, she finds herself quite naturally taking charge. An expert when it comes to the slicing and portioning of meat and the assembling of boxed-lunches, Yoshie is equally adept at butchering and parceling corpses. Moreover, she is fully accustomed to her role as a nighttime laborer, and this new job opportunity, which must also be conducted in the shadows, in fact entails far less arduous work than the labor in which she is engaged at the factory. However, just as Yoshie is able to achieve some financial stability, both her familial relationships and her factory friendships begin to break down. Her daughter steals the money she has earned and runs away from home, and Masako, for the first time, is unwilling to bail her out. Subsequently, a body that the two women have been contracted to cut up is revealed to be none other than their recently murdered co-worker Kuniko—a message from Satake, who is out for revenge. Yoshie is thus rendered both financially and emotionally destitute, and, it would seem, at the brink of being devoured entirely by the demands of those around her: “Tonight she was wearing the windbreaker that she wore every winter. Masako remembered how thin and worn its flannel lining had become. It seemed Yoshie would also wear out one day” [冬になるといつも着ているウィンドブレーカーを今夜も着ていた。雅子はそのネルの裏地が薄く、破れそうになっていたのを思い出した。ヨシエもいつか擦り切れるのではないだろうか].¹ In Yoshie’s final struggle for independence, only one option remains: the destruction of everything that has for so long constituted her reality. Overcome by the resentment expressed by her family members, she sets fire to her house (presumably with her mother-in-law still inside), signifying her withdrawal from the domestic sphere and

¹ Kirino, Auto (下), 284. My translation.
the casting off of her self-identification as homemaker. Subsequently, having become alienated from her former friends, she decides to take her meager insurance settlement and leave town. “Yoshie found a way out” [ヨシエの出口はあった]¹, thinks Masako, as she bids her friend farewell for the last time. Yoshie does find a way out—the fire consumes her home and with it the obligations that consume her. However, her prospects, like those of Yayoi and Kuniko, are grim.

**Jumonji Akira: Part-Time Mobster**

If the many difficulties faced by Auto’s housewives may be linked to Japanese perceptions of female bodily economy, the gangster Jumonji Akira, whose equally precarious existence relies on both the whims of higher criminal powers and his own taking advantage of other marginalized peoples, might be understood in similar terms. Like that of Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie, the scope of labor in which Jumonji participates is difficult to categorize. While some of his endeavors are legal (if not morally questionable), others are definitively criminal. Moreover, he is neither a career criminal nor an arubaito² worker, but rather a precarious part-timer whose labor, like that of Auto’s women, is conducted largely within the shadows. Interestingly, the conditions


2 Although “part-time” and “arubaito” are often used interchangeably, the legal definitions of these jobs differ, as Susan Houseman and Machiko Osawa explain: “The Employment Status Survey and the Survey on the Status of Part Time Workers provide data on both part-time and arubaito jobs. An arubaito job is a ‘side’ job taken by someone who is in school or who has regular employment elsewhere, while part-time jobs are held by those who do not have other employment and who are not classified by their employers as full time. Arubaito jobs typically are held by students; part-time jobs generally are held by married women.” Susan Houseman and Machiko Osawa, “Part-time and Temporary Employment in Japan,” *Monthly Labor Review* 118 (1995): 10-19.
under which Jumonji is employed reflect a rather rapidly growing economic trend in urban Japan. In a 2006 report by Japan’s National Police Agency, it was revealed that, for the first time in history, “part-time” *yakuza* outnumbered their full-time counterparts. According to the report

*Yakuza* are appearing to detach themselves from full-time mob activity by engaging in business, political or social activities in a bid to camouflage their underworld affiliation [...] It is an urgent task to investigate the scope of the semi-regular membership and to take action against companies providing funds to crime syndicates [...] semi-regular *yakuza* help fund their underworld bases, and use the mob’s clout to often engage in illegal activities.¹

Ultimately, Jumonji’s attempts to straddle the boundaries of the ordinary and criminal realms prove to be as difficult as Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie’s attempts to overcome their own subjugation. As such, Kirino’s depictions of his struggles serve to explore an alternative experience of part-time labor, and in doing so highlight the ways in which Japanese economic trends have served to complexify, rather than alleviate, the problem of economic abnormality across genders and social spheres.

Jumonji is drastically juxtaposed to the criminal masterminds under whom he is employed. Aged thirty-one, he is in a perpetual state of financial instability, and, much like Kuniko, where he is lacking in self-confidence he overcompensates in his persistent attempts to maintain his youth, as is evident upon his initial appearance in the text:

Director meant he was the boss. Kuniko was so engrossed with his appearance that she did not think about how unusual it was for the boss to be checking in on her in person or how suspicious it was that he was using a stage name.¹

As the narrative continues, we discover that Jumonji has been involved in a variety of business endeavors characterized by varying degrees of legitimacy according to popular and legal definitions of labor in Japan. However, his ventures in debt collection, gang-related work, and loan-sharking have one thing in common: all of them have constituted precarious jobs that have ensured no long-term financial stability: “It seems as though he would make a killing for a few years and then be shut down” [どうせ荒稼ぎして数年で潰すような金融をやっているのだろう].² Furthermore, we find, Jumonji, like Auto’s women, possesses very little clout within the sphere of labor in which he participates. Consequently, he relies entirely upon his connections with more powerful mobsters to intimidate his employees and customers:

The boss was always bragging that he used to be in that gang from Adachi, the Silk Buddhas or something, and that his buddy had gone on to head the Toyosumi mob. At the drop of a hat, he’d bring up his gang connections, and I have to admit we were all a bit nervous of him. I’d even thought of quitting because of it. Everybody knew we were a loan-sharking outfit, but he didn’t have to go around announcing that we had the mob peering over our shoulder.³

To be sure, Jumonji is a disreputable character, one with whom both members of “ordinary” society and “true” criminals prefer not to associate. However, it is equally evident that he, like Auto’s housewives, is in every respect an economic outsider. Recalling the earlier days of his adult life, during which he collected loans on behalf of

---


the company for which Masako had formerly worked, Jumonji remembers how poorly
Masako’s male office workers had treated her:

Masako was surrounded by a kind of barrier that made it impossible for other people
to get close to her. It was as though she was marked with a sign that she and she alone
was at war with the entire world. As an outsider and a sham yakuza, he didn’t find
these feelings strange. Birds of a feather, they say. And, it seemed, people who didn’t
themselves possess this sign were compelled to bully her.¹

Jumonji’s notion that he and Masako have somehow been imprinted with a “sign” [印
shirushi] signifying their status as outsiders alludes to the “ominous mark” [不吉な印
fukitsu na shirushi] on Yayoi’s abdomen. As such, I suggest, Jumonji’s body may be
understood as yet another locus of subjugation as he, too, is revealed to be a victim of the
consuming socio-economic forces that the bentō factory represents. Ultimately, Jumonji’s
involvement with Auto’s housewives, and theirs with him, are the logical conclusions to
all parties’ attempts to make ends meet in a society wherein they are valuable only
insofar as they continue to labor while maintaining their invisibility.

When Jumonji discovers that Auto’s housewives, led by Masako, are behind the
disposal of Kenji’s corpse, he is inspired to embark upon yet another lucrative business
venture. Masako and Yoshie are quick to agree to take part in his risky enterprise—
providing discreet corpse-disposal to those who are both dangerous and wealthy enough
to require, and pay for, such a service—and once Jumonji overcomes his initial fear of

¹ Kirino, Auto (上), 299. My translation.
working with dead bodies, he becomes quite comfortable with the financial stability afforded by this relatively easy labor. Like the women, who having traded in their sashimi knives for scalpels find themselves quite adept at butchering bodies, Jumonji transitions quite comfortably into his new job: “They loaded the cardboard boxes into the car, and after Jumonji had left, Yoshie aptly remarked ‘He’s just like the foreman transporting the boxed lunches.’ The two women laughed” [段ボール箱を車に積んで十文字が行ってしまうと、ヨシエがいみじくも言った。まるで中山ができあがった弁当運んでいくみたいだね。二人は爆笑した].

However, when Satake—a real yakuza—becomes involved, Jumonji finds himself increasingly unfit for “true” criminality. Consumed with fear for his life, Jumonji has no option but to abandon his business, along with his home, in order to save himself from the same gruesome end that had earlier befallen Kuniko. As Jumonji prepares to leave town, Masako asks him where he plans to go, to which he replies:

“Somewhere like Shibuya, where there are lots of women, would be fine. Anyway, in a year or so things will be alright. After all, I had nothing to do with the Yamamoto affair.”

These were Jumonji’s thoughts, and Masako thought his optimism was youthful. She had already decided that it was all over, that she could never go back.

Although for Masako Jumonji’s carefree attitude regarding the dangerous nature of his

---

1 Kirino, Auto (下), 110. My translation.

2 Kirino, Auto (下), 251. My translation.
occupation seems naïve, this scene reaffirms the notion that Jumonji’s identity is firmly intertwined with his status as an outsider. In a perpetual state of disempowerment, Jumonji’s survival, like that of Auto’s women, requires him to remain at the peripheries of “ordinary” society, always adapting to take advantage of any lucrative opportunities that come his way while simultaneously appeasing the powers for whom he is employed. And, when these two things prove to be in contradiction, he must covertly slink into the shadows until he has once again been forgotten. Thus, as the realities of Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie are one-by-one destabilized, Jumonji, too, realizes the impossibility of locating a sustainable alternative to the precariousness of part-time labor.

Summary

Although the various types of labor portrayed in Auto—factory work, domestic work, and criminal work—represent what in contemporary Japan are perceived to be disparate spheres of labor occupied by very different groups of individuals, as Kirino’s depictions of these characters suggest, these spheres are not, in fact, mutually exclusive. To be sure, Auto’s housewives follow their struggles for autonomy to an absurd conclusion, and Jumonji, likewise, joins forces with the most unlikely of characters. However, as Auto’s narrator so succinctly notes, “If you could numb yourself to the fear involved, the job wasn’t much different from the work they did at the factory.” Thus, in exploring Kirino’s depictions of the characters discussed here within the framework of her overarching concern with the implications of part-time wage labor, I hope to have

1 Kirino, Auto (下), 101. My translation.
elucidated the ways in which the capitalist ideologies represented by the bentô factory come to inform the subjectivities and relationships presented in Auto. This notion, I suggest, sheds new light on the ways in which the text engages with the socio-economic realities of contemporary Japan and in doing so provides a solid framework through which to consider Kirino’s depictions of the novel’s two main characters, Masako and Satake, as well as the narrative’s conclusion, wherein the tensions that arise throughout the course of the novel are played out in a violent bentô factory battle between these two remaining members of Auto’s cast.
CHAPTER IV
Bodies of Destruction and Desire

Introduction

This analysis has thus far explored the ways in which Kirino’s depictions of labor and laboring bodies in Auto attempt to underscore the largely invisible social realities perpetuated and sustained by late capitalist economic trends in Japan. However, an understanding of the full implications of the text is contingent upon a close examination of the novel’s conclusion, wherein the tensions that arise throughout the course of the narrative become manifest in a bentō factory face-off during which Satake brutalizes and rapes Masako, and Masako, in turn, murders him. In spite of its import to the overall implications of the novel, Auto’s conclusion has yet to be adequately addressed. This reality reflects not only the intrinsic difficulty of explicating the tangled web of disturbing imagery and social commentary constructed by Kirino in the final pages of the text, but also, I suggest, the prevalence of the notion that Japan’s contemporary women crime writers are generally unwilling to offer alternatives to the problematic social conditions underscored by their works. Seaman writes

While earlier Japanese detective fiction focused upon tricky plots and superlative detectives, the new women writers consistently draw attention to institutions and practices that they see as harmful to Japanese society and more particularly to Japanese women. It is notable that, although willing to point out flaws, Nonami, Kirino, and Miyabe stop short of suggesting any real changes to the status quo. This is perhaps a reflection of the deeply conservative nature of detective fiction itself, with its interest in establishing order and preserving social harmony.¹

Seaman’s assessment of women’s detective fiction in Japan is frustrating, for in

attempting to dismantle the assumption that contemporary crime fiction functions merely as a conventional mode of entertainment, she argues that the nature of the genre itself prohibits its writers from proffering social change. Seaman applies a similar critique to *Auto*, arguing on the basis of a comparison of Kirino’s text with Kobayashi’s *Kanikōsen* that Masako’s victory over her rapist and subsequent decision to leave Japan constitute an exclusively personal triumph, rather than a public one:

> Whereas Kobayashi leaves his protagonists preparing to confront their capitalist overlords, Kirino leaves Masako gazing into the sunset, planning to extricate herself from the circuit of home and factory that had defined her. To be sure, Kirino raises the hope that Masako will find a better place and a better life—the same hope that motivates Kobayashi’s characters. These hopes, however, are private ones; fulfilling them allows Masako to escape society’s ills rather than confront them, leaving her erstwhile friends excluded not only from the center, but even from the peripheries that have allowed them some sense of place, of identity, and of belonging in an otherwise hostile world.¹

Seaman’s conclusions are problematic in a number of respects. Firstly, although throughout the course of the novel Kirino devotes particular attention to the ways in which Masako and Satake’s desires for power become manifest in their objectification of others’ bodies, allusions to this notion are almost entirely absent from Seaman’s analysis of *Auto*’s final scenes. Moreover, while Seaman touches upon the ways in which Satake’s rape of Masako mirrors her economic devaluation, she ultimately fails to consider the broader implications of either the rape of Masako or her subsequent murder of Satake in terms of the body-centric depictions of labor around which the text as a whole is situated. Finally, as noted earlier, Seaman’s understanding of the aims of proletarian literature does not account for the movement’s collective attempt to situate the laborer at the center of historical inquiry. Ultimately, I will argue in this chapter that *Auto* is, in fact, a

¹ Seaman, “Inside OUT,” 214.
subversive text that not only underscores society’s problems, but also calls for the dismantling of the very identity constructs around which socio-economic activities in contemporary Japan are situated. In moving toward this conclusion, the aims of this chapter are threefold. Firstly, I will analyze Kirino’s depictions of Masako and Satake, devoting particular attention to the ways in which their struggles for power are played out via their desire for and destruction of bodies. Secondly, I will examine the ways in which the novel’s overarching concerns with labor and laboring bodies play into the rape scene in question. Finally, I will consider the novel’s conclusion, wherein Masako murders Satake and resolves to leave Japan, in terms of Carine M. Mardorossian’s “Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape” in order to argue that Masako’s victory over Satake and subsequent detachment from her defining roles in the home and factory do not, as Seaman suggests, imply the impossibility of public resistance, but rather signify both a rejection of the disempowering cultural discourse of otherness and the beginning of a journey toward the production of a new narrative.

**Katori Masako**

While Katori Masako, like all of *Auto*’s housewives, spends her nights working in the *bentō* factory and her days attempting to impose order upon a crumbling family unit, she differs from the novel’s other female characters in one crucial respect: while the other women of *Auto* are engaged in constant struggles for financial stability, Masako, always businesslike, is by comparison financially secure and becomes increasingly so as her skills at corpse-dismemberment are put to use by Jumonji and his *yakuza* employers. However, Masako’s story, like those of *Auto*’s other female characters, is one of an individual whose womanhood has, for the entirety of her adult life, defined her perceived
value in both the private and public spheres. Masako, we find, had once been an office worker, but had lost her job during her company’s downsizing after years of enduring the humiliation of being denied pay raises and passed over for promotions in favor of her younger male co-workers. Having vowed never again to work in an office, and having no other employment options, she had taken up a job at the bentō factory in order to supplement her husband Yoshiki’s income. Although Masako prefers her factory job to the notion of returning to the professional world, as my analysis thus far illustrates, the conditions under which she is employed at the factory reflect the broader historical and economic conditions out of which popular perceptions of women’s labor value in the Japanese home and workforce have emerged. Like the office, wherein perceptions of Masako’s labor value reflected a common assumption that the primary role of women is as homemakers, the factory is a heavily gendered space wherein women are relegated to the menial task of food preparation, which is considered to be appropriate labor for their gender. In turn, the factory is a site of systematized violence not unlike the domestic sphere wherein Masako diligently fulfills her household duties in spite of her loveless marriage and resentful teenaged son. As such, Masako, like Auto’s other women, comes to be defined by the labor in which she is engaged. Interestingly, however, Masako does not enter into the business of corpse dismemberment out of financial desperation; rather, she is motivated by a different kind of desire for power. While the other housewives of Auto strive for financial independence through the destruction of bodies, as Masako’s desire for autonomy becomes increasingly urgent, it is in bodies themselves that she comes to locate power. Specifically, I suggest, Masako’s struggle to undermine her own bodily devaluation is manifest in two distinct yet interconnected ways. The first of these
is her destruction of bodies; the second, her sexual desire.

One of the most perplexing elements of Masako’s character is the enthusiasm with which she takes on first the disposal of Kenji’s body and later the job of corpse dismemberment. When Yayoi calls her to confess that she has murdered Kenji, Masako offers her assistance without hesitation, and, as she prepares to begin the task of chopping up Kenji’s corpse, she finds herself frighteningly eager to begin the job:

When she returned home she went straight to the bathroom, laid Kenji down, and considered her plan for going about the job. A person in her right mind couldn’t think about such a thing, but the desire to take on the challenge of figuring out how to surmount these circumstances had already been born.¹

Although Masako experiences a brief moment of repulsion as she and Yoshie prepare to dismember the corpse, her almost obsessive desire to complete the arduous task quickly motivates her to get the job done. Wearing rubber gloves and vinyl aprons pilfered from the factory, and armed with her sharpest sashimi knives, Masako approaches the task at hand quite methodically, finding herself surprisingly calm as “the narrow bathroom became choked with the smell of blood” [狭い風呂場は血の臭いでむせかえるようになった]² just as the air surrounding the factory is saturated with the “stinking odor of fried food” [揚げ物の油臭い匂い].³

---

¹ Kirino, Auto (上), 128. My translation.

² Kirino, Auto (上), 145. My translation.

³ Kirino, Auto (上), 7. My translation.
In spite of the women’s perpetual fear that their crime will be discovered, Masako’s morbid attraction to the mutilation of bodies only intensifies as the novel progresses. While, as noted, Yoshie is thrust into the business of corpse disposal by dire financial circumstances and even then must be convinced that the task is indeed a “job” before she is willing to participate in it, Masako coolly accepts Jumonji’s business proposition, and even bargains to improve the terms of her employment. Moreover, as she and Yoshie find themselves ankle deep in the steaming innards of their first assignment under Jumonji’s employ, Masako finds herself strangely numb to the gruesomeness of their endeavor:

As they continued dismantling the corpse, the floor became soaked with blood, the foul smell of entrails filled the air, and the pieces of human body scattered about the room created a scene just like last time. However, this time it felt just like a job—remarkably different, easy.\(^1\)

To be sure, Masako’s seemingly innate abilities to dismember and parcel corpses, like those of Yoshie, are broadly contextualized by her years of working with meat and assembling boxed-lunches both in the household kitchen and the bentō factory. However, Masako possesses an ability that Auto’s other housewives do not: the capacity to view corpses that had previously embodied human life as mere garbage.

---

\(^{1}\) Kirino, *Auto* (下), 102. My translation.
Except for those who had stakes in the affair, dealing with a corpse was not unlike throwing out the trash. Garbage was an absolute fact of life, and who was throwing away what was no one else’s concern. Of course, one had to resign oneself to being thrown away, too, when the time came.\(^1\)

Although Masako’s perception of corpses as garbage [ゴミ gomi] appears callous to her friends and business partners, it is soon revealed that her predisposition toward the gloomy darkness that encompasses both the factory and her new labor stems from a desire to extricate herself from the oppressive realities of “normal” existence:

Days of living an honest life, free from loneliness and guilt. Days she did not want to go back to. Things are fine as they are now, Masako thought. When pebbles warming in the sun were turned over, the cool, moist earth underneath was exposed. Now, Masako relished this gloom. There was no dampness in this soil, but it was familiar and tranquil. She was like a bug, all curled up. Yes, she had become a bug.\(^2\)

Interestingly, this passage is reminiscent of Franz Kafka’s 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis*, which has profoundly influenced a number of Japan’s modern writers, most notably Abe Kōbō and Murakami Haruki. In Kafka’s narrative, Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman and the sole financial provider for his family, awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect. For several weeks Gregor remains safely hidden away in the comfort of his bedroom, surviving on the rotten leftovers of the household’s meals. However, his family’s growing feelings of apathy and disgust begin

---

\(^1\) Kirino, *Auto* (下), 105-6. My translation.

to erode away at his psyche and, eventually, his body. He eventually dies as a result of both the injuries his father inflicts upon him and starvation, and he is swept away with the trash. Like Auto, The Metamorphosis is a text situated around the problem of labor. Gregor’s transformation into an insect, a “vermin” [Ungeziefer] who is incapable of any longer participating in wage labor, underscores the notion that Gregor’s value to his middle-class family members is inextricably tied to his physical capacity to work in order to provide for them. Via his transformation, Gregor’s body becomes a physical manifestation of that to which he has, in truth, already been reduced: an insect, a drone, isolated by his labor from his family and society. Moreover, in the end Gregor’s body, like the corpses that Auto’s housewives dismember, is thrown out as though he were nothing more than the “garbage” he consumes. In Auto, Masako’s retreat into isolation follows a similar trajectory to that of Gregor, and her perception of herself as a “bug” [虫 mushi], content in its isolation from the rest of the world, becomes increasingly powerful throughout the narrative. However, while Gregor ultimately succumbs to the consuming forces surrounding him, Masako emerges from her self-imposed isolation having been psychologically transformed. Uninterested in participating any longer in a society that has consumed every ounce of her being, the destruction of others’ bodies comes to constitute her only mode of achieving a sense of power. Furthermore, as Masako becomes increasingly comfortable with her new employment, her long-repressed sexual desire begins to reemerge, and does so in a fashion that serves only to further illustrate the

---

1 Franz Kafka, Die Verwandlung (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2008), 3.

2 Kafka, Die Verwandlung, 56.
extent to which her alienation has altered her perception of the value of life.

As Masako begins to rediscover her sexuality, her desire takes the form of a longing to succumb to the violence that she has struggled against for so long. Following the completion of her first dismemberment job, the exhausted Masako falls asleep, only to be awakened by an erotic dream about being strangled by an unknown man:

Before she could get away, long arms had closed around her from behind and she couldn’t move. She tried to scream for help but her voice died in her throat. The man’s hands tightened around her neck. She tried to struggle, but her limbs seemed paralyzed. Sweat began to flow from her pores, as if her frustration and terror were seeping from her body. The fingers tightened, and Masako went rigid with fear. But then, slowly, the warmth of his hands, the rough breathing on her neck, began to arouse a buried impulse in her, the urge to surrender, to relax and allow herself to die. Abruptly, her fear began to dissipate, as if floating weightlessly away, and in its place came a sense of blissful pleasure. She cried out in delight.¹

When, upon awakening from this dream, Masako asks her husband Yoshiki why they no longer have sex, he reminds her that she was the one who decided to take a nightshift job: “You know you could have found something in accounting at a smaller company. The fact is, you were hurt, and you weren’t willing to risk letting it happen again,” he tells her. “Masako realized that he was right, that they had chosen separate paths,” writes the narrator. “There was nothing particularly tragic about that, but it did make her feel lonely.”² It is made evident here that just as Masako’s womanhood, which is perceived to embody a predominantly reproductive value, leads to her workplace devaluation, her failure to embrace the roles of wife and mother is the cause of her sexual devaluation at home. In turn, just as the bentō factory functions for Masako as a kind of refuge from the isolating conditions of the full-time professional realm, her yet-to-be-fulfilled desire to be

¹ Kirino, *Out*, 292.

murdered represents a bleak but preferable alternative to her emotionally and sexually unfulfilling domestic life. However, when Masako agrees to dismember the corpse of her erstwhile friend and co-worker Kuniko, she is faced with the horrifying reality of her desire. Gazing at Kuniko, whose lacy black panties have been stuffed into her mouth by Satake, Masako realizes that death is anything but seductive. Likewise, as the threat of Satake becomes progressively more imminent, Masako, now caught in the criminal web she has spun, begins to realize that this sphere of labor is not, in fact, a source of empowerment, but rather a gruesome iteration of the consuming work in which she participates in the factory and at home:

In a sense, this passage is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s celebrated line “Out damned spot, out, I say!” which is exclaimed by Lady Macbeth amidst a guilt-induced fit of sleepwalking wherein she dreams that her hands are covered in the blood of Duncan, who she and her husband have murdered. However, Kirino’s imagery in this scene differs considerably from this scene in Macbeth. Masako’s hands are not covered in blood (imagined or real), a substance which has archetypal associations with sin, and which may be washed away with water, an action that in literature often signifies purification. Rather, her hands are coated in viscous fat—fat that “cannot be removed”

---

torenai], and which, as though it were a living thing, “crawls deep underneath” [奥深
潜り込み okufukai kugurikomi] her fingernails and “spreads” [潜る suberu] all over her
fingers. It is a substance that repels water, clinging to Masako’s skin as a grotesque
reminder of the excessive consumption represented by Kuniko’s fleshy body. Moreover,
this fat is not, like the imagined blood on Lady Macbeth’s hands, associated with guilt.
Rather, it represents an inextricable abjectness, the heavy weight of Masako’s feelings of
hopelessness, powerlessness, and vulnerability. In her decision to go through with the
dismemberment of Kuniko’s corpse, Masako seeks to dismantle that which Kuniko’s
body represents, as well as to undermine Satake by demonstrating her lack of fear.
Ultimately, however, the insoluble fat proves to be as meaningful as the bruise on
Yayoi’s stomach, the twisted hunks of beef in Kuniko’s boxed-lunch, and the noisome
odor of Yoshie’s apartment—all of which signify the oppressive conditions of the
women’s existence. By this point in the novel, Masako has realized what she has become;
however, just as she cannot wash away the fat on her hands, she is far too invested in
criminality to extricate herself from her situation. With the intention of fleeing the
country, she goes to Kazuo, whose own body, along with his apartment, adorned in
remembrances of Brazil, now function as her only sources of comfort. She collects the
money she has entrusted to his care and returns to the factory parking lot to retrieve her
car. However, Satake is waiting for her, eager to punish her for her transgressions, and he
captures her and takes her to the abandoned bentō factory—a site which throughout the
text is associated with the fear of sexual violence—wherein the novel’s tensions are
played out in a grisly scene of torture, rape, and death.
Satake Mitsuyoshi

Like Masako, Satake Mitsuyoshi, *yakuza* and proprietor of both the nightclub Mika and a casino, is a character whose desire to extricate himself from the rest of humanity leaves him emotionally isolated from the world around him. In truth, Kirino offers little insight concerning Satake’s personal history compared to that which she discloses regarding *Auto’s* other characters. However, what information she does provide points to the fact that Satake, too, occupies an existence situated around the alienating labor in which he participates. It is disclosed early in the narrative that as a teenager Satake had left high school and run away from home after a fight with his father. With few other options, he had become a mahjong hustler but was soon convinced to join a *yakuza* family that was running a highly successful prostitution ring. While employed under these *yakuza*, he had been sent to intimidate a woman who was recruiting the gang’s girls on behalf of a rival gang. Instead of merely scaring her, however, he had brutally raped and murdered her. After the crime Satake had been shunned by his fellow gangsters, and, following his release from a seven year long stint in prison, had decided to keep a low profile due to his criminal record. Although the conditions of Satake’s disempowerment differ from those of Masako, these two characters are similar in a number of respects. Most notably, Satake, like Masako, occupies a peripheral sphere of labor that is enshrouded by the gloomy darkness that characterizes the *bentō* factory. Moreover, Satake, likewise, responds to his disempowerment via the fulfillment of his fantasies of destroying the bodies of others. However, while Masako’s desires are manifest in the form of a transgressive negotiation of the gendered labor division to which she is subject, Satake’s fantasies, we discover, ultimately serve to affirm rather
than mitigate his weakness.

Satake’s rape and murder of his first victim are revealed to the reader early in the narrative, when something Anna says to him jogs his memory of the event:

The woman was gasping beneath Satake. Satake’s body slid against hers in the warm, viscous fluid, and after a short time it was as though he had become entangled with her body, now growing cold, and they clung together, becoming one. The woman vacillated between ecstasy and pain. Satake covered her lips, stifling the screams of joy or anguish, and stuck his fingers deep inside the hole he had pierced in the side of her stomach. Blood flowed endlessly from the wound, staining their sex with violence. He wanted to go further inside of her. He wanted to melt together into one.¹

Satake’s desire to be “further inside of her” [もっと女の中に入りたい motto onna no naka ni hairitai], to “melt together into one” [二人で溶け合いたい futari de tokeaitai], suggests that he is searching for something other than sexual gratification; however, it is unclear here what, exactly, he is looking for. His psychology is explicated in a subsequent scene, wherein it is suggested that Satake’s sexual desire functions as a manifestation of his longing to explore the limitations of his own power:

二十年近くたった今でもはっきりと思い出す。あの女の断末魔の表情と声。凍った女の指が這うように、佐竹の背筋にまた寒気が走った。
殺すことはなかったのだが、殺すまで自分自身の境界がわからなかったとは何ということだろう。激しい慟愴の念がある一方、佐竹は自身に加虐の欲びを楽しむ性向があることを、そして死を共有した欲びが強烈だということを初めて知ったのだった。

Though it had been twenty years now, he still remembered it clearly. The woman’s face, her voice, in the throes of the agony of death. Her frozen fingers had sent shivers running down his spine. He didn’t have to kill her, but until you had killed someone you had no concept of your own boundaries. Though on the one hand he felt a strong sense of guilt, Satake had discovered that he delighted in inflicting pain, as well as the fact that it was gratifying to share in death.¹

Interestingly, Satake’s memory of the murder as described here is vaguely reminiscent of Kazuo’s thoughts following his attempted rape of Masako. Just as Kazuo believes that he is being subjected to a spiritual test wherein “his own willpower would give him the strength, the self-control to reach his goal,”² Satake, too, views his own body as a site of power. Moreover, we find, Satake’s desire, like that of Kazuo, is aroused not by women in general, but rather by women who he perceives to be powerful in some respect. However, unlike Kazuo, who is motivated by what is depicted to be a sincere, if misguided, longing for companionship, Satake is inspired by something other than loneliness:

Except for the one he had killed, there was no woman who could truly understand him, who could seduce him to heaven or hell. Only in Satake’s fantasies could he encounter her, could he achieve ecstasy, and that was just fine. And because of this, there was no pimp who was as kind to women as he was.³

This passage elucidates the extent to which power and powerlessness play into Satake’s desire. To be sure, Satake, like Kazuo, is aroused only by women who embody the

¹ Kirino, *Auto* (上), 73. My translation.

² Kirino, *Out*, 120.

strength to subvert socially constructed limitations of normality. However, the very power that Satake finds so seductive functions also as an affirmation of his own lack of autonomy. Although Satake is a criminal, he is fundamentally weak. Always under the watchful eye of the law, he persistently strives to adhere to mainstream notions of appearance and behavior in order to maintain the image that the labor in which he participates is legitimate, as well as more or less morally sound. As such, women who have the audacity to traverse the boundaries of social norms, who are unconcerned with maintaining the appearance of normalcy, represent that which he is not. Moreover, the “understanding” [理解 rikai] that Satake seeks differs from that which Kazuo desires. Satake is uninterested in establishing an emotional connection, a “mutual understanding” [相互理解 sōgo rikai], with the women in question. Rather, he wishes to be validated by them, to be recognized on an intellectual level as an embodiment of power. However, the one advantage Satake possesses is his brute strength, and so it is only through the destruction of what he perceives to be transgressive bodies that he is able to achieve the recognition he desires. As such, Satake discovers within himself a sadistic enjoyment of “inflicting pain” [加虐 kagyaku] and “sharing in death” [死を共有した shin o kyōyūshita], for it is only in these fleeting moments that his fantasies of empowerment may be fulfilled. Convinced that no woman other than the one he murdered has the capacity to awaken in him the violent lust explicated here, Satake becomes comfortable in his ability to exist untouched in the grim shadows of urban Tokyo. However, Masako’s infringement upon his territory signifies a disruption of the space he has created for himself, and his violent desire is reignited.

Satake’s story becomes intertwined with that of Auto’s housewives when he is
falsely imprisoned for the murder of Kenji, whose dismembered body, due to Kuniko’s negligence, is discovered in Tokyo’s Koganei Park. When Satake is arrested, he loses much of his business and most of his employees, and upon his release from prison he becomes fixated upon seeking out, and exacting revenge upon, Kenji’s true murderer. Satake quickly deduces that Yayoi is behind the crime; however, his attentions turn toward Masako, who, he discovers, had not only directed the women’s efforts to dispose of Kenji’s body, but also has become the ringleader of Jumonji’s corpse disposal business. Satake becomes obsessed with Masako, whose cunning and willingness to participate in the male-dominated sphere of criminal labor remind him of the woman he had killed so long ago. As his desire to test the limitations of both his own and Masako’s power steadily intensifies, he begins to fantasize about raping and torturing her:

猿ぐつわをかませ、窓を開け放したまま思い切りたぶってやる。寒さできっと鳥肌が立つに違いない。その粟のような粒をナイフでこそぎ取れるだろうか。暴れたら腹を抉ってやろうか。恐怖のあまり慈悲を乞い、苦しんでのうちまわっても許さない。そのくらいは耐える女だ。

He would gag her and, with the windows flung open, torture her to death. The cold would surely give her goosebumps, which he could scrape off with a knife as though they were grains of millet. If she struggled, he would hollow out her belly. Though she would beg for mercy and writhe in pain, he would not yield. She was a woman who could take it.¹

Satake’s gruesome fantasy again points to the female body as a site of power that can be dismantled only via the destruction of its physical form. Satake’s desire to “hollow out” [抉ってやろう egutte yarō] Masako’s belly, reminiscent of his digging into the wound in the stomach of his earlier victim, again suggests that he is searching for something. And, in his sadistic longing to torture Masako, to slowly push her body and mind to their

¹ Kirino, Auto (下), 161. My translation.
outermost limits before killing her, that something he is seeking is once again revealed to be an affirmation of the power he believes himself to possess. Shortly after imagining his murder of Masako, Satake is presented with the opportunity to rehearse his plan when Kuniko unexpectedly stops by his apartment. However, after suffocating Kuniko until she is unconscious and stripping her clothes off to reveal an “enormous body that reminded him of an animal” [巨大な、動物を連想させ], Satake finds himself uninspired to torture her and, after a brief interrogation, strangles her to death. “This murder, the second in his lifetime, was truly boring” [生涯二度目の殺人は実につまらなかった], the narrator writes. Nevertheless, Satake cleverly utilizes Kuniko’s corpse to instill fear within Masako, who finds herself terrified upon realizing that he is out to exact revenge upon the women. However, Masako refuses to run. After literally dismantling her fear via the dismemberment of Kuniko’s body, she persuades Jumonji to list Satake as the guarantor on all of Kuniko’s loans. When Kuniko’s creditors come calling, Satake is thrust to the center of the attention not only of his curious apartment complex neighbors, but also of the multitude of loan sharks who are eager to collect what is owed to them. As he realizes that he has been tricked, he discovers Kuniko’s black, lacy panties—the same ones he had earlier stuffed into her mouth—hanging on his doorknob, a reminder that his attempt to intimidate Masako has been turned against him. His lust for Masako is intensified by this act of defiance, and, unable to bear his feelings any longer, he waits for her in the factory parking lot after her next scheduled nightshift with the hopes of

---


capturing her and playing out his violent fantasies.

**Auto and the Rhetoric of Rape**

As earlier noted, throughout the course of *Auto* the defunct *bentō* factory in which Satake brutalizes and rapes Masako is persistently associated with the threat of sexual violence against the operative factory’s female employees. In her own analysis of the text Seaman comments on this fact, writing that rape is “a form of public violence against women that serves to constrain the behavior of women in general, since the fear of being attacked turns supposedly ‘public’ spaces into places of private danger.”

Although Seaman’s observation is astute, her assertion that within the novel the implications of rape itself are exclusively private hinges upon one thoroughly problematic assumption: that the notions of “public” and “private” are themselves inversely related. In truth, these two constructs are heavily analogous given that those endeavors which are commonly perceived to be private ones—for instance family, friendships, and sex—are, as Kirino demonstrates in *Auto,* more often than not regulated by public value systems and institutions. In her analysis of the final pages of the novel, Seaman embraces this fallacious distinction, and in doing so is led to divorce the rape of Masako, as well as Masako’s psychological transformation in the wake of her victory over Satake, from the broader cultural conditions with which they engage. As such, her reading of the text largely disregards the ways in which the final pages of the narrative are interconnected with Kirino’s earlier depictions of the laboring body as an object of destruction and desire. Seaman is thus led to the conclusion that, unlike *Kanikōsen,* *Auto* fails to

---

1 Seaman, “Inside OUT,” 212.
challenge the unjust socio-economic conditions that it exposes and, moreover, suggests the impossibility of doing so. By contrast, I will argue here that the events of the final pages of *Auto* should be considered in terms of the text’s eminent concern with labor and as such embodies a number of broader implications concerning the problem of agency within late capitalist Japan. Specifically, I aim to address the ways in which Kirino’s decision to set the rape of Masako within the abandoned bentō factory situates that which might otherwise be perceived as a personal struggle within a public space that is associated not only with the fear of sexual violence, but also with the institutionalized abuse of those employed within the operative bentō factory—a space explicitly designed for the purpose of exploiting its workers. In doing so, I will argue that the rape of Masako does not, in fact, constitute a privatization of the factory space, but rather aims to expose the veiled dregs of globalization, a process under which the novel’s characters have become figuratively shackled to their labor just as Masako is, literally, tied by Satake to the factory’s conveyor belt. Moreover, I will examine the novel’s conclusion, wherein Masako, following her defeat of Satake, makes the conscious decision to extricate herself from the confining ideological constructs which until this point have defined her existence. Utilizing Mardorossian’s “Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape,” I will argue that this decision does not, as Seaman claims, constitute an escape from, rather than a confrontation of, the ills of society, but rather signifies Masako’s transformation from an object of subjugation into an active subject who embraces her capacity for self-liberation.

After Satake captures Masako, he takes her to the abandoned factory wherein he strips her of her clothing, ties her to a conveyor belt, and repeatedly beats and rapes her. Kirino adopts a compelling method of conveying the scenes that take place in the defunct
factory: the reader experiences the rape first from the perspective of Satake and, later, from Masako’s point of view. The impact of this narrative shift is powerful. In placing the reader first in the dominant position of the rapist, Kirino returns to a narrative tactic that she repeatedly employs earlier in the novel by denying the objectified figure—in this case, Masako—any degree of subjectivity. Instead, she immediately thrusts the reader into the uncomfortable position of identifying, if only for a brief time, with Satake, who, while not a particularly sympathetic character, exhibits an intense longing for affirmation. After Masako fatally wounds Satake, the events leading up to this moment are recounted, this time from Masako’s perspective. In a sense, this second narrative of the events in question is even bleaker than the first, for the reader has already been made acutely aware of what is in store for our protagonist. However, even more powerful than the feelings of humiliation, fear, and hatred projected by Masako is the manner in which her experience of these events is delicately intertwined with Auto’s overarching concern with the laboring body as an object of destruction.

Satake’s initial rape of Masako is brief, and the narrator offers little insight into either Satake’s motivations or Masako’s perception of the situation, except to suggest that for Satake the act is a futile exercise in self-control—he ejaculates prematurely—while for Masako it is a matter of life or death that hinges upon her capacity to understand her victimizer:

佐竹は夢の中にいる、と犯されながら雅子は思った。佐竹にしかわからないのははてない夢の中にして、自分は生身の道具にされているだけだと感じる。他人の夢の中からどうしたら逃れられるか、と考えるのはやめにしたほうがいい。それより、佐竹を理解することだ。そして先を読むことしか残された道はなかった。

Satake was in a dream, thought Masako as he raped her. An endless dream that only
Satake understands, and within which she was merely a flesh-and-blood implement. It was better not to think about how one might escape another person’s dream. Instead, she needed to figure Satake out. Then she could anticipate what was coming next, so that she could stay alive.¹

The notion that Masako is merely an “implement,” or “tool” [道具 dōgu], for the fulfillment of Satake’s sadistic fantasy alludes to earlier characterizations of Masako, as well as the other characters discussed here, as figures who serve similar functions within their everyday lives—whether as factory laborers, homemakers, or sex workers. Having realized her role within Satake’s fantasy, Masako initially accuses him of being sexually perverse, but soon thereafter she comes to believe that he is neither a deviant nor a madman, but rather someone “wandering in a passionate search for something” [何かを激しく求めて彷徨っている]² that has yet to become apparent to her. Subsequently, Satake resolves to wait for sunrise so that he may perform the act again, this time with the goal of fulfilling his desire for power by watching her face as he rapes and tortures her in the same way that he had his previous victim. As Satake awaits the opportunity to rape Masako for the second time, the interconnectedness of the sexual violence being imposed upon Masako and the brutal conditions endured by the variety of laborers represented throughout the text becomes increasingly apparent:

工場の残骸。まるでコンクリートの棺だ。二年間も夜通し働いてきたことを考えると、ここで死ぬのも運命かと思えなくもなかった。扉を開けた自分を待っていた苛酷な運命とは、これだったのか？

The ruins of a factory. A concrete casket. When she thought about the two years she had spent her nights working in a place like this, she couldn’t help but wonder if she

² Kirino, Auto (下), 319. My translation.
was fated to die here. Was this the cruel fate that awaited her beyond the door that she herself had opened?\(^1\)

Here the coffin-like factory in which Masako is physically trapped becomes a powerful allegory, representing the stifling and seemingly inescapable conditions of modern existence. Subsequently, as if to affirm this, Satake inquires of Masako, who is physically bound to the conveyor belt: “You made those boxed-lunches on this kind of thing, didn’t you?” [弁当作る時はこの台でやるんだろう？].\(^2\) From Satake’s perspective, this question successfully strengthens Masako’s feelings of hatred toward him. However, the revelation of Masako’s point of view marks this moment also as a point of deep introspection as she begins to realize that her desperate quest for freedom has led her down the same dreary road upon which Satake treads:

まるで雅子がベルトコンベアに載せられた食物のように。雅子は緊張を隠そうとする。佐竹の言う通り、確かに自分が縛りつけられるとは思わなかった。工場のコンベア。コンベアの速度を決定するヨシエの出口。自分の出口は今、この男に塞がれようとしている。「おい、どうやって死体をばらしたんだ」佐竹は繊細な指先で雅子の首の周りに線をつけた[…]
「おまえは俺とそっくりだ。おまえも戻れない道を進んでいるんだ。」

Masako lay on the conveyor belt like food being transported down the line, trying to conceal her fear. Satake was right—she certainly never would have imagined she’d be tied up here. The factory’s conveyor belt. Yoshie, who determined the speed of the belt, had an out. But her own escape was now blocked by this man. “Hey, how did you chop up those bodies?” Satake asked her, delicately making a line across her neck with the tip of his finger […] “You’re exactly like me. You’re on a path from which you can’t turn back.”\(^3\)

The narrator’s comparison of Masako’s body to “food being transported down the line”


[ベルトコンベアに載せられた食物] is perhaps the text’s most explicit conveyance of the body as an object of destruction. Here Masako is, quite literally, bound to the conveyor belt upon which food had previously been sliced, portioned, and packaged for consumption, just as in her everyday life she is bound by socio-economic constraints to her consuming roles as factory laborer and homemaker. Moreover, Satake’s inquiry regarding her dismemberment job, accompanied by his mock decapitation of her own head, affirms that which Masako had already begun to realize on her own: that her most recent endeavor is not, in fact, a way out, but rather yet another dead end. Masako realizes in this moment that she is indeed becoming like Satake—she is emotionally numb and feels empowered by her destruction of others. However, even this realization does not dampen her will to survive, and as Satake begins to rape her for the second time, she continues to search for a means of escape.

Satake’s second rape of Masako is depicted in considerably more detail than the first, and moreover delves much deeper into the psychologies of both characters. Regarding Satake’s perception of the event, the narrator writes:

Satake pulled open her eyelids. He looked for fear, or the hatred that surpassed it. While frantically searching inside of Masako, he held her. But what was he searching for? The other woman? Masako? Or himself? Was this a dream or reality? Though he had no sense of time, the body of the woman he was having sex with seemed to be becoming one with his own. It was okay if he was no longer part of this world—from
the beginning he hadn’t ever compromised.¹

This passage is a quintessential example of Satake’s delusions of power. Having been outwitted by Masako on an intellectual level, he now derives immense pleasure from his ability to physically subdue her, to make her enjoy the rape in spite of the feelings of hatred that he had earlier attempted to arouse. However, Masako’s perception of the rape differs considerably. That which Satake perceives to be pleasure on her part is, in truth, yet another example of Masako’s resilience, her ability to survive in even the most despondent of situations. On the verge of freezing to death in the cold factory, she is reinvigorated by the warmth of his body inside of hers and is able to resume her task of figuring out what it is that Satake is searching for. Here her hatred for Satake becomes intermingled with feelings of pity for her rapist, a man whose pleasure relies on his being despised by others. Although Satake confesses earlier in this scene that he hates her “because she is a woman” [おまえが女だからだ],² as she is being raped Masako begins to realize that it is not merely her womanhood that Satake hates, but rather the fact that she is a woman who has outsmarted him. Subsequently, Masako undergoes a perceivable psychological transformation as she is once again confronted with the fact that Satake embodies the same sense of desperation that she does:

1 Kirino, Auto (下), 311. My translation.

2 Kirino, Auto (下), 310. My translation.
Just as she had thought she wouldn’t mind being killed by him, Satake now wished to be destroyed by her. Masako suddenly understood him. She loved him. As she realized this, she felt as though the dream in which Satake was trapped was dissolving, that he was moving closer to reality. Their eyes met, and they became one body. Within his eyes, only she was reflected, and an unbelievable wave of ecstasy took hold of her. She could die like this. But at that moment, the glimmering knife blade reflected the sunlight across her face, and she was thrust back into reality.

In this passage Masako realizes that her self-imposed isolation, her embracement of a life like that of a “curled up bug”  

[まるで丸まった虫だ], is no different than Satake’s own lonely life of solitude. However, her newfound understanding of Satake extends beyond either a sense of pity or a desire to be understood herself, for while Masako is momentarily pulled into his fantasy, she is quickly “thrust back into reality”  

[現実に押し戻された] while Satake remains thoroughly trapped within his dream—a dream which, in spite of his own delusions of power, is ultimately revealed to be his weakness. Taking advantage of Satake’s disconnect from reality, Masako seizes the knife with which he had intended to stab her, and Satake is forced to abandon his fantasy a second time. For interrupting his fantasy, he viciously beats her; however, soon thereafter Masako gains the upper hand, fatally wounding Satake by slicing open his face with a scalpel she had earlier hidden in her coat pocket.

While Masako is victorious over Satake, subsequent pages of the novel paint a grim picture of our protagonist as she comes to terms with the fact that she has sentenced Satake to his death:

---

Now the morning sunlight came pouring in the factory window, radiantly bright. Like
the lights of a theater, stripes of dust connected the square windows to the dirty
concrete floor. Shaking, Masako followed Satake’s gaze and looked up toward the
window. Her trembling was not from the cold. It was because of what she had done.¹

Here the bright sunlight penetrates the factory, an auspicious sign that there exists a
world outside of the concrete casket in which Masako has for the past several years been
trapped. However, face-to-face with the disfigured Satake, who is rapidly bleeding to
death, Masako has yet to realize that her opportunity for freedom is right outside of the
factory door. She embraces Satake, attempting to hold his gaping wound closed, and
when he asks her why she wants him to live, she replies, “If you die, so will I. I couldn’t
live with that kind of sadness” [あんたが死んだら自分が死んだと同じだから。そんな
な悲哀しい思いで生きていくなんてできない].² When he asks her again, she answers
“Because I understand you now. We’re the same, and I want us both to live” [今、あん
たがわかってから。あんたと同類だもの。だから、一緒に生きていくよう]. As
Satake fades into death, Masako kisses him, promising to take him to Brazil: “It’s
because I can’t go back” [あたしも戻れないから],³ she tells him, to which he answers,
“We can’t go back, and we can’t move on” [互いに戻れないし進めいないか].⁴ Soon

¹ Kirino, Auto (下), 327. My translation.
² Kirino, Auto (下), 330. My translation.
³ Kirino, Auto (下), 331. My translation.
thereafter Satake dies, whispering in his final breath “We’ll be free” [自由になろうぜ].

As Seaman observes, the fact that Masako’s newfound liberation is somewhat undermined by her identification with her rapist problematizes a conventional feminist reading of the text. While Masako’s murder of Satake may be understood a signifier of her freedom from modern conceptualizations of her value as a woman, she remains tied to her feelings of empathy for Satake, with whom she shares a desperate longing to escape the conditions of modern existence. Moreover, by murdering Satake, Masako fulfills his desire, empowering him with the freedom he locates in death. The troubling ambivalence that pervades these scenes constitutes a remarkable point of departure from the climax of the conventional psychological thriller, which tends to be situated around a relatively normative moral compass and whose quintessentially righteous protagonist either triumphs over, or is destroyed by (often via imprisonment, institutionalization, or death), the villain. Diverging from orthodox perceptions of good and evil, Kirino momentarily obfuscates the discrepancy between victimizer and victim, pointing to the fact that late capitalism in Japan embodies major implications for all of its participants. However, in the final chapter of Auto Kirino points also to the possibility of Masako’s recovery, which, we find, is located in her refusal to participate any longer in the defining spheres of labor around which her life is situated:

雅子は深爪に近いほど短く切られた自身の指の爪を眺めた。弁当工場の仕事のために、二年間一度も長く伸ばしたことはない。青白いては、過剰な殺菌

4 Kirino, Auto (下), 331. My translation.

1 Kirino, Auto (下), 331. My translation.
Masako stared at her fingernails, cut short to the quick. Because of her job, she had not allowed them to grow long once in two years. Her hands were thoroughly chapped from the constant disinfectant. Twenty years working at the credit union. Giving birth to a child, doing the household chores, spending time with her family. What had those days meant? In the end these marks that indelibly stained her were undoubtedly no less than who she was. Satake was living an empty dream, and Masako was surviving everything reality had brought her way. Masako realized that her freedom was different than Satake’s […] Her own freedom—not Satake’s, or Yayoi’s, or Yoshie’s—was surely out there. If one door closed behind her, she had no choice but to find a new one and open it.¹

While this passage clearly marks a psychological turning point for Masako, Kirino scholars have yet to adequately address Auto’s concluding scenes. Seaman’s analysis offers the most thorough attempt to understand Masako as a rape survivor; however, her notion that Masako’s victory is an exclusively private one, I suggest, detaches Masako’s experience from the overarching thematic concerns of the novel, in effect undermining the implications of the text as whole. In her essay “Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape,” Mardorossian tackles what she perceives to be some of the major problems with rape-oriented scholarship within the field of contemporary feminist studies, thereafter offering an alternative mode of theorizing rape survivorship. Mardorossian criticizes the postmodern feminist movement for what she considers to be its failure to theorize rape outside of the scope of cinematic representation, arguing that while the movement has devoted much effort to exposing the ways in which media and feminist criticism alike have contributed to the reproduction of the “ideology of rape,” the wealth of attention devoted to such studies has

¹ Kirino, Auto (下), 334. My translation.
yet to “render explicit and theorize the relationship between these signifying practices and antirape politics and activism in and outside of academia.”¹ Moreover, she posits, postmodern feminist discourse regarding rape survivorship is largely counterproductive in that it exhibits a general tendency to discuss rape victims not as subjects, but as objects who are “irremediably and unidirectionally shaped by the traumatic experience of rape and hence incapable of dealing with anything but their own inner turmoil.”² Mardorossian suggests, alternatively, that survivors of sexual assault are empowered not through the highly personal process of reclaiming the self, as Seaman suggests is the case with Masako, but rather through what she calls the “production of narrative”:

The focus is on the potential for the invention of the self this word-shaped reality entails rather than the excavation of a core center. Rape is a reality that feels anything but real to the victim, yet this very same unreality can become the basis of a representation the speaker can manipulate and gain control of, that can command an audience's attention and be made intelligible in other than the available cultural terms. Empowerment in this respect is about accessing one's life as material rather than depth.³

The distinction Mardorossian outlines between “material” and “depth” is exemplified in Auto’s final scene, quoted above. Reflecting upon her life—her roles as factory laborer, wife, and mother, her confrontation with Satake, and her relationships with Auto’s other housewives—Masako embraces the reality of her past while simultaneously disallowing the cumulative trauma that she and her companions have endured to dictate her future existence. In other words, freedom remains a possibility for Masako not because she has

---


² Mardorossian, “Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape,” 768.

discovered, or rediscovered, what Mardorossian calls a “foundational self”—that is, an inner core or former self buried deep beneath trauma—but rather because she emerges from trauma prepared to grapple with whatever reality hands her and determined to invent herself in her own terms rather than in those of others. To be sure, realizing the potential to move forward necessitates the disruption of the family unit and friendships around which Masako’s existence revolves; however, these disruptions come to signify the emergence of an autonomous agent of self. Masako’s detachment from her defining roles in the home and factory does not, as Seaman suggests, imply the impossibility of public resistance. Rather, it signifies her rejection of the disempowering cultural discourse of otherness and refusal to participate in the reproduction of a common narrative of victimization.

---

CONCLUSION

More than four decades after the death of Edogawa Ranpo, Japanese crime fiction is receiving an unprecedented degree of attention both domestically and abroad. Along with Kirino Natsuo and the aforementioned female crime novelists Miyabe Miyuki and Nonami Asa, contemporary crime writers such as Akagawa Jirō 赤川次郎 (1948-), Shimada Sōji 島田荘司 (1948-), Ono Fuyumi 小野不由美 (1960-), Kyōgoku Natsuhiko 京極夏彦 (1963-), Hase Seishū 馳星周 (1965-), and Satō Yuya 佐藤友哉 (1980-), along with cross-genre writers such as Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (1949-) and Murakami Ryū 村上龍 (1952-), have enjoyed no small degree of acclaim for their literary explorations of the relationships between criminality and culture in modern day Japan. The works of these and other authors span a number of sub-genres—among them detective and mystery fiction, psychological thrillers, hard-boiled narratives, courtroom dramas, police procedurals, and noir—and have received varying degrees of local and global, popular and critical renown. They have been translated into a number of Asian and European languages, adapted into manga, anime, and film, and nominated for and received prestigious literary prizes both in Japan and abroad. In some respects, Kirino’s writing integrates seamlessly into the broader schema of contemporary Japanese crime fiction. Her works belong to an ever-increasing number of female-centric crime novels that have become widely circulated and discussed both in Japan and across the globe, and her gritty portraits of modern Japanese urbanity underscore some of the same bleak realities with which many of her contemporaries are concerned. However, in other respects Kirino
occupies a curious space within this schema. While female writers such as Miyabe and Nonami, socially conscious though they are, seem to have difficulty dissociating their female characters from the conventional roles that they fulfill within the male-dominated professional and domestic spheres, Kirino thrusts her female characters, along with other liminal figures, into unexpected situations in order to locate the larger socio-economic processes that hinge upon their collective marginalization.

In examining Kirino’s depictions of laboring bodies in Auto, I have attempted to explicate the ways in which the text underscores and interrogates the problematic relationship between late capitalist labor practices and identity politics in contemporary Japan. In Chapter I, I sought to establish a working definition of “labor” within the context of late capitalist Japanese employment practices, as well as to explicate the ways in which the bentō factory in Auto functions as a microcosmic model of the broader socio-economic schema of contemporary Japan. In Chapter II, I examined Kirino’s depictions of two immigrant laborers—Anna and Kazuo—with the aim of highlighting Auto’s concern with the implications of late capitalism across perceived boundaries of gender and ethnicity. In Chapter III, I explored the ways in which Kirino’s depictions of the housewives Yayoi, Kuniko, and Yoshie, as well as the gangster Jumonji, engage with a number of real-life Japanese sociological issues, all of which are situated around capitalist perceptions of bodily labor value. In Chapter IV, I analyzed Auto’s two main characters—Masako and Satake—with the aim of explicating the ways in which their perceptions of their own and others’ bodies reflect the power struggles around which the novel as a whole is situated. Subsequently, I considered the ways in which Satake’s rape of Masako, as well as Masako’s murder of Satake, function as a metaphor for the violent
tendencies of contemporary Japanese capitalism. Finally, I examined the novel’s conclusion within the context of Mardorossian’s discussion of rape survivorship, ultimately arguing that Masako’s detachment from her defining roles in the home and factory constitutes a disruption of the historical cycle of victimization and calls for the dismantling of the conventional identity constructs around which Japanese economic activities are situated. As this analysis illustrates, *Auto* is a novel that is eminently concerned with production and consumption not only as integral capitalist processes, but also as constitutive life activities for Japan’s inhabitants, and in particular those belonging to the nation’s stratiﬁed mass of precarious laborers. It is a text, I have argued here, that subverts conventional perceptions of the relationship between identity constructs such as gender, ethnicity, and class and one’s labor value by exposing and undermining many of the economic justiﬁcations for Japan’s persisting social inequalities. Moreover, by offering an alternative perspective on Satake’s rape of Masako, as well as Masako’s decision to dissociate from both the spaces and relationships around which her deﬁning roles are constructed, I hope to have demonstrated that Masako’s victory over her rapist does not signify a privatization of the issues presented in the novel, but rather affirms the capacity for one to actively resist, and in doing so disrupt, the cyclical process of victimization. To be sure, *Auto*, as earlier noted, differs signiﬁcantly from the proletarian literature by which Kirino was inspired. However, these differences do not, as Seaman claims, point to either an unwillingness to offer alternatives to the status quo or the longing to preserve social harmony on the part of Kirino. Rather, I argue, Kirino seeks to undermine not only established conventions of the crime genre, but also the notion of social harmony itself via her explorations of
various loci of cultural discord. As such, her writing is doubly transgressive. In *Auto*, Kirino aims not only to narrate reality, but also to interrogate it, her writing itself functioning as a mode of public resistance—a fact, I suggest, to which the global appeal of *Auto* and works like it may be attributed. *Auto* demonstrates that the market success of contemporary Japanese crime fiction does not, as many of its critics posit, rely on the perfunctory reproduction of literary convention, nor does it merely constitute a vehicle of escape from modern existence. Rather, the popularity of *Auto* evidences the reading public’s demand for, and critical engagement with, socially conscious art. As Kirino’s writing illustrates, crime fiction embodies the capacity to grapple with the complex and ever-changing social realities of modernity. As such, works like *Auto* offer readers a critical lens through which to examine reality, politicizing not only the act of writing, but the act of reading, as well.


Obayashi Mieko. “Out ni Miru ‘Kane’ to ‘Kawaki’ no Hate: Shufutachi no Beruto


