

Otaku Dreams: The Re-membering of Japan in Murakami Takashi's "Earth at My Window"

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Abstract Japanese pop culture artist Murakami Takashi's *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* includes an explication of the artist's view of the relationship among *otaku* culture, post-World War II Japanese history, and the future national identity of Japan. In this article I argue that for Murakami the hope of a better future for Japan relies on the remasculinization of national identity. That remasculinization relies on the cultural imaginings of Japan's *otaku*. However, Murakami's account of *otaku* elides both the gender realities of the *otaku* community and the heterogeneity of that community; if the future of Japan is built on Murakami's account of *otaku*, that future has a shaky foundation.

Key words Murakami Takashi; Earth at my Window; *otaku*; national identity

"I Have a Message from Another Time." — *Twilight*, Electric Light Orchestra¹

In the opening section of "Earth at My Window," the first essay in Murakami's *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, Murakami posits that "Japan may be the future of the world" (100). Murakami's essay is both an historical and a cultural project, an attempt to "find the kernels of our future by examining how indigenous Japanese imagery and aesthetics changed and accelerated after the war" (101). In his account of those changes and accelerations, Murakami posits *otaku*² culture as the historical culmination of post-World War II imagery and aesthetics, both condemning *otaku* culture for its obsession with *kawaii* (cute) merchandise and celebrating it for its exemplification of a uniquely Japanese culture. As Melek Ortabasi points out, Murakami knows that there is something wrong with *otaku* culture but "*Little Boy* is still a manifesto in defense of *otaku* cultural production" (282). More than that, the opening essay of *Little Boy* is a specific project, an attempt to position *otaku* as dreamers whose imaginative acts offer a better future for Japan, and in whose redemption lies the restoration of the Japanese nation-state. Murakami's argument begins by positing the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima as the beginning of *otaku* culture and culminates in his claim that while "it's night in America. . . Japan is always dreaming" ("Earth" 149). Specifically, it is *otaku* who are always dreaming, and it is their dreams that provide glimpses of the future of the nation.

Murakami's construction of history and emphasis on dreaming are reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's account of the production of nation-states in *Imagined Communities*, particularly given Murakami's explicit consideration of past, present, and future Japan. In this paper, I will explore the implications for Japanese national identity in the *otaku* dreams of Murakami Takashi's "Earth at my Window," and offer several criticisms of both Murakami's project and its implications. In order to do so, I will first attempt to clarify what is meant by *otaku* in Murakami's essay, review Murakami's position in the world of Japanese contemporary culture, and link Murakami's essay and Anderson's work on the imagining of the nation-state. Both Partha Chatterjee and Marc Redfield offer important considerations of Anderson's seminal text, and I will briefly consider their work for implications relevant to Murakami's project. Anderson's, Chatterjee's, and Redfield's texts reveal the limited possibilities for an imagined community and the layers of privilege inherent in the imagining of the nation-state; these limits and layers provide useful guidelines in examining Murakami's "Earth at My Window."

Second, I will consider Murakami's essay as a historicizing project, one which establishes the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as the origin of *otaku* culture and post-World War II Japan, and the social redemption of *otaku* as the future of the nation. Murakami is not alone in claiming the atomic bomb as the beginning of post-World War II Japanese history, but his representations of the bomb clearly simplify and sanitize the actual event. Neither is he alone in arguing that *otaku* culture may provide insights to the future of Japan; however, his account of the *otaku* community is also a simplification.

Third, I will examine Murakami's discussion of Japan's "phantom limb" for its implications of what *otaku* and *otaku* dreams offer for the future of Japan. In this section of the paper, I will argue that the implicit masculinity of *otaku* culture informs what might be better understood as a re-membering of history than a representation of actual events. Re-membering history, constructing an explicitly masculine account of post-World War II Japan, permits the imagining of a future in which national identity is both limited and exclusive.

Finally, I will return to Murakami's account of *otaku* culture and the *otaku* community. While Murakami assumes a homogeneous *otaku* community, Melek Ortobasi and Alisa Freedman offer accounts of the *Densha Otoko* ("Train Man") phenomenon that reveal not only the existence of subgroups within the *otaku* community but also the differences and dissensions among those subgroups. Murakami's account of *otaku* elides both the gender realities of the *otaku* community and the heterogeneity of that community; if the future of Japan is built on Murakami's account of *otaku*, that future has a shaky foundation.

Otak-Who?³

It is impossible to avoid *otaku* in any discussion of contemporary Japanese culture. (Murakami, 132)

"Earth at My Window" might be understood as an attempt to resolve misunderstand-

ings about *otaku* and *otaku* culture, and to establish the value and significance of *otaku* culture, particularly in its promise of a better future. Moreover, Murakami's essay might be understood as an attempt to socially and morally redeem *otaku*; Mark McLelland, in his introduction to the April 2009 edition of *Intersections*, points out that the term has a rather dark history in Japan (par. 11). Such an understanding, though, raises the questions: What is *otaku* culture? and Who are *otaku*? More specifically, who are the *otaku* in Murakami's "Earth at My Window"?

In her article "National History as *otaku* Fantasy," Ortabasi writes, "for the uninitiated, the term *otaku* is commonly used to designate a rabid fan/hobbyist of anime, manga, computer games and related genres" (277). Lawrence Eng agrees, noting that while *otaku* is now a contested term, its meaning shifting with context and place, it began as a label for specialized consumers of specific media products (3); those consumers were recognized for their "monomaniacal focus" and social maladjustment (11–12). It is important to note that this process of labeling began within *otaku* subculture: Sawaragi Noi points out that "*otaku*—literally, 'your home,'—is derived from a habit of the subculture crowd, whose members called each other by this generic pronoun instead of using their individual names" (188–9). Such recognition is important given the explicitly negative representation of *otaku* through mainstream media following the arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu, a young man portrayed as having an obsession with anime and manga, for a series of child murders from 1988 to 1989 (Ortabasi 278), and the 1995 Sarin attacks on the Tokyo subway performed by Aum Shinrikyō, a "recognized *otaku* cult" (Murakami, "Earth" 121). The in-group labeling of *otaku* by *otaku*, with its implications of competitive but harmless fandom, gave way to the out-group labeling of *otaku* by mainstream media, with its implications of dangerous obsession. Moreover, as Ortabasi points out, linking *otaku* culture with Miyazaki's horrifying crimes "caused the *otaku* to be gendered primarily male in the public imagination" (278). That gendering of *otaku* persists. While Tomoko Aoyama points out that female *otaku* now outnumber males in both cultural consumption and production (qtd. in McLelland, par. 12), Freedman argues that contemporary media "present female *otaku* as anomalies rather than role models" (par. 40). Media representations and the perspectives of non-*otaku*, it seem, outweigh the gender realities of *otaku* cultural consumption and production.

While Eng emphasises the imprecise qualities of the term and the importance of determining whether it is applied by non-*otaku* or by *otaku* themselves, Ortabasi emphasizes the out-group perspective, writing of the media coverage of Miyazaki's arrest that "overexposure has turned the *otaku* into a personification of anxiety about the nation's future" (279). In "Earth at My Window," Murakami reiterates Ortabasi's emphasis on the negative connotations of being *otaku*; he writes, "Japanese society has consistently ridiculed *otaku* as a negative element, driving such personalities into the far corners of the social fabric" (132). However, Murakami also reiterates Ortabasi's claim that *otaku* somehow personify the nation. In distinguishing subculture from *otaku* culture, Murakami defines subculture as "cool culture from abroad" and *otaku* culture as "uncool indigenous Japanese culture" (132). For Murakami, the distinction is essential: *otaku* may be socially alienated but they are essentially and uniquely

Japanese.

There is, though, an inherent tension in Murakami's definition of *otaku* culture. The negative connotations of "uncool" contrast with the positive connotations of "indigenous Japanese"; a similar tension is evoked through Murakami's claim that the latest generation of *otaku* has "ceased to attract social disdain" and has integrated "thoroughly into the mainstream" (133). This characterization of *otaku* culture is seemingly at odds with Murakami's account of *otaku* as being driven "into the far corners of the social fabric." It is, nonetheless, a critical ambivalence. Murakami can hardly posit *otaku* as a necessary step toward a better future for Japan without somehow redeeming them from their association with a serial killer and a fanatical, murderous cult. Murakami's claims that the latest generation of *otaku* is both essentially Japanese and has integrated into the mainstream of Japanese society is the extension of a historical timeline: *otaku* began as harmless obsessives, became seen as dangerous sociopaths, and now represent an opportunity for contemporary Japanese culture. Murakami may condemn *otaku* for their adoration of kawaii culture (Ortabasi 282) but he celebrates them for their vision of the future. The problem of kawaii, as McLelland writes, is that it is "a ubiquitous and hence extremely unstable signifier" (par. 3). As an essential part of Japan's "gross national cool" (McGray qtd. in Freedman, par. 29), kawaii culture transfers from products and merchandise to the national identity of Japan (McLelland, par 8); the result is a nation-state grounded in undetermined, unstable values. In this light, Murakami's condemnation of kawaii culture is the condemnation of a nation that has lost its stability and uniqueness. His celebration of *otaku* culture is the unveiling of an opportunity to restore Japan.

"Japanese People Are Too Unaware of History" (Murakami qtd. in Looser, 92)

The simultaneous condemnation and celebration of *otaku* in Murakami's essay, the ambivalence of claiming both positive and negative connotations of the term, echoes Murakami's own ambivalent status as *otaku*. As Ortobasi points out, Murakami "might deny that he is an *otaku* in the strict sense, but he is unquestionably indebted to the aesthetics of manga and anime" (282). Moreover, as the foreword to the text specifically states, *Little Boy* is an exploration of *otaku* "and their influence upon Japan's artistic vanguard of the 1990s and today" (vi). Murakami, it seems, might not identify himself as *otaku* but he is very much willing to speak on their behalf. Given Murakami's status and success in the world of contemporary pop culture, his voice is not only likely to be heard but respected.

In a 2006 review of *Little Boy*, Marilyn Ivy describes Murakami Takashi as "the regnant *enfant terrible* of Japanese contemporary art" (499). Ivy's choice of terms is, of course, a reference to the book's title, which, in turn, is a reference to the nickname given to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Nonetheless, Ivy's point is clear: Murakami occupies a powerful and unique position in contemporary Japanese pop culture. He is a prolific artist, a successful entrepreneur, and the subject of dozens of articles and reviews; a recent curriculum vitae posted on V Gallery's web site includes 14 densely packed pages listing Murakami's exhibits, collections, publica-

tions, awards, interviews, and articles. Annual sales of his artwork and merchandise are in the millions of dollars and he has partnered with Louis Vuitton and Kanye West in producing, respectively, limited-edition handbags and a music video.

Sawaragi Noi, in an essay on Japanese Neo Pop, presages Ivy's description of Murakami within the world of Japanese contemporary art: "Japanese Neo Pop is a distinctively Japanese form of artistic expression. . . rooted in Japanese subculture⁴ and perfectly exemplified by the work of Takashi Murakami [sic]" (187). Sawaragi might be forgiven some hyperbole, given that his account appears in Murakami's *Little Boy*; what remains clear, however, is Murakami's exalted position in contemporary Japanese pop culture.

Murakami's words, then, are likely to be understood as representative of *otaku* culture. What Murakami is interested in doing with those words, it seems, is establishing a history of *otaku*, one that includes the vision of an *otaku*-grounded future. Moreover, Murakami's project seems to be one of conflating *otaku* history with post-World War II Japanese history. Thomas Looser, in an analysis of contemporary Japanese culture and its relationship to Japanese history, argues that Murakami's art can be understood as a "remedy" to an ignorance of history among Japanese people. Looser points out that "Murakami seems to believe that art potentially has real social and political force;" presumably, that force can be channelled to educate Japanese people and offer an escape from the paralysis of ignorance (92).

Murakami's historical project is consistent with other literature around the development of *otaku* but only to a point; the project deviates in explicitly claiming that *otaku* culture offers an opportunity for a better future for Japan. It is precisely that deviation, that attempt to redeem *otaku* and position them as contemporary Japan's hope for the future, that I am most interested in considering here. Murakami's vision of an *otaku*-grounded future is a vision of a redeemed nation, a Japan made unique through its contemporary culture. It is a vision made possible only through a very carefully constructed history.

"The Nation is 'an Imagined Political Community'" (Anderson 6)

In his influential text, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that the nation is not an inevitable political community but the product of very specific historical conditions. For Anderson, the nation is an arbitrary construct, a community that reveals the dynamics of power that underlie its formation even as it reinforces those dynamics. In considering the nation and the means of its formation, Anderson offers this definition:

[The nation is] an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. . . The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, bounda-

ries beyond which lie other nations. . . It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. (6 – 7; emphasis original)

Of these three characteristics of the nation, that it is “imagined,” “limited,” and “sovereign,” the first has occasioned the most discussion. In a post-colonial critique of *Imagined Communities*, Partha Chatterjee affirms Anderson’s characterization of the nation as imagined, writing that nations “were not the determinate products of given sociological conditions such as language or race or religion: they had been, in Europe and everywhere else in the world, imagined into existence” (406). The imagining of the nation, though, is only made possible through the specific media shared by the nation’s citizens. Anderson argues that the nation is reified through its citizens’ imaginative acts of, for example, reading the newspaper (33). It is only through imaginative acts associated with the media shared by the nation’s citizens that such a thing as the nation, with qualities that distinguish it from other nations, actually comes to exist.

Marc Redfield, in an analysis of Anderson’s text, posits that “all communities. . . are in some sense imagined. . . But the nation is radically imagined: it cannot be experienced immediately as a perception” (49; emphasis original). Unlike a village or a small town, the nation cannot be experienced by its citizens: it is simply too large. The nation’s size, though, is not merely geographical or physical but also conceptual, thus requiring radical acts of imagination (rather than, say, radical acts of travel). Those radical acts might substitute themselves as experiences of the national community by its citizens but they should be recognized as “grounded in and produced by a systematic misrecognition” of the nation’s origins (54). The imagining of the nation constitutes the origin of the nation but disguises itself as a different kind of mental act: recognition.

Redfield’s and Chatterjee’s considerations of Anderson’s text are perhaps most useful for their troubling of the assumptions around the imaginative act. In particular, Chatterjee raises the questions: Who imagines? Who is not permitted to imagine? and What are the limits of imagination? The answers seem to be linked to Redfield’s qualification of imagining the nation as “patriarchal fantasy.” Redfield points out that “it is part of the achievement of *Imagined Communities* to have shown how poorly grounded, yet also how insistent, that patriarchal fantasy is” (59). The nation, as a function of the dynamics of power that precede it, cannot help but embody those dynamics, despite their inherent arbitrariness. The answer to the first question posed above seems to be: men in positions of power in society. The answer to the second: everyone else. The answer to the last, then, is: any community that maintains men in positions of power.

Interestingly, Chatterjee writes that “as history, nationalism’s autobiography is fundamentally flawed” (407). It is an important point to emphasize in Anderson’s account of the nation as an imagined community, one which is consistent with Redfield’s point about the poorly grounded yet insistent patriarchal fantasy. The history of

a given nation, that nation's "autobiography," is both arbitrary in its construction and necessary to the imagining of that nation.

In this light, Anderson's emphasis on the historical conditions of imagining the nation is immediately relevant to Murakami's history of *otaku* culture. Murakami's reference to post-war Japan's "American puppet government" (101), along with his insistence that "Japan is now enmeshed in the search for what it means to have a self" (131), evokes Anderson's characteristic of the nation as sovereign. The newspaper as the basis for imagining the nation easily gives way to Murakami's contemporary anime and manga. And, in "Earth at My Window," Murakami is intent on establishing the historical conditions that will permit a very specific imagining of the nation: the future of Japan.

In the Beginning⁵ :

On August 6, 1945, for the first time in actual warfare, an atomic bomb, nicknamed "Little Boy," exploded over the city of Hiroshima. . . . After the tragic explosive-destructive-Whiteout! of the bombs, only burned-out rubble remained: wasteland upon wasteland, utterly vacant land. (Murakami, 100)

Like any good history, Murakami's account of *otaku* culture includes an origin, an absolute beginning. In choosing the atomic bomb as the origin of *otaku*, Murakami explicitly locates his history within an established *otaku* timeline, borrowing from the opening of DaiCon IV, the 1983 science fiction convention and *otaku* landmark. Emphasising the importance of the convention to *otaku* culture, Murakami provides more than three pages of detailed description of the opening, animated sequence, including this account of the last scene:

the fundamental metaphor for any Japanese creator, the atomic bomb—our symbol of "destruction and rebirth"—explodes in an unexpected way. . . . everything is destroyed by (what can only be construed as) an atomic bomb. In the ensuing whirlwind, petals from Japan's national flower, the cherry blossom, engulf everything in a blast of pink; the streets become scorched earth, mountains are burnt bare, and the whole world becomes a wasteland. Amidst this devastation, Spaceship *DAICON*, symbolizing *otaku*, floats in midair emitting a powerful beam—the beam of science-fiction fans. The world revives, giant trees rise in a flash, and Mother Earth is once again bedecked in green. (117)

In both of these accounts, the bomb dropped on Hiroshima may be a symbol of "destruction and rebirth" but the emphasis is clearly on the latter. In explicating the historical references of *otaku* culture, Looser argues that Murakami's focus on the atomic bombings "forms an absolute beginning. . . . [It] serves as a single origin to a clear, unified narrative of modern national identity" (107). Ivy supports Looser's contention that Murakami's representations of the atomic bomb constitute not only the origin of *otaku* culture but of the contemporary Japanese nation; she writes that "Murakami

means for us to see that one thing follows another, to see that everything is related to everything else, with every aesthetic road leading back to its origin in nuclear explosion" (501). Murakami's account of *otaku* culture implies, as Ivy points out, a historical continuity; that historical continuity clearly relies on the atomic bomb as an absolute origin, an event without antecedent or precedent.

Ivy clarifies her criticism of Murakami's historical project by locating it within the "well-worn politics of the nation-state and postwar history" (502). Murakami's insistence, she writes, on installing "this well-rehearsed origin narrative as explanatory for all of Japanese aesthetic culture today... [is] an erasure of mediation" (502). Moreover, while he seems to be finally and explicitly relating contemporary Japanese art to politics, he does so according to a historical sense as one dimensional and flattened as the acrylics he produces... Aesthetic possibilities mutate but the historico-political narrative stays the same (502).

Murakami's history of *otaku* culture is flawed, a simplification that seeks to reinscribe the historico-political narrative of a unique nation. That simplification is clear in Murakami's victimless representations of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

Importantly, Murakami specifies that the animated "atomic-bomb-grade explosion" of DaiCon IV "hits an unpopulated city" (116); similarly, all that remains after the actual "tragic explosive-destructive-Whiteout!" is "utterly vacant land" (100). These representations of the atomic bomb occur in a mysteriously empty city and leave behind an equally empty nation; they fail to include the victims and survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. This failure is a deliberate act of forgetting and also one of cleansing; as such, it is entirely consistent with Redfield's analysis of Anderson's imagined nation. Writing that "nationalism needs to be able to acknowledge and quarantine loss" (71), Redfield emphasises the appropriation inherent in historical representation: loss must be acknowledged, but it also must be limited and contained. In Murakami's account of the atomic bomb, loss is revised as an opportunity to form the basis of the imagined nation; the historical representation of the atomic bomb as origin is already a misrecognition. Moreover, it is misrecognition of Japan as a nation made feminine by the atomic bomb. Japan as "utterly vacant land" is unspoiled, virgin territory and, as such, allows the possibility of a reconstruction or restoration of masculine identity.

Murakami, of course, is not alone in constructing a history that permits such misrecognition. In a consideration of revisionism in Sino-Japanese history, He Yinan points out that "remembering the past is not a simple act of recording historical events, but a process of constant reconstruction of these events in light of present social and political changes" (65). In light of He's analysis, Murakami might be better understood as a mythologizer than a historian, someone who "[tends] to portray history as a one-dimensional picture, imposing a subjectively predetermined, often simplistic theme on the otherwise complex and multifaceted historical process" (65). Strangely, though, it is precisely that simplicity that Sawaragi appeals to in support of Murakami's construction of history. Wondering how the memory of the war and the atomic bombs ended up "confined to the utterly depthless, sleek, and Superflat space of manga and anime" (202), Sawaragi bizarrely claims that it is within the space of

Otaku culture that true history endures (205). Murakami's work, then, not only exemplifies *otaku* culture but also permits an understanding of the true history of post-World War II Japan, at least from an *otaku* perspective.

Re-membering the Nation

"There is a pun implicit in the notion of re-membering... the use of 'member' to mean the male sexual organ suggests that to 're-member' is also to reattach the penis onto the body of a male" (Michelson 231). In her discussion of Cartesian rationalism and its influence on the epistemological foundations of contemporary education, Elana Michelson argues for an understanding of knowledge as necessarily gendered. For Michelson, "re-membering" the history of contemporary Western epistemology requires acknowledging the power and privilege of men over women. "Re-membering" is not merely a pun but an explication of that power and privilege in the relationship between memory and remembering: "the reattachment of [the] penis becomes an oddly appropriate symbol for the re-location in particular human bodies and particular social histories" (231). The recognition of the implicit masculinity of historical knowledge, the "re-membering" of history, allows the possibility of refuting that masculinity and creating a space of memory that permits both male and female experience.

Murakami's history of *otaku* culture offers no such possibility. Instead, his vision of the future of Japan is based precisely on the re-masculinization of history and the nation; it is the very power and privilege of male *otaku* that Murakami posits as the hope for the future. The problem of contemporary Japanese culture, and hence the problem of contemporary Japan, is its "significant degree of sexual incapacity" and, more specifically, its "impotence" (137). In Murakami's eyes, Japan is a "castrated nation-state" (141). As it is for Michelson, Murakami's solution is a process of "re-membering"; however, Murakami's attempt to reattach the penis to Japan is not an attempt to create a space that permits both male and female experience. Instead, it is an attempt to create an exclusively masculine space, a nation and national citizen that are inherently male.

Interestingly, Murakami includes a discussion of the inadequacy of the Japanese national body in "Earth at My Window." For Murakami, "phantom limb" syndrome, the perception of sensations from a missing limb, provides an analogy for the incomplete post-World War II nation. Writing that "Japan has continued to operate with a phantom arm throughout the postwar era" (139-140), Murakami posits *otaku* and *otaku* culture as a remedy, albeit one which requires the acceptance of a missing arm. *Otaku* culture, in its apparently truthful representations of contemporary Japan and post-World War II history, permits the recognition of Japan's missing limb, the inadequacy of the national body. It is a recognition that has only recently become possible because "until now, Japan has rejected *otaku* profoundly. Why? Because Japan didn't want to acknowledge its missing arm. Because we didn't want to accept that our bodies were inadequate" (140 - 141). What has changed, it seems, is the ability of *otaku* to overcome that rejection, to force a recognition of Japan's missing limb.

In a fascinating consideration of the historical dynamics underlying the contem-

porary mail-order bride industry in Japan, Olena Guseva argues that the fragmentation and restoration of Japanese bodies occur along gender lines. Guseva points out that representations of female *hibakusha* (those affected by the atomic bombs) emphasize their damaged bodies; female *hibakusha* are exposed to the reader as “the Other—the opposite to the whole body idealized and promoted as the epitome of humanity” (15). This exposure is consistent with the way that “the bodies of mail-order brides. . . become texts that project the insecurities of the societal self-consciousness, desires and norms” (17). The implication of Guseva’s argument is that it is through this fragmentation, this projection of insecurities on the female body, that the male body is able to restore and represent itself as whole. In this context, Murakami’s identification of contemporary, post-World War II Japan as feminized, and therefore incomplete, allows the possibility of a complete, re-masculinized nation in the future. In light of Japan’s “impotence,” its status as a “castrated nation-state,” the nation’s missing limb may not be an arm. Instead, it seems more likely that Japan’s inadequacy, as a national body, lies in its missing penis. Murakami’s re-membering of history, his redemption of *Otaku* culture, is then an attempt to attach *otaku* as penis to the national body. *otaku* culture does not merely permit the recognition of the castrated nation but offers the possibility of re-masculinization.

Murakami’s attempt to construct a history and future of post-World War II Japan through the historicization of *otaku* culture is hardly unique. In his article “Framing Manga,” Eldad Nakar writes that popular manga is a “powerful [way] to access the Japanese people’s recollections of World War II” (177) and that “manga [serves] as collective representations of how most Japanese perceived World War II in the post-war periods” (191). Leaving aside the assumptions that he makes in positing manga fans as representative of the entire national population, Nakar’s article is noteworthy for its emphasis on post-World War II history as a subject for contemporary Japanese culture. Moreover, Shimazu Naoko, in a consideration of representations of history in popular Japanese culture, points out that while the government is influential in “re-designing” the past (101), “the Japanese case has shown that popular culture can bring to bear an inordinate amount of influence in creating and moulding representations of the past” (116). Murakami’s project may not be unique, but in light of Nakar’s and Shimazu’s insistence on the power of *otaku* culture, Murakami’s construction of *otaku* history, from the atomic bomb to the re-membered nation, is not easily dismissed, particularly given Murakami’s own standing in the worlds of *otaku* culture and international art.

Otaku vs. Otaku

Nonetheless, Murakami’s history is vulnerable to several criticisms. His claims that Miyazaki Hayao’s animated film *Howl’s Moving Castle* offers “vivid renderings of a contemporary Japanese ethos” (104) and that “the protagonist’s quest for the meaning of life. . . mirrors the same quest of contemporary Japanese” (103) may be safely assumed within the world of *otaku* culture; it is not at all apparent, though, that Murakami’s claims can be accepted outside that world. *Howl’s Moving Castle* might offer an opportunity for an imaginative act, Murakami’s dreaming, similar to that of reading

the newspaper in Anderson's imagining of the nation. But just as Anderson's analysis of the nation-state reveals the layers of privilege inherent in the process of imagining the nation, so too does Murakami's dreaming of the future of Japan. Specifically, Murakami's dreaming is conducted exclusively by masculinized *otaku*; the bodies of the future nation and the national citizen are both male. Murakami's re-membering of the nation requires an explicit construction and, far from providing an unquestionably better future for the nation, that explicit process might result in a destabilization of the Japanese body as male, a refutation of the *otaku*-grounded future. Given Guseva's explication of the fragmentary objectification of women's bodies in the restoration of male identity, Murakami's re-membering of Japan seems to require not just an exclusion of female identities and bodies but the objectification and fracturing of those identities and bodies.

Even within the world of *otaku*, it is not clear that Murakami's insistence on *otaku* culture as an opportunity for a better future is well-grounded. In her history of *otaku* culture, Ortobasi describes "a supposedly real *otaku* identified by his online username 'Densha otoko' ('Train Man'⁶)" (278): Train Man's story became a bestselling novel, manga series, television series, and a movie. Unlike Murakami's future of the nation, one shaped by the power of *otaku* culture, Train Man's story culminates in his abandonment of *otaku* culture: "In the end, the protagonist is 'cured' of his *otaku* lifestyle and wins the girl, thus reentering the fold of the respectable citizenry" (Ortabasi 279). This version of *otaku* redemption is worth emphasizing, differing as it does from Murakami's version. Freedman points out that once Train Man won the girl, "his task was now to advance into 'mainstream' society. . . leaving his former life behind. . . Although a hero, he was no longer [*otaku*]" (par. 12). Countering Murakami's claim that the latest generation of *otaku* has already integrated into the mainstream, Train Man's story offers such integration at the expense of *otaku* lifestyle, reinforcing the rejection of *otaku* and countering their exemplification of the contemporary Japanese citizen.

Interestingly, Freedman's account of Train Man's story parallels Murakami's account of *otaku* and *otaku* culture. Freedman argues that Japanese mass media espouses "the belief that *otaku* are a cause and symptom of the possible breakdown of Japanese society" and points out that "prejudices against *otaku* have even resulted in hate crimes" (par. 30). Train Man's story, however, "shows that an *otaku* has the potential to become a new kind of ideal man" (par. 35). Further, "*Train Man* has had a lasting influence on the ways that *otaku* culture has been examined in order to find possible solutions to pressing national issues" (par. 44). In framing *otaku* as alienated and uncomfortable in mainstream Japanese society, *Train Man* nonetheless establishes *otaku* as essentially decent and good, and thus able to better themselves and integrate in that mainstream. In both Freedman's and Murakami's accounts, *otaku* culture is a possible resource in determining the future of the nation; however, Freedman's emphasis on Train Man's need to "move outside his community" (par. 13) is at odds with Murakami's insistence that the possible restoration of Japan lies within *otaku* culture.

Freedman's consideration of *Train Man* reveals an *otaku* culture inconsistent with

Murakami's account of that culture, not only in terms of the relationship between *otaku* and "mainstream" society but also in terms of the *otaku* community. While Murakami assumes that *otaku* are a homogeneous group, Freedman points out that "*otaku* are divided into subgroups" (par. 10) which differ in their reactions to *Train Man*: "not all *otaku* have felt positively about the mentality depicted in *Train Man* or the discourse on masculinity it engendered. Many instead have expressed a sense of pride at being part of a community apart from greater society and were angered by the suggestion that they should change" (par. 38).

Not only is Murakami's account of *otaku* troubling for its elision of the gender realities of the *otaku* population but also its failure to recognize differing and dissenting voices within the community. Murakami's account of *otaku*, then, is not only ambivalent in its condemnation and celebration, but also fundamentally problematic in its distortion and simplification of the realities of the *otaku* community.

Murakami's history of *otaku* culture places *otaku* at the centre of contemporary Japanese life; it is *otaku* culture that offers the possibility of a better future in the shape of a restored national body. Murakami's insistence on the historical necessity of *otaku* culture even allows the possibility that "an *otaku* lifestyle...may well be appropriated in the future world as an exemplary model of rehabilitation" (141). Such a possibility, though, is troubling. Murakami's project is founded on an historical appropriation, a simplified representation of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as the origin of *otaku* culture. Further, the *otaku* who dream the future while America sleeps are clearly, and exclusively, male; the dream of the future of Japan consists in the re-membering of the bodies of the nation and the national citizen. The process of dreaming and its national product explicitly exclude the participation and recognition of women. For Murakami, the future of Japan may be *otaku* but that future is not better than the present, or even the past.

Notes

1. Electric Light Orchestra's "Twilight" was used as the soundtrack for the opening animation sequence at the 1983 DaiCon IV science fiction convention in Osaka, "one of the most famous *otaku* events of all time" (Ortabasi 279).
2. The foreword to *Little Boy* provides this definition of *otaku*: "roughly translated as 'geeks' or 'pop culture fanatics'" (vi). In this paper, I will attempt to provide a definition of *otaku* more specific to Murakami's "Earth at My Window."
3. This pun is borrowed from the title of Lawrence Eng's paper: "Otak-Who? Technoculture, youth, consumption, and resistance: American representations of a Japanese youth subculture."
4. Sawaragi notes: "I use 'subculture' in this text as a synonym for *otaku* culture" (206)
5. The following quotation is the beginning of the text of Murakami's "Earth at My Window."
6. Freedman discusses the differences among the original online posts, novel, manga, television episodes, and movie, in her article "Train Man and the Gender Politics of Japanese 'otaku' Culture: The Rise of New Media, Nerd Heroes and Consumer Communities." The plot points discussed here are consistent across the various media versions.

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