

**Ecology, Society, and Imagination in Oyamada Hiroko's *The Factory* and *The Hole***

by

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## Ecology, Society, and Imagination in Oyamada Hiroko's *The Factory* and *The Hole*

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Two of Oyamada Hiroko's best-known works are her proletarian debut novella *The Factory* (*Kōjō*, 2013) and her Akutagawa prize-winning novella *The Hole* (*Ana*, 2014). My thesis focuses on representations of the unseen forces at play in everyday life in Oyamada's novels. Oyamada constructs multispecies worlds in which capital, patriarchy, and the environment are intertwined. I examine how *The Factory* represents alienation and precarity in the current neoliberal economy. The factory is depicted as the background for a multispecies assemblage in which all beings are affected by capitalism. In shifting focus to marginalized beings, Oyamada challenges notions of modernity which conveniently ignore their existence. I discuss capitalism's extension into the home in *The Hole*. Women's reproductive roles in the family serve to support models of production based on the myth of the male breadwinner. Oyamada shows how women are covertly nudged into traditional gender roles, and how wildness offers a potential alternative.

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## 1.0 Introduction

We hear about precarity in the news every day. People lose their jobs or get angry because they never had them. Gorillas and river porpoises hover at the edge of extinction. Rising seas swamp whole Pacific islands. But most of the time we imagine such precarity to be an exception to how the world works [...] What if, as I'm suggesting, precarity *is* the condition of our time – or, to put it another way, what if our time is ripe for sensing precarity?

- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*

In the decades following the collapse of the economic bubble of the 1980s, a sense of precarity has loomed over everyday activities of life in Japan, which anthropologist Anne Allison describes as “a sense of being out of place, out of sorts, disconnected (*fuan, fuantei, ibasho ga nai*)” (Allison 14). Japan’s welfare policies have increasingly shifted responsibility for the wellbeing of oneself and one’s family from the government and the corporation to the individual. As safety nets fall, life becomes more unstable. Yet for the majority who are accustomed to viewing the world through the forward-facing lens of progress and modernization, precarity, as Anna Tsing describes in the above quote, is imagined to be an exception to the rule (Tsing 20). Akutagawa Prize-winning author Oyamada Hiroko<sup>1</sup> makes visible this pervasive, yet evasive sense

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<sup>1</sup> When Japanese names are written, I use the Japanese naming convention of family name first, given name second, with two exceptions: scholarly work in which the author is identified with the Western convention of given name first and family name second, or when discussing the characters in the English translations of *The Factory* and *The Hole*, whose names are represented in the text with Western naming conventions.

of precarity in her speculative fiction. Oyamada's writing embodies a feeling of uneasiness and disorientation as her protagonists grapple with societal expectations in twenty-first century Japan. In *The Factory*, workers are gradually consumed by their unstable and unrewarding jobs, while in *The Hole*, a young woman faces an expectation to fulfill a role as an unpaid caretaker of her husband's family. Oyamada's lucid depiction of the psychological toll of life under neoliberal capitalism has earned her a reputation of being a "writer for Japan's 'lost generation,'" those who came of age in the tumult of the 90s and early aughts (Tillack 109).

However, Oyamada is not the only author writing about work, gender, and precarity in post-bubble Japan. What distinguishes Oyamada's voice is her perceptivity to the precarious world beyond the experience of the individual. Oyamada creates imaginative multispecies worlds in which natural and built environments overlap, and humans are only one component of a broader ecosystem. Birds fly through the factory windows, moss grows in unexpected places, and animals dig holes for humans to fall into. While these intrusions of other creatures on supposedly human spaces cause confusion for the narrators, their coworkers and families seem nearly oblivious to these beings' existence. Yet the narrators, and the reader, are forced to ask: What are these creatures? How in the world did they get here? And how do they manage to survive? In reading *The Factory* and *The Hole*, our senses are awakened – we are enabled to "sense precarity" where it otherwise goes unnoticed.

This thesis interprets Oyamada's fiction through the lens of its multispecies ecologies. In overlapping boundaries, cross-species encounters, and shifting temporalities, I argue that the weirdness of Oyamada's writing works as a strategy to encourage the reader to consider the expansive, overarching systems of which the narrators (and we) are a part. Caught in an extensive, seemingly self-sustaining ecosystem, there appears to be no escape from patriarchal capitalism. It

explains why her protagonists feel such a sense of malaise – like cogs in a machine, eerie forces seem to dictate their actions. Here, conformity is a mechanism for survival. However, while the ecosystem helps to materialize these otherwise abstract concepts, the animals in Oyamada’s fiction are far from an unambiguous metaphor for issues in human society. With their complexity rendered in vivid detail, Oyamada’s animals resist easy categorization. While unsettling, the animals in *The Factory* and *The Hole* evoke empathy, bringing to light the ways in which industrialization has also led to environmental precarity which affects not only humans, but all living beings. Moreover, by opening our eyes to marginalized creatures, can we uncover other ways of existing? In viewing the world through the lens of progress, things which do not conform to a narrative of growth are filtered out. While the animals affect and are affected by human environments, they also build adjacent worlds of their own, perhaps offering clues for survival in precarious times. While drawing attention to the labor that we perform and the system that it benefits, Oyamada does not call for revolution. Her imperative is a simpler one: to open our eyes and notice.

### **1.1 Biography and Literature Review**

Born in 1983 in Hiroshima, Oyamada Hiroko is a member of the “lost generation” raised in the aftermath of the economic bubble collapse. Youths who entered the workforce during this recession faced a paucity of well-paying jobs, leading to under- and unemployment. Oyamada, who often writes based on her own experiences, found inspiration for her 2010 novella *Kōjō* (*The Factory*) working a series of temporary jobs, including a factory job for an automobile manufacturer (Oyamada, “Daiyonjūnikai”). *Kōjō* won the 42<sup>nd</sup> Shinchō Prize for New Writers, and in 2013, it was published as part of a collection of short stories under the same name. The collection



won the 30<sup>th</sup> Oda Sakunosuke prize. In 2014, she won the 150<sup>th</sup> Akutagawa Prize for her novella *Ana (The Hole)*, which was inspired by her experience relocating to the countryside with her husband. Oyamada is a prolific author who has also published two other collections of short stories titled *Niwa (Garden, 2018)* and *Kojima (Islet, 2021)*, as well as two collections of essays released in 2023. Her work has been translated into several languages. David Boyd has been a longtime English translator of Oyamada, and his English translations of *The Factory* and *The Hole* were published in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

Some of Oyamada's influences include Kafka and Latin American magical realism; she named Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Green House* as inspiration for the disorienting nature of *The Factory* (Oyamada, "Daiyonjūnikai"). Oyamada's writing joins a body of literary work by modern and contemporary authors that employs Kafkaesque elements and magical realism. According to Mina Qiao, the fantastic elements in modern and contemporary Japanese literature "manifest the experiences and sensations of postmodern Japan – the enduring impact of the collapse of the economic bubble, [...] as well as the anxiety resulting from present-day political and economic circumstances" (Qiao 3). Oyamada's work almost always features plants or animals, which she attributes to a lifelong fascination with botany and zoology (Oyamada, "Sakka"). Oyamada joins a number of other contemporary authors who consider the perspective of nonhuman life, such as Kawakami Hiromi, Furukawa Hideo, and Tawada Yōko. While Oyamada's writing shares some features with that of her contemporaries, she possesses a unique voice. Oyamada is known for her dense paragraphs, sometimes several pages in length. Oyamada also depicts the scene from an unsettlingly close perspective, zeroing in on tiny details. She describes her writing process as fragmented, writing only small pieces at a time, then connecting them, contributing to the disorienting feeling of the text (Oyamada, "Daiyonjūnikai").

Despite the acclaim for her work in the past decade, there is relatively little existing research on Oyamada. Much of this literature focuses on the existential nature of Oyamada's novels. Peter Tillack and Mina Qiao both take a psychoanalytical approach in analyzing *The Factory* and *The Hole*, respectively. They focus on identity and the loss of the protagonists' subjectivity as they fulfill their responsibilities to society. In Tillack's chapter titled "Writing a Place for Politics in the Space of Capital," he reads *The Factory* as "a tale of psychic abjection vis-à-vis contemporary capitalism" (109). He argues that in each factory worker's alienation, he or she comes to identify with the animals on the factory's periphery and cease to identify with the aims of capitalism, causing each protagonist to lose subjectivity and metamorphose into factory animals themselves. Tillack characterizes the protagonists as "freed of subjectivity" and their metamorphosis as "pure, ungentrified *jouissance*" (110). Tillack's interpretation of the factory animals is interesting, and I would agree with his implication that the factory animals seem to awaken in the protagonists "a much-weakened propensity to desire" (116). However, I question whether the metamorphosis experienced by the characters is truly freeing in any way. I address this question further in the next chapter.

Qiao discusses *The Hole* briefly in her chapter titled "Shōjo, Mother, and the Uncanny Space in Ogawa Yōko's Writings," but her discussion of the uncanny in works by female authors which revolve around marriage and motherhood is relevant to my own reading of *The Hole*. Qiao interprets the use of "dreamlike fantasy" as a technique to display the "romantically committed female protagonists' fear of their social transformation and the annihilation of subjectivity" (42). She goes on to argue that the "uncanny arises from their doubts about marriage repressed by their consciousness" (42). While both Tillack and Qiao's analyses are more heavily psychoanalytical than my own, I am interested in Asahi's loss of her identity as a *shōjo*, or girl, in *The Hole* as she

transitions to a new role as a housewife and future caregiver. In Chapter 3, I examine how Oyamada evokes the eerie to illustrate the discomfort of this transition.

Hikita Masaaki devotes two chapters of his book *Trans Modern Literature* to Oyamada, with one chapter focusing on *The Factory* and another focusing on *The Hole*. Hikita also examines Oyamada's work psychologically, applying Gestalt theory to the fragmented nature of the protagonists' experiences. This is an interesting way to discuss Oyamada's work given her fragmented writing process, the temporal fragmentation of the text, and her tendency toward vivid description of minute details. Protagonists in *The Factory* experience the factory from a close-up point of view without a clear understanding of the bigger picture, reflecting Oyamada's own alienating experience as a factory worker. Hikita focuses here on the human experience; his discussion of the animals is somewhat limited. In his close reading of *The Hole*, however, he explores animality in the bodily motifs of teeth/fangs and nails/claws.

Sofia Samatar and Kate Zambreno also discuss Oyamada in their book *Tone*. Their book is a lyrical exploration of tone in which they discuss the affective landscape of *The Factory* among other literary texts. Chapters are divided according to theme, with the two chapters in which Oyamada is mentioned being "Hoard, or an Unaired Room," and "Aviary, or Animal." Samatar and Zambreno discuss *The Factory* among other works evoking the "hoard" or the excesses of capitalism. In their chapter on animals, they write, "In these speculative Japanese narratives, it is the bird or other creature who serves as a metaphor or extension for trauma and alienation," before asking whether it is possible to truly decenter the human (64). While Oyamada's stories never entirely decenter the human, I would argue that the animal is not only a metaphor and that the experience of the animal is also considered. By juxtaposing natural and built environments, Oyamada depicts a multispecies ecosystem in which animals, too, are touched by capitalism.

While the existing scholarship on Oyamada offers intriguing contributions, most of the analysis of Oyamada's work has focused on the individual. Identity is certainly an important theme in Oyamada's writing, and psychoanalytic approaches can offer insight in this regard. However, psychoanalysis is limited in its ability to address the wider ecosystems in which the stories occur. I hope to drive the discussion further in the direction of the animal and the ecosystem. Samatar and Zambreno's discussion of tone is an interesting step in this direction, since atmosphere is important to Oyamada's method of world-building. In my environmental reading of Oyamada, I also look to scholars within the field of animal studies, a growing interdisciplinary field which draws expertise from both the sciences and the humanities to explore questions of animality and interspecies relationships. One such scholar is Anna Tsing, whose anthropological and ecological study on matsutake mushrooms and their surrounding economy has been helpful to my understanding of multispecies assemblages. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Tsing examines matsutake, which grows only in human-touched forests, as unexpected, uncontrolled beings that spring up on the periphery of the capitalist ecosystem. Those who pick them, often disadvantaged and disenfranchised workers, also exist on the margins of capitalist society. These connections, which Tsing calls "a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life" can also be seen in *The Factory* and *The Hole* (Tsing 4). Like Tsing's matsutake trade, the complex ecosystems in these two novellas can only be seen by those willing to look beyond the capitalist framework.

Tsing examines the possibility of multispecies survival in a capitalist world without romanticizing the relationship as harmonious. I am suspicious of appeals to harmony with nature, and I am interested in how Oyamada denies the reader an image of harmony between humans and nonhumans. The concept of harmony with nature is argued by some to be a value inherent in

Japanese culture. Yuki Masami discusses the controversial discourse of harmony in Japanese ecocriticism: “Some scholars and intellectuals celebrate perceived harmony between humans and nonhuman nature as an ecologically sound alternative vision, whereas others see the notion of living in harmony with nature as culturally constructed and purely ideological with little ecological significance” (Yuki 2). Essentialist claims to a connection with nature are often criticized as impediments to true environmental sustainability. When identifying as a member of a culture who cares for the environment, complacency becomes possible; it is easy to turn a blind eye toward acts of environmental destruction which contradict this identity. Additionally, nature itself is a constructed concept. When one praises nature, they may not embrace wilderness in its true form, but an environment that has been manipulated to suit the needs or preferences of humans (Yuki 4). Karen Thornber coined the term “ecoambiguity” to describe “the complex, contradictory interactions between people and environments with a significant nonhuman presence,” and examines “how attention to and appreciation of the natural world have been so readily conflated with love, and love with stewardship, despite ample empirical evidence to the contrary” (Thornber 1, 61). *The Factory* denies the ecoambiguous message common in Japan that development can happen harmoniously with nature. Any harmony between manmade and natural environments that appears on the surface of Oyamada’s novels is, upon closer examination, more a disjointed juxtaposition between two unlike things than any kind of seamless integration. I explore this concept further in Chapter 2.

Another question that this thesis proposes is one of agency. In the worlds that these characters occupy, who or what has the power to influence their decisions? Oyamada’s characters are strikingly inert. Despite their unsatisfactory life situations, they do nothing to change them. When they encounter things that make no sense, they make little attempt to understand them. Does

this mean that they accept their roles willingly, or are other influences at play? The ominous, eerie atmosphere of Oyamada's work elicits a feeling that greater forces may be behind the protagonists' everyday actions. Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* provides insight into the discussion of environment and agency. In his study of science fiction and horror, he identifies the weird and the eerie as modes of fiction which capture "a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition, and experience" (Fisher 8). This is certainly relevant to Oyamada's horror-adjacent style, in which otherworldly beings and experiences represent the unseen made visible. Eerie fiction in particular is "tied up with questions of agency," leading the reader to question what forces produced such unsettling environments (Fisher 11). This thesis applies Fisher's theory to Oyamada's work, arguing that the weird and the eerie are utilized by Oyamada as a strategy to draw attention outwards toward the ecosystems of which the narrators are a part, shifting the agency from the individual to the capitalist machine.

The chapters that follow contribute to this growing body of research by examining the multispecies ecosystems in *The Factory* and *The Hole* and how they reveal precarity in neoliberal 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan. In each, weirdness directs our senses toward entities which typically go unnoticed: the natural environment itself, the oddities of social conventions, and the broader forces which deprive individuals of agency. Chapter 2, "Alienation and Precarity in the Multispecies World of *The Factory*," imagines the factory as a sprawling ecosystem that is organic and mechanical, human and animal. The factory ecosystem is a fantastic representation of the corporation in Japan as a powerful and esoteric entity that prioritizes production while lacking deeper meaning for individual laborers. Not only do the eerie yet sympathetic factory animals draw attention to the horrors of work in contemporary Japan, but they also reveal the ecological impacts of capitalism. Chapter 3, "Capitalism Beyond the Factory in *The Hole*," shifts the focus from the

urban to rural, and from the workplace to the home. This chapter explores how even the rural and family spheres, sometimes imagined to be an escape from society, are affected by capital. A mysterious black animal guides the narrator through an eerie and stagnant rural landscape which evokes an image of an area left behind in the age of progress, and makes traditional gender norms, present though obscured in urban areas, openly visible. While these 2010s novellas reflect the discomfort of living in precarious times, Oyamada's vibrant ecologies allow the reader to imagine what may lie beyond the status quo.

## 2.0 Alienation and Precarity in the Multispecies World of *The Factory*

Oyamada Hiroko's novella *The Factory* provides a bizarre account of factory work. From the moment Yoshiko Ushiyama steps into the factory, something is amiss: "I thought I could smell birds" (*Factory* 3). Filled with eccentricities, Oyamada's factory is a disorienting landscape which its three newly hired protagonists must navigate. Yoshiko Ushiyama is a contract worker working in the printing department, shredding documents which are carted to the basement in a seemingly endless stream. Yoshiko's brother, called only by his family name, Ushiyama, is a temp worker hired as a proofreader at the factory after being fired from his job as a systems engineer. Yoshio Furufue is hired as a regular employee to singlehandedly design a green roof for the factory but is given no training, guidance, or deadlines. The tasks they are asked to perform – endless shredding, editing documents by hand with no technological assistance, and creating worthless maps of mosses around the factory – are strange and nonsensical, but they nevertheless evoke the very real sense of alienation felt by both waged and salaried workers as Japan's workforce becomes increasingly precarious.

As the three try to make sense of their surroundings, they notice other oddities: a hoard of black birds staring at the factory; enormous rodents, coypus, poking their heads out of the drains; and greenery peeking through the gray concrete. The factory is intertwined with the natural environment that surrounds it. Rather than examine the factory in isolation, Oyamada depicts it as part of a complex ecological assemblage. This chapter asks: What does it mean to live and work in today's neoliberal economy, not just for human workers, but for other species who are affected by capitalism? Why does it make sense to examine the economic and the ecological in tandem? How are humans and nonhumans alienated by capitalism? On the other hand, how do these



marginalized creatures exert their influence? In this chapter, I examine how the multispecies world of *The Factory* approaches these questions.

## 2.1 Alienation

*The Factory* is essentially a story of worker alienation. Each of these three employees reveals a sense of alienation from their work, one which Oyamada herself felt while working various non-regular jobs. Oyamada found inspiration to write *The Factory* while working part-time for an automobile manufacturer. In an interview with the Japanese publisher Shinchōsha after accepting the Shinchō Prize for New Writers, Oyamada described the “deep chasm” (*fukai mizo*) that she felt existed between herself and her work (Oyamada, “Daiyonjūnikai”). According to Oyamada, she had no idea how the tasks she was asked to complete were beneficial to the corporation or to herself, saying, “There was always this sense of not understanding why I was being paid to do this” (Oyamada and Boyd, “JFNY”). She also explains, “I felt like I was constantly being made aware that to the job, I was replaceable, and likewise, that the job was replaceable to me” (Oyamada, “Daiyonjūnikai”).

Oyamada’s experience aligns with Marx’s theory of alienation of labor. Workers are alienated from the product of their labor and from the act of production. According to Marx, what constitutes the alienation of labor is “that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature; .... the external character of work for the worker is shown by the fact that it is not his own work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person” (Marx 156). In factories, workers perform labor that has no relation to their own identities,

but which is purely a means for survival. Their actions are determined by the demands of the capitalist. In work, one's sense of self is displaced.

It is interesting that Oyamada chooses a factory for the setting of this novel, especially since the jobs that the protagonists perform are not characteristic of those most readily associated with factory work. None works on an assembly line or contributes to the manufacture of products. The machinery one might associate with factories is also absent – the only machines operated are printers and shredders, which could easily be found in any office. The Ushiyama siblings perform what might be considered office work, while much of Furufue's job takes place outdoors. Of course, the factory environment reflects Oyamada's own experience with factory work. However, the situation of the narrative within the factory setting also provides an association with Marxist labor critiques and indicates a focus on the worker. While factories are of course still present in modern-day Japan, the factory is often associated with early industrialization. Perhaps Oyamada also aims to criticize the ambition for growth and progress which has disadvantaged the worker since the beginning of Japan's industrial era.

White-collar work within a factory setting also erases much of the distinction between factory and office work – *all* work is repetitive, meaningless, and separate from the individual. The jobs that Furufue and the Ushiyamas are assigned are incredibly specific; their ultimate purposes are unclear. Through the character of Furufue, Oyamada parodies white collar work which exaggerates a company climate in which participation and showing dedication to the company are even more important than the product. Furufue had been researching moss at a university when he was recruited for a position at the factory. When he arrives for his interview, he finds that somehow, unbeknownst to him, he has already been hired. He is expected to singlehandedly design a green roof for the factory, yet he lacks the expertise or resources to do so.

He is unable to make any progress toward his goal, yet his boss is unconcerned, saying that a “result-oriented approach simply doesn’t make sense in Japan” (*Factory* 69). Furufue is told to focus instead on classifying moss specimens he finds on the factory grounds and leading “moss hunts,” an educational activity for children of the factory workers. These daily tasks he performs seem to serve no purpose, and over time, the green roof gradually seems to appear on its own. Rather than taking the job, the job has taken him. He is unable to perform his work as he chooses – the job mysteriously does itself while Furufue wastes time on pointless activities. Ironically, Furufue ends up doing taxonomy, the initial focus of his research at the university. However, once he is paid by a corporation to do it, it loses its meaning.

Yoshiko’s alienation from her work manifests in metamorphosis. A member of the “Shredder Squad,” Yoshiko operates a shredder for seven and a half hours per day in the basement of the main factory building. Workers in jumpsuits deliver an endless stream of internal documents to be shredded. As she performs this dull and repetitive task, she herself comes to resemble a machine. Yoshiko describes in detail the cycle of physical motions she must execute:

For a seamless feed, you grab the next stack with your left hand while loading the paper with your right. The machine tugs on the paper, drawing your hand toward it, almost like a handshake .... Once the shredder starts sucking the paper in, you pull lightly so there’s no slack. You do this to keep the paper from crumpling as it passes through the blades – otherwise the machine jams, crunching to a halt. Too many sheets at once guarantees a jam, so the ideal method is a steady stream of fewer sheets. Using one shredder for too long will make it overheat, and when that happens you move on to the next machine (*Factory* 61).

For the entire workday, Yoshiko's body and mind are dedicated to the operation of the machine; she becomes an extension of the shredder. The integration of her body with the machine results in the loss of her sense of self as she mechanically performs work that requires not "a single brain cell" (*Factory* 61).

Yoshiko's brother also struggles to relate to his work as he is forced to edit documents by hand without technological assistance. As a former systems engineer, his years of training with computers are now completely worthless. The documents' contents cover a wide range of absurd topics and are often completely illogical. Ushiyama's coworker explains that there is no reason to fuss over the documents; the edited documents tend to reappear with worse mistakes than before. After reading countless documents, Ushiyama wonders what the factory even does:

"Who wrote this stuff? For what audience? To what end? Why does it need to be proofread at all? If these are all factory documents, what the hell is the factory? What's it making? I thought I knew before, but once I started working here I realized that I had no idea. What kind of factory is this" (*Factory* 75)?

Indeed, seemingly important details about the factory, such as its name and what it produces, are never revealed to the reader. This fits Oyamada's strategy of depicting parts in detail while obscuring the whole to illustrate her experience of alienation.

Oyamada further evokes a sense of alienation through her writing style. The novella's disjointed temporality makes for a disorienting reading experience. Time shifts abruptly, even within a paragraph or conversation. For example, in this passage, Yoshiko meets her brother's girlfriend for the first time. Over lunch, Yoshiko silently judges the girlfriend's eating habits as they discuss the coypus around the factory. Then, without a break in paragraph, a new scene suddenly begins on another morning in the factory basement:

She took a bite, added more sauce and took another bite, even though it already had an umeboshi inside. “I think I like it better with bulldog sauce.” What was my brother thinking getting involved with this hideous freak? “But, yeah, it’s basically a really big rat.” “Good morning.” “Morning.” It was raining, but the basement was the same as ever. Always the same temperature, same humidity....  
(*Factory* 64-65).

While consecutive quotations normally imply a continuation of the conversation with alternating speakers, here the phrase “Good morning” begins a new conversation among different speakers in a different setting. Flashbacks abruptly begin and end; it is difficult to tell when the present is. At the beginning of the novel, it also seems as though all three characters are new hires. However, while Yoshiko is a new hire, it is revealed that Furufue has actually been working for the factory for fifteen years, and it is unclear how long Ushiyama has been employed there. The shifts in time create a sense of disorientation. In the factory, employees are stuck in an endless present; time passes without their control as they find their lives consumed by work. The factory is on the one hand obsessed with efficient time management. Showing up on time for one’s daily activities, for example, is important. In one example, Furufue’s orientation group is told not to be late returning from lunch: “Be sure to keep an eye on the time while we walk. If you show up after one o’clock, it’ll mess everything up for the temp staff in charge of cleaning up” (*Factory* 18). While keeping time is important day-to-day, long-term deadlines are also meaningless. After fifteen years of work for the factory, Furufue has no accomplishments to speak of, yet he receives his paycheck as usual. In this way, time distortion also contributes to the emphasis on process over product.

Lucy North, another translator of Oyamada, mentions how Oyamada's lengthy paragraphs contribute to this sense of distortion: "Oyamada often writes very long paragraphs. The writer Kikuko Tsumura has described this as a "wall of prose." This has an interesting effect on the reading experience. It counteracts the usual tendency to see "events" in the narrative as "steps" in a story that progresses in a linear way" (Boyd and North). In denying the reader a clear beginning, middle, and end, *The Factory* also challenges the societally expected linear order of life events: go to school, go to college, get a job, climb the career ladder, then retire. Precarity has disrupted this order for the narrators, whose lives are now suspended in factory time.

Oyamada's narrators also elaborately describe minuscule details in their environments. The reader views the scene from an exceedingly close perspective, which has a disorienting effect on the reader. As in the above example where Yoshiko watches her brother's girlfriend eat, meals are often described in vivid detail. In another scene, Furufue meets with his academic advisor over lunch. Oyamada describes exactly what each person had on their plate, the tastes and textures of the different foods, what food they bit into, how they bit into it, and in what order. This kind of meticulous attention to detail can be found broadly across her work and is an important characteristic of her writing style. This not only creates an unsettling atmosphere which renders everyday moments nauseating, but it also disorients the reader by directing the focus to minuscule details, thus blurring the broader picture. This reflects Oyamada's, and the narrators', experience of focusing only on their immensely specific jobs without comprehension of how their contributions fit into the broader objectives of the factory. When exposed to these details, the reader may intuit that they are somehow important to the plot, like how a close shot in a film may indicate its significance to the narrative. *The Factory* is like a film full of close shots, the objects of which rarely resurface in the plot. Yet, as mentioned, the reader does not even know key

characteristics of the factory, such as its name or what it produces. The big picture, the factory's overall purpose, intentionally remains blurry and indecipherable. This technique of emphasizing parts over the whole reflects a sense of alienation felt not just by Oyamada and her narrators, but by many young people in Japan whose livelihoods are increasingly precarious.

## **2.2 Increasing Precarity of the Japanese Workforce**

To understand why Oyamada's generation feels alienated, one can look to recent trends in Japanese employment. The Japanese workforce consists primarily of two types of employment: regular and non-regular. Regular workers are salaried workers who are hired full-time for a company. They experience the greatest job security of all types of workers and are typically entitled to five key benefits: a retirement pension, bonuses, national health insurance and pension benefits, and employment insurance. Non-regular workers, on the other hand, may experience some of these benefits, but none are guaranteed (Osawa and Kingston 128). They may earn a salary or hourly wage, but they typically earn much less than regular workers. A complex system comprised of various types of non-regular workers exists, but the two types of non-regular worker represented in *The Factory* are the contract worker and the temporary or dispatch worker. Contract workers are hired by the company on a temporary but renewable contract. Temporary workers also work on a renewable contract but are sourced through a third-party agency (Gordon 9). In focusing on contract workers and temporary workers, Oyamada emphasizes the part-time workers who are hired to perform many of the same tasks as regular workers. *The Factory* intentionally represents the labor market as consisting of these precarious jobs, and contrasts them from the stability of the regular worker.

In recent decades, the shift toward non-regular employment has been profound. As of 2014, thirty-eight percent of all workers were non-regular, compared to fifteen percent in the early 1980s, a change which Andrew Gordon describes as “the most important shift in employment of the past three decades” (Gordon 9). While non-regular employment has existed in various forms since the beginning of the Japanese industrial era, postwar employment has historically been centered around the (male) regular worker. A lifetime employment system promised many of these male regular workers job security until retirement and a substantial pension. The recent expansion of non-regular posts began in the 1980s during the rapid expanse of the Japanese economy, when corporations hired non-regular employees in order to reduce costs and remain competitive in an increasingly globalized economy. However, the rate of the addition of these jobs increased especially after the economic collapse and the ensuing stagnation of the 1990s and 2000s as non-regular employment was heralded by corporations and the government as an inexpensive solution to economic troubles. Neoliberal policies promoted in recent decades shifted a greater amount of the responsibility and cost of welfare onto individuals as benefits diminished (Takeda 65).

Not only are non-regular positions touted as beneficial to the economy, but public perception also considers these jobs to be a convenient and satisfying option for many, despite their lack of security and benefits. The term *freeter* refers to a young person who voluntarily performs non-regular work, often after graduation but before pursuing more serious employment, in order to take advantage of the flexibility that these jobs provide. Voluntary non-regular workers may also include women who require more time for domestic responsibilities or who desire a socially acceptable alternative to the demands of regular work. However, Oyamada’s depiction of non-regular work is far from liberatory. *The Factory* also challenges the perception that this type of labor is embraced by workers voluntarily.



Rather than presenting the protagonists with open-ended flexibility, their careers seem to have pushed them toward a dead-end. Neither of *The Factory*'s two non-regular workers intended to pursue such jobs. Yoshiko had applied for a regular position at the factory for which she was qualified, but at the interview, she was offered a contract position as a document shredder. Because Yoshiko had changed jobs several times after graduation and had not held a single position for longer than a year, she was considered unfit for the regular position. Yoshiko's brother arrived at his factory job after working for years as a systems engineer until he was suddenly fired. In need of a job, he turned to his girlfriend, who was a regular employee at a temp agency. He finds himself in a proofreading job for which his training as an engineer is useless. Despite the shift to non-regular work, most companies still value seniority. This means that job-hoppers such as Yoshiko have a lower likelihood of mobility into regular positions. While on the surface non-regular jobs seem more flexible, once one is employed as a non-regular worker, their chances of attaining regular employment later decrease.

Yoshiko and her brother also reveal a gender division in the Japanese workforce. Women are more likely to perform non-regular work, and this is often described as a natural and noncontroversial phenomenon, a topic which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. While Yoshiko's identity as a woman is unharmed by her acceptance of a contract job, her brother appears to feel emasculated by his temporary job. This is exacerbated by the fact that his girlfriend helped him find a job at the factory. Men are more likely to feel marginalized in non-regular jobs (Osawa and Kingston 132). While Yoshiko's brother is adamant that his job is a temporary setback in his career, Yoshiko appears initially to be comfortable with non-regular work. When deciding whether to accept the non-regular position that she is offered, Yoshiko rationalizes that the contract position is actually a better deal than the regular position. She appears to be convincing herself repeatedly

that this job is something she desires. Oyamada's characters tend to rationalize their choices after the fact, throwing into question whether their choices were made according to their own free will.

*The Factory* does not expose the difficulties of non-regular work as a way to elevate regular work, but reflects disillusionment with regular employment as well. As mentioned earlier, prior to the collapse of the economic bubble in the 1990s, there was a (theoretical) lifetime employment system – loyalty to the company was expected by the worker, and in exchange the employer offered job security until retirement. There were several caveats to the system - for one, these secure positions were almost exclusively filled by men. Additionally, the guarantee of job security and sufficient benefits during the 20<sup>th</sup> century is often overstated – there was never truly freedom from dismissal, and not all regular workers could support themselves and their families on one income. However, regardless of how widespread lifetime employment truly was, generations of Japanese were raised on the belief that if only one obtained an education and secured a good job, a comfortable life was guaranteed. Yoshiko's brother's loss of his highly skilled permanent position reflects the fragility of these promises. In recessionary Japan, there is even less hope of securing lifetime employment as companies are less likely to prioritize workers' job security and jobs are increasingly outsourced to cheaper temporary workers. Even to those for whom lifetime employment is attainable, such as Furufue, regular employment leaves much to be desired.

For each, work is an alienating and unfulfilling experience, yet each is reliant on the factory for their livelihood. This characteristic connects them with the strange animals surrounding the factory, which will be discussed in the next section.

### 2.3 Factory Animals

When Yoshiko and Furufue stare out across the water from the factory, their gazes are met by hundreds of shining black eyes. The narrators of *The Factory* soon find that they are not alone, but are surrounded by animals. Toward the end of the novel, an older factory employee and his grandson approach Furufue with a report supposedly written by the boy about the factory animals. Rather than a boy's school report, it reads more like a scientific treatise. Yet despite the abundance of details given about the animals, their existence, like everything else about the factory, remains mysterious. The three fictional animals mentioned are the "factory shag," a species of black bird that nests in the brackish waters at the mouth of the factory river; the "grayback coypu," a species of rodent which can reach six feet in length and lives in the drains under the factory; and the "washer lizard," a species which lives in between the washing machines at the factory laundromat.

Each of the animal species present in *The Factory* are fictional creations by Oyamada. It is interesting that Oyamada chooses animals that are not easily identifiable to the protagonists or to the reader. Throughout the novel, the narrators wonder what exactly the animals are. The factory shags are described as being completely black except for the whites of their eyes and the insides of their mouths. Furufue wonders whether the birds are shags, crows, or cormorants. The birds' resemblance to cormorants, used for centuries in Japan for fishing, invites an interpretation of exploitation. Attached to leashes, the cormorants swim alongside the fishing boat and swallow fish, which the fisherman can then extract thanks to a snare around the bird's neck. Because of this association, the factory shags in part evoke an image of labor exploitation. Furufue observes that the birds looked "like if you wrung one by the neck you'd get black ink all over your hands" (*Factory* 9). This recalls the practice of cormorant fishing, but also the ink of the printers, a reference which is recurring. One day in the basement, Yoshiko thinks she sees a woman carrying

a black bird, which turns out to be a printer cartridge. This scene comes full circle at the end of the novel, when Yoshiko really does see an employee carrying one of the birds up the stairs. Suddenly, Yoshiko herself transforms into a bird. Yoshiko, who operates as an extension of the shredder, is now one with the factory shags, who are similarly a cross between the biological and mechanical.

However, it is interesting that the birds are not cormorants, but instead something in between – not quite a cormorant, crow, or shag; not quite a river or ocean bird; perhaps a bird and perhaps a printer cartridge. Oyamada seems to intentionally choose animals that are alienating and lacking in cultural resonance. The coypus share this quality; as an invasive species originally from “a stretch of land from Brazil to Argentina,” are not readily associated with Japan (*Factory* 77). The massive rodents with long orange teeth seem completely out of place walking on the factory grounds. Yet it is possible that the coypus have been there longer than the factory. *The Factory* describes the grayback coypus as having been “brought to Japan in the 1930s for their fur, which the military used for coats. People also cooked and ate them. After the Second World War, Japan no longer needed military clothing, therefore graybacks were no longer useful. The graybacks that remained went feral, and now inhabit river areas throughout Japan” (*Factory* 77). The coypus were used as resources, then discarded when they were no longer useful. This is an example of the way in which nonhuman animals are also affected by the state and capital.

The third species of animal living in the factory is the washer lizard. The lizards most signify precarity and exploitation. The peculiar species lives in the factory laundromat in between the washing machines, surviving on dryer lint and detergent. Competition over resources is fierce, and the lizards live a dangerous existence. Many die by falling into the machines in search of food, and many youth do not reach adulthood. Their difficult lives seem a commentary on the cutthroat environment in which students compete for academic success. From childhood, Japanese students

study long hours, attend cram school, and compete to enter the best high schools and universities. This is perceived as essential to securing a good job. Furufue's parents' overjoyed reaction to his being hired at the factory is indicative of the importance of securing a good job in becoming a full-fledged member of society. While Furufue was previously living an enjoyable life pursuing his research interests at the university, he is pushed out – the university experience is meant to be a temporary respite in an otherwise work-focused life. Though the machines are harmful to the lizards, their precarious lives depend on them. The lizards' lives are "inextricably tied" to the machines, and even their biology supports this. When they are born, their bodies are human flesh-colored, but as they reach adulthood their bodies turn gray, "according to the machine it inhabits" (*Factory* 80). Their transformation reflects moving from one's natural state to one of corporate uniformity. For the animals as well as for the human workers, the rhythms of life are determined by the corporation (the greyback coypu's life cycle also coincides with the fiscal and academic year: they are born when the cherry blossoms bloom, and elderly coypus die around March).

The lizards are not the only animals who are reliant on the factory – each of the three species exists only on the factory grounds. Each animal has evolved in some way to accommodate the factory environment. Despite the difficulties of their lives, they are a part of the factory and are unable to survive beyond its grounds. The workers, too, can be considered "factory animals" – dehumanized, they are used like resources, yet there is no alternative to capitalism. Everyone, human and nonhuman, comprises this ecosystem which cannot readily be escaped.

While the factory policy regarding the animals is to downplay their existence, to the workers who notice them, they are conspicuous outliers in the factory landscape. Their jarring existence evokes the weird. In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher describes the weird as "involv[ing] a sensation of *wrongness*: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel

that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid” (15). Victims of precarity are typically thought of as a blip in an otherwise well-functioning system, as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing explains. But perhaps, as Tsing posits, rather than an inconsequential anomaly, “precarity *is* the condition of our time” (20). Noticing and empathizing with the animals requires an acknowledgement of their existence not as a random and unexpected occurrence, but as a natural result of an unjust system.

## 2.4 Multispecies Assemblage

While the human employees are able to identify with the animals through the shared experience of alienation, the animals are more than just simple metaphors for the human experience. Oyamada’s writing is interesting in its depiction of the unique experiences of nonhuman animals. She expands her focus beyond the factory itself to the entire ecosystem of which it is a part. Nature is often depicted as a romantic escape from capitalism, but here, it is not something separate from the factory. Instead, the two overlap like a collage or mosaic, sharing space. She depicts it as an assemblage of human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, biological and mechanical actors which interact to create the world. Capital and progress tend to ignore anything on the periphery that exceeds its narrative of growth, but Oyamada looks carefully at what exists on the edge. She observes the animals and landscapes that are affected, as well as the people who are forced to live precariously. This has the effect of criticizing the push to modernize at the expense of living things, but also opens a door to possibilities for survival.

In her own study of multispecies assemblages that make up the matsutake mushroom trade, Tsing examines how beings survive collaboratively. Tsing explains that precarity leads to “unpredictable encounters” (Tsing 20). While we were promised that modernization would lead to stability, it in fact has led to precarity. Tsing’s ideas of assemblage can be applied to Oyamada’s factory ecosystem. The animals, unexpected actors which have formed colonies right under management’s noses, are an apt symbol of precarity. Everyone is affected by capitalism, but somehow, the animals manage to survive. Their existence in the face of the power of the factory shows the limits of the factory’s control. Tsing reminds us that “(m)aking worlds is not limited to humans;” animals too have the power to alter the environment (22) The animals in *The Factory* also build worlds from the scraps they are given. The coypus construct dens within the factory drains, and the smell of the birds permeates the factory, leaving a reminder of their existence. The factory cannot prevent itself from being affected by others. In order to promote an image of itself as self-contained, they give up trying to eradicate these wild actors and resort to trying to hide them. The animals take what they can from the factory and try to make something of it. Perhaps this is why the employees have a fascination with them – there is something interesting about the potential that they hold.

It is important to note that Oyamada’s assemblage does not evoke notions of harmony; it avoids showing a utopia where progress and development thrive alongside a conventional imagination of nature. In the introduction, I discussed the concept of ecoambiguity to describe contradictory feelings and actions toward the environment. In some ecocritical literature, nature is praised for the value that it brings to humanity. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* is a case in point – while groundbreaking, it decried the deprivation of the world of birdsong. What we imagine to be natural also tends to be built environments, not the wildness that occurs on its own. Policy tends

to call for sustainability that allows humans to live in harmony with nature. In discussions of nature, it seems human interests (or rather, capitalist interests) are always present. But the idea that progress and wilderness can coexist peacefully is flawed. The instances of so-called nature in *The Factory* is more disturbing than beautiful. While the animals and the factory seem to hold a strange symbiosis, the relationship is almost depraved – the animals exhibit disturbing behaviors and evoke imagery of environmental contamination.

The disquieting relationship between the factory shags and the factory are an example of these ecocritical aspects of *The Factory* and its denial of imagery of harmony. In flocking and flying through factory windows, the unsettling image of the factory shags is evocative of Hitchcock's *The Birds*, as well as Daphne du Maurier's short story of the same title on which it is based. Du Maurier's story can be interpreted as a punishment against humanity for its hubris in thinking that it can control nature for its own economic development. The factory shags' stares at the factory seem to confront it for its overzealous expansion. The idea that humans can continue developing and building indefinitely is unfeasible. At some point, the system erupts, harming humans and nonhumans. Each becomes a commodity to be used. However, though humans and animals are harmed physically and mentally, they have nowhere else to go. The imbalance of power prevents the relationship between the factory and its animals and workers from being a harmonious one.



## 2.5 Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis is also a provocative tool for displaying the interconnected nature of human beings, nonhuman animals, and the factory. On a walk to see the birds on a rare afternoon off, Yoshiko stands on the large bridge connecting the north and south sides of the factory and has a revelation: despite repeatedly telling herself that she is thankful to have work, she does not want to work at all. She states, “Life has nothing to do with work and work has no real bearing on life” (*Factory* 94). She realizes that she is not good at working and has no desire to do it. Shortly thereafter, she meets Furufue, who has also come to observe the birds. The two discuss the birds and then share a meal, during which they talk about their work at the factory. In this collision on the bridge, it feels as though the two are on the brink of discovery. Then, they return to work and life returns to normal.

Throughout the novel, Oyamada primes the reader to believe that important, subtle clues are being given about the animals. Then, a deluge of information about them is given in the young boy’s report. However, most questions about them remain unanswered. How did they get there? What is their purpose? Perhaps unsatisfying for the reader who desires a succinct conclusion, life just goes on. Yoshiko and Furufue, who seem to be united by their discontent with the factory, do not rise up and join forces. There is no rebellion, only a missed connection.

Then, both suddenly transform. The odd transformations of these characters is a tool to display this existential quality which they and the factory animals share. As Furufue sits down to read the animal report, he notices a strange sensation on his face and realizes he is growing a beard: “I was stunned, but only for a fraction of a second. It wasn’t anything, after all. Hair had been growing everywhere, on the backs of my hands, all over my body” (*Factory* 111). After fifteen years of working for the factory, Furufue has undergone a gradual transformation as he sinks

deeper into the system. Yoshiko's transformation, occurring in the last lines of the novel, is more abrupt: "I wasn't thinking about anything at all, just feeding paper into the machine. Then, as soon as the shredder swallowed the last pages, I became a black bird. I could see people's legs, their arms. I saw gray, and a little green. I thought I could smell the ocean" (*Factory* 116). While some might associate birds with being freeing, Yoshiko is far from free. She becomes a part of the machine, a part of the factory ecosystem. As in Kafka's "Metamorphosis," the worker, alienated from himself, transforms. Oyamada explains that rather than convey a particular message, she aims to depict life as it is, including instances where people do what they can just to get by (Oyamada and Boyd, "JFNY"). For most, revolution against the overwhelming forces of capitalism is out of reach, and they must participate in order to survive. In the absence of revolution, the only option that remains for these workers is evolution.

Ultimately, *The Factory* is neither a call to revolt nor a cautionary tale about what happens when we fail to do so. Rather, it reflects the challenges that workers face and the forces that make it difficult to resist. Capital itself, as Fisher describes, is an eerie entity which exerts control over all aspects of life (Fisher 11). Oyamada observes the world surrounding the factory to show how people and animals are living through it. *The Factory* is a timely novel which shows the sense of dread or disillusion that many young people feel about their life prospects in recessionary Japan. While precarious work may not be ideal, it is true that many are choosing it. The incentive to strive to be the ideal worker or live the ideal life according to myths of progress and modernization shrinks as it becomes clear that working hard does not necessarily offer a good life. There are also people who choose not to work at all, such as *hikikomori*, shut-ins; or NEETs, an acronym for "not in employment, education, or training." Oyamada says that she hadn't considered this group when

writing *The Factory* – most, like her, work in whatever way they can, doing what they need to survive (Oyamada, “Daiyonjūnikai”). At its core, *The Factory* is about survival.

A multispecies approach is useful in reaching these conclusions. Oyamada connects two groups of marginalized beings, the worker and the animal, who are forced to adapt to the factory environment. Despite the one-sided nature of their relationship in which the factory benefits most, people and animals have no worthy alternatives. The connection between these two not only highlights humans’ internal struggles, but also the precarity that animals face as a result of industrialization’s intrusions on their ecosystems. Here Oyamada also offers a critique of the direction of unbridled economic development in Japan. The idea that the economy and industry can continue to grow indefinitely with no repercussions to humans or the environment has proven fallible. The promise of success through modernization was never real to begin with. The safety nets have fallen – jobs, money, and security are lost, the environment is degraded, and everyone suffers. But even so, it is impossible to opt out of such a wide-reaching system. This is the reason why Yoshiko, her brother, and Furufue cannot just quit, and why the shags always stay with the flock at the mouth of the river. Beyond capitalism, there is no place left to fly.

### 3.0 Capitalism Beyond the Factory in *The Hole*

While *The Factory* depicts precarity amongst urban workers, *The Hole* shifts the focus to rural Japan. Through the eerie atmosphere of the rural ecosystem, Oyamada brings the unseen to the forefront. *The Hole* is about a young woman named Asahi Matsuura who quits her office job to move to the countryside when her husband is relocated for work. When her parents-in-law offer to let the couple live in the house adjacent to theirs, which they also own, for free, Asahi agrees, but wonders why she has never noticed that house before. The couple moves in, and Asahi becomes a housewife for the first time. After finishing the housework and cooking for the day, she finds that she has absolutely nothing to do and nowhere to go. She lies around in the summer heat, listening to the deafening roar of cicadas, until one day, when her mother-in-law asks her to run to the convenience store on a strange errand. On the way there, she notices a black animal which she is unable to identify. Curiosity compels her to follow the animal, which leads her to a field of holes. Asahi falls shoulder-deep into a hole which seems to fit her body perfectly. After she emerges, her experiences grow increasingly strange as she notices people and animals behaving in a mysterious manner. It soon becomes clear that few others, if any, are able to see these phenomena.

The plot revolves around Asahi's transition to a new role within the Matsuura family. Asahi has joined the family through her marriage to Muneaki Matsuura, who is largely emotionally absent, rarely looking up from his phone. While Asahi's father-in-law is also absent for the majority of the novel, her mother-in-law, called Tomiko in the English translation, is another main character in the story. Asahi's mother-in-law works full-time while caring for Grandpa. Grandpa, who is Muneaki's paternal grandfather and Tomiko's father-in-law, lives with Muneaki's parents.

The last member of the family is a man who introduces himself as Muneaki's older brother. The brother-in-law claims to be a shut-in, and that his refusal to participate in society led to his family's disowning him. It's ambiguous whether the brother-in-law is truly Muneaki's brother, or if he is even a real person. Notice that the men in the Matsuura family are all related by blood, while the women have married into the family. Yet, the family's survival relies on the women who join the family as outsiders and perform the necessary care work. Through a variety of narrative and stylistic techniques, Oyamada renders these family relationships bizarre.

### 3.1 The Uncanny, the Weird, and the Eerie

Oyamada's translator David Boyd writes: "In some ways, the entirety of *The Hole* feels like a dream. What grabs most readers, it seems, is not any particular scene, but the atmosphere" (Boyd). This eerie atmosphere, driven by natural elements such as the heat and humidity and the roar of cicadas, works to draw attention away from the individual towards the broader environment. Oyamada's writing could be considered uncanny, but perhaps Oyamada's work is better described through Mark Fisher's concepts of the weird and the eerie. Fisher distinguishes between Freud's *unheimlich*, or uncanny, and two other affective modes, the weird and the eerie, in horror and science fiction. According to Fisher, the difference between the *unheimlich* and the weird and the eerie

is their treatment of the strange. Freud's *unheimlich* is about the strange *within* the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange.... The wider predilection for the *unheimlich* is commensurate with a compulsion towards a certain kind of critique, which operates by always processing the outside through

the gaps and impasses of the inside. The weird and the eerie make the opposite move: they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside (Fisher 10).

In other words, Freud's *unheimlich* is limited in that it remains focused on the self. The weird and the eerie are concerned with the outside, the external factors that shape our subjective experiences. Fisher's disappointment with Freud's explanation of the *unheimlich* as arising from castration anxieties is reasonable – it hardly feels adequate to reduce Asahi's experience within this strange world to the inner workings of her own psyche. Oyamada constructs imaginative worlds which indicate something greater, an ominous, unseen presence that influences the protagonists' choices and those of others around them. The weird and the eerie approach the heart of these outside forces.

Oyamada embraces the outside perspective in her writing. Like the three narrators in *The Factory*, it is Asahi's status as an outsider in a new environment that enables her to see things that are unseen by most. Asahi's entry into gendered life in rural Japan is therefore far from familiar or homely, and is instead abstract and foreign. Both the weird and the eerie are evident in *The Hole*. As Fisher explains, the weird "involves a sensation of *wrongness*: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid" (Fisher 15). The presence of weird animals and people in the midst of the traditionally gendered rural environment indicate the inadequacy of heteronormative categorical impulses. The eerie, on the other hand, is distinguished by the opposition between presence and absence: "when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something" (Fisher 61). The tension between presence and absence

is notable in Asahi's seeing things which are invisible to most. Are these visions hallucinations, or does Asahi witness a reality to which others turn a blind eye?

Perhaps most crucially, the eerie is concerned with questions of agency. Fisher asks, "What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all" (11)? Does Asahi act according to her own free will? In reading *The Hole*, I am interested in the unseen, external forces at play in Asahi's life choices, which Oyamada begins to draw out into the open, yet never fully reveals. I argue that the eerie resides in Asahi's being consumed by a system larger than herself, a generational current which pushes her toward traditional gender norms and family responsibilities shaped by a capitalist society which demands women's unpaid care work in support of male productivity.

### **3.2 Rural Ecosystem and (Re)productive Labor**

Oyamada evokes the eerie in the surprisingly unnerving rural landscape in which the story occurs. Fisher explains that the eerie, being concerned with the outside, is attached more readily to abandoned landscapes than to enclosed domestic spaces (11). What made the landscape this way, and where is everyone? Although *The Hole* is about a woman grappling with her new role in the domestic sphere, the story does not occur in the home as one might expect, but almost entirely outdoors. While *The Factory* featured a landscape altered by human activity, in *The Hole*, the natural environment at first glance appears largely untouched by human beings. Humans are ominously absent, and everything is lush and overgrown. Grass, insects, and flowers are described in exquisite detail, and seem to possess lives of their own. Yet, while the rural landscape is often romanticized, Oyamada's description of the ecosystem is far from idyllic. Instead, Asahi's

surroundings are eerie, stagnant, and even sickening. This is illustrated in the following passage, in which Asahi walks through town to the convenience store.

To the right of the path was the river, and to the left was a row of houses, each with its own garden and walls covered in goya and other vegetables. Beyond the leaves and vines, no signs of life. No one was making a sound – no TVs, no vacuums, no children.... Parts of the river were murky blue, stagnant green, or totally black from the blinding sunlight. The dry grass almost smelled baked. There was a big pile, brown and wet, on the path in front of me, probably left by a dog. On top of it were a couple of silver flies.... Even the flies weren't moving. Maybe they were dead, knee-deep in dog crap.... The cicada cries drilled into me with every breath I took. From the sound of it, the area had to be full of them. It's not like they lived very long, so where were all the bodies? .... The black water ahead of me glimmered in the sun. The grass clung to my skin as I walked, crushing things as I went. Plants, trash, crap, flies. They all broke or bent underfoot (*Hole* 29).

The scene is marked by absence – the absence of bodies and the absence of movement. Here, time stands still – not as a time capsule of an idealized past, but seemingly separate from time entirely. Far from the beautiful rural landscapes depicted in Ghibli films or tourism campaigns which evoke nostalgia for an idealized past, Oyamada creates a sense of unease and unfamiliarity. One of the most interesting aspects of Oyamada's writing is the way in which she reworks cultural tropes. While the sound of cicadas often signifies nostalgia for late summer, their cries in *The Hole*, which disturb Asahi throughout the novel, create a deeply discomforting atmosphere.

The rural landscape is often romanticized as an escape from the city to a simpler life. Asahi's new life stands in sharp contrast to her previous life as a non-regular company employee



in the city. Asahi exhibits a sharp awareness of the unjust labor conditions faced by non-regular workers, who are predominantly female. She explains that she and the other non-regular workers do the same work as regular workers for a fraction of the pay and that they are expected to work unpaid overtime. Asahi's experience working in unrewarding non-regular positions is likely familiar to many women in contemporary Japan. Under recent economic policy reforms, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers, yet most of the new jobs created were non-regular jobs like the one Asahi describes (Macnaughtan 8). Because women are expected to leave the company upon having a child, companies have less motivation to commit to them. The assumptions that a woman has a husband who makes an additional income and that she will be more devoted to her child and less devoted to her job justify her lower pay (Nemoto 523). Yet, non-regular workers fill an important role – they tend to be hired to perform many of the same tasks as regular workers for less reward, or to fill in the gaps in the labor market by performing less desirable jobs. Many women feel that even regular jobs in Japan have little to offer. In a study of workplace attitudes, Nemoto finds that many women opposed the strenuous working conditions and pitied men for having no choice but to work hard. Because they see themselves as having “gendered privilege,” “women accept male workers’ position of power over them and the existing system of gender inequality in the workplace.” (Nemoto 522) When Asahi's coworker hears that Asahi will be moving and becoming a housewife, she expresses her envy that Asahi will be “living the dream” (*Hole* 10). For many Japanese women, being a housewife and mother is desirable compared to the alternative of working in such unrewarding and strenuous jobs, especially when benefits are sparse.

However, Asahi's move to the countryside proves to be a lateral one, rather than an escape, as leaving work introduces a new set of problems. While *The Factory* displays the monotony of

working life, *The Hole* shows the equally disappointing results that occur when the fantasy of leaving work is fulfilled. Stripped of her identity as a worker, Asahi begins to wonder who she is. Despite no longer having a financial need for employment, Asahi cannot escape the impulse to work. Asahi expresses, “[I]t didn’t feel right. My husband was working late every night while I was at home, on my own, with all the time in the world? I had to work. Even if I couldn’t find a job, I had to do something” (*Hole* 46). Asahi also feels that without making a productive contribution, she does not deserve to engage in the other basic tenet of capitalism, consumption. She sacrifices her own comfort and enjoyment, despite the increase in her family income:

In theory, I could watch TV, use the computer, read a book, bake like I used to when I was single – but it seemed like everything cost money [...] I wasn’t bringing in any money, so it didn’t feel right to blast the AC when I was the only one at home. How could I allow myself to nap in air-conditioned bliss when my husband was sweating at his desk? (*Hole* 22-23)

Asahi’s feelings of guilt recall those of Yoshiko in *The Factory*, who felt that she should be thankful for any job despite its shortcomings. Asahi, too, feels a sense of indebtedness to her husband for ‘allowing’ her to live an easy lifestyle, even if it is one that does not bring her satisfaction. Her words also reflect those of the female workers in Nemoto’s study who felt a sense of guilt and pity towards men who must work long hours. These real and fictional women internalize the cultural mandate to be grateful, squashing any inclinations toward resistance. Mainstream feminist discourse often paints a dichotomy between working and staying at home, in which some women want to work for personal fulfillment and others desire home life. However, Oyamada’s female protagonists find little fulfillment in either option. Despite disliking her work, Asahi struggles to forge an identity separated from her productive capabilities.

In this void, her new neighbors begin to assign a new identity to her, that of “the bride” (*yome*) of Muneaki. She is defined by her relationship to her husband and her new family, and she is expected to perform gender in a so-called traditional sense by performing domestic work and having a child. The countryside thus signifies a return to traditional gender norms. The traditional heteronormative family structure in which husbands work outside the home and wives perform care work for the family is far from natural; rather, it is a constructed social norm whose creation has been aided by policy. This can be traced back to the early Meiji period, when the government began to promote a nuclear family model to take the place of the extended family household in order to westernize and modernize (Muta 54-60). It argued that the patrilineal system needed to be revoked in order to encourage enterprise and decrease dependence on one’s family (Muta 54-60). It was also thought that nuclear families could be better mobilized to support the nation. (Muta et al. 54-60) Later in the Meiji period, the Meiji Civil Code signaled a return to the extended family model, but sentiments about women’s role within the nuclear family continued to linger. Muta explains, “[P]aradoxically, this orientation toward a “homey” family pattern also functioned to ascribe a domestic sex role to women, in ways that paralleled traditional, Confucian views of women” (55) Thus, women’s roles as primary caretakers of the home and family were solidified as the nuclear family model combined with Confucian ideals (Muta et al. 54-55, 64). Asahi’s transition from a worker to her role in this system as an unpaid caregiver is thus one that is neither a product of nature nor a choice made by her as an individual, but one which has been designed for over a century.

As a housewife, Asahi may not feel like a productive member of society, but the care work that wives perform free of charge is beneficial to the state, capitalism, and patriarchy. Feminist activists Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James created the concept of the social factory, which

argues that capitalism is reinforced by family relations (Weeks 121). They argue that the family structure creates the illusion that wages bestowed upon the head of household extend to unwaged family members. This justifies lower pay and longer hours based on the assumption that these unwaged family members will compensate for the worker's lack of contributions at home. At the same time, it convinces us that the capitalist wage system can provide for those very unwaged family members. Kathi Weeks explains that despite the crucial role it plays in the wage system, the family "remains a hidden partner, its role concealed by all those discourses that naturalize, romanticize, privatize, and depoliticize the institution" (Weeks 121). And because the wage system cannot truly provide each with a living wage, "the ideology of the family performs a kind of mopping-up function, enabling us to accept the legitimacy of the wage system despite its shortcomings by encouraging us to imagine that it can provide for those capable of living up to its norms of family form and responsibility (Weeks 121).

The care work itself that women typically perform also reproduces the social factory in that it prepares the male head of household for more work. In preparing his meals and clothing and relieving him of all household duties, the home becomes a place where Asahi's husband can rest and refuel. Since becoming a housewife, Asahi makes all meals from scratch, feeling that this is her "end of the bargain" (*Hole* 41). Wives perform reproductive labor without compensation, saving money for not only the husband himself but also for companies who do not have to take employees' physical needs into consideration. This free labor, performed even by women who work, is vital to the success of capitalism, yet it is often not considered work. Perhaps this is why Asahi fails to feel as though she is doing anything useful. Even in rural areas, where an escape from capitalism seems possible, its effects extend into the home.

### 3.3 A Generational Current

It is eerie that as a woman, forces in Asahi's life seems to lead up to her acceptance of this role. In an interview with the Japan Foundation of New York, Oyamada discussed major life changes she experience while writing *The Hole*, being pregnant for the first time and the death of her father, which further contribute to the eerie sense in *The Hole* that life is predetermined. Oyamada describes these events as having triggered a feeling of being "part of a bigger continuum," an unstoppable cycle of life and death (Oyamada and Boyd, "JFNY"). Oyamada described a feeling like being swept up in a current: "What it really made me feel was this flow of life that had gone on uninterrupted, and that I was a part of this flow, and that now I was the endpoint of this flow" ("JFNY"). In *The Hole*, this unsettling current of life is reflected in the natural environment – Asahi's new rural home is located next to a flowing river which becomes the site of many disquieting interactions.

On the riverbank, Asahi falls into the hole that begins a series of strange experiences. First, Asahi sees only one hole, but toward the end of the novella, she realizes that there are many. The hole is full of contradictions – it is both seen and unseen, which makes it eerie and difficult to grasp. The hole itself is a void, an absence of dirt and grass, yet it is also a feature of the landscape. Asahi can see this void, but most appear to be unable to – to them, the field seems intact. It is also compelling that it is not naturally occurring but is instead a mark of someone's influence. One is forced to wonder who or what has thus altered the landscape. Asahi had been led to the hole by a black animal. The animal is unidentifiable; it looks something like a dog or a raccoon. When Asahi sees a similar animal on another occasion, Asahi is convinced that it must be different from the first: "It couldn't be the same animal as before. Its fur looked a little softer, its tail a little shorter"

(53). Is this a lapse in memory, or are there multiple animals? Asahi is told that the animals dig the holes, yet she never witnesses any holes being dug.

For some, the holes are a home. Inside the hole, Asahi sees a variety of insects, which are described in detail. Now up to her eyes in dirt, Asahi sees a perspective she never has before.

At the edge of the hole, a click beetle flew up toward my face. When it landed, I could see streaks running down its black shell. The antennae on its head looked bent.... I could see some black ants and red ants in lines, soldiering around. Their lines broke apart and intersected, the tiny red ones marching over the bodies of the larger black ones.... A black ant took one of the red ones in its mandibles while other red ones bit its legs. The red ones looked softer than the black ones (*Hole 32*).

There is even a hole inside the hole, housing more creatures: “I thought I heard something scuttle by my feet, maybe a small animal that had popped out of its own hole, then retreated in panic” (*Hole 32*). Asahi feels oddly comforted inside the hole, which perhaps reflects the too-comfortable feeling of Asahi’s life. However, the hole is not only a home but also a trap. When Asahi meets her brother-in-law, he is standing next to a hole with a metal grill over it. The man explains that the hole is manmade and was once used as a well. He says the animal is inside – when Asa looks in she thinks she can see it. He says he covers the well when it goes inside. “I guess I’m just hoping he’ll eventually decide to settle down and stay put” (*Hole 59*). Asahi, too, is trapped inside the hole. She becomes trapped in her new life as a daughter-in-law.

Without realizing, Asahi falls into the trap of taking on the care of her husband’s family. Asahi’s moving to live next to her parents-in-law was ostensibly coincidental – her husband’s company happened to relocate him to that area, and his parents just so happened to own a house that the two could live in for free. Yet, Asahi unwittingly comes to participate in a Japanese

tradition of wives of firstborn sons moving to their husbands' hometowns (often in rural locations) and caring for their husbands' parents. This tradition is reinforced by neoliberal policy. In the 1980s, the so-called "Japanese Type of Welfare Society" was introduced as new welfare policy that utilized women's unpaid care work for family members as a "hidden asset" of the Japanese economy (Takeda 65). By relegating care of the elderly to the family, the state continues to rely on women's unpaid work to keep welfare costs low. In caring for her in-laws, Asahi follows in the footsteps of her mother-in-law Tomiko, her uncanny double. As mentioned earlier, Tomiko is a name that appears only in the English version of the text. In the original Japanese, the character is referred to only as *shūtome* (mother-in-law). While Asahi refers to her mother-in-law as *shūtome*, Asahi is referred to by others as *yome*, which Boyd translates as "the bride." *Yome* has the connotation of entering another family. The women are two sides of the same coin. Oyamada explains, "What happens to women when they get married is that their name gets overwritten" (Oyamada and Boyd, "JFNY"). Asahi's mother-in-law has already lost her name, becoming *shūtome*, and Asahi is just beginning to lose her own, becoming *yome*. The two women become defined by their relationship to the son/husband Muneaki and to one another.

Grandpa represents not only the weight of Asahi's responsibility in caring for her in-laws, but also the unstoppable current of life that Oyamada describes. Grandpa's appearance and behavior are depicted in a strange and unsettling manner. He moves robotically and unnaturally: "He nodded and held his hand up at what was probably a right angle to his body, but his whole body was tilted to one side. Just when I thought he couldn't grin any wider, he did. He couldn't hear a word I said. Beneath his giant hat, his teeth were shining" (53). Grandpa is always silent – he appears not to hear Asahi, nor does he speak. When he whistles, no sound emerges. On most days, Asahi notices Grandpa outside in the garden. While agriculture is a symbol of production

and reproduction that one might expect to be present in a rural setting, the town is almost devoid of farms or gardens. An exception is Grandpa's garden, a site of collision between the domestic and the wild, the orderly and the chaotic. Rather than a perfectly cultivated plot, the Matsuuras' garden is wildly vibrant, yet revolting. Grandpa waters the garden for hours each day, even in the rain, reducing its soil to mud. Asahi peers into the mess to find a wild scene taking place. She notices the life within it that is unplanned:

In the bushes beyond the sun, a black shadow blinked. A pair of bright yellow circles closed, then opened again. A large, round frog. Close to it was a single dahlia, swarming with yellow aphids moving sluggishly up and down the long stem. The aphids had eyes. They were only black dots, no bigger than the tip of a needle, but I could see them with terrible clarity. They looked so large that I thought something had to be wrong with my own eyes. The flowers were past their peak. Their petals were curling up, changing color. It looked like the frog was about to feed on the aphids. I waited for it to unleash its pink tongue and snap up the unsuspecting insects. The dahlia collapsed from the root. A blast of water had knocked it over. Grandpa – whistling soundlessly – was flooding the garden around him, leaving the dahlia on its side before moving on to the bush where the frog had been. (*Hole 52*)

The garden, and Grandpa's watering of it, is discussed for several pages in another example of her tendency toward vivid description. As Oyamada zooms in on details as tiny as an aphid's eyes, humans come to be decentered. In looking closely, Asahi appears to be seeing things that others are no longer able to notice. In the garden, life and reproduction are something disturbing and foreign as life and death are muddled together.



In the rural ecosystem of *The Hole*, insects abound. Another insect that is prevalent is the cicada. Throughout the novel, the drone of cicadas is almost constant. Asahi describes the sound: “The cicadas were the only sound. Cicadas cry to find a mate. They hear other cicadas crying around them and use what they hear to choose a partner. To my human ear, they sounded like a bunch of machines, a spray of emotionless noise. Maybe that’s how we sound to them, too” (*Hole* 31). Cicadas live most of their lives as nymphs underground, but when they emerge, their short lives above the surface revolve around reproduction. They live just long enough to mate and produce the next generation of cicadas. The life cycle seems to be something automatic and mechanical. To Asahi, the cicadas are reproductive machines, and she wonders if they have this in common with human beings. Asahi, too, claws her way out from a hole in the dirt, after which her life slowly transforms as she encounters the expectations faced by adult women in capitalist society. With the arrival of summer and the cry of cicadas, the spring of Asahi’s youth is over as she enters her reproductive age.

The hole also resembles the womb, reflecting Asahi’s discomfort with her expected role as a mother. Physically, Asahi was fairly comfortable inside the hole, as if in the comfort of the womb. Perhaps in the hole is the desire to return to the womb, clinging to what remains of her *shōjo* identity. After she emerges, she begins to recognize the strangeness of society. Asahi is surrounded by children, whom she first encounters at the convenience store shortly after falling into the hole. She later sees them playing erratically on the riverbank. Then, they begin to interact with holes in the ground, which seem to multiply:

One of [the children] leapt up, then vanished underground.... Suddenly there were holes everywhere. The child had slipped inside one and was shaking with laughter. “Holes all around us!” And there really were. Some were narrow and others were

wide; some were shallow and others were deep.... One hole was brimming with dirty water, trembling. Bugs were hatching on the surface. Children popped up all around me, wriggling out of their holes (*Hole* 72).

As each child bursts from the fertile earth, Asahi seems to feel perplexed and uncomfortable. Asahi is unable to relate to the children or to make sense of their strange behavior. Their play is more disturbing than wholesome, throwing into question the commonly held belief that desiring motherhood is inherent in being a woman. Asahi faces many other characters who expect her to want to give birth as soon as possible. Her coworker, assuming that the reason Asahi is childless must be that she is struggling to get pregnant, assures her, “Once you move and you have some time on your hands, I bet you’ll get pregnant in no time” (*Hole* 11). Asahi’s new neighbor, Sera, suggests she should simply have a child as a solution to her boredom. There is something disturbing in the expectation that Asahi continue the family lineage.

*The Hole* also perhaps reflects Oyamada’s own discomfort with pregnancy and the unease surrounding parenthood among many Japanese women. Amanda Seaman’s analysis of other contemporary literature shows that while pregnancy, children, and motherhood are often depicted as positive signs of the future and a natural desire for women, there is a subset of women’s fiction that challenges these views. Contrasting with images of happy mothers in pregnancy manuals, an important theme within this subset of literature is “the woman’s perception of pregnancy as a violation, co-optation, or transformation, not only of her body, but also of her identity and her life as a whole” (Seaman 176-177). Although Asahi is not yet pregnant, she seems to feel a sense of impending transformation as she encounters an otherworldly pressure to procreate and take on the next link in the chain of life.

### 3.4 Hallucination, Imagination, Wildness

An initial reading of *The Hole* may suggest that Asahi is hallucinating. The sweltering heat and the boredom of her new life produce ideal conditions for hallucination. Eventually, she asks the woman working at the convenience store about the children in the area, to which the woman replies, “What children?” While Asahi’s experience seems to have been an illusion, the text itself is ambiguous. To state definitively that she is hallucinating would close the door to other possibilities. Could all of Asahi’s strange experiences have been real? Oyamada states that to her, everything is in fact real. Perhaps, then, it is not Asahi who experiences hallucination, but everyone else who experiences negative hallucination. As Asahi’s brother-in-law states: “People always fail to notice things. Animals, cicadas, puddles of melted ice cream on the ground, the neighborhood shut-in. But what would you expect? It seems like most folks don’t see what they don’t want to see.” (Hole 67) When one is immersed in a gendered, capitalist world, most fail to see anything strange about this system and accept it as natural.

For a brief period, Asahi is able to question this capitalist framework. I want to consider not only the role that hallucination plays in this story, but also that of imagination. Asahi’s experiences with these characters and creatures, real or otherwise, spark Asahi’s imagination. When she agreed to move to the countryside, she was still youthful and innocent of the fate that lay ahead of her. She, along with the brother-in-law who had refused to participate in capitalist society, were the only characters who retained the ability to imagine. Like Alice in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Asahi allows herself to be led down a hole by the black animal, to notice wild creatures, insects and children playing, and to question the strange rules that seem to exist in this world.

While eerie, a certain power lies in the chaos of Asahi's imaginative experience. Jack Halberstam's theory of wildness in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* perhaps can be applied to Asahi's experience with the natural environment in *The Hole*. According to Halberstam, "[w]ildness names simultaneously a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulation, loss of control, the unpredictable." (3-4) In wildness, opposition to the restrictive rules of society can be found. Everyone that Asahi meets in the fields – her brother-in-law, the children, the animals and insects – seem to live according to different rules, or no rules at all. In recognizing them, Asahi has an opportunity to desire a life beyond her prescribed role.

Eventually, however, Asahi stops seeing these strange occurrences. Some may consider this to mean that Asahi has rejected her wildness, her imagination, and the opportunity for a different life, and has chosen to embrace her new life and role in the family. However, Asahi may not be so decisive. While Asahi accepts her life, she is far from thrilled with it. I would like to return now to Mark Fisher's questions about agency. What kind of agent is acting here, and is there an agent at all? Does Asahi herself have agency in *The Hole*? Or does she act under forces greater than her own free will?

Toward the end of the story, Grandpa passes away. One night, Grandpa rises from bed and races toward the riverbank before diving into a hole. Asahi and her brother-in-law follow him. While her brother-in-law remains standing, Asahi jumps in a hole behind Grandpa. Meanwhile, they watch the river flow by. Her brother-in-law asks, "it was your choice after all, wasn't it?" to which Asahi replies, "What was?" (*Hole* 78) He explains, "This. This current that never stops" (78). As the current flows, Asahi can only think about how she has to get Grandpa out of the cold. Asahi has taken on the role of Grandpa's caretaker. However, there is no one else who can help.

This scene happens without the knowledge of her husband, who is asleep. Soon after, Grandpa dies. After the funeral, Asahi goes out to the shed where her brother-in-law supposedly lives to find it looking as though it has been abandoned for years. From that point onward, she never sees her brother-in-law, the black animal, the holes, or the strange children again. In the next scene, Asahi is pedaling her bike home from her new job at the convenience store. On her way home, she runs over a cicada on the road. Finally, she arrives home and looks at herself in the mirror, wearing her uniform. When she looks at her face, she sees Tomiko's face looking back at her.

Perhaps Asahi's inability to see the visions anymore owes less to her actively choosing her role, as her brother-in-law states, and more to her inaction. The visions cease abruptly after Grandpa's funeral because at this moment, Tomiko's duties as dotting daughter-in-law end. Asahi is next in line to fill Tomiko's position. Tomiko had teased Asahi when Asahi saw a photograph of Grandpa's wife, Tomiko's mother-in-law, and told Tomiko that she could see the resemblance between the two women. Now, Asahi too has lost not only her name, but also her face, as she joins a long line of women who have filled this role. This flow of life is a force Asahi cannot stop; she is in this position simply due to the passage of time. This appears to me like the generational current Oyamada describes, one that women are swept up in no matter what they do.

Choice feminism would tell us that we should praise Asahi's "choice" to be a housewife, and that anything a woman chooses is a feminist expression of agency. After all, it was Asahi who approved the move to the countryside, and for the most part, she took on her responsibilities without complaint. But what factors were in place that led to her making this choice? A dearth of well-paying jobs for women with decent hours and benefits, a family system designed to support the aspirational male breadwinner, the pressure to produce, reproduce, consume, and repeat. In her eerie fiction, Oyamada critiques the lack of choices that exist for us all, but especially for women,

in capitalist society. Capitalism may be the eeriest entity of all: as Fisher states, “conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity” (Fisher 11).

As Asahi’s realization of the strangeness of capitalist society fades, what remains? Let us revisit Asahi on her way home from the convenience store. She says, “I saw a dead cicada in the middle of the path. Its legs pointed to the sky, its back against the blistering asphalt. I tilted the handlebars of my brand-new bike and aimed for the insect. I thought it was going to be dry, but it stuck to the front tire, buzzing with every rotation.” In running over the cicada, Asa rejects the enigmatic, wild realm of insects, beasts, and ghostly visions and embraces her role in a gendered society. Yet, as Asa suppresses her wildness, the cicada continues to buzz. It serves as a small reminder for Asahi, but also for the reader, of our own wildness and the possibility of life beyond our constructed societal roles.

## 4.0 Conclusion

The multispecies imagination presented by Oyamada provides insight into the precarity that abounds in 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan. Oyamada's protagonists look closely at the details, noticing the strangeness of the societal norms to which they have become accustomed. Her literature calls into question the status quo, but it is also remarkable in its call to notice the other lives that surround us. In *The Factory*, the alienating nature of work is made visible by the disorienting factory environment. Humans and animals are both suspended in space and time, showing how precarity affects all beings. *The Hole* approaches gender roles in 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan, showing that the female protagonist's escape from work is not truly an escape from capitalism or one's duties to society; life continues to be shaped by outside forces. Eerie animals and plants awaken Asahi to the strangeness of her gendered world. While the novellas contain elements specific to Japan, economic and environmental precarity is a global issue. The recent influx of translations of female authors has brought Oyamada's work to wider audiences. Though originally written in the 2010s, these recently translated novellas feel as relevant as ever, both in Japan and worldwide.

This thesis was limited to only two of Oyamada's early works. In the decade or so since the publication of *The Factory* and *The Hole*, Oyamada has published several collections of stories. In future research, it would be interesting to examine whether the strategies discussed in this thesis apply across her work more broadly. Most of Oyamada's work includes plants, animals, and mysterious or fantastic elements. However, there is some interesting variation in the use of language and style. Oyamada's work also calls for a more in-depth analysis of the stylistic and linguistic techniques that she utilizes.

Oyamada's literature demands engagement from the reader. Her style is disorienting and intentionally difficult to follow. David Boyd describes the importance of "leaving space" between words in the translation of Oyamada's writing; she leaves much open to interpretation (Oyamada and Boyd, "JFNY"). The ambiguity in her writing requires imagination on the part of the reader. Oyamada does not tell the reader what to think, but evokes thinking about wider, systemic issues. Her writing is speculative in nature – her bewildering style and vibrant ecologies are not simply ornamental; they ask us to look deeply and closely until we notice the peculiarity of the world around us.

The eerie also plays an important role in bringing out unexpected relationships. In these novellas, atmosphere is equally important to, or perhaps even more important than the plot. Eerie environments and unsettling creatures evoke the sense that something is hidden out of sight. The atmospheric tendencies of the stories not only reflect the disorientation and stagnation that the narrators feel internally, but they also draw our attention outwards in search of the entities that cause these feelings. Who or what else is out there? In shifting the focus to the environment, we open ourselves to noticing our role as one part of a working machine that is both ecological and social. It also invites us to reflect upon how animals, too, are affected by capitalism.

I now return to Samatar and Zambreno's view that the animal is purely an "extension for trauma and alienation," and their question as to whether it is possible to decenter the human (64). It is true that these stories are told from the perspective of the human being. Oyamada never gives a voice to the animals, and we see them only through human eyes. The issues the stories illuminate are largely those of human society. However, the animals in her work are not simply metaphors for the human experience. They have their own agency and the ability to alter the human world. They are described in excess of symbolic similarity to humans; they possess their own unique



traits. The boundaries between human and nonhuman animal perhaps never disappear entirely, but the fact that interactions between human and nonhuman are nearly invisible to most human characters outside of the protagonists in these novellas suggests that these boundaries are socially constructed and willfully ignored.

The idea of *The Factory* and *The Hole* existing in the same universe is an interesting one. The novels complement one another: the characters experience many of the same social pressures, though in different settings. The urban workplace and rural home represent two sides of the same world, dominated by the same forces and populated by similarly strange creatures. Each utilizes the same atmospheric quality to give the impression that these influences are far-reaching, affecting all aspects of our lives. No matter where one goes, there is no escape. Each story reinforces one another, expanding and tying together the ecosystem. Ultimately, however, in creating these mysterious realms, the weird world she aims to depict is our own, stating, “Everything I write, I write with the intention of its being real” (Oyamada and Boyd, “JFNY”). If we were to examine our own society more closely, perhaps we would feel similarly bewildered.

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