

Living on the Edge: The Negotiation of Modern Borders in Nagai Kafū's *Amerika*

monogatari

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Abstract

This chapter argues that Nagai Kafū's (1879-1959) literary works can be read as a series of negotiations with multiple borders. Indeed, it is this very encounter with a range of diverse realities both within Japan and abroad that informed Kafū's experience of life and made him a truly modern writer. I will explore this thesis primarily through Kafū's *Amerika monogatari* (*Tales of America*, 1903-1907), a collection of short stories based on his travels through the United States. These stories articulate most obviously the shock of the new that confronted the writer and the border-crossings that this encounter with the new invoked. However, more metaphorical border crossings also come under scrutiny. For instance, how did Kafū's foreign travels reshape his understanding of borders between self and other? To what extent did demarcations of class and race inform his literature? Moreover, given his immersion in Western culture over several years, is it even possible to assume the existence of unambiguous distinctions between Japanese and Western identity within his writing? The multiple borders highlighted within *Amerika monogatari* are also placed within a broader, cultural context through reference to Kafū's experience of modernity both before he left for America, and just after his return to Japan.

‘All that is solid melts into air’ (Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*)

Introduction

Modernisation theory was a dominant paradigm among the social sciences during the 1950s and 1960s. One of its main tenets was an assumption that ‘traditional’ non-Western countries needed to ‘catch up’ with their Western counterparts before they could enjoy the benefits of modernity. This viewpoint was problematic because it assumed a hierarchy of cultures in which the West, supposedly the original source of modernity, always remained as the exemplar by which other, late-comer cultures were to be judged. By way of contrast, Harry Harootunian has more recently sketched out a counter-narrative, suggesting that a global and inclusive paradigm of modernity emerged contemporaneously in various non-Western places. Specifically, he argues that Japan underwent a ‘coexisting or coeval modernity, inasmuch as it shared the same historical temporality of modernity . . . found elsewhere in Europe and the United States’ (Harootunian 2000, xvi).

This more generous outline of modernity’s genesis helps to locate Nagai Kafū (1879-1959) as an iconic modern figure in the context of Japanese literature. After all, if Harootunian is correct to challenge the West-centred view by identifying an equally valid, ‘coeval’ expression of modernity spontaneously emerging out of the Japanese experience, then it is more appropriate to speak of a range of different, albeit overlapping and interconnected, *modernities*. Furthermore, any such plurality implies not merely one border, but a series. Each of these must be crossed in order to facilitate the passage from one form of modern lived reality to another. Arguably, Kafū’s entire literary oeuvre exemplifies these borders, both geographical and metaphorical. However, borders are particularly noticeable in *Amerika*

monogatari (*Tales of America*, 1903-1907), a collection of short stories that Kafū wrote in response to his travels across the United States.

These stories articulate most obviously the shock of the new that confronted the writer and the border-crossing that this encounter with the new invoked. However, more metaphorical border crossings also come under scrutiny. For instance, to what extent did Kafū's overseas journey reshape his interpretation of borders between a fixed sense of Japanese self and Western other? And, given his personal immersion in Western culture over five years, is it even possible to assume any unambiguous distinctions between Japanese and Western identity within his writing?

If we consider Kafū's relationship with modernity both before he left for America and after his return to Japan, then the borders outlined in *Amerika monogatari* can be located within a broader cultural configuration. This wider contextualisation leads to a range of questions. For example, what sort of borders already separated Kafū from most of his compatriots in terms of social class and experience of Western culture even before he set sail for America in 1903? Conversely, following his transformative trip around the world and his return to Japan, did any new cultural borders open up between Kafū and his Japanese counterparts? And, more generally, to what extent might Kafū's very awareness of borders be construed as a marker of his identity as a modern writer?

Border Crossings within *Amerika monogatari*

Kafū left Japan in September 1903, and returned to Japan in July 1908. His circumnavigation of the world had taken him eastwards right across the North American continent. Reaching Victoria Harbour, Canada, on 5 October, he spent his first year in Tacoma, a little south of Seattle, where he worked as a branch manager for the Seattle-based import company, Furuya Shōten. In October 1904, he visited the World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri, before going on

to Kalamazoo, Michigan, in mid-November where he audited classes in English literature and French language at Kalamazoo College. Between July and November, 1905, he worked at the Japanese Legation in Washington, DC, and then moved to New York, where his father had organised a job for him at the branch office of the Yokohama Specie Bank. He stayed there until July 1907, when he set sail for France. He was based at the Lyons branch of the same Bank for only eight months, because he found the work unbearably tedious, and spent his final two months overseas in Paris, the city of romance he had yearned to visit for many years. His return trip to Japan took him through the Mediterranean, Egypt, Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Singapore, before he disembarked at the Japanese port of Kobe.

If a major characteristic of modernity is the encounter with a wide range of geographical and metaphorical lived experiences, then Kafū had a golden opportunity to imbibe those influences personally and to incorporate them into his own literature. However, Stephen Snyder goes further by suggesting that Kafū should be identified not simply as a significant *modern* writer, but more specifically as a leading Japanese exponent of the literary and artistic movement that emerged globally from around the mid-19th century known as *Modernism*. Perhaps the simplest way to identify the 20th-century Modernist aesthetic in the arts is through ‘the consciousness that the medium itself becomes the subject matter’ (Snyder 2000, 3). We might keep Snyder’s definition in mind when exploring the degree to which Kafū’s writing consciously and methodically problematises the nature of borders that extend well beyond mere geographical spaces.

In order to assess the extent to which Kafū’s writing problematizes various categories of borders, we might begin by considering how the narrative voice in modern fiction articulates the boundaries between external world and inner self. Indeed, who is experiencing what, and how is that experience conveyed? Who has the authority to speak about the modern experience, and how are those authoritative narrative voices constructed within a text?

The Return of the Narrator

Kafū was certainly not the first modern Japanese writer to address the thorny problem of narrative voice. Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), a literary giant of the Meiji Era (1868-1912) for whom Kafū had huge admiration, had also grappled with this issue. When the pair actually met in a Tokyo theatre in 1903, Kafū was thrilled to hear that Ōgai had read one of his stories (Keene 1984, 399). While they were chalk and cheese in terms of personality as well as writing style, they had both lived abroad, both wrote fictional accounts based on their experiences, and both struggled to sketch out a clear sense of self-identity in their texts.

Ōgai's *Maihime* (*The Dancing Girl*, 1890) largely demonstrates a 'fixed, internal focalisation of the protagonist' based on the *Ich Roman* technique of the late-Romantic European novel (Snyder 2000, 15). However, even as the story begins, a rather more complex and fluid narrative voice takes centre stage. Ōta, the main protagonist, is passing through the port of Saigon on his way back to Japan after an extended study stay in Germany. He is fully conscious that the naïve and enthusiastic younger self who came this way five years earlier no longer exists. The course of events that have made him a different 'I', now riddled with remorse, constitutes the core of the story. Ōta's passionate affair in Berlin with a dancing girl, Elise, had resulted in the birth of a child. But when he ultimately decides to abandon her and their child in preference for the official duties that await him back in Japan, the grief-stricken Elise loses her mind. This is reason enough for Ōta's bitter re-evaluation of his fundamental self-nature. However, he is also shaken by an even deeper level of existential angst:

In many ways I feel dissatisfied with my studies, but I have also come to realize the sad nature of this transient life. I have become aware not only of the unreliability of human emotions, but also the fickleness of my own heart. How could I possibly use my pen

to record my impressions of the moment if they were right yesterday but are wrong today? (Ōgai 1992, 419)

Ōta has learnt that the heart (*kokoro*), supposedly the fixed centre of consciousness, is an unreliable and insubstantial thing. How appropriate, then, that he should find himself sitting on a boat moored in Saigon, a city whose own identity was similarly unsettled. Several decades earlier, the Vietnamese had been forced to sign the 1862 Treaty of Saigon that ceded territory to the French as part of an ongoing process of colonial annexation. The Saigon that appears in Ōgai's story still remained very much under the yoke of French occupation, suspended tentatively in the orbits of both East and West.

From Ōta's more individual perspective, his arrival in Saigon confirms that he has left Europe behind and re-entered Asia, and yet Japan remains a distant prospect. This port might be understood as a metaphorical cross-over point, in which the disorienting ambiguity of his own self-identity is given space to resonate. He reflects upon not only the faded spectre of an enthusiastic younger self who was once impatient to reach Europe, but also a chastened, older returnee unable to escape the consequences of his reprehensible callousness while in Germany. Even more disturbingly, the narrator does not conclude that his earlier naïve self-image has given way to a darker, yet more honest version of the self. Rather, *all* self-representations appear equally transitory and fickle. From a broader perspective, Ōgai is setting out an uncompromisingly raw and honest insight into the nature of modern identity. This identity equates to a multiplicity of selves, any one of which may arise at any time, but none of which is any more rooted than his boat that floats on the water's surface.

Kafū records an analogous episode in his 'Shingapōru no sūjikan' ('A Few Hours in Singapore', alternatively entitled 'Akkan', 'Ill Feeling'), one of the short pieces from his collection, *Furansu monogatari* (*Tales of France*, 1909). It, too, depicts a narrator passing through a port that marks the transition from East to West—in this case, Singapore—on his

way back to Japan after a long absence, and it exposes a parallel set of uncomfortable complexities centred around the nature of modern self-identity.

The instability generated by this transition is evident in the ambiguous stance adopted by Kafū's narrator. On the one hand, this narrator adopts the unashamed guise of a cultural snob, appalled by what he considers the uncouth shallowness of modern Japanese culture on full display on the boat. For example, he takes an instant dislike to a Japanese family who come aboard in Singapore. The thick-necked father, described sarcastically by the narrator as 'the gentleman', is disparaged as an obnoxious military officer or policeman type, with his helmet and white stiff-collared suit in the colonial style, and sporting a moustache that spreads out 'like a shrimp's antennae' (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.5, 301). His child is equally repulsive; a snivelling brat with a face like an octopus, who bursts into tears after wetting himself in public. The wife, meanwhile, mistakes her son's crying as a sign of hunger and brazenly opens her kimono to proffer her breasts in full view of the other passengers (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.5, 303). As a sophisticated intellectual in thrall to (as he sees it) the superior French culture he has just left behind, the narrator can only contemplate with dread the dull and uncivilised exile that awaits him back in Japan.

On the other hand, the narrator is also constricted by a different set of circumstances that fundamentally undercuts any facile assertion of cultural superiority. As he looks out across the harbour at the many ships bound for destinations around the globe, he cannot help but acknowledge the raw manifestation of brute imperial force that entraps him in an irrefutable set of economic, cultural and political structures of power. This collective imperial consciousness, moreover, simply overrides any space for individual sensitivity:

Ah, Singapore. The port of Singapore, the Straights colony under British dominion. Freighters, savages, migrants... I was suddenly shocked to realize that things like

fashion, style and display were so irrelevant to the wide world. (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.5, 299).

Like Saigon, Singapore constitutes a liminal space that throws the inescapable realities of life into particularly sharp focus. Kafū expresses chagrin that the ‘fashion, style and display’, surely allusions to his beloved French culture, are no match for the global network of British imperial power that fans out before him. Moreover, reference to ‘savages’ (*doban*) highlights the racialised hierarchy that oils the wheels of British imperialism. While the author would never have included himself within such a derogatory category, his acute literary sensitivities inevitably led him to conjure up the discriminatory language that so informed the age. In that sense, he was merely prefiguring Natsume Sōseki’s (1867-1916) excruciatingly painful and more direct assessment of a racial pecking order just a few years later. Catching sight of his own image reflected in a large shop window in central London, Sōseki dolefully observed a man of diminutive stature surrounded by the tall good-looking English (Sōseki 1965-76, vol.12, 36).

Kafū, with Ōgai also, provides effective literary backgrounds against which a new kind of self-reflective, unstable and fragmented narrator is brought to light. However, ‘Shingapōru no sūjikan’ was not Kafū’s first foray into experimenting with narrative styles. ‘Chōhatsu’ (‘Long Hair’, Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 61-72), a story which appeared in the earlier *America monogatari*, showed an imaginative flourish by presenting not one, but three, narrative voices (Snyder 2000, 46). It opens with a first-person narrator sat on a bench in New York’s Central Park who watches the city’s most fashionable people, dressed in their springtime finery, parade by in fancy horse-drawn carriages. He is particularly entranced by an American woman in her late twenties accompanied by a younger, exotic-looking man with long hair and a short red moustache. A few days later, the narrator happens to learn from a fellow Japanese that the long-haired man is also a Japanese, called Fujigasaki Kunio. This fellow Japanese takes up the

second first-person narration to explain how he and Kunio began their studies together at New York's Columbia University, but Kunio had dropped his classes and moved into the woman's smart apartment overlooking the park. He describes several visits to the apartment as he tries to persuade his recalcitrant friend to return to his studies. Kunio briefly takes up the third and final first-person narrator role in order to explain to his interlocutor the motives for his unorthodox behaviour.

Each narrator serves a separate function, and presents a very different viewpoint. The first narrator might be characterised as curious but non-judgemental. His role is to set up the story's dynamic by noticing the remarkable young man in the first place, and instigate the search for his identity. The second narrator, who occupies the greater part of the story, comes across as far more moralistic and judgemental. Upon visiting Kunio at the apartment, he finds the manner of the woman, a divorcée, to be 'quite vulgar and lascivious' (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 66). This narrator is also intrusive, insistently returning to the apartment several times in order to uncover the exact nature of the couple's relationship. His prim, conservative response to what he discovers places him in a camp close to that of the boorish 'gentleman' in Singapore. The narrator struggles to accept the fact not only that Kunio is a kept man (*otoko-mekake*), lacking 'the slightest sense of dignified, strong, manly love' (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 70), but also that he has (in the narrator's opinion) an unnatural appetite for older women. Kunio, meanwhile, offers a view of things that could not be more different. He reveals that he is drawn to the woman because of, rather than despite, her morally dubious character. Indeed, his decision to grow his hair long signifies a conscious challenge to conventional gender power relations; whenever she loses her temper and wants to push him around, the hair helpfully offers her something to grab.

Why, then, did Kafū alight upon this particular literary narrative form, and how does such a choice relate to the matter of borders and modernity? One major source of inspiration

is undoubtedly the writings of modern French authors. Before Kafū left for America, he had written *Yume no onna* (*Dream Woman*, 1903) in the Naturalist writing style of Émile Zola (1840-1902), whom he greatly admired. However, it was while he was in America that Kafū's interest was piqued by the style of Guy de Maupassant, especially the latter's use of the framed narrative, a narrative within a narrative. This is the style that operates in 'Chōhatsu' in which the three narrators offer three irreconcilable perspectives that amount to the narrative 'malfunction' typical of modernist fiction. This is what Wayne Booth famously referred to in his discussion of Henry James (Snyder ETC) as the 'unreliable narrator.' Given Kafū's aversion to the heavy-handed Confucian moralising that he associated with much of Meiji society, his choice of a less proscriptive narrative formula is understandable. His story is structured in such a way as to imply that lived experience should be more honestly presented as a series of fragmented and sometimes irresolvable realities rather than as a hackneyed assertion of moral rectitude.

In keeping with Harootunian's notion of a 'global and inclusive paradigm' of modernity, it would be remiss to conclude this section with the impression that Kafū gleaned his understanding of modernity entirely from his experiences in America. On the contrary, while still in Japan he was subject to a particularly complex configuration of overlapping cultural experiences that set him apart from the majority of his fellow countrymen. His father, Nagai Kyūichirō, was not only a successful *nouveau riche* Meiji businessman who had travelled widely abroad, but also an accomplished composer of traditional Chinese-style poems. Kafū recalls his father relaxing at their home, which was filled with Western art and furniture, dressed in a Western suit, smoking a pipe and reclining in an armchair (Hutchinson 2011, 16). His mother, Tsune, had equally culturally eclectic tastes. She loved Edo literature and Kabuki, sang *nagauta* (a form of Kabuki theatre music) and played the traditional *koto* (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 46). At the same time, she regularly attended a German Protestant church and

would bring home German recipes for the family to try out. In short, metropolitan influences from childhood ensured that Kafū was already familiar with juggling the impact of conflicting cultural experiences even before he left for America's shores.

Social Borders

Close attention to narrative voices is a useful tool when exploring Kafū's overall delineation of the complex boundaries between autonomous self identity and the external other. However, *Amerika monogatari* offers evidence of other forms of identity, and the borders between them, that arose specifically out of his experiences in America. What is more, such apparently fixed social categories are particularly noteworthy because they turn out to possess a more fluid, and therefore, modern permeability than first impression would suggest.

In some ways, it is hard to pin down the distinguishing characteristics of, and thus the defining borders between, the various Japanese figures portrayed in *Amerika monogatari*. After all, many of them have travelled overseas precisely in order to escape the restrictions of life in Japan and to reinvent themselves. For instance, the narrator of 'Kyabin yawa' ('Night Talk in a Cabin', Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 7-16) listens to two fellow passengers on the boat from Japan as they set out their motives for moving to America. One of them, Yanagida, describes his house having burnt down in Japan and his misfortune in love, so that he now hopes to forge a better life abroad. The second passenger, Kishimoto, aspires to return to his family in Japan once he has obtained a superior foreign education that will improve his work prospects. A third motive that draws some Japanese to America is the potential for spiritual transformation through Christianity. 'Oka no ue' ('On a Hilltop', Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 27-45) introduces Watano, a religious sceptic who experienced a spiritual crisis while attending an East Coast university, and who has now moved to Kalamazoo in order to see if he can embrace 'the religious life in this remote countryside' (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 31). Many of

these Japanese characters seem rather lonely and adrift, lost and even tragic in their separate ways, but they all share the common experience of being able to realise the dream of foreign travel, an option unimaginable to earlier generations of Japanese.

On the other hand, *Amerika monogatari* also portrays certain social groups from Japan with experiences of life so completely at odds with each other that they seem to have come from different planets. For example, the narrator of ‘Noji no kaeri’ (‘Return Across the fields’, Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 17-26), like the author himself, is a socially privileged Japanese man destined to take up a high-status, professional position in America. During his voyage across the Pacific Ocean, he encounters some Japanese migrant workers (*dekasegi rōdōsha*) who emerge from the ship’s hold like intriguing objects of an anthropological study. The narrator’s choice of words emphasises an unbridgeable gulf between the viewer and the viewed:

They are being treated more like cargo than human beings, crammed into the small, dirty, smelly hold. When the weather looks good, they drift up onto deck like plumes of smoke (*mokumoku*) from the depths of the ship, and gaze at the vast sky and ocean. But, unlike us tender-hearted types (*kokoroyowai warera*), they seem to lack strong feelings. They form small groups and discuss something or other (*naniyara*) in loud voices, while they smoke tobacco in the long *kiseru* pipes they have brought from Japan. They scatter ash on the deck until they are reprimanded by some sailor who happens to pass by. On moonlit nights, they sing local popular songs that betray the regions in Japan from which they hail. (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 19)

The narrator’s disinclination to decipher the ‘something or other’—most probably spoken in local dialect—with the aim of clarifying the actual substance of their conversations confirms a continuing wall of indifference between these fellow countrymen whom chance has thrown together. Perhaps that is only to be expected. After all, the labourers share none of the narrator’s modern sensibility as they suck on their traditional *kiseru* pipes and show ignorance

of the simplest rule that deems the scattering of ash on the floor a breach of etiquette. Even reference to regional songs underlines an historically longstanding Japanese antipathy between sophisticated metropolitan culture and the humble provinces. And if that were not enough, ‘our’ (*warewa*) tender-heartedness, in contrast to the migrants’ lack of strong feelings, implies an exclusionary bond between the author and his equally sensitive Japanese readership.

Migrant workers, and the complex implications of their literary representation, appear in several stories from *Amerika monogatari*. ‘Akuyū’ (‘Bad Company’, Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 107-19) outlines a mixture of bewilderment and prurient fascination on a truly continental scale among some well-to-do, educated Japanese towards their more lowly compatriots. One evening, a party of well-heeled Japanese gathers in New York City to discuss the social and political issues of the day, but before long their conversation turns to the prevalence of Japanese prostitution on the West Coast. They do manage to maintain a degree of decorum appropriate to their station as they listen, enthralled, to salacious stories of pimps and whorehouses. As one young man in the group explains, consorting with fallen women might be appropriate for ‘people of no standing’ (*mibun no nai mono*), but not for ‘us chaps’ (*bokura*) (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 108).

A second member of the party, Shimazaki, probes further into the lives of the lower classes by offering his listeners a first-hand account of the grotesquely cramped and dirty living conditions in the so-called ‘Oriental Colony’ (*Tōyōjin no koronī*) (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 110), a district of Seattle situated far from the well-ordered commercial city centre. The image of street life that he portrays is designed to shock and titillate in equal measure:

The layabouts (*renchū*) who hung around the district during the day were joined later by labourers who had finished their day’s work at various piers and constructions sites, and came out of nowhere to mill together. The atmosphere there was already foul, but now it was mixed with the stink of alcohol and sweat. (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 111)

Shimazaki offers a vicarious thrill to his peers as they contemplate this unsettling scene from the safety of the opposite side of the vast country. Moreover, its titillation value depends partly upon the shock of a vision of America unrecognizable from the perspective of these more urbane New York-based Japanese. The Oriental Colony lacks any sign of ‘the whistles of steamships, the bells of trains, the sound of orchestras on gramophones’ (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 112) that signified the spirit of this continent to so many people. But the shock runs deeper. Shimazaki does not merely thrust appallingly rough and unclean bodies under the noses of his audience, he also draws attention to the disturbing racial hotchpotch of its population. The Colony is described as being rife with ‘dens’ (*sōkutsu*) of unsavoury Chinese and Japanese, as well as a haven for ‘unemployed Western labourers and poor, persecuted Negroes’ (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 110).

It is precisely this anxiety regarding racial mingling that threatens to challenge the apparently fixed boundaries between different categories of Japanese in *Amerika monogatari*. The author even goes so far as to highlight the central significance of race as the story opens. The party had initially been discussing ‘the question of race, the “Yellow Peril”, internationalism’ (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 107) because they had in mind a recent real-life *cause célèbre*. Some white Americans, mostly on the West Coast, were fearful of a major influx of Japanese immigrants who were buoyed up by Japan’s 1905 victory in the Russo-Japanese War, and they were agitating for tougher anti-Japanese immigration laws. In 1906, the San Francisco school board responded by moving 93 Japanese children into a separate school for non-white students (Gallicchio 2000, 14).

This harsh reality of racial discrimination points to the dilemma in which the Japanese party in New York found itself. After all, no matter how closely they may have shared with parts of the white American population a discomfort towards the kind of racial mixing portrayed in some of Seattle’s less salubrious streets, a seamless and continuing alignment

between privileged Japanese and white Americans was by no means inevitable. By the turn of the century, Jim Crow laws had all but crushed the initial hopes of improvement in racial equality between blacks and whites that had stirred briefly in the wake of the American Civil War of 1861-65. At the same time, widespread white xenophobia concerning the threat of a ‘Yellow Peril’ risked placing even elite Japanese on the receiving end of the discriminatory stick. In short, any assumption of cultural superiority by Shimazaki and his group over their less fortunate Japanese compatriots rested on very unstable foundations.

Kafū’s literary articulation of racial boundaries, and particular the Japanese ranking in a modern world driven by an imperialist narrative, did not emerge from thin air. It depended upon a range of influences that prevailed even before the Meiji Era. For example, after Commodore Perry successfully concluded a commercial treaty between America and Japan in Edo Bay in 1854, he entertained the Japanese contingent by putting on a blackface minstrel show, performed by whites, aboard the flagship *Powhatan*. The Japanese were reported to have loved it (Russell 2009, 92). Likewise, a member of the 1860 Japanese mission to the United States demonstrated the extent to which derogatory racial attitudes had insinuated themselves into the common sense of some Japanese when he spoke of African natives with faces that ‘are black as if painted with ink and resemble those of monkeys’ (Russell 2009, 93). Of course, not all Japanese were driven by the same callous disregard. One Japanese visitor to South Africa during the Meiji Era was so appalled by the treatment of the black population by the white English that he questioned the right of the latter to call themselves a civilized people (Russell 2009, 94).

It could also be argued that Kafū was merely gleaning his ideas from Japanese literary precedents. Kanagaki Robun’s (1829-94) comic novel, *Seiyōdōchū hizakurige* (*Shank’s Mare to the Western Seas*, 1870-76), depicts two comical figures, Yajirōbei and Kitahachi, who travel by sea from Japan to London via China, Sri Lanka and Egypt (Mertz 2003, 199); that is,

very similar to Kafū's voyage to Japan, but in reverse. Both Kafū's 'Shingapōru no sūjikan' and Robun's novel acknowledge the unquestionable superiority of Western culture. Whereas Robun's two ribald figures of fun adopt a more elevated tone the closer they come to the West, the mood of Kafū's narrator darkens the further he approaches the Far East (*kyokutō*) at the extreme periphery of the civilized world.

Kafū's world view also rested on the latest 'scientific' race theories set out by one of Meiji Japan's most influential intellectuals of the time, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), in his book, *Bunmei-ron no gairyaku* (*An Outline of a Theory of Civilisation*, 1875). Inspired by the ideas of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, Fukuzawa identified the West as the centre of civilization (*bunmei*), while Asia was classified as 'semi-civilised' (*hankai*). The third category, 'barbaric' (*yaban*), applied to Africa and black people in general (Russell 2009, 95), as illustrated by both Robun and Kafū in their literary texts.

In *Seiyōdōchū hizakurige*, the two protagonists come to identify themselves as modern Japanese nationals through a growing awareness of how they rank in the cultural and racial world order. They revere Western culture, but there are other groups of people whom they look down upon. For instance, their rapacious sexual appetites are doused when it comes to the women of Sri Lanka, who are portrayed as barely human, walking around 'half-naked, with tattoos like swirls around the dirty skin of their faces and lips, like a night-parade of a hundred monsters' (Mertz 2003, 46). Something similar is discernible in Kafū's 'Shingapōru no sūjikan' where the inhabitants of Sri Lanka are depicted as integral to a natural, brutal world characterised by 'forests of coconut trees, naked savages, frightening water buffalo, and the fierce light of the sun' (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.5, 298). The quandary facing the Japanese party in New York is that they can never reliably count upon maintaining a position of privilege. Opinions about who exactly was classified as a 'savage' were liable to change in time.

The narrator in the opening sentence of ‘Rinkan’ (‘In the Woods, Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 97-105) states his opinion very clearly when he complains that the beauty of Washington, DC, is marred by ‘a large number of ugly (*minikui*) Negroes wandering all over the city’ (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 97). However, it would be wrong to leave the impression that Kafū was entirely unsympathetic towards the plight of black Americans. He recalls with real distaste not only a white soldier’s heartless abandonment of his black lover, but also his shocking offer to pass her on to any of his fellow white soldiers in search of a guilt-free, disposable sexual relationship. However, Kafū fundamentally fails to give his black characters any substantial voice of their own in *Amerika monogatari*. And this is particularly ironic because, despite the exceptionally charged racial environment of the time, there were still black voices in America to be heard, and some of them were reaching out specifically towards Japan. Many black Americans were excited by the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War precisely because, as W.E.B. Du Bois put it, Japanese victory had broken the ‘foolish modern magic of the word “white” and raised the spectre of a “coloured revolt against white exploitation”’ (Gallicchio 2000, 7-8). Many contemporary discourses argued vehemently against the very idea of racial equality. However, as a young and inquisitive Japanese writer keen to savour the full American experience, Kafū might have responded by trying to negotiate a different set of boundaries and imagine an alternative structure of modernity when it came to matters of race. He chose not to.

Landscapes of Feeling

So far in this chapter, we have explored Kafū’s articulation of the narrative voice and the diverse range of cultural experiences within his literary texts. However, Sakagami Hiroichi offers some additional comments on the relationship between people and place within Kafū’s

texts that open up a third approach when examining the author's central significance as a major modern writer. Sakagami also highlights the concept of border-crossing from a new angle.

Sakagami suggests that the *Amerika monogatari* stories demonstrate far more interest in the transitory Japanese visitors compared to the American inhabitants themselves. On the other hand, the climate (*fūdo*) of America, along with its distinctive topographical features, left an indelible mark on Kafū and his literature. For example, he must surely have been sensitive to the contrast between the miniature scale of nature as it is commonly experienced in Japan and the vast natural landscapes of the American continent (Sakagami 1997, 93). However, it is Sakagami's choice of the word, *fūdo*, that particularly stands out because the term encapsulates not only climactic features and associated environmental factors but also the human response to those conditions. Of course, any attempt to establish some neat, essentialist parallel between a nation's climate and the character of its people is highly problematic—Watsuji Tetsurō's (1889-1960) seminal work, *Fūdo: ningengaku-teki kōsatsu* (*Climate: An Anthropological Consideration*, usually translated as *Climate and Culture*, 1935) is perhaps the exception that proves the rule—but the possibility of a creative, shifting interaction between human feeling and landscape is worth exploring because it provides another opportunity to trace Kafū's engagement with fluid borders.

Amerika monogatari presents a wide range of American landscapes, both urban and rural, but we concentrate here on just a few sketches of nature centred around the author's stay in Kalamazoo in 'Oka no ue'. The first thing to note is that the significance of any specific landscape is not fixed but subject to changing circumstances, such as the character's mood or the time of the year. For example, following a long, harsh Michigan winter, the narrator exudes unalloyed joy as he strolls through an idyllic countryside during the month of May. He passes through orchards of apple blossoms in order to reach the meadows where he will 'lie down on soft clover next to the grazing cattle, or linger by a little stream, drunk on the fragrance of

violets and singing along with field larks' (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 31-32). The bucolic phrasing might be rather clichéd, but the scene rather sweetly conveys the very human relief that accompanies the arrival of spring. At the same time, it hints at the free-wheeling spirit of a Japanese visitor, temporarily free of the burdensome family and social ties left behind at home, as he ambles effortlessly through a site of pristine nature.

On the other hand, the landscapes of Kalamazoo sometimes convey far gloomier sentiments. One grey late December afternoon, the narrator climbs the hilltop close to his college where he encounters Watano, the religious sceptic and the only other Japanese in Kalamazoo. As they watch the sun sinking beneath the horizon, Watano laments the 'desolate scene' of the frozen wasteland 'that brings to mind the sorrow of life and the pain of human existence' (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 29). With no fragrant spring blossoms to console his feelings of despair, this landscape offers no sense of human belonging, no thrill of untrammelled freedom from the strictures of home. Two Japanese men simply stand side by side, like rootless ghosts pausing momentarily on their passage across America. By the story's end, even Watano has decided to abandon the allure of Christian salvation in Kalamazoo and move to New York in order to test his resilience against temptation.

However, if human feeling is fickle, so too is the significance of any landscape. With a change in season, the same hilltop scene inspires a far more sublime mood of belonging and interconnectedness. It is now springtime, and the narrator stands alone under a hazy full moon, gazing down on a vast prairie illuminated by the night sky:

Puddles of water dotted here and there caught the pale moonlight and reflected the colours of the dark sky. From behind me in the college came the sound of some girl students enjoying themselves as they played music, and quiet lights could be seen in every window of the houses in the nearby rural town (*inaka machi*). Ah! What a

magical, dream-like spring night in a faraway land (*ikyō*)! (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 32-33)

Brimming with moonlight, the puddles bound to the curving plain encapsulate a harmonious, universal resonance between heaven and earth. Winter's bleak isolation has now given way to the settled tranquillity of a college town inspired by Christianity, 'far from the many temptations of the city', where teachers and students 'lead an ideally pure religious life' (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.4, 27). There is something slightly anodyne and decidedly American in this idyllic scenario; a well-regulated, unthreatening, prettily lit 'rural town' infused with the civilising effects of music, religion and delightful female laughter. The narrator is understandably enthralled by the 'magic' of this particular manifestation of the American Dream, historically often associated with frontier life, that almost any Japanese traveller of the time might have been delighted to savour. However, the landscape viewed from the Kalamazoo hilltop tells multiple stories. It is home to other dreams and to other ghosts.

When the first European settlers arrived around the area of Kalamazoo in the southwest corner of Michigan during the early nineteenth century, it was already occupied by the Potawatomi tribe. The tribe grew corn, beans and squash, and they were famed for their medicinal herbal gardens (Van Buren n.d., 1). As the population of white settlers grew, the United States government increasingly pressured the Native Americans to abandon their claim to the land they lived on. The 1833 Treaty of Chicago stipulated that all Potawatomi were obliged by law to leave the area forthwith. But it was not until 1840 when, despite the tribe's absolute determination to remain on the land of their ancestors, all of its members (except those who had converted to Catholicism) were marched under duress by the U.S. Army to an unknown future on new reservations in Iowa (MIGenWeb, n.d., 4). It is hard to find the language to bridge the gap between such premeditated cruelty and the sweet charm of beautiful music on a spring evening.

There is no reason to assume that Kafū was familiar with this story, even though it is tempting to imagine Watano intuitively grasping the root of the ‘sorrow of life and the pain of human existence’ that had left its mark on the very same prairie only sixty-five years earlier. My point, however, is that modernity always implies a fluidity of landscapes, an intertwining of histories, and the incorporation of alien spaces into familiar homelands through the power of imagination. This is the malleable, shifting world that Kafū inhabited and reproduced in his literature. Memories are never entirely vanquished. They bide their time, but eventually they rise again to the surface. And this is true not only of the landscapes encountered by Kafū in America but also of the Tokyo scenes he depicted upon his return to Japan.

The Japan which Kafū encountered after an absence of five years was very different from the place he had left behind. Visually, Tokyo’s architecture was in the midst of an intense period of city reconstruction (*shiku kaisei*) that would continue until the end of the Taishō Era (1912-26). With his real experience of Western cities, Kafū took a dim view of what he considered the ‘utter absurdity’ (*funpan kiwamaru*) (Minami 2009, 9) of the imitative Tokyo cityscape. During 1909-10, his first two years back in Japan, he set out his concerns in a series of ‘Returnee Stories’ that included ‘Fukagawa no uta’ (‘A Song of Fukagawa’, Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 103-18), ‘Donten’ (‘Cloudy Weather’, Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 95-101), and ‘Shinkichōsha no nikki’ (‘Diary of a Recent Returnee’, Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 151-209). But let me explore another story from the same series, ‘Kangokusho no ura’ (‘Behind the Prison’, Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 43-59), since it skilfully outlines not only Kafū’s sense of suffocating isolation, but also his struggle to carve out a more productive way forward as a literary man; a struggle, moreover, that involved a continuing negotiation of borders.

The narrator of ‘Kangokusho no ura’ has just returned to Japan and is living in his father’s house situated next to Tokyo’s Ichigaya Prison, at a loss about his next step in life. After years of relative freedom abroad, he feels overwhelmed and trapped by the web of

familial and social obligations as keenly as if he were incarcerated in the prison. Japan now seems to offer a shallow imitation of life, ‘limited, and lacking any sense of depth (*fukami no nai*)’ (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 50). However, Kafū’s imaginative response is to discover what might be called a shadow of modernity, by reconstructing that depth through the incorporation of memories of foreign travels into the old Tokyo landscape. For example, one chilly day on a walk along a local street, he comes across some impoverished local housewives with sore-infested infants on their backs, ‘exposing their filthy teeth as they nattered away’ and washing their laundry in the warm stinking waters of a drainage ditch (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 54-55). The barely discernible humanity of these impoverished Tokyo women, so outside the narrator’s lived experience, echoes the portrayal of the migrant workers bound for America who emerged from the ship’s hold like creatures from another world, and the ‘naked savages’ who populated the land of Sri Lanka. Like Ōta in *Maihime*, Kafū’s returnee narrator has been transformed by overseas experiences in a way that can never be undone.

The narrator elaborates further on the source of his despair when he strolls along a neighbourhood street lined with shabby shops. Stopping at a fishmonger’s, he observes some fish steeping in greasy water, their dead eyes ‘cloudy and stagnant’, while the blood of their sliced bodies appears ‘lustreless and chilled’. He recalls having once been repulsed by the vivid red meat hanging in butcher shops in the West, but now that he inhabits the lifeless, dull universe of a Japanese returnee, ‘the thought that the cold, faded flesh of fish was the only source of blood nourishment for most fellow Japanese’ saddens him deeply (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 55). Experiences abroad now evoke a powerful vibrancy in contrast to the entirely insipid, bloodless pickings on offer back in Japan.

‘Kangokusho no ura’ is extraordinary because its portrayal of spiritual malaise and impasse necessitates an irrepressible impulse to develop the literary language of modernity. At the heart of this creative energy is the crossing of new borders. Idleness provides the

inspirational spark as the narrator, ensconced in his father's home, spends 'day after day gazing absent-mindedly at the garden' (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 49). One sultry early evening in August, he witnesses a scene of utter stillness as sunlight spills through the trees onto the moss below. Then, suddenly, a shower bursts forth with the dramatic force of a full symphony:

Frail plants drooped towards the earth while stronger ones sprang back high into the air. The leaves thrummed with sounds heavy or light, depending on their thickness. The evening shower symphony reached a terrifically high, powerful crescendo accompanied by the reverberating bass drum of thunder as it rumbled through, until it suddenly faded into the gentle moderato of green frog flutes from which it had first begun. (Kafū 1992-2011, vol.6, 49)

Such minute attention to the varying timbre of raindrops as they hit leaves of different thickness suggests that this is a writer with time on his hands. Moreover, the musical metaphor highlights the entirely artificial quality of this 'natural' scene. The text is a Modernist artefact, in which the leaves and the frogs are players in the creation of a literary symphony. The medium of language itself constitutes the message.

In some ways, the garden scene is a typical Japanese-style nature sketch in miniature; it is even marked by the season in traditional fashion. But its palpable ferocity and power and energy suggest that Kafū is touching on something deeper. The shower speaks of the returnee's sudden release of pent-up anger, fear and hopelessness, but it also overflows with bitter-sweet memories of endless prairies and passionate embraces abroad. Sakagami was surely right to assert that Kafū must have become conscious of the contrast between Japanese nature in miniature and America's vast landscapes. However, this passage would imply that Kafū had no option but to address his own shifting self-identity by continuing to cross borders, by fusing spaces both miniature and vast into an entirely new, modern landscape of the imagination.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that multiple examples of border negotiations—both geographical and metaphorical—within Kafū’s literature help define him as a modern writer. Moreover, Harootunian’s concept of a number of coeval modernities has opened a way to identify Kafū as an important figure in a broader configuration of global Modernist movements. I have explored these ideas from three perspectives; narrative voice, social boundaries and configurations of landscape. However, other angles, such as Kafū’s representations of urban space or modern technology in both Japan and America, might offer equally rich insights. I have tried to avoid a hackneyed distinction between ‘Japan’ and ‘The West’ because Kafū’s fluid sense of self in his stories resists the narrow definitions of any single set of national cultural experiences. In fact, that very ambiguity about where exactly the author belongs confirms his status as a modern writer. It is true that his attitude towards matters of class and race may make uncomfortable reading for some readers today, even though many of his contemporaries would probably have recognised nothing but ‘common sense’. And finally, while Kafū’s literary style, his nostalgic tone and the content of his texts have frequently marked him as a rather narrow-minded and quintessentially ‘Japanese’ writer in the eyes of his readership, he proves to have been engaged in a far more fundamental negotiation with the broad, shifting contours of a modern world.

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