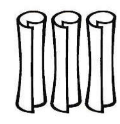
Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Women Writers

Edited by Rebecca Copeland



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Chapter 14
Women and Queer Kinships: Matsuura Rieko, Fujino Chiya, and Murata Sayaka

Anna Specchio

Individuals with physical particularities, gay and transgender people, even a woman with no interest in sexual intercourse or love affairs populate fiction by contemporary Japanese women writers. This chapter focuses on the depiction of these queer subjects in the works of Matsuura Rieko, Fujino Chiya, and Murata Sayaka. As the bubble economy collapsed in the 1990s, so did the myths surrounding the nuclear family and the ideals of "masculine" and "feminine," yet, the ideology underpinning these ideals, as well as the strict gender-binary system, still permeates contemporary society, where minorities are either not represented or are alienated. In the stories by these contemporary writers, the protagonists' perceived feelings of being an outsider vanish as they create new kinships (friendship, chosen family, or alliances), showing how being in a relationship can define an individual's subjectivity, and how these writers envision a more inclusive society.

Introduction

The term "queer studies" comes from Teresa de Lauretis's 1991 work, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities: An Introduction," which gave name to a field of critical studies that investigates the sexualities, identities, and, more broadly, subjectivities of non-binary individuals who, albeit refusing heterosexuality as the benchmark for sexual orientation, do not feel represented by the labels of "lesbian" or "gay." These studies challenge current notions of sexuality and criticize "identity categories that are presented as stable, unitary, and 'authentic'" (McLelland 2005, 2). Annamarie Jagor points out, that "institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity, and gender-corrective surgery. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'" (Jagor 1997, 3).

In Japan, "queer studies" began to gain traction in the 1990s, with its meaning initially confused with "lesbian" and "gay." At the same time, between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the collapse of the bubble economy and the myths surrounding the nuclear family system,

gave rise to a "gay boom" (Wallace 2020; Suganuma 2018). These years also witnessed the emergence of several women writers who depicted new models of femininity which deconstructed the myth of the *sengyō shufu* (full-time housewives) and the idea that women are fundamentally heterosexual (Chalmers 2002).

In this chapter, I use "queer" to refer to all those subjects whose identity does not fit in the binary gender system or who, in general, represent a minority compared to the heteronormative majority. Similarly, I define "women" as any individual who identifies themselves as such despite their sex assigned at birth.

Through an analysis of three works written by Matsuura Rieko, Fujino Chiya, and Murata Sayaka over the last three decades, I investigate the way queer, or minority, individuals are depicted, within the socio-cultural framework of those years. In particular, I focus on their ability to create connections. Outsiders in society, the protagonists of these works try to create new relationships to feel accepted, relationships that I call "kinships" to underline their unfixed, hybrid, or queer nature, as the term includes friendship, companionship, familiar closeness, and alliances.

Matsuura Rieko depicts a queer companionship composed of individuals united by secrets related to their bodies: a travelling group staging sexual performances whose role is nuclear in the main protagonist's acceptance of her toe-penis. Fujino Chiya traces the lives of apparently ordinary people who share an unsaid feeling of loneliness, and choose each other's company to create a sort of urban family. Murata Sayaka presents a female protagonist who questions her identity and challenges the gender-binary system by refusing to "become a woman," and becoming a "*konbini-ningen*" (convenience-store human) instead. These works provide insight into how queerness, by destabilizing all life experiences that meet social expectations, produces new desirable modes of existence. As a result, these new existences produce a weave of inclusive, equal, or posthuman relationships that help "outsiders" feel like "subjects."

Matsuura Rieko: Man? I feel like a (queer) woman!

Matsuura Rieko (1958–) graduated Aoyama Gakuin University, where she majored in French literature after having fallen in love with the stories of Marquis de Sade and Jean Genet. Echoes of these writers' works now reverberate in her own literature via frequent allusion to sadomasochism, same-sex eroticism, as well as fetishisms. Her literary debut coincides with the publication of *Sōgi no hi* (1978, The Day of the Funeral), a story she wrote while in college, which won the Bungakukai Prize for Emerging Writers in the same year of its publication. Since then, she has published four essay collections and eight novels, the latest published in February 2022 and entitled *Hikari bunshū* (A Collection of Writing on Hikari). Her works, at least those written before *Hikari bunshū,* have been examined through a myriad of approaches, from Freudian penis envy and castration anxiety to Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs," via the lessons of Lacan, Irigaray, Kristeva, Dworkin, or Butler. These perspectives have caused critics to find parallels between her ideas and those of post-structuralist feminist criticism and to categorize her fiction as lesbian or homosexual. Matsuura's work challenges the concept of sexuality as unique and irreducible, but since the publication of *Nachuraru ūman* (1987, Natural Woman) she has categorically rejected the label of "lesbian

or homosexual writer" (Quimby 2019; Innami 2011; Komiya 2015; Egusa 2006; Nagaike 2004; Ichimura 2000; Amann 2000).

The publication of *Oyayubi P no shūgyō jidai* (1993, The Apprenticeship of Big Toe P: A Novel, hereinafter "Big Toe P") led to major debates between Matsuura Rieko and Japanese feminist critics. *Big Toe P,* serialized in the journal *Bungei* from 1991 to 1993 and published as a volume in the fall of that year, won the Women's Literature Prize (*Joryū bungakushō*) in 1994.[1] Immediately after its publication, the novel became a bestseller. In her review of the novel in *Bungei,* feminist psychologist Ogura Chikako defined *Big Toe P* as the story of a "pseudo-castrated man" and criticized Matsuura's attitude towards feminism as ideologically "self-contradictory" (Ogura 1993, 96–97). Ogura insisted so vociferously on the lesbian matrix of the novel that in an interview with the novelist published in a subsequent issue of the same journal, Matsuura declared her intention to kill the reviewer ("*koroshite yarimasu*") and asked Ogura not to read her novels again, clarifying that "[*Big Toe P*] is not homosexual literature, but is rather intended to cancel that label." Matsuura insisted that she was in fact anti-feminist and anti-academic (Matsuura 1995, 35).

Additionally, Matsuura Rieko denounced "the feminist conflation of the penis with the phallus … [invoking] wide-ranging feminist and psychoanalytic discourses on 'the phallus,' from the distinction, or correspondence, between the penis and the phallus to Lacanian theories of 'being' vs. 'having' the phallus—and numerous feminist analyses and critiques of both" (Quimby 2019, 94). She also criticized feminist scholars' vision of what they called "heterosexual male-centrism" (*iseiai dansei chūshin shugi*), and which Matsuura defines as "genital unionism" (*seiki ketsugō shugi*) (Gōhara 2020, 104).

Matsuura's unconventional *Weltanschauung* follows the idea of deconstructing the cultural symbols and meanings which cover the genitals, and she proposes for the first time in her essay "Yasashii kyosei no tame ni" (1987, For a Gentle Castration*), that the genitals "have no particular value, they don't speak for anything, they aren't a symbol, and they suggest nothing. Perhaps they don't even show sexual difference" (Matsuura 2006, 205). Then, why did—and still do—the majority of critics, label Matsuura's *Big Toe P* a homosexual, or lesbian novel?

The label derives mainly from the Kafkian transformation experienced by the main character, Mano Kazumi. The big toe on her right foot transforms into a penis, and that penis subsequently leads to several adventures, including a sapphic romance—apparently, the idea came to Matsuura as she herself dreamed her own big toe turning into a penis (Lies 2010). But the reason for the label is also to be found in the context of the novel's publication, which coincided with the explosion in Japan of the above-mentioned "gay boom." In those years there appeared a large number of novels with gay, lesbian, or transgender protagonists, such as Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchin* (1987, Kitchen*), Hiruma Hisao's *Yes-Yes-Yes* (1989), Nishino Kōji's *Shinjuku ni-chōme de kimi ni attara* (1993, If I meet you in Shinjunku ni-chōme), or Nakayama Kaho's *Sagurada famiria: sei kazoku* (1998, La sagrada familia). Of these, Nakayama is also the only self-identified lesbian women writer. These years also witnessed "the golden period" for transgender people in Japan, when "trans individuals started appearing on variety television shows" and new terms categorizing minorities flourished, even though "until the mid-1990s, transgender individuals were mostly recognized as entertainers or sexual workers" (Dale 2020, 61).

The media coverage of gay, lesbian, and transsexual people, however, focused on their individual "difference" (their sexuality and sexual orientation) rather than on their relationships

within a community. Far from encouraging a mainstreaming of sexual difference, the coverage only heightened the notion of their otherness Indeed, in *Big Toe P*, Matsuura Rieko anticipated not only future tendencies in her creation of a story "with such a variety of sexual minorities" (Komiya 2016, 93), but also the narrative trope of the "queer family" which emerged with the growing interest in women, gender, and queer studies from the 2000s.

As mentioned above, *Big Toe P* is the story of Kazumi, a university student, who wakes up to find that the big toe on her right foot has mutated into a penis. Her boyfriend Masao, who embodies the stereotypic homophobic straight man as the Chinese characters which compose his name suggest,[2] is horrified by the metamorphosis and tries to castrate Kazumi, who despite her own homophobic prejudices and difficulties in relating to other people, leaves him and tries her best to deal with her new body. She soon meets and becomes engaged to Shunji, a blind bisexual pianist who uses sex as a means to befriend others, and they both join the "Flower Show," a group of queer individuals who travel around Japan performing sexual acts for elitist audiences. Each component of the Flower Show has a physical particularity related to sex: Masami is a MtoF transgender with a vagina without a clitoris and who has "never once had sex with any love in it" (Matsuura 2009, 408). Aiko has eczema which appears every time her body comes in contact with others' bodily fluids. Yohei's eyeballs pop out as he reaches orgasm, and Sachie has teeth in her vagina.

There is also an unusual couple: Eiko and Tamotsu. Shin, Tamotsu's Siamese twin is embedded in Tamotsu, with the exception of a penis, which prevents Tamotsu's from developing. Even though Kazumi is reluctant to perform on stage with the Flower Show, she follows the group on its tour and gradually becomes closer to the other members, especially Eiko, who is part of the team by virtue of being Tamotsu's girlfriend. After Shunji temporarily leaves the group to follow an older musician, Kazumi experiences her first, and unique, lesbian relation with Eiko.

At the outset Kazumi is shy and unable to accept her toe-penis. Once she is surrounded by other queer people, she slowly gains confidence and eventually shows her toe-penis to Eiko and Tamotsu. When Eiko touches and starts masturbating Kazumi's penis, it has an erection which makes Kazumi feel an excitement she had never felt before, driving her to think about the possibility of a non-heteronormative relationship. Indeed, this episode becomes the prelude to Kazumi and Eiko's elopement, following which, having overcome her semi-homophobic prejudices, Kazumi feels grateful to her toe-penis, declaring:

> *"It had played such a significant role in my life, led me to places I could never have imagined before, and I didn't want my honeymoon to end."* (Matsuura 2009, 443)

Certainly, without her big toe's metamorphosis, Kazumi would not have had the opportunity to change her stance on homoerotic relationships. Most critics agree that the apprenticeship continues until Kazumi accepts herself as she is (that is, as a person who identifies as a woman, with both a vagina and a penis) and understands that sex and pleasure are not bound to the union of different-sex-genitals—the "genital-unionism" which Matsuura criticizes. But I suggest that another factor leads to Kazumi's attitude towards sexuality: her acceptance of and acceptance in the Flower Show with all its queer members.

At the beginning of the novel, Kazumi explains she hardly has friends and is not good in human relationships at all. When the toe-penis shows up, she fears her new condition as

queer will make her feel like even more of an outsider than she already is. At this point, it is fundamental to observe that the term "queer" is not used in the novel. Its absence should not surprise us. The word was only introduced in Japan during the 1990s, and at the time its initial meaning was not much different from terms such as "gay" (*gei*) or "lesbian" (*rezubian*). This association may have led Matsuura to refuse to use it. Instead, she selects the word "freak," whose meaning is not only that of "outsider," but also "monstrous," "deformed," or "frightening." This explains society's perception of the members of the Flower Show, not merely as outsiders, but as "abnormal." In accordance with the gay boom of the period, which saw "queer" people as part of the world of entertainment, the majority takes them into consideration only when they perform their sexual show. All members of the Flower Show are excluded by the mainstream due to their non-adherence to gender and sexual constructions. Hence, to borrow Butler's words, "the strange, the incoherent, that which falls 'outside', gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently" (Butler 1990, 110). In *Big Toe P*, Matsuura uses the Flower Show to unsettle normative perceptions of gender, sexuality, and categorizations related to sex and creates a small community where all members share similar feelings and can relate to each other as a family. Consequently, it can be said that Kazumi grows up, and accepts herself because she is surrounded by individuals who share conditions and emotions similar to hers. As Komiya Chiho states, "in this work, as the distinctive sexuality of each character is revealed, it becomes clear that sexuality is not just a question of one's own state of being, but also affects the way one views relationships with others" (Komiya 2016, 96).

At the same time, Yutaka Ayako notices that the "disturbing nature of the gender performance depicted in the novel can be immediately detected in the girls' culture of the same period" (Yutaka 2017, 422), and she picks up an example from Takeuchi Naoko's famous 1990s manga *Bishōjo senshi sērā mūn* (Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon*).[3] The three Sailor Starlights, who appear in the last series of the manga, are women who disguise themselves as men in everyday life; in the later anime, they are men becoming women when transforming into Sailor fighters. I suggest that, in addition to the "disturbing" gender performativity of the Flower Show, other aspects of *Big Toe P* also parallel *Sailor Moon*, and that is the "family" nature found in both works. Starting from the third series of *Sailor Moon*, we encounter a same-sex couple who, together with another woman fighter, raise a younger fighter. In so doing they create the same kind of queer family described in *Big Toe P*.

Returning to Matsuura's work, Yutaka points out that the toe-penis is "a gift to make us forget all the conventions we have sadly been forced to learn" (Yutaka 2017, 417), and it functions as a narrative strategy to lead Kazumi in her journey of self-discovery, which, she eventually achieves thanks to her queer family rather than to her sexual experiences themselves. In fact, at the end of the story, the introvert Kazumi decides to take part in the show to save Shin's penis which Tamotsu is going to evirate in Sachie's vagina-with-teeth. Her sign of affection for the Flower Show, her queer companions, is the ultimate goal of her apprenticeship.

Fujino Chiya: A promise of family

Fujino Chiya (1962–) is one of the few acknowledged MtoF transgender authors working in Japan today, and presumably the only to win the Akutagawa Prize, in its 122nd edition in 1999, with the middle-length novel *Natsu no yakusoku* (2000, A Promise of Summer). Before starting her career as writer, Fujino worked as a manga editor. She was fired after a discussion with her boss who learned she cross-dressed (*josō*) for her commute to work, since she felt discomfort wearing male clothing. Having experienced discrimination herself, she is very astute in her depictions of the sorrow of sexual minorities, and in a more recent work, *Henshū domo atsumare!* (2017, Let's Get Together, Editors!), her first autobiographical novel, she draws the main character's process in becoming MtoF transgender.

Despite winning the most prestigious literary prize in Japan, *A Promise of Summer* did not receive the same kind of attention other works of the same period enjoyed. Only a few critics paid attention to the value of the work; among these, Atogami Shirō was the first to associate the word "queer" with the novel (Atogami 2001). *A Promise of Summer* was published at the edge of the new millennium, right after the "golden period" of transgender and the "gay boom" of the 1990s, in a moment when "the understanding of trans individuals as entertainers or object of entertainment changed abruptly ... [as] the first penis reconstruction was conducted for a transgender man in Japan" (Dale 2020, 61).[4] Yet, the kind of images of gay and trans people that dominated the public imagination in the previous decade was commodified and flamboyant. This depiction meant that anyone who did not fit this image, such as those who were non-glamorous, fat, and from the countryside were erased from the narrative. This set of exclusions paradoxically revealed that even in the portrayal of a queer world, there was a heteronormative evaluative standard that translated in homophobic reactions from the majority. Subsequently, gay, lesbian, transgender and other queer people who did not correspond with mainstream representations had difficulties coming out (Ogawa 2017; Dasgupta 2005; Chalmers 2002).

Interestingly, the 1990s and 2000s also saw the emergence of a heteronormative literary genre known as "chick-lit." Directed primarily towards a young female readership, chick-lit began as an Anglo-American phenomenon. The genre "transports elements of the romance into an urban setting" (Ferris and Young 2006, 39) and privileges women protagonists who find support from each other as if they were a family, where men "are sometimes love objects," and "a gay male best friend instead functions prominently as the protagonist's confidante." (Harzewski 2011, 33). Both chick-lit and works by Fujino are centered on an urban family that is chosen rather than "natural."

In *A Promise of Summer*, Fujiya gives voice to a gay couple, two non-hegemonic and non-dominant representatives of women, and a transgender woman, ordinary people in their daily, unrewarding routines who come to know each other by coincidence. The story does not depict the underground world of the LGBTQ+ community in the 2000s Japan; neither does it give an explicit sense of discomfort towards each individual sexuality or identity, rather it focuses on the protagonist's hesitancy towards living out in the open. Although the author chooses to focus on some funny moments in the lives of her characters, she also provides examples of bullying and the discrimination the protagonists face, showing how society eventually shortfalls on what it promises.

Maruo and Hikaru are a gay couple. Maruo, a salaryman, is entering his thirties and when his colleagues discover he is gay, he feels pressured to leave his all-male-dormitory and find his own apartment. Although he is overweight, he has a very "masculine" appearance. Whereas he does not try to hide his sexual orientation, as he frequently walks hand-in-hand with Hikaru, he shows little interest in a long-term relationship. It is as if he is still questioning the possibility of a heterosexual future, of marrying and becoming "*ichinin mae no shakaijin*" ("a fully adult social being").[5] On the contrary, Hikaru is a very open-minded, cheerful guy working as a freelance editor who "has read all kinds of literature on sexuality and has a generally negative view of so-called gender roles, yet becomes a completely old-fashioned effeminate in bed" (Fujino 2019, 38).

Kikue is a writer who perpetually needs money as her novels are unpopular, and is tormented by a past episode, when, during a summer camp her intellectually disabled brother asked for help, and she refused him. Her friend Nozomi, an office lady inclined to drinking, frequently visits Kikue's apartment. People mock Nozomi for her lack of common sense, suggesting that she lost her brain when her mother risked an abortion.

Maruo and Hikaru, and Kikue and Nozomi share a friend in common, Tamayo, a MtoF transgender hairdresser who has a very special relation with, or devotion to, her female dog named Apollon. To borrow one of the new terms coined during the 1990s to describe non-binary individuals, Tamayo is an "*okama*," that is, male-assigned but feminine presenting:

> *Her strong chin and nape gave the feeling of masculinity, but overall hers was a feminine face. Inside her orange shirt jiggled her not-so-small breasts.* (Fujino 2019, 104–5)

Tamayo is the one who, during a picnic under the blossoming flowers in spring, makes the others promise they will go camping together as summer arrives. She seems to be the only one who insists on the promise, trying to persuade her friends to maintain it. She is depicted as a positive character, and her presence frequently leads others to smile and have fun, helped by the sketches with the little Apollon.

Tamayo's relationship with Apollon is crucial to understanding the novel's intentions, as it functions as a metaphor for her loneliness, and, broadly speaking, the loneliness of all queer people in Japan in the 2000s. In a dialogue with Maruo she reveals that Appolon constitutes eighty percent of her world—the rest being food (Fujino 2019, 102–3). But I argue here that, by affirming the importance of Apollon, what Tamayo actually intends is the opposite, namely that Apollon is eighty percent of her world, her horizon, because her life is monotonous and filled with solitude.

> *"I sleep curled up, and I swear Apollon's right in that space. It's like the two of us create a perfect shape!"* (Fujino 2019, 69)
>
> *"I mean, you often think about a lot of unpleasant things, right? People you hate, for example. But when Apollon snuggles up next to me, she loves me unconditionally. Does she even like me like that?"* (Fujino 2019, 103)

What are the unpleasant things to which Tamayo refers? In Japan of the 2000s, transsexual individuals may have no longer been objects of entertainment, however, from the

information we have about Tamayo's life, there is no evidence of social interactions within the rest of the community. Tamayo works in her hair salon attached to her house, she takes Apollon for walks, and tries to share moments with her few friends, but this does not mean society as a whole accepts her. The unpleasant things shall thus be understood as the episodes of marginalization and discrimination she faces, and as a matter of fact, she emphasizes that Apollon loves her for who she is, unconditionally. Also, no data is given about Tamayo's partners, leaving unanswered the question of whether she has found someone who loves her for who she is. And it is in her loneliness that, arguably, the reason for her insistence in camping together shall be found: Tamayo is desperately trying to keep her friends united, as her chosen family whose members share experiences of solitude and discrimination.

In fact, despite the author drawing mainly happy moments as vignettes, indulging in funny jokes on commonplace occurrences regarding non-binary individuals, she also mentions some regrettable episodes of mockery or bullying which the protagonists encounter. An example of a light moment can be found when Hikaru invites Maruo's neighbor Okano to have a drink at Maruo's, and Okano asks "Is Hikaru your boyfriend or girlfriend?," with Maruo promptly answering "My boyfriend!" albeit being immediately contradicted by Hikaru complaining that he's his girlfriend (Fujino 2019, 79). At the same time, Maruo experiences chauvinism, such as when he is walking together with Hikaru and students passing near them call him "Fat-fag" ("*homodebu*", Fujino 2019, 34) or when he finds in the men's toilet of his company the drawing "Matsui Fag" (Fujino 2019, 58).

And, ironically, Tamayo will endure a discriminatory episode, that prevents her from going camping with her friends. One evening, as Maruo and she are walking together, Tamayo is accidentally hit by a pot (*nabe*), non-intentionally launched by a couple having a discussion. In addition to the humorous contrast of Tamayo being hit by a *nabe*, which inevitably leads to thoughts about the terminology related to non-binary transsexual individuals, identifying "*onabe*" the opposite of the "*okama*," namely a FtoM transgender, Tamayo is hospitalized in the male wing, in a room with six beds, with another patient calling her a "cutie-trans" ("*kama-chan*," Fujino 2019, 116). Moreover, the newspapers reporting the incident, write about a "male hairdresser." Her hospitalization makes the camping project vanish, but what Tamayo gets is her friends.

The promise of camping, which was meant to allude to the assurance that better days would come, is postponed, but Tamayo is still surrounded by her group of friends who visit her and take care of Apollon. In spite of the discrimination that surrounds them, the five protagonists have managed to create a kind of "family," similar to the model of the "urban families" that appear right around this time in the above-mentioned chick-lit genre. The difference is that whereas in chick-lit works the urban families include at most one or two gay friends of a cisgender female protagonist, in the family presented by Fujino Chiya all the protagonists are, each in their own way, queer.

Murata Sayaka: Making kin with the *konbini*

The works of Murata Sayaka (1979–) are prized for the way she amplifies *iwakan*, that is, a sense of incongruity. This notion of incongruity is found in a number of the themes that dominate her writing, such as female physicality in relation to identity, sex and sexuality (the former understood as both a sexual act and biological sex, as well as social construct),

loneliness and marginalization, the inability to adapt, and discomfort with being a woman and the gender roles imposed by society recur (Miyauchi, 2011; Ichikawa, 2011; Kurihara, 2013; Enami, 2013; Yano 2017).

The protagonists of her works, all of whom are biologically female, at least up to the time of this writing, are characters who question their own sexuality, and who deviate, even in the case of cisgender women, from gender norms. In this sense, they are all protagonists who show their intolerance of the system of gender binarism and accord more with the concept of gender queer (Iida 2019).

In *Konbini ningen* (Convenience Store Woman*), first published in June 2016 in the magazine *Bungakkai* and the winner that same year of the 155th Akutagawa Prize, Murata presents a protagonist who, unable to conform to the rules of society, chooses to spend her life as a part-time worker in a convenience store (*konbini*). If at the time of its publication Japanese critics seem to have paid more attention to the setting of the story, inspired by the personal experience of the author who combined her writing with a part-time job in a convenience store for several years, *Convenience Store Woman* has subsequently attracted the attention of international critics by virtue of the multiple interpretative approaches to which it lends itself. In particular, *Convenience Store Woman*, "highlighted to international audiences the intersections of gender and precariousness in Japanese working cultures" (Coates et al 2020, 5). Saitō Minako cites it as an example of new "labor novels" (*rōdō shōsetsu*) which emerged during the 2010s (Saitō 2018, 226–29), but it is also possible to read it as an emblem of loneliness spread across the world (Nagai 2017), and as a novel that leads to reflection about the concepts of "ordinary" and "anomalous" (Yano 2017), as well as "majority" and "minority" (Hashimoto 2019).

As Yano Chiaki (2017, 128) points out, *Convenience Store Woman* is the first of Murata's novel set in present-day Japan after several years of works set in future or parallel societies, such as *Seimeishiki* (2013, Ceremony of Life; translated as Life Ceremony: Stories*), *Satsujin shussan* (2014, Birth Murder) or *Shōmetsu sekai* (2015, Dwindling World).[6] In these works, female protagonists do not feel uncomfortable with their bodies and identities or feel *iwakan*—even if they might show some perplexity regarding the social systems they live in—as happens to those who appear in earlier works such as *Junyū* (2003, Breastfeeding) or *Hakobune* (2010, The Ark). At the same time, Hashimoto (2019, 57) remarks that within the story there is no occurrence of the term "*konbini ningen*" (literally "convenience store human"), and people working in the novel, the protagonist included, are referred to as "*konbini* workers" (*kobini tenin*); thus, the definition of a "*konbini ningen*" is up to the readers and to the critics. In this section, I argue that "*konibini ningen*" should be interpreted as a hybrid or cyborg-like character who refuses the gender binary and the patriarchal system and who liberates itself by refusing to become a "woman" (intended as a culturally constructed adult female human being). This hybridity is the only way Murata can allow her character Furukura Keiko, an "outsider, or queer" as seen via other people's eyes, to feel "subjecthood" in a society where "human" means "man" (Iida 2019, 51). By creating a new kinship with the *konbini*, Furukura Keiko thus becomes an example of a post-human and post-anthropocentric subject (Braidotti 2013), and it is in this particular aspect that her queerness lies.

Furukura Keiko is thirty-six years old and has been working in the *konbini* since she was eighteen, from the very first day the Smile Mart opened outside the Hiiromachi Station on May 1, 1998. "The time before I was reborn as a convenience store worker … everyone thought I was a rather strange child" (Murata 2018, 6), Keiko says. When she was in nursery

school, she asked her mother to grill a dead bird, claiming that it would be the most natural thing to do since her father was crazy about *yakitori* (a kind of chicken shish kabob), while later, in elementary school, she bashed a spade over a classmate's head in an attempt to stop an ongoing fight. Fed up with not understanding the adult world's dismay at her behavior and always being judged as abnormal, she finally decides that she would no longer take personal initiative, "and would either just mimic what everyone else was doing, or simply follow instructions" (Murata 2018, 10).

This assertion is a clue to how once again Murata projects us in front of an outsider subject who questions the validity of the norms that govern contemporary society. But this is not Keiko's only diversity. A few pages later, we discover that she is also totally devoid of sexual instincts and has never fallen in love with anyone, nor has she kissed or had sexual intercourse. Her condition creates quite a few problems in her relationships with her friends and other people in society, who are surprised to find that she is eternally single and clinging to her part-time job, that is in a perpetual state of precarity. However, instead of imagining that she may have problems, her friends believe that she just has different tastes, yet another demonstration of Murata Sayaka's attention to minorities:

> *"You know, I've got quite a few gay friends," Miho intervened, "So I kind of get it. These days you can also be asexual or whatever you like."*
>
> *"Oh yes, I heard that's on the increase. Like there are young people who just aren't interested in it at all."*
>
> *"I saw a program on TV about it. It's apparently really hard for them to come out too."*
>
> *I'd never experienced sex, and I'd never even had any particular awareness of my own sexuality. I was indifferent to the whole thing and had never really given it any thought. And here was everyone taking it for granted that I must be miserable when I wasn't.* (Murata 2018, 37)

In this passage it is relevant to note both how the author has been able to leave room for the possibility of representing non-cisgender subjects, and the way in which, despite the willingness of her friends to accept her gender identity and sexual orientation, she perceives herself to be different from the norm. The concept of asexuality already present in previous works returns here. For an example of an earlier occurrence, in *Hakobune* Riho comes to define herself as "asexual" (*museisha*). Unlike Riho, who, until the end of the story seems unable to find a place in the society, Furukura Keiko stumbles upon the possibility of conforming to the norms of Japanese society as she tries to appease her friends and parents when she meets her new male colleague Shiraha.

Shiraha is presented as a negative character, convinced that the world has not changed since the *Jōmon* period (14,500–300 BCE) and that men are still seen as hunters and women as those who take care of the house and kitchen. According to Hashimoto Natsuki, Shiraha, who looks down on his colleagues and who they, in turn, disdain, represents a minority within the minority (Hashimoto 2019, 53), although his way of thinking allows the reader to feel the burden of fulfilling the societal roles ascribed to each gender typical of the majority. Shiraha is also, in his own way, an outsider. He and Keiko agree to stage their cohabitation

in order to appease their families and convince them, through this relationship, that they too are perfect members of society—in a situation reminiscent, at least in part, of the *gisō kekkon* (fake marriage) rounds staged by the protagonists of Ekuni Kaori's *Kira kira hikaru* (1991, Twinkle, twinkle)[7] in which the characters live as husband and wife while secretly maintaining their queer identities. To complete the plan, Shiraha convinces Keiko to quit her part-time job as a clerk at the *konbini* and seek full-time employment.

However, moving away from the *konbini* and living together with Shiraha, Keiko realizes that she does not want to be a "woman" in the sense society intends, that is, a heterosexual adult female human who is happy with her heteronormative relationship and ready to procreate. Rather, she prefers to be a "neutral" human being, who belongs to the *konbini*. At this precise moment in the story, her sense of *iwakan* manifests towards the pressure to be a woman in a society still strongly marked by a gendered division of roles. Her position in the *konbini* voids this pressure. Here, while she performs her role as a clerk, all she needs to do is to adhere to the written rules of a manual that imposes standard movements and phrases, turning both men and women into genderless work machines. "Here in the convenience store we're not men and women. We're all store workers" (Murata 2018, 51), Keiko declares, and the fact that all part-timers wear the same uniform makes her think of the environment of the *konbini* as a non-gendered one—even though we know that since she started her career, Keiko has met eight different male store managers and no female ones, while her part-time co-workers were almost always students or older housewives, highlighting the gendered and hierarchal structure of that workplace.

In any case, the fact that Keiko feels comfortable only when she is in the artificial and (in her opinion) non-gendered environment of the *konbini* is the reason she chooses not to pursue a life determined by societal expectations and to instead create a new queer kinship with the *konbini*. Keiko never thinks of herself as a woman working at a convenience store, but rather, she is a "cog" or an "animal" of the *konbini*, a clerk whose work is not intertwined with any gender-based role. The hybrid identity she creates via this queer kinship makes her feel like a *subject* for the first time, she finds the place to stay where she feels she belongs (*ibasho*).

In the context of the ongoing quest to provide an ideal place in contemporary society for minority subjects who "suffer from the difficulty of their lives … unable to find a compromise with reality as well as their surroundings" (Fujita 2013, 283), Murata Sayaka seems to suggest that it can be found in the "neutralization" of gender and sex. Furukura, who has never had sexual impulses, hears the "music" of the *konbini*, a call of love that leads her to think that she has found a new sexual identity, which could be called "*konbini*-sexual." By lending her voice to female representatives of sexual minorities who do not necessarily feel the need to be loved by heterosexual adult men, Murata Sayaka confirms herself as "Matsuura Rieko's legitimate heir" (Enami 2013, 169),[8] from whom Murata Sayaka herself claimed to have received several teachings.

In the end, the "*konbini ningen*" Murata describes is a queer subject, half human and half *konbini*, with no gender despite being biologically female. And since the *konbini* itself seems to turn from an aseptic space to a more natural environment, as its mechanical sounds at the beginning of the story—the tinkle of the door, the beeps of the bar code scanner and so on (Murata 2018, 1)—turn into a "voice" (Murata 2018, 161), I argue it is also possible to consider the "*konbini ningen*" a sort of present-day *yamanba*, the literary construct who embodied "liberation and freedom from feminine norms, a feminine existence and possibility outside of and surpassing the gender system" (Mizuta 2002, 21) used by modern women writers. In

this construction, the *konbini* becomes the new mountain—a decentered place where people can live freely. Furukura Keiko chooses to live in, for, and with the *konbini*, creating a new mimetic ontology, as well as a queer kinship, unbounded to society's rules and roles.

Conclusion: Queering kinships

Patrick Carland summarizes that, within the Japanese context, "the family has been defined as a fundamentally *heteronormative* and *reproductive* unit" (Carland 2019, 217), in a model promulgated in the postwar period, which collapsed together with the bubble economy at the beginning of the 1980s, a blast whose echo still reverberates in contemporary society. The apparent death of the nuclear family as an ideal, as well as the myths around "masculinity" and "femininity," brought the emergences of new non-binary, gay, lesbian, transsexual, and queer subjects who claimed their space to live and be accepted. Yet, without finding it in the majority, most found a place in small groups, or communities, or environments that make them feel comfortable. In other words, they created new kinships to feel supported, without the discomfort of being alienated. The subjects presented in these three novels challenge normative roles, questioning what is considered normal, natural, and accepted.

Matsuura Rieko's backlash against mainstream representations of gender and sexuality is translated into *Big Toe P* in the use of a toe-penis, which allows the main protagonist Kazumi to experience a feeling of self-acceptance thanks to the extended family she finds within the Flower Show. At the end of the tour, the group eventually separates, each member going their own way. But as Kazumi has learnt, genitals are not decisive in relationships; closeness is.

Fujino Chiya depicts the mundane lives of five individuals who seem to be happy with their routine, although a pale sense of loneliness emerges, which embraces them all. Despite recent feminist and LGBTQ+ community calls for inclusivity, the majority in society seems not to accept their diversities, and they find support in each other, mirroring the way a chosen family can prove to be an even stronger relation than a biological one.

Murata Sayaka chooses to destabilize gender-binary and societal norms by presenting a queer woman whose identity hardly fits in the society, and who chooses the precarity of her job as a clerk as a metaphor for refusing to become a *shakaijin*, a married woman within the heteronormative and reproductive family. She eventually feels like a subject as she creates a new kinship with the *konbini*, paving the way for new queer alliances.

All these stories share queer individuals' desire to find a place, and represent the prelude to a new "queer boom" which is likely to emerge in the next few years, as evidenced by the increasing abundance of gender and queer issues in literature. Some examples can be found in Tawada Yōko's *Kentōshi* (2014, The Lantern Messenger; translated as The Emissary* [US] and The Last Children of Tokyo*[UK]), Yamashita Hiroka's *Kurosu* (2020, Cross), or Li Kotomi's *Higanbana ga saku shima* (2021, The island where the red spider lilies bloom), just to mention a few. More and more women writers are contributing to this new "queer boom," probably because women, just like queer individuals, represented, and still represent, a minority in Japanese literature and media. The hope is, in the new millennium women and queer subjects will finally find a place in a more inclusive society.

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Notes

[1] Prize awarded to women writers from 1962 to 2000, promoted by the publishing house Chūō Kōronsha.

[2] Masao is written with the Chinese characters of "straight/right" and "man/husband."

[3] Manga series written and illustrated by Takeuchi Naoko serialized in Japan from 1992 to 1997 by Kōdansha, and released into an anime series by Toei Animation. The success of the story led to a live-action television adaptation and several movie transpositions, as well as to the worldwide translation of the manga and anime.

[4] This doesn't mean that transgenders were fully recognized as such. As Mark McLelland remarks, "it was not until 2004 that, under strict conditions, some transgender individuals were granted the right to change their birth sex on identity documents" (McLelland 2011, 14).

[5] See Dale, 2020; and Dasgupta, 2005.

[6] See also Specchio (2018; 2020) and Harada and Seaman (in this volume). *Seimeishiki* was first published in 2013 in the periodical *Shinchō* and then in 2019 in the collection which brings its title, issued by Kawade Shobō Shinsha.

[7] See Iwabuchi Hiroko and Hasegawa Kei (2006), *Jendā de yomu ai/sei/kazoku.*

[8] In particular, Enami emphasizes that in Matsuura Rieko's *Kenshin* (A Dog's Body), the protagonist rejects her "woman" nature and indulges in a sexual deviation which can be called "dogsexual." See also Fraser's chapter in this volume.

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