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JOHN WHITTIER TREAT

## Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: *Shōjo* Culture and the Nostalgic Subject

The Japanese are no longer producers. Our existence consists solely of the distribution and consumption of “things” brought us from elsewhere, “things” with which we play. Nor are these “things” actually tangible, but are instead only signs without any direct utility in life. None of what we typically purchase would, were we deprived of it, be a matter of life or death. These “things” are continually converted into signs without substance, signs such as information, stocks, or land. What name are we to give this life of ours today?

The name is *shōjo*.

Ōtsuka Eiji, *Shōjo minzokugaku*<sup>1</sup>

The Shining Season of the *Shōjo*, Never to Come Home Again

Cover blurb, *Tugumi*<sup>2</sup>

This is an essay about a young Japanese writer who calls herself Banana, cites comics as the greatest influence on her style, and whose pink-covered novels of nostalgic schoolgirls have raised the aesthetic of cuteness to new heights in contemporary Japan. This is also an essay that catalogues some of the particular forms, both literary and sociological, that late twentieth-century consumer capitalism has assumed in Japan. It must begin, however, with the account of a grotesque series of murders that, combined with Banana's success and consumerism's power, has something important to say about Japanese popular culture today.

I would like to thank Hayashi Tadashi for first bringing Yoshimoto Banana to my attention. I am also grateful to Lawrence Grossberg of the University of Illinois, Therese Grisham of the University of Washington, and the anonymous referees for the *Journal of Japanese Studies*.

1. Ōtsuka Eiji, *Shōjo minzokugaku* (Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 1991), p. 18.
2. Yoshimoto Banana, *Tugumi* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1989).

## I

In early August 1989, the Japanese press reported that Miyazaki Tsutomu, a 26-year-old printer with a history of child molestation, had been arrested the previous month on suspicion of abducting, mutilating, and murdering a young girl. Subsequent and widely publicized investigations led to the discovery of three more victims, each of them juvenile, female, and horribly dismembered. Miyazaki confessed that he had committed these crimes over a period of several years, and furthermore that he had perpetrated them out of “necrophilic desires.” The police discovered in his home over 6,000 videotapes, some of which were of his victims and some of which, the newspapers reported with a telling care for high-technological detail, were in “the Beta format,” and others “VHS.” In addition to the video equipment used to prepare and display these tapes, police confiscated from the Miyazaki’s home such sophisticated electronic apparatus as copying machines, a personal computer, and a word processor. These possessions sufficed to identify Miyazaki in the public mind with the 1980s key phrase of the *otaku-zoku*, used to describe introverted young adult males fond of video games, computers, and comics. He was, in the nearest American parlance, a “nerd” or a “dweeb.”

Early theories of the suspect’s alleged necrophilia held that “family pressure in favor of marriage [had] distressed Miyazaki and prompted the crimes,” but also noted that he had been influenced by a recent Japanese horror-film series entitled “Guinea Pig.” Two installments in particular were cited: *Akuma no joi-san* (Devilish Woman Doctor), in which the popular male transvestite Peter played the title role and thus provided a possible link with Miyazaki’s own use of a feminine pseudonym in notes he had sent his victims’ families, and *Ketsuniku no hana* (Flower of Blood and Flesh), which included the depiction of crimes much like those of which he now stood accused.

Two years later, just as Miyazaki was about to undergo a battery of psychological tests—he had amended his confession to say he committed the murders not deliberately “but as if he were in a dream”—his lawyers issued the following statement: “The crime, which seems to be unrelated to our lives, is in fact closely related to social phenomena such as unified [coeducational] school education, the overflow of information and goods, and a distorted parent-child relationship.”<sup>3</sup> Miyazaki’s defense team in-

3. “Child Killer’s Mental State to be Examined,” *Japan Times*, Nov. 29, 1990, p. 2. For the sources of earlier quotes and background information concerning the Miyazaki case, see “Police Find a Severed Head in Okutama, Say Suspect Admits Killing 5-year-old Child,” *Japan Times*, Aug. 11, 1989, p. 1; “Police Take Miyazaki to Koto Ward and Charge Him with Girl’s Slaying,” *Japan Times*, Aug. 12, 1989, p. 2; “Horror Video May Have Led to

tended to rationalize its client's admitted murders by invoking the media's loaded rhetoric of contemporary public ills, namely the breakdown in social order, the eroticization of children, and the proliferation of gratuitous images and commodities synchronized with the postmodern consumer-capitalist "crisis" of Japanese society today. Miyazaki, surrounded in his home with all the choice paraphernalia that marks both the material affluence and alleged moral decline of that society, was portrayed in the press as a hyperbole of what the individual today threatens to become.<sup>4</sup> The product of a failed family, deviant in his object choices and gender identification and unable to interact socially, Miyazaki was able nonetheless to "live" a life by simulating one. He retreated into a cartoonish criminality with the accomplice of image-producing and reproducing equipment so successfully marketed by Sony, Matsushita, Canon, and company, and there rehearsed private desires on videotape destined to be broadcast on the evening news.

Those desires do indeed appear resonant with the nearly unbridled semiotic play of excesses deployed in the strategies of advanced capitalism not only in Japan but around the world. "Nothing," Brooke Shields reminded America when she still looked ambiguously pubescent, "comes between me and my Calvins." Miyazaki Tsutomu trespassed when he acted, according to his lawyers, in precisely the way the discourses of the modern consumer's life encourage us to act, were we only to take those discourses "at their word." He consumed the empty sign of our simulated desire and disposed of it like a throw-away carton; he pursued a terrifyingly referential finish what was always meant to elude us because it is just that Sisyphean pursuit of the newest product, or the youngest girl, that makes the wheels of our late-model lives go around and around. The Japanese public was obsessed—for a while—with these serial murders in much

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Murder of 5-year-old girl," *Japan Times*, Aug. 15, 1989, p. 2; "Murder Suspect Reportedly Blames His Actions on Necrophilic Desires," *Japan Times*, Aug. 20, 1989, p. 2; "Copier and Word Processor Seized in Second Search of Miyazaki Home," *Japan Times*, Aug. 22, 1989, p. 2; and "Miyazaki Says He Videotaped Ayako after Abducting Her," *Japan Times*, Aug. 23, 1989, p. 2.

4. The Miyazaki case has inspired much controversy over the mass media's role in creating the public sensation that still surrounds these crimes and in particular their perpetrator. Anthropologist Ōtsuka Eiji—who was admittedly shocked to learn through footage broadcast on television news that Miyazaki's possessions included one of his own books on *shōjo* culture—has gone so far as to proclaim himself "Miyazaki's friend" and organize a legal defense support group on his behalf, not out of sympathy for the crimes to which Miyazaki has admitted but because of his alarm at the Japanese media's unrestrained power to reinvent, luridly and at will, anyone as a demented social failure and threat to the public good. For a survey of critical reaction to the "Miyazaki Incident," see the essays assembled in Ōta Shuppan, ed., *M no sedai: Bokura to Miyazaki-kun* (Tokyo: Ōta Shuppan, 1991).

the same way, perhaps, that the Ted Bundy story once fascinated the American public. Serial murders committed by simulacra—"false copies"—of ourselves attract morbid curiosity precisely because the crimes do seem to us both so absurd and utterly predictable at the same time, the consequence of newly postmodern imperatives which beget desires never meant to be satiated.

At the same time that Miyazaki Tsutomu was committing his crimes against young girls, a young woman by the name of Yoshimoto Banana stood at the center of another media blitz. Banana is the daughter of Yoshimoto Takaaki, perhaps Japan's most influential, if maverick, postwar intellectual<sup>5</sup>; she was also the most important new writer to debut in the late 1980s, familiarly known by a botanical pen name that insinuates something as perishable and consumable, as domestic and playful, as her father's high-cultural work is conversely massive, argumentative, and almost unreadably serious.<sup>6</sup> Born Yoshimoto Mahoko in 1964, a year whose Olympic spectacle is typically cited as proof of Japan's successful entry into the company of advanced capitalist nations, Banana, unlike Takaaki a generation earlier, has grown up in a late-twentieth-century Japan where pervasive talk of the tedium of life ("sono nani mo nasa," as she puts it<sup>7</sup>) contrasts with the turbulent national history that drove Takaaki's and his postwar generation's critique of an intelligentsia faulted for the unfortunate results of its purported elitist insularity.

At the age of 23 Banana published her debut work *Kitchin* (Kitchen) in the November 1987 issue of the literary journal *Kaien*. She immediately attracted the attention of readers and critics, and won that journal's annual prize for new writers. *Kitchin* is the story of a young college student, Sakurai Mikage. Orphaned at an early age, Mikage is suddenly left completely alone in the world when her grandmother dies. She finds lodging with a young man named Yūichi and his mother Eriko, only to discover that Eriko is a transsexual and in fact Yūichi's father. This story, whose raw style is reminiscent of a teenager's diary, evokes what is commonly if curiously termed the "unique world" of Japanese schoolgirls.

5. For an introduction to Yoshimoto Takaaki's importance in postwar Japanese intellectual culture, see the late Lawrence Olson's "Intellectuals and 'The People': On Yoshimoto Takaaki," *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer 1978), pp. 327–57.

6. Despite the suggestive similarity between Banana's choice of pen name and that of seventeenth-century poet Matsuo Bashō, Banana insists (perhaps in the spirit of her typical mockery of the high-cultural) that the inspiration for her name came from a flowering banana plant that was placed on a table in the restaurant where she worked as a part-time waitress after graduating from college. See Yoshimoto Banana, "Banana no himitsu," *Painappurin* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1989), pp. 13–16.

7. Yoshimoto, *Tugumi*, p. 236.

One of the judges for the *Kaien* prize, senior novelist and critic Nakamura Shin'ichirō, said of *Kitchin* that

this is a work written on a theme, and with a sensibility, that the older generation of which I am part could not have imagined. It is the product of an abandon completely indifferent to literary traditions. Its naive rejection of the very question of whether it does or does not conform to conventional concepts is precisely what makes it strike me as a new sort of literature.<sup>8</sup>

Nakamura, while guarded in his praise, is nonetheless generous in thinking of Banana's writing as "literature" (*bungaku*), in Japanese more than English a high-cultural appellation. Others have wondered. She has been labeled the cutting edge of the new Japanese "minimalism," ultimate in the sense that she is the perfect pop-cultural disposable (*tsukaisute*) author, like the *manga* comic books with which she is legitimately compared.<sup>9</sup> The "rejection" to which Nakamura refers includes the entire high-cultural pantheon: Banana's debts, she tells us herself, are to horror-novelist Stephen King and *manga* writer Iwadata Mariko.<sup>10</sup> But part of the critics' doubt over Banana's literary longevity hinges on the assumption that, like the popularity of such pop singers as 1980s-sensation Matsuda Seiko, her teenage narratives cannot survive her own teenage years, that there is nothing to her stories apart from the guise she herself assumes as a *shōjo* novelist. This is an assumption that betrays a cynical hope on the part of some for such stories to fade quickly from view, and it is a cynicism defensively generated by the nervous crisis of intellectuals in Japan dating back to the mid-1960s, the years of Banana's own infancy.

In Japan today it is commonly said that more than half the submissions to the numerous new-writer prizes come from adolescents. Banana herself has stated that she wanted to be a writer from her earliest elementary schools days. It was a desire, she says, just like wanting to become an "airline stewardess" and thus presumably an ambition no more special.<sup>11</sup> But quite unlike every aspiring author, Banana's novels and collections of short stories and essays, and the two motion pictures they have inspired, have been notably commercial. By 1990 her five hard-cover books had sold

8. Nakamura Shin'ichirō, quoted in Mitsui Takayuki and Washida Koyata, *Yoshimoto Banana no shinwa* (Tokyo: Aoyumi Sha, 1989), p. 143.

9. Shima Hiroyuki, "Yoshimoto Banana wa kakitsukerareru ka?" *Bessatsu Takarajima* 88, p. 152.

10. See Yoshimoto "S. Kingu to watakushi" and "Josei ni tsuite," *Painappurin*, pp. 73–78, 122–32; also her "'Sakka' no kaku wa hitogara no yosa de kimaru," *Fruits Basket* (Tokyo: Fukutake Shoten, 1990), pp. 197–98.

11. Yoshimoto, "Yonjūdai to nijūdai," *Fruits Basket*, p. 116.

four million copies, and she is already available in English.<sup>12</sup> Although it is readily assumed in Japan that the preponderance of her readers are women from high-school age to approximately 30, one suspects that Banana's works, like the *shōjo manga* or "teenage girls' comics" often indicated as the major influence on her themes and style, are enjoyed by readers of older ages and men, as well.<sup>13</sup> Banana is, in the words of her critic Washida Koyata, "without a doubt the number one [*nanbā wan*] writer of popular fiction today."<sup>14</sup>

This success, however, has been linked with the same "overflow of information and goods and a distorted parent-child relationship" cited as the root causes of her contemporary Miyazaki Tsutomu's crimes.<sup>15</sup> Critics, in often apocalyptic rhetoric, generally view Banana and her success as final confirmation of a fundamental shift in how one is to understand "culture" in Japan since the early 1970s, particularly "literary culture." Nakamura's bewildered and backhanded praise is one register of how Banana represents what older generations of writers have dreaded: the victory of popular, which is to imply non-oppositional, culture over the critical po-

12. Yoshimoto, "Kitchen," translated by Ann Sherif, in Helen Mitsios, ed., *New Japanese Voices: The Best Contemporary Fiction from Japan* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991), pp. 152–71. A complete translation of this novella is now available from Grove Press (1993) as *Kitchen*, translated by Megan Backus.

13. See Mitsui and Washida, *Yoshimoto Banana no shinwa*, pp. 9–54.

14. Washida Koyata, "Yoshimoto Banana no shudai wa shi," *Ushio*, No. 373 (May 1990), p. 440.

15. One may object to my use here of the term "shōjo" to refer to Miyazaki's victims, who were indeed much younger than any of Banana's characters and thus were, perhaps significantly, *not shōjo*. While true that most accounts of his crimes speak of murdered "yōjo" (little girls) rather than "shōjo" (young girls) (but not all: Yazaki Yōko, for example, calls Miyazaki's victims "*giji-shōjo*," or "pseudo-shōjo" ["*Giji-shōjo kuraishisu*," in Ōta Shuppan, ed., *M no sedai*, pp. 158–63]), those social and cultural traits associated with *shōjo* identity—most crucially *kawaisa*, or "cuteness"—are attributed to even infant females. In a published dialogue with Ōtsuka Eiji, Nakamori Akio suggests that Ōtsuka's general definition of the *shōjo* as "whomever is said to be cute [*kawaii*]" in fact best applies to younger *yōjo* (Ōtsuka and Nakamori, "Bokura wa media no kodomo da," in Ōta Shuppan, ed., *M no sedai*, p. 70). Just why Japanese popular culture should not differentiate between infant and adolescent females on the basis of sexual availability, as does American popular culture, is suggestively answered by critic Serizawa Shunsuke, who is quoted in the Ōtsuka-Nakamori dialogue:

*Shōjo* excel in cuteness, *yōjo* in innocence, and both have begun to signify an idealized Eros. The tendency to attribute this quality to females of ever-younger ages can be seen as the inevitable consequence of the spontaneous drive in consumer society to market an unproductive [*hiseisanteki*] Eros as a new universal—a new commodity. (p. 73)

Rather than think of Miyazaki's lethal pursuit of five-year-olds, then, as a flight from the "proper" object of an adult male heterosexuality, it makes more sense to see it as the logical (and in this instance, tragic) result of just this "tendency . . . of consumer society" to render young women and their "unproductive" libidinal value literally a commodity value, as well.

tential long (if anxiously) associated with *jun-bungaku*, or “pure literature.” Ōe Kenzaburō, a prominent voice on the left for intellectual literature committed to social change, has bemoaned for nearly two decades the irrelevancy of serious fiction for reading audiences in contemporary Japan. In the widely reprinted essay “A Novelist’s Lament” that appeared on the eve of Banana’s debut, Ōe complained that “Japanese intellectuals, including students at the major metropolitan universities, no longer look to serious literary writing for new models of the future.”<sup>16</sup> What Ōe means when he uses words such as “serious” and “models” are the discourses of his own New Left generation raised on Sartre, Mao, and James Dean and committed to the romance of the artist as high-brow disaffected rebel. Banana and a host of other young writers today such as Tawara Machi, Murakami Haruki, and Takahashi Gen’ichirō comprise in the words of pop musician Nanba Hiroyuki the “pure literature [*jun-bungaku*] of the *manga* generation” in a reference to the comics that fairly dominate the print side of Japanese popular culture today and that raise the collective ire of “serious” critics.<sup>17</sup>

When asked if her famous father Takaaki inspired her to become a professional writer, Banana responded that on the contrary it was her reading of *manga*.<sup>18</sup> There are, however, certain familial coincidences. At the same time that Ōe was ruing the demise of intellectual, politically critical literature, Takaaki was theorizing present-day Japanese culture as a “complex indeterminacy,” which is to say a culture without a fixed center or hierarchy. Instead, argued Takaaki, Japanese culture is now one in which diverse classes, subcultures, and discourses circulate and contend with equal claims to legitimacy.<sup>19</sup>

Yoshimoto father and daughter alike enlist in their respective analytical and fictional work certain postmodern qualities of contemporary life which, for better or worse, fundamentally depart from the presumptions of modernism and modernist literature. Banana refers to herself with no evident embarrassment as a “popular writer” (*taishū sakka*).<sup>20</sup> She boasts that her generation was “raised on *manga* and TV. That’s why we understand only those things that go fast.”<sup>21</sup> Narratives spun out of speeding sound-bites, this postmodern textuality that Banana was both raised within and

16. Ōe Kenzaburō, “A Novelist’s Lament,” *Japan Times*, Nov. 23, 1986, p. 6.

17. Nanba Hiroyuki, “Yoshimoto Banana: ‘Manga sedai’ no jun-bungaku,” in Hasegawa Izumi, ed., *Josei sakka no shinryū* (a special volume of *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to kanshō*) (Tokyo: Shibundō, 1991), p. 316.

18. Yoshimoto, “‘Sakka’ no kaku,” p. 194.

19. Yoshimoto Takaaki, quoted by Inamasu Tatsuo, *Aidoru kōgaku* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1989), p. 14.

20. Yoshimoto, “Ren’ai ni tsuite,” *Fruits Basket*, p. 14.

21. Yoshimoto, “Watakushi-tachi ‘Chibi Maruko-chan’ sedai,” *Fruits Basket*, p. 269.

now reproduces in her own work cannot be countenanced as fully literary in the view of critics nostalgic for the times when writers believed themselves engaged in the work of a critical introspection that prepares consciousness for the prospect of social change. Banana's stories, given their idiomatic kinship with billboards, television commercials, pop songs, and fashion magazines, appear to those critics as an unconditional capitulation to the forces of commercialization so often cited as the nefarious agent behind the production of popular culture, a charge familiar in the West at least since Theodor Adorno's famous essay on the depressing predictability of Tin Pan Alley's music.

The apparent victory of popular culture emblemized by Banana's success and its unsettling postmodernist traits has produced apprehensive fears among those intellectuals convinced of modernist high culture's unique stake in issues of human freedom and individual worth. As in the case of Miyazaki's crimes, desires licensed in the culture-wide objectification of young women and propagated by the media and its technology seem to go "awry" once they surface in Banana's stories only to be redirected toward new readers (or victims, in Miyazaki's instance). In producing a specifically *shōjo* point of view—ideologically a *shōjo* "subject position"—Banana authorizes a place from where the popular, consumer-capitalist culture that articulates the *shōjo* can be reiterated and potentially reread.

Banana has clearly generated an enthusiastic response among readers who heretofore lacked a body of fiction with which to empathize. These readers are not solely adolescent women. One of her critics—both male and nearly middle-aged—has written of his and his wife's startling, exciting experience of identification with the vacuous ("nani mo nai") sense of life represented in Banana's books.<sup>22</sup> Her fans are reportedly attracted to her works because they are "easy to understand," written in a style both colloquial and "real."<sup>23</sup> Fans could only approve, however, if the "world of girls" therein described is the idealized ideological "lived" experience of those fans themselves, and such experience can neither be simple nor insignificant. Banana's stories are not causally dismissible as the sentimental narratives we may or may not correctly associate with *shōjo* culture in Japan. Banana's romanticism is always qualified and amended, and while her characters are thoroughly assimilated into Japanese youth culture, they are not reductively "pop" in the sense of lacking discrete individuality. Part of their appeal certainly does, however, lie in the way they mark a clean break with earlier "pure" fiction valorized as "intellectual" and

22. Matsumoto Takayuki, *Yoshimoto Banana ron: "Futsū" to iu miishiki* (Tokyo: JICC Shuppanyoku, 1991), p. 16.

23. Mitsui and Washida, *Yoshimoto Banana no shinwa*, pp. 107–8.

a shift toward a fiction unapologetically and intimately targeted toward “anata,” “you,” i.e., the teenage woman and her cohorts, an audience and point of view never too removed from the center arena of contemporary Japanese public culture.<sup>24</sup>

Banana has defined her generation as that age cohort that “came into contact with exactly the same kinds of consumer products” (*mattaku onaji yō na shōhin ni furete kita*).<sup>25</sup> Those commodities, in other words, define what is particular about the generation induced to consume them. Magazines, radio, above all television: in whatever direction one turns, the barely (and thus ambiguously) pubescent woman is there both to promote products and purchase them, to excite the consumer and herself be thrilled by the flurry of goods and services that circulate like toys around her. Banana recognizes that her own works are commodities, which is to say that they have a planned obsolescence; she has said, for example, that she wants all of her previously published books removed from the store shelves whenever she comes out with something new.<sup>26</sup>

24. Much of the criticism of Banana’s writing concerns itself with issues of its language and style, neither of which is held in universally high regard. However, Matsumoto Takayuki, who notes the marked difference of Banana’s writing from “the formal language of ‘literature’” and its congruency with the language “of the ‘comic book,’ of ‘animation,’ of ‘film,’ of ‘popular songs,’ and of ‘television,’” also claims for it a “contiguity with the sensibility of the everyday lives we lead” (*Yoshimoto Banana ron*, pp. 16, 83). Ogasawara Kenji has dubbed Banana’s close transcription of young people’s speech as “the new literary vernacular [*shin-genbunitchi*],” implying a shift underway in the language of Japanese literature as momentous as that which occurred in the Meiji period (Ogasawara Kenji, *Bungakuteki koji-tachi no yukue* [Tokyo: Goryū Shoin, 1990], p. 147).

Of particular relevance here, however, are the distinctive discursive features of Banana’s writing style. Each of her stories and essays produces the effect of a direct, intimate, and subjectifying address: that Banana is literally speaking privately and in confidence to a reader assumed to be a fellow *shōjo*. Matsumoto understands this effect to be generated by a “subliminal second-person [*senzaiteki nininshō*]” (a term used earlier by Okuno Takeo in his analysis of Dazai Osamu’s predominant narrative mode) (*Yoshimoto Banana ron*, pp. 43–52). The power of such narration resides in the production of the reader, regardless of gender, as the *shōjo* subject itself: an interpellation that potentially explains much of the anxiety expressed by Banana’s older male critics. But her rhetoric of a homogenous *shōjo* subjectivity has conceivable ideological and social consequences. Writing on the quality and utility of the *shōjo* colloquial in general, Kohama Itsurō observes:

So-called “feminine speech” is discarded in favor of a radically blunt language [*tsuppari kotoba*] usually deemed vulgar in the extreme. Such language conforms to the *shōjo*’s paradoxical aesthetics by virtue of the audacity and insularity that that very radicalness brings with it. . . . This obdurate language functions among *shōjo* almost like a secret society’s special code, and thus spontaneously expresses their rejection of any likelihood of their being sanctioned by the existing civil society. (“*Shudai to shite no shōjo*,” in Honda Masuko et al., eds., *Shōjo ron* [Tokyo: Aoyumi Sha, 1991], p. 91.)

25. Yoshimoto, “Watakushi-tachi,” p. 239.

26. Yoshimoto, “Chōnōryoku tte, zettai ni sonzai suru to omou,” *Fruits Basket*, p. 279.

The modern concept of the *shōjo* coalesced in the Meiji period, when rapid economic change produced a social utility for “adolescence,” i.e., a period between childhood and adulthood during which labor is trained for its role in industrial culture. Horikiri Naoto dates the concept of a “special *shōjo* world” to the Taisho period, when rising affluence permitted middle- and upper-class families to send their daughters to girls’ boarding schools, creating the youthful and all-female subculture described, for example, in Yoshiya Nobuko’s 1924 literary work, *Hana monogatari* (Flower Stories). Before this time, such girls were routinely put to domestic work by the age of 12 or 13; after, at least for girls from certain class backgrounds, there was an extended period of adolescence that soon generated its own dedicated cultural milieu.<sup>27</sup>

However, with the advent of Banana’s generation the *shōjo* was rearticulated as a definitive feature of Japanese late-model, consumer capitalism. It was during Banana’s infancy and youth that modern boutiques (known in Japanese as “fanshii bizunesu,” or “fancy businesses”), brand-name marketing, and Western fast-food merchandising were introduced widely throughout Japan. The role of the *shōjo* in this service economy was not to make these products, but to consume them (more precisely, to *symbolize* their consumption). The *shōjo* are, if you will, “off the production line,” lacking any real referent in the “economy” of postmodern Japan. Until they marry, and thus cease to be *shōjo*, they are relegated to pure play as pure sign. It is in the interim of their *shōjo* years that these young women (and the young men that increasingly resemble them) participate in a uniquely *unproductive* culture. They effectively signify sheer consumption, and as such cannot exist as wholly “real” in an economy otherwise committed to creating value, be it in terms of goods and services, if one is an ideal man (*otoko*), or children, if one is an ideal woman (*haha*).<sup>28</sup>

27. Horikiri Naoto, “Onna wa dokyō, shōjo wa aikyō,” in Honda et al., eds., *Shōjo ron*, pp. 108–9.

28. Women, of course, have been widely theorized as the literal items, or token signs, of sexual or economic exchange at least since Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* was published in 1949; and it is in French feminism today, heir not only to structural anthropology but to its encounter with contemporary (specifically Althusserian) Marxism, where such theorization has perhaps proceeded the furthest. Of special relevance here to the important distinction I wish to draw between the socioeconomic deployment of Japanese *shōjo* and that of adult women (*haha*), for example, may be some of the ideas displayed by Luce Irigaray in her essay “Women in the Market”:

*As mother, woman remains on the side of (re)productive nature and, because of this, man can never fully transcend his relation to the “natural” . . . The virginal woman, on the other hand, is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men. In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange. (Luce Irigaray, “Women in the Market,” from *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by*

The word most often associated with this *shōjo* culture is *kawaii*, or “cute.” This aesthetic value is directly linked to the consumer role that *shōjo* exist to play. A *kawaii* girl is attractive, and thus valorized, but lacks libidinal agency of her own. While others may sexually desire the *shōjo*—and indeed, another phenomenon in the Japan of the 1980s was talk of the *rorikon* “Lolita complex” of adult heterosexual males<sup>29</sup>—the *shōjo*’s own sexual energy, directed as it is toward stuffed animals, pink notebooks, strawberry crepes, and Hello Kitty novelties, is an energy not yet deployable in the heterosexual economy of adult life in Japan. But as a master-sign for economic consumption, the *shōjo* is indeed of immediate and profitable use: in some sense, anyone who consumes in Japan today is to that extent a “shōjo.” Horikiri, for one, is aware of an ironic reversal that now marks contemporary Japanese culture:

I wonder if we men shouldn’t now think of ourselves as “shōjo,” given our compulsory and excessive consumerism, a consumerism that in recent years afflicts us like sleepwalking. We are no longer the shabby and middle-aged teacher Humbert Humbert who chased Lolita’s rear-end in his dreams. We all have become the forever-young Lolita herself. We are driven night and day to be relentless consumers. . . . The “shōjo,” that new human species born of modern commodification, has today commodified everything and everyone.<sup>30</sup>

It is important, given Horikiri’s extended application of the term “shōjo,” to understand the word as one of difference rather than identity. It is probably incorrect and certainly misleading to translate the term *shōjo*

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Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985], pp. 185–86.)

I can only speculate on what Irigaray would have concluded of a culture, such as modern Japan’s, in which the virginal woman—the *shōjo*—is not merely “the sign of relations among men” but additionally a master trope (and more) for conceivably all relations of production to consumption. For an elaboration of this perhaps peculiarly Japanese articulation of young women with consumer capitalism in general, see the prologue to Ōtsuka Eiji’s *Shōjo minzokugaku* suggestively entitled “Dare mo ga ‘shōjo’ de aru jidai”—We Are All *Shōjo* Today (pp. 9–24).

29. A concise description of both this “Lolita complex” and an indication of its implication for the establishment of a heterosexual male subject and its agency at the expense of women is found in remarks made by the late novelist and critic Shibusawa Tatsuhiro:

We men find little birds, dogs, cats, and *shōjo* endlessly erotic precisely because they are passive beings of which they themselves cannot speak [*mizukara wa katari-dasenai ukemi no sonzai*]. . . . Of all these, it is the *shōjo* who most perfectly satisfies the essential sexual urges of the male . . . because both socially and sexually the *shōjo* is utterly ignorant. And being ignorant, the *shōjo*—like little birds and dogs—symbolizes a total object, the object of play, and one that cannot express itself of its own accord. (Quoted by Iizawa Kōtarō, “Shashin, shōjo, korekushon,” in Honda et al., eds., *Shōjo ron*, pp. 40–41.)

30. Horikiri, “Onna wa dokyō,” pp. 114–15.

with any single English phrase. “Young girl” is not only redundant but can refer to infants, and “young woman” implies a kind of sexual maturity clearly forbidden to *shōjo*. In English, gender is binary—at every stage one is either “male” or “female.” But in Japan, one might well argue that *shōjo* constitute their own gender, neither male nor female but rather something importantly detached from the productive economy of heterosexual reproduction. Anthropologist Jennifer Robertson points out in an essay on the all-women Takarazuka troupe that “literally speaking, *shōjo* means a ‘not-quite-female female. . . . *Shōjo* also implies heterosexual *inexperience* and homosexual *experience*”<sup>31</sup>—presumably homosexual because the emotional life of the *shōjo* is essentially narcissistic in that it is self-referential, and self-referential as long as the *shōjo* is not employed productively in the sexual and capitalist economies.<sup>32</sup>

Authorial subject “Yoshimoto Banana” herself is used to exemplify *shōjo* culture within its critical and media representations. Though now nominally beyond the strictest upper age limit of the *shōjo*, Banana’s own life is depicted as still thoroughly *shōjo*-like. Banana is the first literary figure in Japan to achieve the status of an *aidoru*, English “idol,” a celebrity rank heretofore limited to such wildly popular *shōjo* singers as Matsuda Seiko. The *aidoru*’s appeal lies not in any unique talent but instead in its purported lack: anyone is theoretically a potential Matsuda, or Banana, and it is that interchangeability and disposability—that “commodification”—that makes the *shōjo* affiliate with the signifying processes of Japanese consumer capitalism. Just as the television *aidoru* is a proliferating reproduction of the cinema star (*sutā*), the fiction-writing (or more commonly, *manga*-writing) *shōjo* rebounds as a photocopy toss-off of the *sakka* “novelist.”

Given this “absence” of value that is now itself a value, it is easy to look upon Banana and what her success portends with disdain or even alarm. As is often said of popular culture in general, the *shōjo* phenomenon seems to celebrate the rapidness of our contemporary existences, as against the richness of human life attested to in such high-cultural artifacts

31. Jennifer Robertson, “Gender-bending in Paradise: Doing ‘Female’ and ‘Male’ in Japan,” *Genders*, No. 5 (Summer 1989), p. 56.

32. One might cite the compulsory school uniform as a further indication of the indeterminate gender, in binary terms, of the *shōjo*. The sailor’s suit or a blazer, once male clothing, is now adapted by the (often single “sex”) institutions that engender *shōjo* identity in order to mark them as neither “quite-female” nor “quite-male,” but instead simply as *shōjo*—a term whose untranslatability into American English suggests distinctly Japanese gender constructions that might help account for Japanese popular culture’s evident difference from American in its devotion to adolescent women. See Ōtsuka, *Shōjo minzokugaku*, pp. 25–46.

as the “intellectual novel.”<sup>33</sup> Specifically the lament most often heard over *shōjo* culture since the 1970s is its apparently complete displacement of the overtly critical Japanese “youth culture” of the 1960s which, like its counterparts in Europe and North America, pointedly took issue with institutional power.<sup>34</sup> This remorse for the eclipse of the 1960s’ modernist “counter-culture” and the related trepidation before the rise of a complicitous mass culture recall attacks made on the “culture industry” by European intellectuals before World War II, who held that the actual product of film, radio, and advertising was the construction of a “pseudo-individual” to purchase goods and services. In this critique, popular culture was identical with the dominant capitalist ideology, with the intent of defeating authentic selfhood and replacing it with pliant workers and consumers. As T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote in 1944, “the culture industry as a whole has molded men as a type unflinchingly reproduced in every product.”<sup>35</sup> This view of popular culture, still current, usefully

33. More alarmed than most at the phenomenon of Yoshimoto Banana is Masao Miyoshi, who has recently dismissed her writings as “baby talk, uninterrupted by humor, emotion, idea, not to say irony or intelligence” (*Off-Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991], p. 236). Miyoshi characterizes literature from Tanaka Yasuo’s 1980 *Nantonaku, kurisutaru* to Banana as “bastardized,” a telling choice of metaphor in light of Banana’s thematic disruption of the so-called legitimate family. Miyoshi echoes Adorno’s panic that popular literature serves no function other than simple commercial advertisement:

In Yoshimoto Banana’s stories, girl baby talk drones on about the cool and abundant delights of gourmet commercial life. Yoshimoto’s imaginary space is filled with floating zombies defined by the blurs of the brand goods they choose to buy. Unreadably banal and vacant, her books sell by the millions. (“Women’s Short Stories in Japan,” *Mānoa*, Vol. 3, No. 2 [Fall 1991], p. 38.)

Leaving aside Miyoshi’s exasperation with the book-buying public, he is wrong, but revealingly so, about the content of her books. They contain none of “gourmet commercial life” or “brand goods” shopping that he attributes to them. But the fact that he remembers her work as otherwise suggests the powerful and perhaps even unconscious effects of the widespread synchronization of the *shōjo* cult and consumer capitalism that does indeed exist in Japanese mass culture.

34. *Asahi shinbun* cultural editor Nishijima Takeo has darkly concluded of popular culture in Japan today:

Japanese culture in the 1980s was a culture that sucked everything in like a black hole, and let nothing out. No oppositional culture was established to provide an antithesis to the traditional one. Nor did any native culture develop to critique European or American culture. What did develop was only a retroculture that cited mere convention. (*Kara-genki no jidai: Hachijū nendai bunkaron* [Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun-sha, 1991], p. 208)

For a further, and personal, comparison of Japan’s contemporary popular culture with its 1960s youth culture, see Furuhashi Nobuyoshi, *Yoshimoto Banana to Tawara Machi* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1990).

35. T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Seabury, 1972), p. 127.

points to the relationships between cultural practices and modes of capitalist production, but reductively describes ideology as monolithic and finally irresistible.

In more recent decades, however, the analysis of popular culture has been enlivened with more complex and less static models of the relationship between ideology and mass culture.<sup>36</sup> Rather than reduce consumers under popular culture to the mindless dupes of some omnipotent “system,” it now seems more illuminating to posit that within the matrices of popular cultural production and reception there are a plethora of opportunities for the rearticulation of the roles that might very well be intended for or assigned us. Within that dynamic set of discursive and non-discursive practices called popular culture, a polyvalent “we” construct for “ourselves” equally various and even contradictory meanings out of what may indeed seem to be the uniform products of mass culture. It is commonplace now, after the work of critics such as Fredric Jameson in the United States and Stuart Hall in Britain, both of whom elaborate ideas initiated by Antonio Gramsci, to look upon popular culture as the site of struggle for hegemony, a “contested terrain” between the admittedly dominant ideological intentions for how we are to live within culture and the emergent ideological ways in which we may succeed in re-articulating that culture in our own diverse interests. If, as Jameson argues, popular culture is both “ideological and utopian,” then it is internally contradictory in a way that permits us some small space to position ourselves variously within it.<sup>37</sup>

It is in this framework that I wish to read Yoshimoto Banana: as a phenomenon that on one level seems to celebrate the “lifestyles” Japanese are encouraged to lead under its present and not wholly consistent consumer-capitalist logic, yet at the same time describes a melancholy ambivalence over those same lifestyles—suggesting an equally ambivalent stance in regard to the ideologies that inform them. Banana’s stories, no less than those of a modernist Natsume Sōseki or Ōe Kenzaburō, permit their reader to interpret meaning and interpolate point of view, and it could

36. Lawrence Grossberg has frequently needed to remind critics of popular culture that they

must avoid reducing the politics of popular cultural practices to any single dimension or measure. Empowerment need not deny the possibility of disempowerment, or of forms of empowerment that are oppressive. It does, however, register the fact that people must find something positive in the forms of popular culture that they celebrate. (“Putting Pop Back into Postmodernism,” in Andrew Ross, ed. for the Social Text Collective, *Universal Abandonment: The Politics of Postmodernism* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988], p. 187.)

37. See Fredric Jameson, “Rêification et utopie dans la culture de masse,” *Etudes Françaises*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1983–84), pp. 121–38; and Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 227–39.

even be argued that Banana's theme of the *shōjo*—an “empty sign” easily scriptable—represents a point of difference especially open to ideological contestation. Reading Banana while receptive to such questions should also free us to look at her success as not the baleful reminder of a moribund high culture, but as its own opportunity for studying how an emerging sub-genre of fiction positively affords readers the power to imagine themselves and their place as other than the constraints of everyday life might otherwise dictate.

## II

A reading of any Yoshimoto Banana story, all of which feature adolescent or young adult heroines, discloses how the character of the *shōjo* is reinscribed in a variety of both potentially hegemonic and oppositional positions. But her most commercially successful work to date, the 1989 novel *Tugumi* (Tsugumi), is probably her most paradigmatic. The character after whom the novel is named, Tsugumi, might be described as a stereotypical *shōjo*. Eighteen years old, she nonetheless is still physically skinny, flat-chested, and a “shrimp” (*chibi*), a “kirei de wagamama” child—pretty but willful. The first line of the novel (“Tashika ni Tsugumi wa, iya na onna no ko datta”) tells us that she was a “difficult child”; her “quite proper outward appearance, like that of a doll lovingly made by God,” belies a personality so easily capable of wanton meanness that others around her are both intimidated and vicariously thrilled (p. 11). Who knows her best is cousin and closest friend Shirakawa Maria, and she serves as the novel's narrator. The two grew up together in the back rooms of the Yamamotoya, a traditional inn in a now rather dowdy seaside resort town on the Izu peninsula. Recently Maria's mother, who worked with the rest of her family at the inn, has moved to Tokyo to live with her lover, Maria's father. Maria, one year older than Tsugumi, has just begun college there. Their friendship remains close, despite not only the distance that now separates them but Tsugumi's cruel penchant for practical jokes and generally bizarre, indeed often militantly antisocial, behavior.

Tsugumi's true capacity for hazardous eccentricity is revealed in the climatic events of the novel. Maria has come back to the resort town to spend her first college summer vacation. She and Tsugumi soon meet a young man named Kyōichi. Tsugumi develops an innocent crush on him despite the fact he is the son of a commercial developer building a large modern hotel in the town, a hotel that everyone knows will put the smaller inns out of business. Tsugumi's father, in fact, has already decided to close the Yamamotoya and start a more modern “pension” elsewhere, perhaps in the mountains. The idyllic seaside childhood that Tsugumi and Maria

spent in each other's company is about to end, although no reader at this point really knows just how soon, or how dramatically.

Kyōichi has a pet dog, named Gongorō. One day Gongorō inexplicably disappears, and after a thorough search for him suspicion grows that a band of local boys, resentful of Kyōichi and his father's new hotel, has done away with the animal. Everyone blames the incident on the unavoidable delinquency of youth—everyone, that is, except Tsugumi. Her behavior grows increasingly erratic, the consequences of which are revealed one night when an aunt discovers an underground pit Tsugumi has secretly dug in the garden of her family's inn—a pit in which is found, in the nick of time, one of the local boys she had suspected of killing Gongorō.

Tsugumi's nearly homicidal stunt is explained away as a "joke," but her physical and mental health, never good, is consequently diagnosed as serious enough to warrant a long hospital stay. Kyōichi and Maria stay in touch with Tsugumi and her family, and are assured that she is recovering. One day Maria receives a surprise phone call. Don't read the letter from me you're about to get, Tsugumi ominously instructs; just throw it away. I'm much better now than I was—I didn't die after all. An intrigued Maria, of course, reads the letter as soon as it arrives.

When they were younger Tsugumi and Maria used to play a game of their own invention called "ghost mail" (*obake posuto*). They would send each other letters supposedly from the spirits of dead people interred in a nearby cemetery. Once Tsugumi went too far by sending Maria a "ghost" letter from a person over whom Maria still very much grieved, her recently deceased grandfather. The letter this time is also from a "ghost" Maria is not quite ready to accept as such. It is from a Tsugumi who had, at the time of its composition, been planning for her own death. It is not clear whether what prompts this is a worsening illness or a decision to take her own life. Tsugumi writes her final farewells to Maria at considerable length, and with the last line of the letter—"Anyway, I am happy to be able to die in this town. Take care" (p. 234)—the novel ends.

In a postscript Banana characterizes this novel as both autobiographical and nostalgic:

Every summer I go to the western coast of Izu with my family. I have come to think of that one inn, in that one town, where we have gone for more than ten years, as my home. Somehow or other I just while away my summers there.

The ocean, the walks, swimming, sunsets: I have written this novel based on my experiences of those summers stored away somewhere within me. If one day I were to lose all memories of myself and my family, I would be able to retrieve them by reading this book. You see, I am Tsugumi. What is naughty about her is naughty about myself. (p. 236)

What *Tugumi* retrieves for Banana is the memory of her family, but “family” is precisely what could be termed the core problematic of this work. Contrary to what we might have expected to find in fiction directed toward an audience of adolescent women, there are no stereotypically “perfect” families in any of Banana’s stories, unless they exist as images, dreams, copies, or untrustworthy memories. In her 1988 novel *Kanashii yokan* (A Sad Premonition), orphaned *shōjo* character Yayoi describes the fantasy of her adoptive family’s life as “a bright world of the sort of happy middle-class family you see in a Spielberg movie.” But that simile never approaches the real—Yayoi can only muse, “If only somewhere, in some far-off place, I had a real family.”<sup>38</sup> In another example of the American pop-cultural representation of the ideal set of social relations that frames Banana’s work, the 1989 short story “Yoru to yoru no tabibito” (Night and the Night Traveler) includes a character named Sarah who comes from a “happy American family.”

The complement to the mythical or lost family is the unconventional—the so-called “dysfunctional”—family, of which there is a plenitude in Yoshimoto Banana. Already mentioned is the family in which *Kitchin*’s Mikage finds herself. Living with half-sibling/half-boyfriend (and thus always potentially incestuous) Yūichi and surrogate mother/father transsexual Eriko (who very nicely blocks the Oedipal trajectory for anyone), Mikage can be neither “sister” nor “daughter.” The family is “assembled” just as Mikage is “found.” Blood ties and genealogy are less important than circumstance and simple human affinity. This is true of other Banana works where, as in many *manga*, characters are the illegitimate offspring of mistresses (*Tugumi*) or orphans (*Kitchin*), or are compromised by any number of other potentially handicapping personal backgrounds. These characters invariably stumble upon or recruit alternative families for themselves. Feminist critic Ueno Chizuko observed of Banana’s work that it typically “describes the experience of a non-biological pseudo-family created by a young girl otherwise parentless.”<sup>39</sup> These *shōjo* are alienated from their biological families because they discern no necessary link between the obvious fact that they are “derived” from their (original) parents and themselves. These characters live in a different world or time frame from their parents, and thus also this way obviate the logic of the Oedipal triangle. With no sense of a familial “history,” the self cannot be the result of any genealogical “process” at all. In *Kitchin*, for example, Mikage reflects upon her present moment and its radical dislocation from the past:

38. Yoshimoto Banana, *Kanashii yokan* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1989), pp. 24, 51.

39. Ueno Chizuko, *Middonaito kōru* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun-sha, 1990), p. 30.

Sometimes I realize that I used to have a family, a real family, but over time it grew smaller and smaller, until now I'm the only one left. When I think of my life in those terms, everything seems unreal. Time has passed, as it always does, in these rooms where I've grown up, but everyone else is gone. What a shock.

It's just like science fiction. This vast, dark universe. (p. 153)

One might speculate that Banana's characters choose to assimilate their experiences in terms of popular culture (e.g., "science fiction") because their pasts are only available in the form of its artifacts. Unlike previous eras, when often only our iconography was taken from the everyday and transported into the legitimated higher cultures we thought our authentic home, we and Banana now can be said to *live* in the popular. But what is specifically key here is Mikage's skeptical isolation, her awareness of her familial past as "false." The father is always distant or missing entirely in Banana's stories. (Banana, perhaps not coincidentally, never makes explicit mention of her own father in her essays.) This means that the families from which her characters exit and the ones they enter cannot be exclusively patriarchal. Tsugumi's father, Tadashi, is so tangential to the novel that the one or two times he does briefly figure in a scene, it is comical. Maria notes that "Uncle Tadashi never spent much time with Tsugumi" (p. 10), and Tsugumi herself says of her father that she "never felt that much love for him" (p. 143). Nor is there much regret expressed over this lack. It is amply compensated for in the close relations the two teenage women enjoy with each other.

Fathers are shadowy and ambiguous figures in much modern literature, and not just Japan's. The relative decline of the prestige of the patriarch is variously explained. It is common, for example, to hear argued that the nuclear family and its father has been rendered anachronistic with the advent of late capitalism. Sociologist Sodei Takako notes "major shifts, from around 1965, in the attitudes and behavior of the Japanese with respect to marriage and the family,"<sup>40</sup> and Banana, born at just that critical moment, has observed in an essay that the conventional household (*katei*) "is completely disappearing."<sup>41</sup> Our desires, according to this view, are no longer sublimated or organized within the frame of the Oedipalized family—excess, play, and unbridled consumption are now to be encouraged rather than curbed. With the collapse of the father's authority, so falls the libidinal economy in circulation around him: a daughter will not first "resent" her father for his phallic power only to forgo her desire to identify with him and form an erotic attachment. Like Tsugumi's father (who, it

40. Sodei Takako, "The Fatherless Family," *Japan Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Jan.–March 1985), p. 81.

41. Yoshimoto, "Yonjūdai to nijūdai," p. 123.

should be recalled, is closing his obsolete business), all fathers, their power and their appeal, are rendered moot.

This argument, of course, overlooks how patriarchal authority has been dispersed rather than dispensed with, but its linkage of the reduced role of the father with the rise of mass consumerism helps to make sense of Yoshimoto Banana's stories. *Tugumi*, a work whose avowedly simple school-girl style has vexed critics, is richly complex in its postmodernist critique of the modern nuclear family. While the utopian symbolism of "home" has certainly been used in Japanese fiction to romanticize the patriarchal family, the term also engages meanings and desires at a level of ordinary day-to-day life that are of a more open-ended and critical nature than any simplistic definition of "ideology" accommodates. In addition to Tsugumi's own family—one made up of women—there is Maria's family, or rather her multiple families. The daughter of Tsugumi's aunt and that aunt's adulterous married lover, Maria has grown up in a type of exile at the Yamamotoya inn, where she has spent her life as part of a feminine extended family in which both Tsugumi's father and her own are real but invisible.

In an early memory that Maria long repressed, she recalls her mother crying on the phone with her father in Tokyo: into the warm happiness of that old-fashioned seaside inn, there only occasionally intrudes the uncomfortable reminder of the father. Eventually Maria's father divorces his wife and brings Maria and her mother to come live with him in Tokyo, which they do despite the great regret with which they leave their idyllic seaside life and cozy female companionship. One day Maria and her mother walk out of a Ginza department store and catch the scent of the nearby harbor, prompting them to confess to each other how they miss the sea and what it now symbolizes—living not with Papa but instead collectively with other women at the Yamamotoya (p. 53).

This is not to say that life with Papa is miserable, only that that "happiness," like Mikage's family, seems "false." The daily rhythms of the nuclear family seem rehearsed and thus ersatz. Maria describes her father, who at middle-age now very much enjoys the domesticity of having Maria and her mother close by, as a "my-home papa who has come home late" (p. 42). He finally has what he has long wanted: a normal family with a child and a wife who stays at home. Maria, too, enjoys this new role for herself, but cannot shake the feeling that it is, indeed, a "role" and nothing more: "We used to live in such a strange way that now the three of us are as affectionate with each other as actors would be in a scenario entitled the 'Typical Happy Family'"; "life," Maria concludes, "is a performance" (pp. 46–47).

This mood of alienation, of simulation, makes Banana's work both different from much other adolescent fiction and at the same time indica-

tive of the uncanny sense of the basic incongruity—increasingly salient throughout Japanese popular culture—of daily life with consciousness of it. The “family” in Banana is neither the site of the model home where the Oedipal struggle teleologically unfolds, nor is it the place where, now free of that struggle, the “real” relations that should have obtained between family members are triumphed. Both “family” and “home” are tropes of “everyday life,” which is to say the ideological ground over which different subject positions constituted within (popular) culture contend. As terms that gloss the intersubjectivity of the myriad quotidian ways that human self-reproduction is welded to wider processes of social reproduction, “family” and “home” stage a crucial conversation, a teasing process of negotiation between Banana’s *shōjo* and their lived relations with the world that such words denote.

Whatever sort of biological family Banana describes, her narrators are “there” for no other reason than because their parents or grandparents were “there,” and any worry over what sort of history produced their forebears is irrelevant to the narrative at hand. In other words, the biological family is not governed by any necessarily discordant human relationships. It is, however, a unit that is threatened if not created by such stresses. Maria, for example, has a great apprehension (*fuan*) about her father. She is understandably frightened of losing him again (he did, after all, divorce his wife in order to be with her mother and her) and, in a central chapter entitled “Chichi to oyogu” (Swimming with Father), she is both overjoyed and vaguely disturbed when her father comes to join her for a weekend while she is spending her summer vacation back at the Yamamotoya. Overlapping with the fear of her father drowning in the ocean is another fear: “I don’t really understand a single thing yet about the life we’re leading in Tokyo now. . . . The Tokyo family feels like nothing but a dream . . . and father . . . is just one piece of that still distant dream” (p. 127).

It is that summer back at the Yamamotoya that the idea of “family” assumes, albeit nostalgically, a more actual and authentic sense for Maria. It is interesting to speculate that life at the Yamamotoya—life not only within an extended rather than nuclear family, but within a family whose productive functions, those of running a traditional inn, have not been shifted outside the home—already represents a nostalgic precapitalist social formation that complements Maria’s own elaboration of “obsolete” personal relations. Reunited with Tsugumi and Maria’s cousin—Tsugumi’s older sister—Yōko, Maria revels in the intimate, indolent summer reminiscent of the sort she remembers having before, back (only a year earlier) when she was the *shōjo* that the 18-year-old Tsugumi still is.

Into this reconstituted “family” is introduced Kyōichi, a *shōnen* or “teenage boy” who is nonetheless, like his brethren in contemporary Japanese comics, somewhat effeminate on one hand and somewhat sibling-like

on the other. Tsugumi develops a crush on Kyōichi, but it is an innocent one not notably different from her affection for Maria. In fact when Tsugumi, usually deferential in front of boys, displays her real, i.e., impudent, self in front of Kyōichi, it must be because he is less a phallic threat to the utopian family of women than a feminized supplement to it. The pseudo-sibling relationship is always powerful in Banana's fiction: seldom sexual, never Oedipal, nothing but snug and non-threatening, the pseudo-sibling relationship engenders a kind of lateral parity that contrasts with the hierarchal schema of a patriarchal family organization. In fact Maria manages to reconceptualize even her father as a "brother." That day swimming at the beach, Maria not only realizes that she is at heart still a *shōjo* but imagines her father a *shōnen*. The distance between father and daughter that prevents the family from attaining "critical" nuclear mass also produces a non-erotic but nonetheless intense desire on Maria's part to enjoy her father's company in much the same way she does Tsugumi's. Maria's father complies with Maria's desires when he says to her, "Gee, living this far apart makes my grown-up daughter seem like a girlfriend [*koibito*] to me" (p. 130). "Girlfriend" here is less a reference to any incestuous impulse than simply a cooperative response to Maria's imaginative yearnings for emotional relations devoid of adults (and the "real world" they imply) and especially devoid of potentially disruptive adult males.

It is possible that this sort of horizontal, "brother-sister" or "boy-friend-girlfriend" schema of social organization somehow suggests the shape of the modern household after the often-proclaimed breakup of the nuclear family. But to talk about a "post-" nuclear family is still to talk about the family, and to accept the logic of the term. "Family" is, in fact, a word Banana uses repeatedly, albeit in a radically reworked sense. In an essay entitled "Famirii" (Family) she reflects:

Usually the world is a terribly difficult place to be, and lots of times we end up living our lives apart from each other. That's why the family is a fort built for us to flee into. Inside that fort both men and women become symbols, and there protect the home. I like that fact. I really think it's necessary, even when it's hard.<sup>42</sup>

This defensive concept of family, a response to the stresses of a modern life that demands the participation of each person in differentiated, specialized, and scattered tasks, is one in which men and women become "symbols," which presumably means we act out roles (such as "mother" and "father") that are certainly useful and expedient in "protect[ing] the home," but are not by any means necessarily determined or inevitable for "men and women." The ideal family in Banana's stories, as I have indi-

42. Yoshimoto, "Famirii," *Painappurin*, pp. 39–40.

cated, is never a genetic given but instead a willed construct.<sup>43</sup> As critic Fujimoto Yukari has noted of Banana's work, "There are only unconventional, abnormal families, but within those families there most certainly exists an individual will and liability in having made those choices."<sup>44</sup> Banana harbors no illusions about the permanence of such constructions. In "Famirii" she adds:

Wherever I go I end up turning people into a "family" of my own. That's just the way I am, for better or worse, and I've got to live this way. What I call a family is still a group of fellow-strangers who have come together, and because there's nothing more to it than that we really form good relations with each other. It's hard for us to leave each other, and that bothers me. This happens to me constantly, and each time it does I think to myself that "life is just saying good-bye." But while it lasts there are a lot of good things, so I put up with it. (p. 39)

This sense of "family" as something contingent, provisional, and temporary finds its precise expression in *Tugumi*. The family in *Tugumi*, whether those from which Maria departs or those she enters, is always shifting and recombining. Insofar as Banana's discourse of the "family," and its casual, de-naturalized, and almost accidental character, can be extrapolated to apply to other essentialized units of social organization, it suggests at least a nascent critique of how processes of identification and differentiation may operate throughout the range of contemporary human communities.

Many of the relationships Banana's *shōjo* enjoy with males risk becoming incestuous, as in the case of Maria and her father. But they never do become incestuous, in the sense of consummating in physical intercourse, if for no other reason than because the concept of the *shōjo* does not permit such relations. In *Kanashii yokan* that risk runs the highest, but even there sexual desire is finally deflected toward a self-gratifying and chaste narcissism. Yayoi falls in love with her younger brother, but goes no further than a single innocent kiss that she characterizes as "perfectly natural, not immoral at all" (p. 149). What she feels for Tetsuo are "brilliant feelings of love, feelings that are both dense and light at the same time [and which] filled the small space between the two of them" (p. 161). That such impossibly incestuous impulses are distributed liberally throughout Banana's

43. As I write these words, the newspapers are carrying an Associated Press report about a company called the Japan Efficiency Headquarters, which rents out, by the hour, "families" on behalf of Japanese themselves to busy to carry out the social obligations associated with being good sons, daughters-in-law, grandparents, etc. Its success attributed to "disintegrating traditional family ties," Japan Efficiency Headquarters is testimony to creative entrepreneurship and its ability to commercialize, even commodify, the most basic human "relations."

44. Fujimoto Yukari, "Atsui ocha no kioku: 'Nichijōsei no shisō' to Yoshimoto Banana," in Hasegawa, ed., *Josei sakka no shinryū*, p. 315.

work—as liberally as the theme of the troubled family—suggest they are parallel or even integral phenomena, and are further linked to the construction of a contestatory, non-familial identity for the *shōjo*. This identity repudiates the *shōjo*'s exchange value in the kinship economy of the family, and produces in its stead a non-circulating narcissistic “small space,” a space no longer a momentary “phase” en route to an adult heterosexuality but a site of potential resistance to it.

It is noted that young male characters in her fiction, the characters to whom the *shōjo* are emotionally attracted, are very *shōjo*-like themselves. Rather effeminate, prone to tears, and attuned emotionally to their *shōjo* friends, “the males who appear in Yoshimoto Banana’s fiction,” as one critic has put it, “do not seem to have much vitality [*seikatsuryoku*].”<sup>45</sup> This tendency recalls the similar representation of *shōnen* in the *manga* culture out of which Banana emerges, where young male characters are often depicted as pale in complexion and sensitive in features. They indulge in shopping for designer goods, show interest in cosmetics, and devote themselves to pop *aidoru*. This depiction of both teenage men and women without key heterosexual difference points to an unproductive (in the sense that such relationships are incapable of “producing” value in the form of children) self-referentiality that qualifies the sign of the *shōjo* and that of the *shōjo*-like *shōnen* subsumed beneath it.

### III

It is this self-referentiality that anthropologist Ōtsuka Eiji interestingly sees as linking the concept of the *shōjo* to postmodern consumer capitalism.<sup>46</sup> But in the work of Yoshimoto Banana there is another important feature attending the *shōjo* that on one hand supports the contention that 1980s culture in Japan is a “retro-culture,” yet on the other hand may suggest that such retro-spection preserves the critical agency associated with the modernist culture for which older critics wax nostalgic. Tomoaki and Tomoko, the *shōnen* and *shōjo* in Banana’s 1988 novel *Sankuchuari* (Sanctuary), are only just out of high school but already look longingly back on those years together. Tomoko, unhappy in her marriage, wishes “I could return to when I was in high school.”<sup>47</sup> In *Kanashii yokan*—a novel that Banana described while writing it as “the story about the retrieval of lost memory”<sup>48</sup>—Yayoi yearns for a childhood past she cannot recall. “There is value in it precisely because it is completely gone,” she

45. Furuhashi, *Yoshimoto Banana to Tawara Machi*, p. 71.

46. Ōtsuka, *Shōjo minzokugaku*, pp. 64–65.

47. Yoshimoto Banana, *Utakata/Sankuchuari* (Tokyo: Fukutake Shoten, 1989), p. 154.

48. Yoshimoto, “Yonjūdai to nijūdai,” p. 128.

muses quixotically (p. 3). Yayoi represents that value in the person of Yukino, an older sister whom she had long believed to be her aunt: “She hides something for which she is incredibly nostalgic. Anyone who has lost her childhood is capable of understanding that very well. Something far away, something deeper than the night, something longer than eternity” (p. 124).

It is the search for that “something”—the lost family in which Yayoi and Yukino were once “home”—that provides the plot for *Kanashii yokan*, whose title “sad premonition” according to one critic “describes Yayoi’s process of retrieving the memory of her past.”<sup>49</sup> Nostalgia (*natsukashisa*) is pivotal not only in this work but all of Banana’s: critic Kamata Tōji calls it her literature’s “key word,”<sup>50</sup> and writer Hikari Agata claims to find it in her every choice of imagery.<sup>51</sup> Nostalgia is certainly conspicuous in *Tugumi*, and governs its plot as well as sentimental temper. Maria’s constructed family that summer of her last visit to the Yamamotoya is already a memory even as she experiences it, a replay of a life—not so much one that she ever led as the one she wishes to posit, nostalgically, as having led. The novel suggests an “already always” nostalgia, postmodern in nature because it is so guilelessly simulated. “This tale is a memoir of the last time I returned to the seaside town where I spent my girlhood [*shōjo jidai*]” (p. 8), explains Maria on the first page of the novel, and that girlhood represented by Tsugumi, the perfect *shōjo* who will never grow up, will always be just that in Maria’s mind. “Tsugumi . . . never looked back at the past. . . . there was never anything but ‘today’ for Tsugumi” (p. 57). It is Maria, and only Maria, who can have a “past” and a “future” as well as a “today.” Maria, unlike Tsugumi, experiences nostalgia at every turn; nostalgia is the means through which she registers her existence.

*Tugumi* is a novel in which a young woman who has just crossed the line out of “girlhood” reproduces it by the exercise of a nostalgic “false” memory. That is why Maria recalls Tsugumi as a perfect *shōjo*. Tsugumi is an idealization that assumes more authority and power than what is reflected by that image presumably ever had. But referents hardly matter here: Maria never really sees anyone or anything, only representations of people and places. Every description of something Maria yearns for is like a “dream” (p. 120), or a “painting” (p. 76). Consequently all that Maria experiences is a “memory” of the past communicated to her through the

49. Furuhashi, *Yoshimoto Banana to Tawara Machi*, p. 83.

50. Kamata Tōji, “‘Atogaki’ to ‘natsukashisa,’” in Hasegawa, ed., *Josei sakka no shinryū*, p. 281.

51. “Despite her youth, Banana is oddly sensitive to such [traditional literary] terms as the moon, the wind, etc. . . . It seems to me that there is something in her work that summons up nostalgia.” Hikari Agata, quoted in Banana, “Yonjūdai to nijūdai,” p. 121.

various artifacts and vehicles of nostalgia. The object of this nostalgia is what Maria wistfully calls her adolescent “mukattō no sekai,” or a “world free of troubles.” “Home,” that for which Maria ceaselessly pines, is not where the nuclear family resides—Maria already has that in Tokyo—but that *kawaii* world made up of cousins, boyfriends, and favorite pets. Maria is aware that this perfect world is not only gone, but was in fact never quite here to begin with: “nostalgia,” as one of its theorists has defined it, “is the desire for desire.”<sup>52</sup> Like her youth with which this world seamlessly overlaps, it is a “role” into which one steps and performs. Every action, from walking with boys on the beach to eating ice cream cones, makes reference only to what signified “youth” in all its crystal perfection should be. The nostalgia Maria deploys in order to produce this pseudo-utopia might be called a purposefully “reflexive nostalgia.” She describes, for example, her final summer vacation as having been in a “separate world,” a world “even more intense than the real thing,” a world as vivid “as the dream a soldier has of his hometown on the eve of his death” (p. 216).

The “present” that Maria experiences that last summer is converted into the “past” for which she is already, in some future-perfect way, nostalgic. When she returns to the Yamamotoya, she thinks to herself “I knew that there was no way this could last forever” (p. 66). She traverses a physical distance, that from Tokyo to Izu, in order to create a historical and nostalgic distance. This production of a “past,” which substitutes a temporal longing for a spatial separation, creates a loss that can never be retrieved but never wholly absent either. The “ghost mail” game in which the two women receive letters in the “present” from people who only existed in the “past” reiterates the same relation that obtains between Maria’s “world free of troubles” and her nostalgia for it. Maria is already seeing the present from a future perspective that, while indeterminate, can only be different from the “present” if it is not as “good.” These words “present,” “future,” and “past” have scant secure reference beyond themselves: Yoshimoto Banana generates a “youth” (*seishun*) that could be anywhere, at any time, as an act of homage to a “present” that does not necessarily have to be “now” or “here.”

Banana’s contemporary nostalgia lacks any determined past to validate it. An experience of the “present” without a real-life referent, one that makes sense only as the much-vaunted “empty signifier” associated with postmodernity, is something that many Japanese intellectuals have considered, including Banana’s father Takaaki. “The character of the present is

52. “The point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire.” Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 23.

that it allows the social order created of massive, large-scale images to exist as a pre-existent stratum,"<sup>53</sup> he once wrote, which I take to mean that it is the peculiar function of advanced capitalism, with the collusion of the mass media, to convert through the work of ideology the structure of our modern life into a sense of it as a "moment" we name the "present." In this analysis our lives are subordinated in a hegemony we cannot resist, or even recognize, because it is obscured behind a seemingly spontaneous "now."

But daughter Banana's "present" is not easily described as an ideologized "pre-existent stratum," given how it is always constructed via a reflexive nostalgia. In much fiction, of course, a simulated "youth" is evoked longingly as the "past" from an adult, i.e., displaced, point of view. But *Tugumi* is different. It is as if Banana, reversing the usual order, is describing "now" as if it were "then." This is, for example, precisely what Banana's postscript in *Tugumi* encourages us to think. In fact, the novel's "then" and its "now" are separated by very little real chronological time. The reader seems encouraged to doubt the whole framework of time in the novel, and if the reader does indeed doubt, then an ironic reading and potentially one that resists the inevitability of "growing up" (and the burdens then assumed) becomes possible.

Banana commonly portrays herself—not least of all in *Tugumi*, where she declares in the postscript that "I am Tsugumi"—as the perfect *shōjo*. She typically downplays the fact that she is an adult and commercially successful novelist, but rather insists she is still much the "child" she cultivates in her fiction. In her essay "S. Kingu to watakushi" (Stephen King and Me), she claims to be incapable of writing anything other than a "child's impressions."<sup>54</sup> The question arises why childhood and adolescence should be so idealized as a "lost object" at the expense of a "future" adulthood. At the end of *Tugumi* the two main characters are meted out very different fates. Maria says of herself: "I felt that inside of me some vague, amorphous sense of quiet determination came to fill me. For this moment, and from this place, I will go on living" (p. 239). Maria's "quiet determination" to have a future may be "vague" and "amorphous" because the nostalgic paradigm of "present" and "past" does not account for it, but it is still possible for precisely the reason that her reflexive nostalgia can cast the "present" as desirous from the future, just as the "past" is desirous from the present. Tsugumi has a determination as well, but it is neither so quiet nor vague. In her farewell letter to Maria she writes "In any case, I am happy to be able to die in this town," the town itself a nostalgic sign of something past.

53. Yoshimoto Takaaki, quoted by Mitsui and Washida, *Yoshimoto Banana no shinwa*, p. 21.

54. Yoshimoto, "S. Kingu to watakushi," p. 73.

Banana's stories are always full of deaths and near-deaths—indeed, it has been argued that they are her principal theme<sup>55</sup>—but they seem to function less as important topics in themselves than as the means for dramatically punctuating “youth” not from “adulthood” but from what is “not-youth,” thus making the *shōjo jidai* a neatly self-contained, self-referential object of desire for Maria. Death in Yoshimoto Banana's stories means that teenage women never have to be anything else, and that those who do survive, such as Maria, live only to “remember” those women longingly. Maria will never forget Tsugumi or give up her nostalgic search for the lost object of her own *shōjo* past, because that would mean abandoning her narcissistically invested self-image.

In her essay “Haru no shi” (A Death in Spring) Banana says of herself something readers will recognize as true of Tsugumi:

When I get really depressed I think I'd like to die. It's not like I want to leap into death or anything, but rather that I get unhappy at the very thought of tomorrow coming, that there isn't one thing that's any fun, that I'm disagreeable even to myself, that nothing inspires me. Life ends up being a real drag.<sup>56</sup>

The inability to imagine a future, and thus to deny oneself it, complements the impulse to convert the past, via nostalgia, into exactly what the present and (impossible) future are deficient in. Banana refers to this complementary link in another essay, “Kōfuku no shunkan” (The Moment of Happiness):

What I call the “moment of happiness” . . . is to be overflowing with the feeling that “those days were the good days,” days that later we idealize. But the “moment of happiness,” so intense that at the time we think “I don't care if I die now,” is a moment that cannot be recreated, and grows only dimmer with time.<sup>57</sup>

If happiness is the retroactive consequence of nostalgia, as is its “momentary” nature, then Banana's point of view here is that of a person already nostalgic for nostalgia, one who now reflexively makes nostalgia available to critical scrutiny. Banana is, after all, in her late twenties. Although it might be assumed that the readers of *Tugumi* are themselves teenage women like Tsugumi or Maria, in fact the novel was serialized in the Japanese edition of *Marie Claire*, a middle-brow women's magazine edited by the former staff of the now defunct literary journal *Umi* and marketed to the “office lady” in her early adulthood.<sup>58</sup> The first audience for *Tugumi* may well have ample incentive to review wistfully its adoles-

55. Washida, “Yoshimoto Banana no shudai wa shi,” pp. 400–3.

56. Yoshimoto, “Haru no shi,” *Painappurin*, p. 51.

57. Yoshimoto, “Kōfuku no shunkan,” *Painappurin*, p. 59.

58. I thank Suga Keijirō for this information.

cence recently terminated by the exigencies of either work or marriage at an age approximately Maria's.

The nostalgic relationship of Banana's characters to their everyday lives is replicated in the relationship that each Banana book constructs between the text and its audience. All her novels save one are narrated in the first-person. There is nowhere omniscient narration, nor any exchange of subjective perspective. This point of view also invariably governs the "atogaki," or postscript, found in every Banana book whether fiction or non-fiction. Each takes the form of a direct address by Banana to an assumed audience of fellow *shōjo*, and each describes the process of the writing of the book to which it is appended as a nostalgic exercise. *Tugumi's* postscript, for instance, recasts the novel as an *aide de memoire* that will serve to reconstruct nostalgically Banana's own happy youth and family. Such nostalgia is at root contradictory: what kind of longing could there be without the very memory that Banana fears losing?

But nostalgia in Yoshimoto Banana is divorced from verifiable experience, and from the memory of such. Memory, lost or otherwise, is produced only through the "experience" of reading the novel. As Banana says in the postscript to her collection of essays *Songs From Banana Note*, "I'll want to reread these after I reach that point in life called 'middle-age.'"<sup>59</sup> By placing such postscripts at the conclusion of her books, her stories and essays are situated within a simulated nostalgia anticipated from a future perspective, and within that nostalgia an imagined past is ideologically utopianized. As Banana contends in *Sankuchuari*, "As soon as one unthinkingly takes a step forward in life, the place you were just a moment ago now looks as vivid as a flower-strewn stage" (p. 166).

At the same time, these postscripts, by virtue of their direct address of *shōjo* author Banana to her *shōjo* audience, are suggestively narcissistic. They are phrased like mawkish love letters, in a style that intimates close ties between Banana and her fans and fosters an extra-libidinal intimacy already a hallmark of the relations her *shōjo* characters enjoy with each other or their *shōjo*-like boyfriends.<sup>60</sup> This cozy familiarity is an extension of that produced in other discursive practices associated with *shōjo* culture. Ōtsuka Eiji, for example, claims that from the mid-1970s *shōjo manga* developed the practice of placing asides from *shōjo* narrators to their readers outside the *fukidashi*, or "caption boxes." In a move similar to that of Banana's postscripts, these *manga* establish a direct line of communi-

59. Yoshimoto Banana, *Songs from Banana Note* (Tokyo: Fusōsha, 1991), p. 185.

60. The postscript to *Kitchin*—a novel whose cover blurb asks "I wonder how far my words will go to touch your loneliness"—waxes sentimentally: "I could know no greater joy than if you, my dear unknown readers so kind to have read my still feeble stories, could gain some strength from them. Until that day when we shall most surely meet again, I pray that you pass your days in happiness" (p. 229).

cation between *shōjo* character and reader in spaces outside the conventional graphic perimeters of the cartoon drawings.<sup>61</sup> Banana herself, addressing the importance of such *manga* to her work for precisely this feature, has confirmed that “these manga contain the tacit understanding between both those writing them and those reading them that it’s best if only girls understand what is going on.”<sup>62</sup>

The regular coincidence of nostalgia and narcissism in Banana’s writings is unlikely either accidental or inconsequential. In the postscript to *Kanashii yokan*, a novel propelled by the narrator’s desire to retrieve both her lost past and the love of her brother, Banana writes, “Looking back on it now . . . I am positive that [this book] will be a very important thing I will hold dear” (p. 191). Both the narcissism and nostalgia collude to produce an emptiness; nostalgia by expressing the idealization of something gone, and narcissism by its pursuit for something “else” already “itself.” That both nostalgia and narcissism correspond in Banana’s *shōjo* subject is significant. Just as “shōjo” comprises the empty sign—“signs without substance,” in Ōtsuka Eiji’s words—nostalgia is “a sadness without object”<sup>63</sup> and by definition narcissism, too, conflates what is desired with whom desires.

It is in the home, that place that does not exist except in the nostalgic rehearsals with which popular culture represents it, where Yoshimoto Banana’s nostalgia, narcissism, and *shōjo* self-referentiality are conjoined. When *Kanashii yokan*’s Yayoi and Tetsuo embrace to kiss, these three coincide: “I could detect in Tetsuo that nostalgic scent of ‘home.’ I could smell the scent of the katsura trees of the home in which I grew up, the scent of the rugs, the scent of the clothing” (p. 132). Her sibling-lover’s body literally reeks the metonymy for that lost but longed-for “home” whose memory is erased. The irony is that it is in the repressed narcissistic desire for her brother that the Hollywood version of the “happy home” is retrieved. Later in this same novel Yayoi simultaneously realizes that she is both homesick (“hōmushikku da”) and attracted to her brother (p. 152), linking her two typically incompatible desires under the sign of her *shōjo* character. Similarly, in *Tugumi* Maria’s attraction to her friend and cousin

61. Non-fiction writer Yamane Kazuma has argued it was at this same time that a new and distinct type-face—the rounded, child-like script derived from youthful handwriting and commonly seen in *shōjo manga* and associated commodities (such as notebooks, candy bars, etc.) typically purchased by teenage women in Japan—became prevalent. Dubbing this type-face “hentai shōjo moji,” or “deviant *shōjo* orthography,” Yamane speculates that it became popular because it marks graphically the private discourses of adolescent female culture. See Yamane, *Hentai shōjo moji no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1986); also Ōtsuka, *Shōjo minzokugaku*, pp. 48–68.

62. Yoshimoto, “‘Sakka’ no kaku,” p. 186.

63. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 23.

Tsugumi, her former life at the inn, and her playful flirtation with her “shōnen” stepfather all share an accommodation impossibly small were it not for her steadfast refusal to stop being a *shōjo*. It is there, in that refusal, that there may exist the agency with which this self-referential, empty sign of the “shōjo” proffers the option of meaningful reference after all.<sup>64</sup> As Banana wrote in her postscript to *Kitchin*, “I believe that growing up and overcoming one’s problems are the records of the individual spirit, and that desire and possibility are everything” (p. 228).

## IV

Japanese popular culture in the 1980s is characterized, according to architectural historian Seo Fumiaki, by the “uncertain, mercurial, elastic” qualities of *shōjo* culture, a culture that has “excelled in its potential for creating emptiness.”<sup>65</sup> The idea of “emptiness,” both as one associated with *shōjo* culture and Japanese postmodernity in general, is probably, alongside “commodity,” the key term in contemporary Japanese cultural criticism today. In what Mitsui Takayuki has termed the “vacuity of the present,” Yoshimoto Banana’s work is held to symbolize the “topos of the neuter, neutral sign.”<sup>66</sup> The concept of the *shōjo* itself has been schematized in similar terms: a category of being more discursive than material, an adolescent “space” without substantive or fixed subjective content, a “point” in the commodity loop that exists only to consume. The *shōjo* in its very referentless-ness is taken as emblematic of how contemporary culture manufactures and circulates images, information, concepts, and discourses that in the aggregate constitute our “experience” of everyday life.<sup>67</sup>

64. By “meaningful reference” I am not imputing any intent on Yoshimoto Banana’s part to act, in fact, as a social critic in the very fashion of those who slight her work. As one of the anonymous readers of this essay pointed out, what is new about Banana may very well be her unwillingness to address directly the intellectual issues I am outlining here. But without her readers’ intuitive perception of something both important and relevant to their own lives (either imaginary or real) in her stories—something that can itself be made an intellectual issue—it would be difficult to understand the extent and fervor of her record popularity. It is my own working assumption that, as Lawrence Grossberg put it, “people must find something positive in the forms of popular culture that they celebrate,” and that what maximizes human potential and agency is positive. Perhaps here, in an old-fashioned liberal humanism, is where one finds common ground for both Ōe Kenzaburō’s adult commitment to a progressive politics and Banana’s playful celebration of female adolescence.

65. Seo Fumiaki, quoted in Nishijima, *Kara-genki no jidai*, p. 155; also Seo, “Toshi o fuyū suru shōjo-tachi,” in Honda et al., eds. *Shōjo ron*, pp. 159–75.

66. Mitsui and Washida, *Yoshimoto Banana no shinwa*, p. 26.

67. In *Yoshimoto Banana ron* Matsumoto observes, “Contemporary capitalist society—its advanced media as well as technology—has produced a blank and enigmatic space

The ubiquity of nostalgia in Yoshimoto Banana and *shōjo* culture could be claimed as a demonstration of how our experience is, in fact, now thoroughly ideologized by the structures of what goes under the name, for lack of better, of “late-model capitalism.” Whether as Japan’s “retro” boom that seeks to recall the allegedly carefree (American) 1950s, or as Banana’s characters’ yearning for a childhood or family that similarly never existed, such nostalgia would seem to prove that it is indeed a desire without object, a desire that is produced simply for desire’s sake, and thus as narcissistic as the other key signs of postmodern Japanese culture. For wary critics, this nostalgia looms as politically regrade whenever it idealizes the past rather than the future, and this is particularly true for that intellectual generation that came of age during the vehemently anti-nostalgic “youth culture” of the 1960s. This youth culture, remembered in parts of Tokyo as well as Berkeley by the phenomena of the “hippie” and the “radical student,” rebelled against precisely the consumer materialism that the youth culture today (the yuppie as well as the *shōjo*) seems to embrace and even celebrate. These critics, nurtured on the abstract and oppositional theories of Banana’s father Takaaki, look at how the commodities of youth culture *are* youth culture today, and, like theorists of popular culture before them, often read that culture reductively as the ideological accessory of modern capitalism and its affiliated superstructures.

Nostalgia, however, has been regarded differently by other critics in other contexts. Patrick Wright, for example, has characterized Thatcherism’s revival of English nostalgia for empire as “a nostalgia which, while it may indeed be differentiated according to the division of labor, also testifies in more general ways to the destabilization of everyday life.”<sup>68</sup> It is more than a coincidence that Yoshimoto Banana’s nostalgia, too, seems focused precisely where Japanese “everyday life” is its most destabilized and fragile, and thus its claim to hegemony the most tenuous. Surely it is the function of nostalgia to supply what is lacking, or more correctly, to create a “lack” that then demands a supplement. In the modernist organization of everyday life into the ostensibly opposed worlds of the “individual” and “society,” the term “family” has occupied a decisive intermediary position. Proposed as a kind of reconciliation of the two, and assuming the production of the new individuals needed for the reproduction of the social work force, the family has been the first arena of socialization. It is the oft-noted crisis of society today that families no longer

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in that gap between our feelings of being ‘not exactly dissatisfied’ and ‘not exactly satisfied enough’ ” (p. 92). What perpetuates the desire to consume endlessly in an affluent Japan, in other words, is also what allows the indeterminate sign of the “shōjo” to represent that desire.

68. Patrick Wright, *Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 20.

carry out such socialization, just as it is the oft-noted crisis of Japanese literature that Yoshimoto Banana is the success she is. The nostalgic supplement of this obsolete family does not retrieve that family as much as it does in fact seal its fate.

In establishing an absence—in Banana, primarily the absence of the family as a unit of social production—nostalgia nonetheless requires that someone be invested with the agency to create it. The “nostalgic subject,” if I may theorize one, is an ideological subject produced in and by contemporary Japanese socio-cultural discourses. It is recognized by its equivocal accommodation with “everyday life” through a retreat into the past *and* by its resistance to that same life through its longing for another sort of life, one that never actually “was” because no such life ever “is.” In Banana’s stories this particular nostalgia, reflexive and critical, for a *shōjo* such as Tsugumi who shows every sign of contesting authority and refusing to grow up into the role assigned for her may contribute to an emergent defiance to patriarchal ideologies that condition women (and by extension, men) for their use or exchange functions in the work and marriage economies.

There are those critics (perhaps nostalgic for a time when there was no nostalgia) who consider nostalgic behavior as based purely on the rationale that a culture organized along strongly utilitarian and materialistic lines makes loss, or failure to attain, values supporting this orientation (youth, beauty, productivity, the amassing of property) a threat that requires a search for gratification in the past. Nostalgia is deemed a sub-species of false consciousness that, in defiance of the logic of historical dialectics, looks longingly backward to obsolete social structures.<sup>69</sup> Isn’t it, it could be argued, reactionary to think that the future can only be worse than the past? Such questions were raised by members of the Frankfurt School, some of whom considered the practical agenda of mass culture to be the reconciliation of the masses to the status quo. More recently, the popularity of nostalgia in modern life has been attributed to a lost faith in the possibility of social change, prompting a retreat to the private enclave of the family and the consumption of certain “retro” styles. This is close to what

69. Bryan S. Turner, for example, writes;

In contemporary society, we may detect this nostalgic crisis as manifest in the intellectual critique of mass culture and popular lifestyle. The homelessness of the intellectual is sharpened by the awareness or belief that mass culture represents the loss of personal autonomy, spontaneity and naive enjoyment of the everyday world. Mass culture vulgarizes the traditional forms of cultural expression by making them available to the populace via the falsifying system of the mass media. Within the nostalgic framework of elite culture, mass culture is regarded as a feature of an incorporationist ideology which pacifies the masses through the stimulation of false needs under the dominance of modern consumerism. (“A Note on Nostalgia,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 4 [1987], p. 153.)

Raymond Williams has called “mobile privatisation,” where a high standard of living and a wide range of consumer choices are allied with an inward-looking privacy. Such choices, Williams worries, are purchased at the cost of declining participation and confidence in our public and collective life.<sup>70</sup>

But what if what is looked “longingly backward” on is itself a “moment of happiness” that can suggest an undoing of the present, an opportunity for the future? In an early essay that considered Walter Benjamin’s nostalgia for the nineteenth century, Fredric Jameson optimistically concluded:

But if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other.<sup>71</sup>

70. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), p. 188.

71. Jameson, “Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia,” in Robert Boyers, ed., *The Legacy of German Refugee Intellectuals* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 68. It is ironic, but in perfect keeping with the machinations of nostalgia, that many of us now find Benjamin’s own time, with its faith in the possibility of a “revolutionary stimulus,” preferable to our own.

In Jameson’s later writings, it should be noted, he has grown considerably less sanguine about the political prospects of nostalgia. Arguing that nostalgia must make us reflect upon “the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience” (“Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, No. 146 [July-Aug. 1984], p. 53), he sees nostalgia replacing history with “random cannibalization” (e.g., the 1950s as an era of high school and hair grease, rather than of the Cold War and McCarthyism) in which “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (p. 66). But perhaps there can be nostalgia that functions like “historicity,” a concept offered in Jameson’s more recent work, which is

neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future (although its various forms *use* such representations): it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history: that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which we call historical . . . [W]hat is at stake is essentially a process of reification, whereby we draw back from our immersion in the here-and-now (not yet identified as a “present”) and grasp it as a kind of thing. (“Nostalgia for the Present,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 2 [Spring 1989], p. 523.)

This “distance” that Jameson calls “historical” and which we then “grasp” in order presumably to exploit for ourselves may, however, describe the nostalgic process in Yoshimoto Banana. What Jameson indicates, and what Banana may be read as attempting within the idioms of *shōjo* culture, is the historicization of nostalgia itself, a move that might lead to awareness of how we and our present are produced as subjects within and by nostalgia. The reified historicity that nostalgia in this formulation can lead to—the eccentric historicity of *Tugumi*—is consequently not without utility, in the sense that it opens up the possibility of a changed relationship with the contemporary moment we inhabit. If reification, in Jameson’s phrase, is “defused and recuperated as a form of praxis,” then the “things” produced

As Jameson indicates, the stakes of nostalgia are destined to be high since they may well determine how we will connect ourselves with our future, insofar as an “imagined future” becomes feasible at the same moment as an “imagined past.” When Maria says near the end of *Tugumi* that she “will go on living” as a result of a “vague, ambiguous” determination, her nostalgia for the present-as-past has produced a future that may yearn with desire for what went before, but does not feel governed by it. Unlike Jameson, who hopes for revolutionary change emerging from Benjamin’s nostalgic romance with the past, we can hardly predict that Maria is going to go on to anything quite so dramatic or heroic. But neither can we conclude simply that the nostalgia for the *shōjo jidai*, for “girlhood” and its easy and innocent comradeship, is not without its own potential for rescripting an “adulthood” left “vague” and “ambiguous” because it is so unsavory. We are admittedly left wondering whether the recovery of lost time which is achieved in nostalgia represents a retrospective deception or a retrospective insight. But it is precisely in that equivocation that the nostalgic subject functions as both a corroboration of the consumer culture that elitist critics mistrust, and the corrective imaginary for which Jameson hopes. Whether the recovery of that so-called “lost time” is unreal or real remains an undecidable question as long as the nostalgia subject is constituted precisely where that boundary is contested.

In Banana’s novel *Utakata* (Fleeting Bubbles), the two central characters—again, a near-incestuous pair of half-siblings, *shōjo* Ningyo and *shōnen* Arashi, who have long lived separately with one of each of their parents—dream of reuniting their family. But when Ningyo actually faces that possibility, her reaction is unexpected. “I tried to imagine the scene. Father and mother and Arashi and myself, in that filthy house around a big table: it was unnatural, a bad nightmare, the portrait of a warm happy family in a dream that could never be.”<sup>72</sup> Here is not so much nostalgia as a nostalgia suddenly historicized and exposed. The irony here undoes the romance and supplants it with its own ideological critique. “Unnatural” and as unreal as a “portrait” or a “dream,” the nostalgic object of the “warm happy family” momentarily but fatally loses its appeal. It is not unusual to hear popular culture today identified with a kind of macro-nostalgia in which there is no space we authentically occupy, and so that culture tries to fill the gap by manufacturing images of both home and rootlessness. (Banana’s works are an obvious example, but so is televi-

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by reification, including Banana’s “youth” and the “family,” are things we can fashion for ourselves and in our own interests. “At that point,” concurring in Jameson’s optimism, “reification ceases to be a baleful and alienating process, a noxious side of our mode of production . . . and is transferred to the side of human energies and possibilities” (p. 569).

72. Yoshimoto, *Utakata/Sankuchuari*, p. 49.

sion's *Little House on the Prairie*.) Yet as Banana's remarks on the modern family would seem to imply, the attempt can fail due to its sheer eclecticism, for if we can so easily invent and reinvent our cultural representations of "home," then in fact we have effectively eliminated the need for the institution in the first place. Perhaps "family values," in Japan as well as the United States, become a national issue only once they are irretrievable.

Miyazaki Tsutomu, serial murderer and media star, was portrayed (and may indeed eventually avoid prison) as the proof of Japan's collective social failure. Living alone, unmarried, without the support or supervision of the family one is supposed to have acquired by that age, his unbridled and deviant desires, aided and abetted by the image-proliferating high-technology of an affluent postmodern Japan, found their mark in four small girls unlucky enough to bear the sign—that nominally "empty sign"—of the *shōjo*. The lethal eroticization of his victims ("female thighs," Miyazaki is reported to have said, "are God"<sup>73</sup>) riveted the public's attention because those several taboos he violated are no longer strictly enforced by a family institution believed to be in "crisis." Another institution, that of contemporary literature, is disputed in similar rhetorical terms. Implicated in Japan's pop-cultural "degeneracy" in one version and its "postmodernity" in another, Yoshimoto Banana's *shōjo* undermine the same family structure whose decline now stands accused in the press of permitting the gruesome murder of four real-life others. Tsugumi, we recall, did come close to killing her own kidnapped *shōnen*. The forces at work both in Miyazaki's real life and Banana's fiction may make such powerfully controversial impressions upon us because they are tropes of the complex and contradictory articulations of social relations represented throughout popular culture—specifically Japan's, but by no means exclusively so. As Banana's favorite author Stephen King has made a career of telling us, child's play is seldom just that.

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73. Quoted in Yokouchi Kensuke, "'Kikaku-mono' to shite no Miyazaki jiken," in Ōta Shuppan, ed., *M no sedai*, p. 153.