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### **Impossible to Return: Abe Kōbō, Repatriation Literature, and Postwar Japan**

*Abstract:* This essay examines Abe Kōbō's 1957 novel *Kemono-tachi wa kokyō o mezasu* (Beasts head for home), a relatively neglected work among Abe's oeuvre because of its atypically realistic plot and lucid style. In contrast to previous interpretations, which linked the novel to the author's own experiences of repatriation, this essay argues that Abe was writing *against* the putative genre of autobiographical repatriation narratives and that the novel invokes notions of the impossibility of "return" and the elusiveness of "home" (*kokyō*) to envision an alternative history of decolonization, one that challenges the temporal break between the wartime past and the postwar present.

In July 1956, Japan's Economic Planning Agency (*Keizai Kikakucho*) released its annual economic white paper, which famously proclaimed: "The postwar period has ended [*mohaya sengo de wa nai*]. We are now facing a different situation. The growth from recovery is over. Looking forward, economic growth will be achieved by modernization [*kindaika*]."<sup>1</sup> Although the original intention of the white paper was to alert Japanese nationals to the "painful process of self-transformation," this warning was gradually replaced in the public memory by an optimistic outlook that foreshadowed Japan's high growth, starting with the so-called Jinmu Boom.<sup>2</sup> A decade after Japan's devastating defeat in World War II, the focus of popular discourse shifted slowly yet decisively from ruins to recovery, and eventually to the promise of economic prosperity.

In tandem with the production and popularization of the official or "foundational narrative" of the postwar era, war memoirs (*senki-mono*) were published in great numbers by repatriated civilians and demobilized soldiers.<sup>3</sup> In fact, 1956 witnessed a peak in the publication of war memoirs: in total, 60 appeared that year,<sup>4</sup> including the first two volumes of *Ningen no jōken* (The human condition), Gomikawa Junpei's *magnum opus*. Written from the perspective of the postwar moment, such literary works often managed simultaneously to evoke the horrors of the war and to repress them, preventing them from disturbing a precious sense of the everyday. As Abe Kōbō astutely suggested in his 1969 lecture "Zoku uchinaru henkyō" (The frontier within, part 2):

When we inquire into the nature of our society, status quo and present, we begin to see that a sense of security of everydayness (in which today appears like yesterday and tomorrow appears like today), as for example the sense of security one feels in a community, pervades us. We then gradually extend the continuum of everydayness until we finally enter the framework of the state.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Abe likens a numbing illusion in the unchanging everydayness to a similar sense of security found in collective community, which serves as the gateway through which “we finally enter the framework of the state.” The unity of the temporal and the spatial “sense of security” thus contributes to the foundational narrative that posits the postwar state as the ultimate guarantor of an unbroken “continuum of everydayness.” Narrated as relics of the past, memories of loss and defeat were essentialized and even fetishized as traces of experience necessary for the “building of a new Japan” (*Nihon no atarashii kuni-zukuri*), as the 1956 economic white paper eloquently promised in its conclusion.

This essay argues that within the context of a broad shift from an emphasis on loss to an emphasis on recovery that took place in postwar literary discourse, Abe Kōbō’s 1957 novel *Kemono-tachi wa kokyō o mezasu* (Beasts head for home, hereafter *Kemono-tachi*)<sup>6</sup> rejects the implicit presumption of a temporal break between the wartime past and the postwar present by challenging the genre of autobiographical narratives of repatriation (*hikiage-mono*) as well as the teleology of the return to postwar Japan that such narratives tended uncritically to imply. By closely examining notions of the impossibility of “return” and the elusiveness of “home” (*kokyō*) in Abe’s work, I aim in this article to envision an alternative narrative of decolonization by relativizing the boundary that separates the past from the present and the “outside” from the “inside.”

#### *Between “Formal Realism” and “Structural Flaw” in Literary Criticism*

Born in Tokyo in March 1924, Abe Kōbō spent most of his childhood in Mukden (today Shenyang), Manchuria, where his father worked as a professor at Manchuria Medical College, until 1942 when he resigned his post and started his own clinic. After returning to Japan at the end of 1946, Kōbō started publishing poems and short stories. Heavily influenced by existentialism and surrealism, he quickly established himself as one of the leading avant-garde writers in Japan and won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 1951 for his “Kabe: S Karuma shi no hanzai” (The wall: The crime of S Karma). In the early 1960s, he began collaborating with director Teshigahara Hiroshi, who adapted a number of his novels into films, among which *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) received the

Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, winning both men international fame. Since then, Abe Kōbō has been recognized as one of Japan's most "international" writers and is often compared with writers such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, James Joyce, and particularly Franz Kafka.<sup>7</sup>

For readers familiar with Abe's other works, *Kemono-tachi* may come across as somewhat atypical owing to its highly intelligible plot, lucid style, and realistic descriptions. It is perhaps for this reason that the novel has tended to be disparaged or ignored by critics and scholars. Indeed, compared with his earlier works written under the influence of existentialism, surrealism, and finally communism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, his later novels such as the "missing trilogy" (*shissō sanbusaku*)<sup>8</sup> or his more experimental, plotless fictions, *Kemono-tachi* seems almost to have fallen through the cracks. The reactions of the few contemporary critics who reviewed it were lukewarm at best, as commentators generally dismissed the work as a disorienting, long-winded adventure novel with an overtly autobiographical foundation, notwithstanding some obvious fictional twists, based on Abe's own experiences in his adolescent years in Manchuria.

The novel tells the story of Kuki Kyūzō, a second-generation Japanese youth in Manchuria who traversed the vast, frozen wasteland after the collapse of the Japanese empire. The novel begins with Kyūzō, living under the protection of a Soviet Red Army officer named Alexandrov, plotting to escape from the town of Baharin, where he has spent the first 19 years of his life, in order to get on a repatriation ship back to Japan. Boarding a train bound for Baicheng, where he is supposed to transfer to another train to Shenyang, he makes the acquaintance of a man who professes to be a newspaper reporter by the name of Wang Muzhen. Although Wang initially claims to be Chinese, it turns out that he is half-Korean and half-Japanese and is fluent in a variety of languages, from Japanese, Korean, and Mandarin to less widely spoken ones such as Fujianese, Mongolian, and Russian. By virtue of his multiethnic identity and multilingual capacity, this mysterious man seems to epitomize, at least ostensibly, the slogan of "harmony of the five races" (*gozōkei kyōwa*, namely Japanese, Manchus, Mongols, Koreans, and Han Chinese, with the Japanese at the top of the racial hierarchy), which is revealed later in the novel to be cruelly deceptive.

Shortly after, in a train wreck that results from the civil war between the nationalists and the communists, Kyūzō is left with no choice but to travel with the man, who now changes his name to Kō Sekitō. Despite enduring numerous near-death experiences due to starvation, exhaustion, and the freezing weather, the two men finally manage to reach the outskirts of Shenyang, when Kō suddenly confesses that he is in fact smuggling a large quantity of heroin which he entrusts to Kyūzō while he ventures into the city center to negotiate. One night, however, Kyūzō is ambushed and

knocked out by Kō, who steals the vest that Kyūzō has been using to conceal the heroin, along with his travel certificate, which Kyūzō had hidden in his right shoe. Lacking the certificate, Kyūzō is denied entrance to the Residence of Japanese Detainees (*Nikkeiyō Ryūyōsha Jūtaku*) in Shenyang and barred from boarding the repatriation ship.

At a loss, Kyūzō catches sight of a Japanese man who turns out to be a smuggler by the name of Ōkane. Intrigued by Kyūzō's story, Ōkane agrees to take him along on his next trip. When Kyūzō boards the smuggling ship, he discovers to his astonishment that Kō, who has used Kyūzō's certificate to assume his identity, is also aboard the ship, bound for Japan. In the novel's final scene, both Kyūzō and Kō are captured and locked up in the ship's hold, where Kō, clearly losing his mind, insists that he is in fact Kyūzō and that he has been tasked with the crucial mission of "establishing the central government in exile of the Republic of Manchuria" as the chief president; Kyūzō, pounding frantically at the iron wall, is transformed into a beast.

Published in the monthly literary magazine *Gunzō* in four installments from January to April 1957, *Kemono-tachi* occupies, as Richard Calichman writes in the introduction to his English translation (2017), a rare place among Abe's oeuvre. On the formal level, two distinctive features set it apart from Abe's other fictions. These features, as I show, give the impression that one should approach it more or less autobiographically, as one of the repatriation narratives that were published in such large numbers around the same time.<sup>9</sup> This essay argues, however, that instead of contributing to the spate of war memoirs, chronicles, and autobiographies in the late 1950s, Abe was in fact writing against the genre by deliberately rendering Kyūzō's homecoming journey a pointless endeavor, denaturalizing the very notion of the "return" to postwar Japan.

Unlike most of Abe's other fictions, which are characterized by an emphasis on anonymity, *Kemono-tachi* is remarkably detailed in terms of its presentation of historical and geographical settings, and of its characters' backgrounds. Specifically, whereas most of Abe's stories deal with the mishaps that befall an anonymous male protagonist in an unknown location at an indefinite time, *Kemono-tachi* is set unambiguously in Northeast China (former Manchuria) in the early years of its decolonization. In addition, unlike the characters in his other fictions who are either unnamed or have lost their names for various absurd reasons, most of the characters in *Kemono-tachi* are given specific and realistic names, though their names can be abandoned, invented, and even stolen with ease, as in the case of Kyūzō's mysterious travel companion, who first changes his name from Wang Muzhen to Kō Sekitō and then literally steals Kyūzō's name in order to assume his identity.

The flexibility of names and identities notwithstanding, the specificity of the settings, the lucid style, and the realistic plot have all invited critics to emphasize what they perceive to be the novel's autobiographical elements. As such, scholars have tended to treat *Kemono-tachi* differently from Abe's more fantastic or allegorical fictions by adopting a realist or even naturalist mode of interpretation, in which they map the episodes and landscapes in the novel onto Abe's childhood experiences in Manchuria. While these overlaps are not without historical grounds, such a reading reduces the literary interpretation to a mere confirmation of the author's personal history as well as divorces the novel from and opposes it to the rest of Abe's oeuvre.

The second distinguishing feature of *Kemono-tachi*'s critical reception is that despite the clarity of its plot, critics have often expressed frustration with its narrative structure (*kōsei*). In one of the few lukewarm reviews that appeared following its publication, Yamamuro Shizuka writes: "This work has a disproportionately long torso, but the head, the tail, and the facial features are all hazy. It is simply beyond my grasp." Despite finding "a vague appeal [*bōbaku taru miryoku*] in the fact that he deals with matters beyond modern citizens' everyday reality," Yamamuro complains that he "couldn't help feeling that the writer proceeds without knowing what he is really trying to write."<sup>10</sup> Another critic, Yamashita Hajime, was similarly disappointed by the lack of clarity in the novel's structure, which he explains as follows:

This is a kind of action novel, but I would be hard-pressed to call it a success. It is an innovative attempt, and I find it commendable that the author gets rid of his usual pedantic abstractness. But the muddle [*konran*] of the final chapter exposes the problems with the structure, where the force of the protagonist's impulse underlying his adventure simply fails to rise to the surface.<sup>11</sup>

Yamamuro and Yamashita's opinions of the novel are notably consistent. Although they commend Abe's attempt to tackle materials that transcend the banality of everyday life, both critics express confusion regarding the novel's structure. Specifically, Yamamuro's frustration with the "disproportionately long torso" is likely directed at the exceptionally detailed depiction of the journey across the Manchurian wilderness which, instead of building towards the long-expected showdown between Kyūzō and Kō that would culminate in the victory of one over the other, ends haphazardly as both men are thrust into an indeterminate state of suspension. Similarly, Yamashita's dissatisfaction is centered on the "the muddle of the final chapter," which ends anticlimactically and thus fails to convey the intensity of the protagonists' perilous adventure.

While it is certainly not unusual for critics to find Abe's fictions baffling, their confusion usually stems from the elements of fantastic unreality (*hi-genjitsu*),<sup>12</sup> such as the absolute absurdity of a character's metamorphosis into a wall, a plant, or a cocoon, or else the inexplicable horror of a character's loss of his name or disappearance from the world without a trace. Given the realism and clarity of *Kemono-tachi*'s plot, it is therefore curious that the novel bewilders Yamamuro to the extent that he finds it utterly beyond his grasp. If not for plot, what could possibly account for the incomprehensibility of this putatively straightforward novel? The answer, it would seem, lies not so much in its content as in what Yamashita calls the "structure" (*kōsei*) of the novel, which, rather than culminating in a demonstration of the "force" that springs from the arduous journey, leaves the impression that the story is put to an abrupt halt without a proper closure.

Writing some 15 years after *Kemono-tachi*'s initial publication, Tsuruda Kin'ya similarly identifies what he perceives to be the novel's fatal flaw in the misalignment between its putative genre as a *Bildungsroman* (coming-of-age story), on the one hand, and the protagonist's failure to achieve any "notable development" (*medatta seichō*) on the other.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, Tsuruda points out that in comparison to his firm resolution to abandon his life under Soviet protection and to escape from Baharin, Kyūzō's indefinite imprisonment in the hold of the smuggling ship in the final chapter is a degradation rather than progression in terms of his character. The narrative elicits the readers' anticipation of Kyūzō's development and maturation over the course of his journey, only to betray it in the very last scene, in which Kyūzō tumbles into an abyss of despair and madness. Tsuruda thus attempts to locate the novel's primary failure in the contradiction between two formal characteristics, suggesting that the sense of realism spawned by the specificity of the details is ultimately undercut by the indeterminacy of the final scene, rendering it completely meaningless and absurd.

Whereas Tsuruda laments Kyūzō's failure to live up to readers' expectations, Nakano Kazunori instead reads the final scene in a more positive light by arguing that it is precisely the oscillation (*yuragi*) in Kyūzō's existential condition that demonstrates the development in his identity.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Nakano does not interpret Kyūzō's imprisonment simply as a mark of failure or defeat, but instead, in a manner of dialectical sublation, as presenting an opportunity for sublimation or even transcendence.

Despite their seemingly opposed understandings of the extent to which Kyūzō undergoes growth or development, Tsuruda and Nakano nonetheless partake in the same mode of teleological reading. Typical of autobiographical repatriation narratives, this interpretation assumes the basic

premise that miseries and sacrifices are ultimately supposed to lead to some kind of redemptive meaning, often represented by the protagonist's growth and transcendence of previously insurmountable ordeals. Tsuruda's and Nakano's disagreement lies not in their views of the meaning or role of literature or even their understanding of Abe's goal in *Kemono-tachi*; instead, they simply have differing opinions about the degree to which Abe succeeded. Nakano sees progression in a situation that Tsuruda considers indicative of mere stagnation and degradation.

### *The Continuity and Rupture of Decolonization*

Despite the formal similitude, I argue that *Kemono-tachi* differs at the most fundamental level from autobiographical works such as Fujiwara Tei's bestselling memoir *Nagareru hoshi wa ikiteiru* (The shooting stars are alive, 1949).<sup>15</sup> Whereas most other repatriation narratives are based on the visceral instinct that, as Fujiwara writes, "if we were going to die anyway, we would rather die even one step closer to our home [*kokyo*],"<sup>16</sup> *Kemono-tachi* challenges the very notion of return, and, more radically still, that one must necessarily have a home to which one might return in the first place. By questioning the very possibility of a nostalgic return "home," Abe compels his readers to ponder the elusive and indeed illusive nature of national belonging itself.

Focusing primarily on the genres of memoir and autobiography, Narita Ryūichi points out that most repatriation narratives start with the Soviet invasion of Manchuria in August 1945. The paradox of such narratives, he observes, lies in the fact that "to experience repatriation, one first needs to leave one's home [for the colonies]; but when people talk about postwar repatriation, they usually mention only the return."<sup>17</sup> Detailing the hardships and miseries of the journey, such "tales of suffering" (*jūnan monogatari*), which carefully circumvent discussion of the history that brought the colonizers to the colonies in the first place, tend to reduce circumstances that ought to have been critically examined within the transnational framework of decolonization to national, if not nationalist, discourses of "homecoming" (*kikyō*).

Narita's suggestion that we must take into account the "prehistory" of repatriation—namely, the history of colonial settlement—indicates that what these autobiographical narratives reflect are not necessarily empirical or objective facts but merely the particular "ideological apparatuses" through which memories are reproduced and perpetuated. Specifically, by emphasizing the extreme hardships of their homecoming journeys, autobiographical narratives such as Fujiwara's tend to sentimentalize and essentialize their sufferings into objects of fetishistic possession, which were then



utilized either as discursive capital to highlight their tremendous sacrifices or to ward off the discrimination against them as returnees striving to reintegrate into postwar society.

At the same time, however, the discursive strategy to essentialize their memories into a “state of exception” entails the presumption of and a yearning for an alternative, idealized mode of “normalcy” characterized by an unchanging, everyday life. By reducing their experiences to a kind of “exception”—a regrettable yet ultimately transitory interruption that can be safely detached and excluded, both spatially and temporally, from the hypothetical “normal” situation—the repatriates are able to reassure themselves that they have at long last reached their “home.” By foregrounding the “exceptional” experiences of suffering and sacrifice in their journeys, the autobiographical narratives of repatriation inadvertently push the larger historical realities such as war, imperialism, and decolonization into the background. As a result, memories of war are surrogated by those of defeat, and the conditions of decolonization are confounded with those of occupation. As such, the transnational and transtemporal legacy of Japan’s imperial history, as Narita forcefully argues, are reduced to personal “tales of sufferings” based on their intimate memories.

In *Kemono-tachi*, this logic can be clearly observed when Kyūzō expresses his perplexity at the consequences of the war, which ultimately leads to the total disintegration of his conception of time. Shortly after his escape from Alexandrov’s room, as Kyūzō waits impatiently for the train in whose freight car he is concealed to depart, he suddenly feels a tinge of nostalgia for Baharin, where “all his memories lived”—this despite the fact that he is still in Baharin. Kyūzō is overcome with the presentiment that time itself will be severed irrevocably: “In two hours, this place here would become another’s land, one that could no longer be called ‘yesterday.’ And as for tomorrow, nothing yet could truly be known about it” (p. 19). Caught between nostalgia for yesterday and anxiety about tomorrow, Kyūzō wonders:

Just as today exists within yesterday, so, too, does tomorrow exist within today; and just as today exists within tomorrow, so, too, does yesterday live within today. He had been taught that this was how man lived, and he had come to believe it. As a result of the war [*sensō no kekka*], however, this convention had disintegrated, becoming something scattered and unrelated. For Kyūzō, yesterday and tomorrow were no longer linked together.<sup>18</sup> (p. 19)

Here, Kyūzō ascribes the disintegration of his sense of temporal continuity to the “result of the war.” Given the novel’s setting in Manchuria, one would naturally be inclined to assume that Kyūzō is referring specifically to the Second Sino-Japanese War. However, as I mentioned earlier, Kyūzō

fell into a deep sleep immediately following his reflection on the temporal rupture, at which point the narrative is interrupted by a flashback to “the afternoon of August 9, 1945, in the summer of Kyūzō’s sixteenth year, when news came that the Soviet Union had entered the war” (p. 20). As this transition makes clear, the “result of the war” that Kyūzō has in mind is neither Japan’s colonial domination over the Chinese people, nor China’s resistance against Japanese imperialism, but rather the conditions of defeat and occupation imposed by the Soviet Union. To put it bluntly, his understanding of the war is not based on the general conditions of history but is instead limited to his immediate, personal experiences of the Soviet invasion. His version of “war” ironically refers to what is technically the “end” of the war, and his personal memories of occupation are foregrounded in a way that renders invisible the actual historical contexts of empire and war.

In fact, the implications and consequences of Japan’s imperialism in Manchuria, along with its oppressive racial policies, seem to be completely outside Kyūzō’s purview, and he appears astonishingly unaware of the intense animosity that Chinese people feel towards the Japanese colonizers. After Kyūzō is ambushed and knocked out by Kō, he is rescued by a Chinese youth who makes a living slaughtering and skinning stray dogs. When Kyūzō regains consciousness, he is utterly perplexed by the youth’s hostile attitude:

“So you’re a Jap demon [*Nihon no oniyarō!*]” uttered the dog-catching youth, extending his foot and kicking Kyūzō in the head. Kyūzō was shocked, as he had been wondering how to thank the youth for his kindness. Yet he felt no animosity. The sense of something like friendship that began when he peered at the urchin from the tower continued unabated. He wanted to believe that this was rather a quarrel between friends [*nakama-genka*] over some minor misunderstanding [*chotto shita gokai*]. (p. 155)

Here, Kyūzō’s misinterpretation of the youth’s hostility would be inconceivable had he not been completely ignorant of the brutal reality of Japan’s imperial aggression in Manchuria.

Compared with the naive Kyūzō, Kō and Ōkane are more aware of and sensitive to the animosity between the Chinese and the Japanese, as well as to the danger of exposing their identities, which is represented specifically in terms of their ability to speak Japanese. When Kyūzō first meets Kō on the train, for example, Kō advises Kyūzō not to use Japanese in public: “But it’s best to avoid speaking Japanese too loudly. There’s a lot of anti-Japanese, anti-imperialist sentiment now” (p. 37). Similarly, after being turned away from the Japanese residential quarter, Kyūzō recognizes Ōkane’s “distinctly” (*tokubetsu na*) Japanese features and begs him for help in Japanese, at which point Ōkane

immediately scolds him in hushed voice: “Idiot! I told you to stop! We’ll be killed if people find out we’re Japanese. You’re chattering too loud” (p. 166).

Kyūzō’s lack of historical awareness was, in fact, not uncommon among the Japanese colonizers in Manchuria. Commenting on the roundtable discussion following the publication of *Zaigai hōjin hikiage no kiroku* (Repatriation records of overseas Japanese) in 1970, Marukawa Tetsushi points out that the roundtable participants repeatedly expressed their confusion at the sudden change of attitude among the local Chinese and Korean residents who transformed overnight from friendly neighbors into vicious bandits (*bizōkeu*), as if they were recounting some incomprehensible natural disaster that had befallen them.<sup>19</sup> In fact, many repatriates even described these riots as “rebellions” (*hanran*), which ironically presupposed the existence of a firmly established racial hierarchy undergirded by Japan’s colonial domination in Manchuria. In short, their perplexity at these “rebellions” embodied, on the one hand, their conviction that they were innocent scapegoats for the Japanese military who had shamelessly abandoned them and, on the other, their belief in the hierarchical structure, which exalted the Japanese above all the other races, regardless of the collapse of the Japanese empire.

Kyūzō’s ignorance, however, should not be taken as reflecting Abe’s own lack of historical consciousness. As I explained, the startling contrast between the degree of specificity in terms of the historical and geographical settings and the almost jarring absence of reference to the consequences and legacies of imperialism and decolonization in the main narrative seems to suggest that what Yamashita and Yamamuro have described as a “structural failure” was in fact a deliberate choice made by Abe. Indeed, given that Abe criticizes, quite explicitly, the deceptive nature of Japanese colonialism in many of his postwar writings, it seems reasonable to read his reticence on the hypocrisy of Japan’s colonial rule in *Kemono-tachi* contrapuntally as a sign of a deliberate calculation rather than of his ignorance or indifference.<sup>20</sup>

*Japan in Reality, Japan in Textbook: The Teleology and Tautology of Return*

It is for this reason that I believe we should be mindful not only of how *Kemono-tachi* conforms to, but more importantly how it deviates from mainstream autobiographical narratives of repatriation. Following Narita’s observation, whereas *Kemono-tachi* similarly accords great importance to the Soviet invasion in August 1945, it does not simply circumvent Japanese imperialism in Manchuria; it rather obliges readers to confront its historicity by reflecting on the very rationale, or the lack thereof, for Kyūzō’s arduous journey. As many critics have noted, Kyūzō seems to be

driven less by any rational motive than by what can only be described as a visceral “instinct.” Kobayashi Osamu, for instance, writes:

What really stands out in Kyūzō’s hunger march is, on the one hand, his obsessive and tenacious desire for others. Yet, on the other hand, as if in inverse proportion to his firm determination, no specific reason is given as to why he embarks on such a journey in the first place.<sup>21</sup>

Kobayashi’s observation is echoed by First Lieutenant Bear, one of the Soviet officers who appears early on in the novel, who exclaims: “Everyone who has a place to return to has no choice but to return there. That’s called ‘instinct’ [*bonnō*]” (p. 6). Bear’s nostalgic comment on his own situation turns out to be nothing less than a prophecy of Kyūzō’s fate, since Kyūzō’s “impulse for action,” as Kobayashi puts it, “would always precede any clear reason or motive.”<sup>22</sup>

Critics’ confusion over Kyūzō’s lack of motives is clearly related to the fact that Kyūzō was born not in Japan (*naichi*) but in an overseas colony (*gaichi*). As a result, Kyūzō’s understanding of Japan is derived almost exclusively from his imagination or even fantasy:

What he knew about Japan was only what he had imagined from the textbooks at school. (Mount Fuji, the Three Views of Japan, a smiling island of green surrounded by the sea, where the wind was gentle, birds sang, and fish swam. In the autumn, leaves fell in the forest and then the sun would shine, ripening the red seeds. A land of diligence, with diligent people.) (p. 19)

Here, Kyūzō’s fantasy of Japan as a peaceful, idyllic utopia characterized by beautiful landscapes and diligent people is nothing but an illusion which is, however, so powerful that it sustains his lengthy, laborious journey across the frozen Manchurian wilderness. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that this fantasy is the deliberate product of Japan’s imperial education in the colonies. Specifically, the textbook that Kyūzō mentions here is likely the *Shōgaku kokugo tokuhon* (Elementary school national language reader)—commonly referred to as the *Sakura tokuhon* because the first volume (for first graders) begins with a color print of cherry blossoms—which was adopted throughout the Japanese empire.<sup>23</sup> The stereotypical Japanese aesthetics of the image of cherry blossoms comes full circle, as the final volume (volume 12, for sixth graders) of the textbook closes with a collection of ten poems on the theme of mountain cherry by celebrated late Edo-period scholars.<sup>24</sup> Indoctrinated with such ideas about quintessential Japanese aesthetics, even children who grew up in the colonies would naturally come to identify the “Japanese spirit” with cherry blossoms, even without knowing what a cherry tree looked like.

Thus, what Kyūzō had perceived as his “homeland” (*kokyō*) was to him, from the very beginning, a “foreign land” (*ikyō*). His journey away from Baharin, the town where he had lived until the beginning of the Soviet occupation, is therefore not a journey home to begin with, but precisely its opposite—that is to say, a journey into exile.<sup>25</sup> Given the tendency in existing scholarship to compare *Kemono-tachi* with Abe’s own childhood experiences, it is somewhat curious that scholars have largely ignored one of the most critical differences between the protagonist Kyūzō and the writer Abe Kōbō, namely, their births. Specifically, whereas Kyūzō is explicitly stated in the novel to have been born in the colonial town of Baharin, Abe was born in Tokyo and moved to Manchuria in 1925 with his parents when he was eight months old.

The extreme brevity of the period Abe spent in Japan before emigrating to Manchuria has, perhaps, caused critics to overlook the fact that, unlike Kyūzō, Abe was born in the metropolitan center of the empire. Such a conflation is not wholly unjustifiable—after all, Abe was a mere baby who was unlikely to remember much, if anything, of Japan when he moved to Manchuria. As inconsequential as the eight months may seem, however, the difference between Kyūzō’s birth in the fictional colonial town of Baharin and Abe’s birth in Tokyo is, I believe, significant. In particular, the fact that Kyūzō was born in Manchuria and had never set foot in Japan diminishes the legitimacy of his claim to “belong” to postwar Japan or to be engaged in a journey of return. Had Kyūzō actually been born in Japan, the tremendous sufferings he endured during the journey could have been explained as practical necessities rather than as a sign of his “homing instinct.” What makes Kyūzō’s journey so perplexing, as Kobayashi rightly notes, is precisely the fact that it is based on what can only be described as a vague impulse (*shōdō*) or instinct (*honno*) rather than any clear reason (*riyū*) or motive (*dōki*).

In fact, the title of the novel already gives away, from the very beginning, the secret of Kyūzō’s and Kō’s hunger march—they are but beasts (*kemono*) blindly following their instincts. The boundary between the human and the beast becomes increasingly tenuous as they press on with their journey. For example, Kyūzō is woken up by some “rough panting by his ear” one night and finds himself prey to a wild dog. At the same time, he is himself assaulted with an animalistic desire—a “raging appetite” (*mōretsu na shokuyoku*) for the dog. Ultimately, it becomes impossible to distinguish Kyūzō and Kō from the wild dog, as they are referred to as a group: “Untiringly, the three hungry rascals [*sanbiki no gakkī*, literally, hungry ghosts] continued their game of tag [*onigokko*], their shadows dancing faintly about the vast wasteland” (p. 115). Interestingly, the process of animalization continues even as Kyūzō escapes the wasteland and enters the city of Shenyang. When

the dog-catching youth gives Kyūzō a piece of dog meat, it awakens his appetite and ironically turns himself into a beast, whose saliva drips uncontrollably down his chin. To make it more ironic, Kyūzō is well aware of his own transformation, as he thinks to himself: “It’s like I’ve become a dog” (p. 157).<sup>26</sup>

In any case, since Kyūzō’s birth would not affect the “how” of his journey but only the “why,” it seems reasonable to speculate that Abe deliberately sets Kyūzō’s birthplace in the colony, precisely to make readers reflect on the meaning or, more radically, the meaninglessness of his journey. Instead of simply rejecting the logic of national belonging from a rational perspective, *Kemono-tachi* at a fundamental level challenges the so-called “homing instinct,” which enables the repatriates in typical autobiographical narratives to envision a certain sublimity in *kokyo* (“home”) that goes beyond life and death. The urge to “die even one step closer to home,” as Fujiwara powerfully writes in *Nagareru hoshi wa ikiteiru*, demonstrates that the meaning of “home” is captured not in the opposition between life and death, but solely in the binary between inclusion and exclusion. It is possible to identify a certain “short circuit” of meaning, which disrupts the smooth functioning of national belonging by exposing its fundamental deceptiveness and emptiness.<sup>27</sup> In particular, the sentiment to “die even one step closer to home” lies not so much in the anticipation of a dignified livelihood or even basic survival. Quite the contrary, it stems from an ineffable “transcendental lure” that can only be located in the empty tautology of return itself. To put it bluntly, even death can be redeemed in the last instance as something meaningful, as long as one is incorporated, whether physically or symbolically, into the postwar national community.<sup>28</sup>

In *Kemono-tachi*, Kyūzō experiences precisely this kind of “short circuit” in a scene in which, while Kō leaves to bribe a nationalist general named Bai into escorting them to Shenyang, he is forced to come into close contact with five mummies (*miira*) who supposedly died in a typhus outbreak. At first, Kyūzō mistakes the mummies for “something like rotting wood.” It is only upon closer inspection that he realizes with horror that these “strange and inexplicable” objects are in fact human corpses that have been gnawed beyond recognition by mice. Carved into the wall above their heads are these words: “How regrettable [*munen*]<sup>29</sup> Halfway through the journey [*michi nakaba shite*], all of us, fallen here by a feverish disease, summer, year 21, Mizuura Takeshi, and four others” (p. 131). Kyūzō surmises that the mummies must be “a family or perhaps colleagues from a company or something” who were infected during the major typhus outbreak in 1946 (Showa 21) and subsequently died from exhaustion and thirst.

Thrust into close contact, both physically and psychologically, with the imminent danger of infection and even death, Kyūzō experiences a rapid succession of emotions ranging from sympathy to instinctive and visceral horror, and finally an overwhelming fear of awakening the dead. Given the grotesque description of “their faces and internal organs [as having] all been completely gnawed away in identical fashion” (p. 131), it might be tempting to assume that Kyūzō’s horror is inspired simply by the ghastly sight or his immediate fear of infection and possibly death. But in fact Kyūzō is overcome by this inexplicable terror not when he first identifies these appalling “objects,” but only after he notices the message on the wall and realizes that the mummies are Japanese repatriates, just like he imagines himself to be. Later, he even feels that “these mummies hated him” and “clearly wanted to entangle [*makiζoe*] him in their fate” (p. 132). Thus, the reason Kyūzō “drew back in horror” lies in what he perceives to be a special and even intimate connection between himself and the mummies, without which his imagining of the corpses’ hatred for him would have made little sense. The message on the wall provides clues to help understand the roots of Kyūzō’s fear. More than a direct fear of death itself, the message conveys, above all, the profound sense of regret (*munen*) the dying felt at the thought that they, falling halfway through the journey (*michi nakaba shite*), would never be able to reach their desired destination.

Seen in this light, Kyūzō’s deepest fear is conjured up less by the dire possibility of being infected with or even dying from typhus than by the overwhelming sense of regret that he could have experienced. It is precisely this fate of collapsing “halfway through the journey” that compels Kyūzō to “quietly tiptoe away so as not to awaken them.” The ineffable horror that possesses him thus stems from the “short circuit” of meaning, which circumvents and perhaps even surpasses the imminent threat of death itself. As such, the teleology of Kyūzō’s journey is replaced by an empty tautology, in which the very purpose or “telos” of his return is redeemed precisely through its own self-reflexivity. In contrast to other repatriation narratives in which the protagonists return for the sake of a better life, Kyūzō’s journey is predicated on an ironic inversion in the sense that he clings so tenaciously to life precisely in order to return to his imagined home (*kokyo*). It is therefore this absolute void of meaning that compels Kyūzō to ascribe a kind of unconditional transcendence of life and death to the tremendous sacrifices he endures throughout his perilous journey.

#### *Fetish of Hope, Fetish of Home*

Viewed in this light, the train of tragedies in the novel makes one wonder if the episodes are arranged in a such a way that Kyūzō’s every hope and effort is doomed to be frustrated. Once the

reader begins to suspect that the plot is designed so that things will always go wrong, the events start to seem like a series of theatrical contrivances, in the sense that the reader would expect or even predict that Kyūzō's condition will worsen whenever there seems to be any prospect of improvement. Interestingly, even Kyūzō himself is aware of the paradoxical situation, in which every hope turns into despair in the end. Recalling the decisive moment when he opens the door of Alexandrov's room, which sets in motion his entire journey, Kyūzō suddenly realizes: "Hope was written on the front of that door, but perhaps despair had been written on the back. This was perhaps the nature of doors. A door always appears as hope when one is standing before it, but then turns to despair when one turns around" (p. 63).

The message here, I believe, is more profound than it may at first appear—namely, the cynical cliché that hope may at any moment turn into despair. Kyūzō's metaphor of the door is based not simply on the dialectic unity of opposites in which two antagonistic conditions achieve a synthetic unity but rather on the realization that hope and despair, just like the front and back of the same door, are merely two seemingly opposite *representations* of the same reality. Like the famous thought experiment known as Schrödinger's Cat in which the hypothetical cat is simultaneously alive and dead, hope and despair are immanently constitutive of and embedded within each other.

Faced with this impossible paradox, Kyūzō resorts to a strategy of self-deception: "Kyūzō thus resolves to look only at the front of doors without turning around" (p. 63). Despite his knowledge of the nature of his predicament, in which hope is, from the beginning, nothing other than despair in masquerade, Kyūzō nonetheless pretends to be oblivious to it by refusing to turn around. The series of abandonments and betrayals in the novel should not be understood, then, as mere literary devices to move the plot forward. Instead, these events serve as an eloquent demonstration of the "return of the repressed," in the sense that despair always returns in Kyūzō's very resolution to repress it by averting his eyes.

If so, Kyūzō's attitude can be regarded as a kind of fetishism, whose mechanism Octave Mannoni cogently sums up in the phrase "I know very well, but nonetheless" (*je sais bien, mais quand même*).<sup>30</sup> Here, the contradiction between Kyūzō's belief and action is a matter of the material foundation of ideology rather than simply of the "false consciousness." As Louis Althusser explains in his seminal essay on what he calls "ideological apparatuses," ideology has not an ideal or spiritual existence, only a purely material one that resides solely in one's actions and practices.<sup>31</sup> The key lies not so much in Kyūzō's acknowledging stance "I know very well ([that hope] 'turns to despair when



one turns around’),” but rather in the posture of resignation that follows: “but nonetheless ([I must] look only at the front of doors without turning around).”

Where, then, does Kyūzō’s fetishism stem from? One clue can perhaps be found in the scene immediately following the one in which Kyūzō is denied entry into the Japanese residential district in Shenyang. Unwilling to give up his “hope,” which has already turned into despair, Kyūzō is peering in at a Japanese family when a boy notices him and yells: “Hey, there’s a beggar spying on us!” Kyūzō immediately retorts back: “I’m Japanese, you idiot. I’m Japanese!” (p. 163), at which point he is chased away by the nationalist soldier guarding the entrance. Having nowhere to turn, Kyūzō thinks pathetically to himself:

Dusk is near. Where should I go? I’ve been completely abandoned. [...] Yet there were houses everywhere. If there were houses, then there had to be doors; and if there were doors, then they had to be tightly locked. There was a door right over there, but its inside was infinitely far away. In the end, this is no different from a wasteland completely empty of people. Or maybe it’s worse. The wasteland refused to allow me to escape, whereas the town prevents me from approaching. (p. 163)

In this Kafkaesque monologue, Kyūzō’s fetishistic hope derives from his intense desire to “approach” (*chikazuku*) or to belong to the “imagined community” known as Japan. Kyūzō wishes not only to be allowed into the “inside [that] was infinitely far away” through the locked doors. More importantly, he wishes to be properly recognized as a member of that community, rather than as a beggar who spies enviously on the Japanese from the other side of the wall. Interestingly, the image of the tightly locked doors represents a paradoxical reality in which hope and despair are juxtaposed with or, more accurately, superimposed onto each other. Kyūzō’s implicit realization that the “hope” on the front of the door is made visible precisely *through* the refusal to turn around and look at the back of the door. His recognition that “if there were doors, then they *had to be* tightly locked” therefore suggests that the impossibility of approaching is not incidental but rather essential and structural.

### *The Deconstruction of Telos, or the Meaninglessness of Meaning*

About a decade after the publication of *Kemono-tachi*, Abe developed an attitude of “sustained flight” (*nigedashippanashi*) in his lectures in “Uchinaru henkyō” (The frontier within, 1968-69), which provide important insights into the significance of Kyūzō’s lack of substantial development. Wary of the hegemonic paradigm of “authentic citizens” (*bonmono no kokumin*) who are firmly grounded in the

agrarianist ideology of the land, Abe celebrates instead the “inauthentic” (*nisemono*) nomads such as the Huns, the Gypsies, and the Jews, who embody the liberating potential to transcend established boundaries and dominant structures. As such, the notion of “sustained flight” opens up an alternative possibility of interpretation by replacing typical plot development in terms of growth and maturation with the movement of incessant escape, which in Kyūzō’s case is paradoxically represented as an endless chain of rejection and exclusion. In contrast to critics like Tsuruda and Nakano who attempt to explain the meaning of the novel exclusively in terms of the protagonist’s growth within the narrative, the notion of “sustained flight” allows us to envision an alternative value system based on the precise opposite of linear growth, namely, the defiant position of escape or flight without teleological ends.

The meaning of *Kemono-tachi* can thus be located dialogically through a metatextual performance. Rather than conform to the basic presumption of a definitive message within the text, the suspension of meaning at the end of the novel implodes the typical narrative structure based on the “telos” of plot development. The ostensible senselessness of the ending scene should not be taken at face value as a cynical nihilism. On the contrary, I argue that it needs to be considered as a “space-clearing gesture” that compels readers to dispense with the common propensity to look for a moral lesson in fiction and instead to participate in the dynamic process of meaning making themselves.<sup>32</sup> It is possible to approach *Kemono-tachi* as what Roland Barthes calls a writerly text, which takes into account the role of the readers, who no longer passively consume but instead actively produce the meaning of the text.<sup>33</sup> As such, the meaning of *Kemono-tachi* stems not so much from the teleological end within the plot or narrative but instead from the very deconstruction of its putative meaning. What Yamamuro and Yamashita have regarded as the “muddle” (*konran*) of the last chapter actually constitutes, rather than undermines, the very meaning of the novel. Therefore, in stark contrast with the two most influential repatriation novels mentioned earlier, namely, Fujiwara Tei’s *Nagareru hoshi wa ikiteiru* and Gomikawa Junpei’s *Ningen no jōken*, Abe’s *Kemono-tachi* is distinctive precisely for its radical rejection of the basic premise of a structure that culminates in the teleological or even tautological end of the return to postwar Japan.

Conventionally, scholars have interpreted the two bestsellers by Fujiwara and Gomikawa as representing opposite ends in the spectrum of repatriation literature, because whereas Fujiwara’s autobiographical work culminates with the narrator’s successful return to Japan along with her children, Gomikawa’s six-volume novel closes with the protagonist Kaji’s tragic death in the vast, frozen Manchurian wilderness while longing for his wife Michiko.<sup>34</sup> On a surface level, the

diametrically opposed endings indeed seem to justify the typical categorization of repatriation narratives based on the success or failure of the attempted return. A more critical examination, however, shows that this focus on the comic versus the tragic ending ultimately ties the meaning of the works exclusively to the supposed telos of the return. The difference between the two works, manifested most explicitly in the fates of their protagonists, is not as drastic as it may at first appear, because Kaji's demise in *Ningen no jōken*, far from challenging the telos of homecoming, serves to reify and reinforce it.

It thus becomes clear that *Kemono-tachi* needs to be categorically distinguished from both works, which, despite having superficially opposed plots and, in particular, endings, nonetheless uphold the same teleological ideal of return to postwar Japan. The seemingly ambiguous suspension of meaning at the ending of *Kemono-tachi* fundamentally rejects the basic premises of the genre itself. Despite or perhaps precisely because of *Kemono-tachi*'s numerous formal resemblances to typical autobiographical narratives, it seems more appropriate to consider the work an antirepatriation novel than a repatriation novel proper.<sup>35</sup> In the rest of this essay, I focus specifically on the novel's final chapter to argue that the two protagonists' metamorphoses, prompted by their desperate state of suspension and indeterminacy, serve not so much to generate explicit meanings that conform to the plot as to destabilize and even deconstruct the ostensible givenness and naturalness of "home" (*kokyo*) as the ultimate anchor of meaning or teleological end in repatriation narratives.

#### *Madness and Metamorphosis*

In the final chapter, despite the grudge Kyūzō harbors for Kō on account of his betrayal, Kyūzō is nonetheless driven by an ineffable compassion for Kō, perhaps due to the memories they share of the arduous journey across the Manchurian wilderness. Realizing that Kō is imprisoned somewhere on the ship, Kyūzō is desperate to discover his whereabouts. When Kyūzō finally discovers Kō, locked up in the ship's hold, however, he realizes that Kō has already lost his mind, as Kō not only claims to have been tasked with the mission of "establishing the central government in exile of the Republic of Manchuria," but even believes himself to be the real Kyūzō: "This is top secret, and I can tell only Japanese people, but the fact is that I'm really Japanese. My name is Kuki Kyūzō. But Manchuria and Japan must become allies [*meihō*]. My name is Kuki Kyūzō and I'm really Japanese" (p. 186).

Realizing his own precarious situation, Kyūzō tries to negotiate with the smugglers for his share of heroin but only ends up in the ship's hold himself, handcuffed to Kō. Listening to Kō's

delirious ravings as Kō mistakes the sound of a winch in the quay for the booming of a cannon and believes that the United States and the Soviet Union have gone to war against each other, Kyūzō thinks to himself:

Damn it, it seems that I've just been circling around the same place. No matter how far I go, I can't take a single step out of the wasteland. Perhaps Japan doesn't exist anywhere. With every step I take, the wasteland walks together with me. Japan just flees further away. (p. 190)

Just then, Kyūzō experiences a “sparklike dream” of Baharin, in which his boyhood self is crouching beside his mother. What makes his dream even more eerie, however, is that from over the wall, “another Kyūzō, this one exhausted, peeped timidly in at the sight of them, [...] utterly unable to cross over” (p. 190). Finally, just as Kyūzō recognizes the profound irony that he has been “walking in the opposite direction” from the moment when he first sets out, he is transformed into a beast (*kemono*), “roaring as the skin of his hand peeled and blood oozed out, and yet pounding with all his strength” (p. 191).

This brief concluding chapter, in which Kyūzō's and Kō's lengthy journey wraps up at a dazzling speed, offers a number of important insights. For example, whereas Kyūzō may easily dismiss Kō's hallucinatory remarks about the war between the United States and the Soviet Union as a madman's drivel, readers are retrospectively compelled to take into account the overlaps on the metafictional level between the novel's publication and the historical context of the Cold War. Moreover, as Michel Foucault shows, madness as the paramount “mental illness” should not be considered a timeless phenomenon. To the contrary, it is a historical construct through which power is exercised, normalized, and naturalized in modern societies.<sup>36</sup> Kō's insanity thus needs to be examined through the prism of power, which not only “disciplines and punishes” but more importantly defines the very structures and apparatuses through which power is perceived and perpetuated.

In fact, Kō's ravings in the last chapter are not the first occurrence of his madness in the novel. Earlier in their journey, Kō once loses consciousness due to a severe fever and begins spurring gibberish: “Kō suddenly began laughing and, pointing to the marsh, shouted meaningless words [*imi no nai koto*]: ‘Andara, tsoan, chii, rururu’” (p. 71). A day later, rather than show signs of recovery, Kō's behavior became only more lunatic, as he kept singing a single lyric—“young lady”—in a spooky nasal tone: “Rather than hum the full song, however, he would like a broken record soon return to the ‘young lady’ at the beginning” (p. 73).

Here, Kō's insanity is represented most explicitly through the fragmentation of language, as he mutters "meaningless words" and keeps singing a single lyric "like a broken record." Given that Kō's madness is portrayed from and mediated by Kyūzō's perspective, however, it is entirely possible that Kō's "meaningless words" are in fact meaningful but only *sounded* meaningless to Kyūzō, who lacks the linguistic capacity to decipher Kō's message. In particular, given Kō's multilingual and multiethnic background, it seems far more likely that Kō is unconsciously speaking in his native Korean, which is, however, dismissed by Kyūzō as incomprehensible "gibberish" (*wake no wakaranai koto*).

In this light, the specific content of Kō's speech is of secondary importance, as Kyūzō's very gesture of relegating Kō's unintelligible message to the realm of madness has already precluded any possibility of understanding in the first place. Kyūzō's seemingly impartial description of Kō's "meaningless words" is predicated upon a basic prejudice that endows him with the power to determine whether an utterance contains any "meaning" at all. Yet, the process of signification can only be imbued with meaning if it is rendered as intelligible within the language of the colonizer, who claims the exclusive authority to adjudicate between what is meaningful and what is meaningless, and by extension between reason and madness. Kyūzō's assessment of Kō's mental dysfunction thus reveals the lopsided power structure in which the colonizer assumes the prerogative to dismiss the language of the colonized as meaningless gibberish, which is not only outside of, but essentially incompatible with, the metropolitan, standard language of the colonizers.

If Kō's madness in this scene stems from his unintelligible Korean identity, it is portrayed rather differently in the final chapter, in which his insanity is characterized by his compulsive insistence on Japanese identity. Specifically, in the concluding scene, Kō not only speaks exclusively in Japanese but even goes so far as to insist that he is, in fact, a Japanese by the name of Kuki Kyūzō. Here, the colonized subject is perceived to be mad when he somehow *misrecognizes* himself—that is to say, when he "erroneously" regards himself as being one of the colonizers rather than one of the colonized. Whereas Kyūzō considers Kō insane in the first instance because Kyūzō perceives him as the unintelligible Other, in the second case Kō's madness is apparent for precisely the opposite reason: Kō tries to abolish the very difference between self and other altogether by claiming to become one of "us."

Taken together, therefore, while the two occurrences of Kō's madness in the novel may superficially seem opposed to each other, they are in fact derived from the same structure based on the politics of racialization. Confined within an ambiguous domain of proximity, the colonized find

themselves in a strange predicament in which they either become utterly unintelligible or else misrecognize themselves. Lest they lapse into madness, the colonized must assimilate with colonizers as much as possible, but not so much as to collapse the critical distance altogether. The colonizers, meanwhile, position themselves at the absolute center of reason by relegating “madness” exclusively to the colonial Others who, however much they might attempt to approach it, may never cross the racial boundary between “us” and “them.”

In short, in order to be recognized as a rational subject, Kō can only *pass as* Japanese, which entails his *behaving* sufficiently like a Japanese without actually *becoming* one. In fact, Kō is very much aware of his own ambivalence towards passing, which he explains to Kyūzō when Kō first confides his racial identity shortly after the train wreck: “In any case—ha-ha—this question of where I come from is quite something. I think about various things, such as not blowing my nose with my fingers when I become Japanese or that I must use tweezers to trim my whiskers when I become Korean” (p. 62). In fact, Kō even presses Kyūzō to say whether it seems possible that he could pass as a Japanese: “If I wanted, do you think I could look Japanese? What do you think?” (p. 62).

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems possible that already at this early stage Kō is plotting to steal Kyūzō’s identity. The difference between Kō’s attitude here and his claim in the final chapter lies, however, precisely in the critical distance between *behaving* and *becoming*, and thus, by extension, between reason (recognition) and madness (misrecognition). Whereas Kō’s *behaving* like Kyūzō makes him an impostor, his unconscious *becoming* of Kyūzō decisively makes him a madman. My point here is neither to confirm nor to deny Kō’s madness, which is, after all, incidental in terms of the development of the plot; instead, I mean to suggest that madness is structurally embedded within the violent yet arbitrary network of colonial dominance. As Foucault shows, the determination of madness, which is imposed externally onto the subject, demonstrates the mechanism through which power operates by reflecting and reinforcing the structure upon which racism and colonialism are predicated.

Taking into account the underlying colonial implications, Kō’s claim about his Japanese identity in the final chapter should thus be regarded as a transformation (*henkei*) proper rather than a madman’s wild hallucination. At the same time, Kō’s radical change cannot be separated from his counterpart Kyūzō’s transformation, even though it is touched upon only briefly in the novel’s final sentence: “He became a beast, roaring as the skin of his hand peeled and blood oozed out, and yet pounding with all his strength” (p. 191). Kyūzō’s metamorphosis has typically been interpreted as a mere figure of speech depicting his existential predicament, perhaps on account of the fleeting and

somewhat casual nature of the description or the generally realistic style of the rest of the novel. Compared with Abe's more surrealist fictions in which characters metamorphose into fish ("Suichū toshi," 1952; *The Underwater City*) or a plant ("Dendorokakariya," 1949; "Dendrocacalia," 1991), Kyūzō's transformation into a beast indeed seems rather unremarkable.

Rather than dismiss Kyūzō's transformation based on its lack of novelty, however, it seems more constructive to consider *Kemono-tachi* as part of a genealogy of what Tanaka Hiroyuki calls Abe's "tales of transformation" (*henkeidan*). The very significance of metamorphosis as a central trope in Abe's fictions lies precisely in the fact that the crisis of the disintegrating subject can be represented only reflexively through itself. Indeed, as Lianying Shan notes, Abe makes a slight yet important change between the original serialized version published in *Gunzō* and the book form, which appeared immediately after the last installment of the serialization.<sup>37</sup> In particular, whereas in the original *Gunzō* version Kyūzō merely "began striking the oxide-red iron plate *like* a beast", in the book version he actually "*became* a beast." Abe's rewriting of this sentence makes it clear that he sees Kyūzō's change as a decisive transformation, rather than a mere figure of speech. The protagonists' transformations should thus be understood not as metaphorical but as metaphysical, in the sense that Kyūzō and Kō are compelled to confront a fundamental existential crisis in which their insistence on national belonging leads not to the restoration of subjectivity, only to its failure.

In contrast to the prevailing interpretation that treats the transformations of Kyūzō and Kō as independent metaphors, I argue that they should be apprehended in conjunction with each other: Kyūzō's metamorphosis into a beast can be interpreted as an uncanny prognosis of the fate of Kō, who is slowly yet irreversibly *becoming* Kyūzō. Whereas Kyūzō begins to question the basic premise of national belonging when he wonders whether "perhaps Japan doesn't exist anywhere," Kō nonetheless still firmly clings to his blind belief in national identity by claiming that "my name is Kuki Kyūzō and I'm really Japanese" (p. 186), thus foretelling an instance of ineluctable repetition. As such, contrary to the ostensible synchronicity, Kyūzō's transformation can in fact be interpreted as embodying in advance Kō's eventual fate, of which he is yet oblivious.

In this light, the simultaneous transformations of Kyūzō and Kō seem to operate under two conflicting yet ultimately connected logics. From Kyūzō's perspective, Kō's madness, which is manifested in his *becoming* Kyūzō, represents both an absolute difference and, at the same time, an inevitable repetition. In fact, this dialectic of difference and repetition recurs throughout Abe's career and remains a central theme in his later fictions.<sup>38</sup> For instance, in *Daiyon kanpyōki* (1958; *Inter Ice Age 4*, 1970), acclaimed as one of the earliest science fictions in Japan, the protagonist Katsumi

witnesses, through a “forecasting machine,” a future in which the land is completely submerged under the rising sea.<sup>39</sup> In preparation for the impending apocalypse, scientists created a new race of “aquans” (*suisei ningen*) from aborted human fetuses. Genetically altered to have gills instead of lungs, the aquans are surmised to be incapable of emotions and are thus regarded as both the absolutely unintelligible Other and, paradoxically, the inevitable successor of the human race, which is bound for near total extinction. The relationship between the aquans and the humans, much like that between Kyūzō and Kō in *Kemono-tachi*, is thus characterized paradoxically by an irreducible rupture on the one hand and an anticipated continuity on the other.

The ambivalent structure of “repetition with difference” can be similarly observed in Abe’s later metaphysical detective fictions. In the case of *Moetsukita chizū* (1967), for example, Mark Gibeau suggests that the eventual fate of the private detective is not yet another case of “disappearance” (*shissō*). Rather, it can be interpreted as the recurrence or repetition of an “endless loop,” where the detective *becomes*, albeit unconsciously, the missing husband after whom he has been chasing all along.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in his analysis of the fractured narrative in *Hako otoko* (1973), Baryon Posadas interprets the multiplication of urban homeless who walk around in cardboard boxes not simply as a doubling or mirroring of identity, but rather as embodying the possibility of change and difference, which is “necessarily produced in every new iteration [...] even if only by virtue of the act of repetition itself.”<sup>41</sup> As is shown in these examples, the paradoxical relationship between Kyūzō and Kō is not merely a singular incident but rather foreshadows a pattern that would recur throughout Abe’s literary career.

Seen in this light, Kyūzō’s metamorphosis into a beast should not be casually reduced to a prosaic metaphor for the sake of a dramatic ending. On the contrary, the fact that Kyūzō is transformed into a beast while “Japan is just a few centimeters on the other side” (p. 190) gives form to the profound irony that Kyūzō’s homecoming is doomed to fail from the beginning as well as reflects Abe’s implicit critique of the fantasy of nostalgic return to the idealized national community. Kyūzō’s disillusioned realization that “perhaps Japan doesn’t exist anywhere” thus clearly sets him apart from Kaji, the protagonist in Gomikawa Junpei’s *Ningen no jōken*, who dies while dreaming of an idealized domestic life with his beloved wife. In sharp contrast to Kaji, whose demise ends up reaffirming and reinforcing his belief in the postwar utopia, Kyūzō’s liminal experience at the very boundary of postwar Japan compels him to cast doubt on the existence and legitimacy of national communities.



In conclusion, the reason *Kemono-tachi* has been conventionally considered to occupy an odd place among Abe's oeuvre lies, it seems, less in the "realist" development of the novel per se than in its "realist" mode of interpretation, which, instead of encouraging critics to accept what may ostensibly appear absurd or even meaningless, in fact permits or even persuades them to reconfigure the ending so that it fits into a more conventional narrative structure with an explicit teleological end in moral terms.

In response to the conventional approach that treats this novel either as another autobiographical account, albeit with major fictional twists, or else as a structurally flawed coming-of-age novel, my own reading of *Kemono-tachi* rejects both lines of interpretation and contends that the novel challenges the very traditions and premises of the so-called repatriation narrative. The seemingly awkward juxtaposition of realistic details with a frustratingly meaningless conclusion should not be understood strictly within the framework of the narrative structure of the novel itself. It opens up space for readers to actively make sense of what may appear as nonsensical by taking into account the broader historicity. Moreover, this historicity is concerned not so much with isolated incidents or individual experiences of repatriation, which tend to be relegated to the recesses of the exceptional past, as with the *longue durée* or the implicit temporal continuity from Japan's modernization to imperialization, decolonization, and eventually occupation by the Allied powers.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, the colonial past and the postcolonial present constitute a synchronic, rather than diachronic, relationship, enabling us to intervene critically into the very construction of the repatriation narrative as a genre, which endows tales of suffering in the process of repatriation with a redemptive meaning for the sake of postwar Japan's foundational narrative of recovery and prosperity.

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<sup>1</sup> Keizai Kikakuchō, *Shōwa 31 nendo nenji keizai hokoku* (Shiseidō, 1956), p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Shimizu Kazuhiko examines the transformation of the discourse on "the end of the postwar" in the public memory in "Mohaya 'sengo' de wa nai to iu shakai-teki kioku no kōsei katei," *Edogawa Daigaku kiyō*, No. 25 (2015), pp. 195-206.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the phrase "foundational narrative" from Yoshikuni Igarashi's *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* (Princeton University Press, 2012), in which he suggests that the foundational narrative was co-produced by Japan and the United States in the context of the Cold War regime in East Asia. See pp. 19-46.

<sup>4</sup> "Sengo no sensō bungaku no tenbō," *Yomiuri shinbun* (May 19, 1957). Cited in Oh Mijung, *Abe Kōbō no sengo: Shokuminchi keiken to shoki tekusuto o megutte* (Kurein, 2009), p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> Abe Kōbō, "The frontier within, part 2" in *The Frontier Within: Essays by Abe Kōbō*, trans. Richard Calichman (Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 151.

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the novel are drawn from the English translation: Kōbō Abe, *Beasts Head for Home: A Novel*, trans. Richard Calichman (Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Gibeau opposes calling Abe Kōbō an “international writer,” which he believes overlooks the socio-historical specificity of his writings. He instead suggests considering him as a “nomadic writer” who rejects such ideas as belonging or community altogether. See Gibeau, “Nomadic Community: The Literature and Philosophy of Abe Kōbō” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2006), especially the introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Critics and scholars started using the phrase “shissō sanbusaku” to refer to *Suna no onna* (1962; *Woman in the Dunes*, 1964), *Tanin no kao* (1964; *The Face of Another*, 1966), and *Moetsukita chizu* (1967; *The Ruined Map*, 1969) following Abe’s 1968 interview with Akiyama Shun. This “trilogy,” however, never achieved consensus among scholars. Some added *Hako otoko* (1973; *The Box Man*, 1974) to this list, making it a tetralogy. Others grouped *Moetsukita chizu*, *Hako otoko*, and *Mikkai* (1977; *Secret Rendezvous*, 1979) together as the “urban trilogy.” The different ways of organizing Abe’s later works into a system show critics’ uneasiness with Abe’s deconstructionist, nonlinear, and plotless approach, as well as the desire to bring the ostensibly nonsensical and fragmented structures into an intelligible, coherent genealogy.

<sup>9</sup> I deliberately use “repatriation narratives” instead of “repatriation literature” for two reasons. First, these works tend to follow a “narrative structure” in the sense that they usually assume a teleological mode which unproblematically sets postwar Japan as their end goal or “telos.” Second, I emphasize the importance of nonfictional accounts, which include memoirs and autobiographies as well as interviews, oral histories, documentaries, and so forth.

<sup>10</sup> Yamamuro Shizuka, “Kongetsu no bundan tenbō,” *Tosho shinbun* (March 30, 1957).

<sup>11</sup> Yamashita Hajime, “Jieitai hihiyō no sakuhin futatsu,” *Tokyo taimuzu* (April 8, 1957).

<sup>12</sup> What Abe means by the real or reality (*genjitsu*) is not as self-evident as it may at first appear. With extensive involvement in the avant-garde movement known as the “record movement” (*kiroku undō*) in the 1950s, Abe emphasizes the importance of seeking out reality in what may appear as unreal. Although some critics dismiss Abe’s use of supernatural elements such as the spirits or the dead as “unreal” (*hi-genjitsu teki*), Abe rejects such views as confounding realism with naturalism, which he considers to be a vulgar degradation of the former.

<sup>13</sup> Tsuruda Kin’ya, “Kemono-tachi wa kokyō o mezasu’ ni okeru anbibarensu,” *Nihon kindai bungaku*, No. 20 (1974), pp. 107-17.

<sup>14</sup> Nakano Kazunori, “Mikikan no hikiagesha: Abe Kōbō ‘Kemono wa kokyō o mezasu’ ron,” *Kindai bungaku ronshū*, No. 32 (2006), pp. 84-95.

<sup>15</sup> The title of the English translation by Nanako Mizushima, *Tei: A Memoir of the End of War and Beginning of Peace* (Tonbo Books, 2014), tellingly reveals the epistemic break between the war and the postwar. For a discussion of *Nagareru hoshi wa ikiteiru*, see Andrew Barshay, *The Gods Left First: The Captivity and Repatriation of Japanese POWs in Northeast Asia, 1945-56* (University of California Press, 2013), pp. 170-84.

<sup>16</sup> Fujiwara Tei, *Nagareru hoshi wa ikiteiru* (Chūō Kōronsha, 1976), p. 193.

<sup>17</sup> Narita Ryūichi, “‘Hikiage’ ni kansuru joshō,” *Shisō*, No. 955 (2003), pp. 149-174. See also Yamada Shōji, *Kindai minshū no kiroku, Vol 6: Manshū imin* (Shinjinbutsu Ōraisha, 1978), p. 49; Tamanoi, *Memory Maps*, pp. 64-83.

<sup>18</sup> I made a slight change to Calichman’s translation to highlight the phrase *sensō no kekka* (the result of the war).

<sup>19</sup> This roundtable was hosted by none other than Fujiwara Tei. For a discussion of the roundtable, see Marukawa Tetsushi, *Teikoku no bōrei: Nihon bungaku no seishin chizu* (Scidosha, 2004), p. 122.

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<sup>20</sup> In his autobiographical chronology, Abe writes: “I believed wholeheartedly in the false slogan of the harmony of the five races [*gozōoku kyōwa*], and I felt intense hatred and contempt towards those Japanese who trampled on that ideal.” See Abe Kōbō, “Jihitsu nenpu,” in *Shin’ei bungaku sōsho 2: Abe Kōbō* (Chikuma Shobō, 1960), p. 278.

<sup>21</sup> Kobayashi Osamu, “Abe Kōbō ‘Kemono-tachi wa kokyō o mezasu’ ni tsuite: Manshū taiken no taishōka o megutte,” *Komazawa Tandai kokubun*, No. 25 (1995), p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> On the *Sakura tokubon*, see Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Nejimagerareta Sakura: Būshiki to Gunkokushugi* (Iwanami Shoten, 2003), chapter 7.

<sup>24</sup> Nakano, “Mikikan no hikiagesha,” p. 95.

<sup>25</sup> See Ōkubo Norio, *Gendai bungaku to kokyō sōbitsu* (Kōbundō, 1992), p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> While these examples are to be read figuratively, I argue that Kyūzō’s metamorphosis in the final chapter is decisively more metaphysical. I will return to this point later.

<sup>27</sup> The theoretical underpinning of the phrase “short circuit” comes from a book series entitled *Short Circuits* (edited by Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič, and Slavoj Žižek, published by MIT Press). Žižek explains: “A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network—faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network’s smooth functioning.” This deconstructionist approach to “cross wires that do not usually touch” has the potential, I believe, to critically challenge the dominant forms and hegemonic practices that are often taken-for-granted in our everyday life. See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (MIT Press, 2009), ix.

<sup>28</sup> Another eloquent example of the “short circuit” of meaning is seen in Fujiwara Tei’s *Yobe do kotaezu*. In the story, a member of a colonial reclamation group (*kaitakudan*) in Manchuria blurts out his desire to return to postwar Japan, despite the knowledge that what awaits him is starvation and possibly even death: “I want to go back, even if it’s just one day sooner. I would rather join those twenty million and starve to death!” What sustains his wish is not the desire to “starve to death” but rather the overpowering urge to “join those twenty million,” thereby claiming a sense of belonging to the imagined national community. On *Yobe do kotaezu*, see Saka Kenta, *Abe Kōbō to “Nibon”: Shokuminchi, senryō keiken to nashonarizumu* (Izumi Shoin, 2016), pp. 97-8.

<sup>29</sup> I made a change to Calichman’s rendition of “munen” to emphasize the sense of regret.

<sup>30</sup> Octave Mannoni, “Je sais bien, mais quand même,” quoted in Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the Century France* (Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> On the material existence of ideology, see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 165-70.

<sup>32</sup> I borrow the term “space-clearing gesture” from Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1991), pp. 336-57.

<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>34</sup> For a closer analysis of *Ningen no jōken*, see Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Homecomings: The Belated Return of Japan’s Lost Soldiers* (Columbia University Press, 2016), chapter 2, in which he analyzes both the novel and its adapted film. Lori Watt also briefly examines *Ningen no jōken* in her book, *When Empire Comes Home: Repatriation and Reintegration in Postwar Japan* (Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 148-151.

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<sup>35</sup> In his study of *Moetsukita chizu*, Mark Gibeau performs a similar reading where he rejects the common interpretation of the novel as a “plot-centered linear narrative” and reads it instead as an “anti-detective story.” See Gibeau, “Nomadic Community,” pp. 161-173. In a similar light, Baryon Posadas considers *Hako otoko* a “metaphysical detective novel.” See Posadas, “Double Fictions and Double Visions of Japanese Modernity” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2011), pp. 190-220.

<sup>36</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (Vintage, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Lianying Shan, “Narrating the Colonial Past in Manchuria and Shanghai in Postwar Japanese Literature” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2007), p. 130.

<sup>38</sup> The intricate relationship between difference and repetition is interestingly reminiscent of the pair of concepts of “being” and “becoming” in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. According to Deleuze, whereas the state of “being” is based on static, immutable identities (repetition), that of “becoming” is characterized by a dynamic flux of incessant changes and movements (difference). Moreover, Deleuze suggests that difference and repetition are not necessarily opposed to each other but are rather dialectically unified in a state of what he calls “the being of becoming.” See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> For an analysis of *Daijyon kanpyōki*, see Christopher Bolton, *Sublime Voices: The Fictional Science and Scientific Fiction of Abe Kōbō* (Harvard University Press, 2009), chapter 3.

<sup>40</sup> Gibeau, “Nomadic Community,” p. 171.

<sup>41</sup> Posadas, “Double Fictions and Double Visions of Japanese Modernity,” p. 220.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the “*longue durée* of decolonization” in the Japanese context, see Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (Duke University Press, 2016).