Inescapable Capitalism in Yū Miri's *Tokyo Ueno Station*

Yū Miri's 2014 novel *Tokyo Ueno Station*, translated from the Japanese in 2020 by Morgan Giles, is written in the aftermath of and in response to the events on the 11th of March 2011. On that day, an earthquake off the coast of Japan triggered a tsunami which killed 20,000 people and caused the meltdown of a nuclear power plant in the Fukushima prefecture. Due to the three catastrophes occurring on one day, it is often referred to as the 3/11 "triple disaster." The novel is narrated by Mori Kazu, born in Fukushima in 1933, the same year as the Emperor Akihito, who reigned for most of the events of the novel. Unlike the Emperor, Kazu is born into extreme poverty, entering the labor force as an irregular worker at the age of twelve and eventually becoming a migrant construction worker. At the end of a remarkably tragic life, he turns to living as an unhoused person in Tokyo's Ueno Park, only to die by suicide by jumping in front of a train at the nearby Ueno Station. Nevertheless, death does not free Kazu when he is reincarnated as a ghost trapped in the station until the very end of the novel, where he is freed to watch his granddaughter die as she is washed away by the 3/11 tsunami. The story depicts not only the vastness of class inequality and the exploitation of land and labor, but it suggests, as in Mark Fisher's theory of capitalist realism, that escaping capitalist oppression is impossible through any means, just as it wasn't for Kazu.

After a series of seasonal agricultural jobs, Kazu is employed as a temporary migrant worker, building the facilities for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games using hand tools. He makes enough money to send his son to medical school, but is away from home more often than not, so he has little emotional connection to his family. He only realizes this after his son, born on the same day as Emperor Akihito's son, suddenly dies, leading him to believe "I had lived this life in

vain" (53). After retiring, he returns home to live with his wife until she dies in her sleep while he lay next to her, drunken and unaware of what had happened. He later wonders if he could have saved her had if he been sober and awake, thinking, "it was the same as if I'd killed her" (127). After his retirement, his granddaughter moves in with him for a while before he decides to move to Tokyo and camp in Ueno Park, becoming a member of the homeless community there.

After living as a homeless person for a while, Kazu comes to the realization that he isn't recognized as a part of society because of his status and decides to kill himself. Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism*,* that there is no real alternative to capitalism, is demonstrated when Kazu is reincarnated as a ghost experiencing the same oppression he had previously lived through. Both while homeless and as a ghost, he listens and sees passers-by talking about their middle-class lives. In one scene, he overhears two women talk about how difficult it is to own and feed three dogs, only to be followed by further descriptions of Kazu's traumatic childhood. In another, two women discuss what they plan to eat for dinner while looking at a flower painting presentation. In addition to these vignettes, the novel is interspersed with train announcements, religious chants during his son's funeral, radio announcements from the Japanese National Diet, and stories that take place slightly before or after the main timeline of the novel.

Previous scholarship has discussed the novel's reflection on the history of oppression in Northern Japan. For instance, Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt, calling the novel a "literary re-evaluation of Japan's post-war history" (2), frames her argument with the helpful historical background of Japan's treatment of the Fukushima prefecture. Japan's post-war growth was derived on the labor of migrant workers from Fukushima and elsewhere in Northern Japan, and

in response, the area turned to nuclear power as a way to supplement the lack of domestic production following this emigration of workers. In fact, the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear power plant where the 3/11 disaster occurred supplied no power to the people of Fukushima, and instead was wholly owned by the Tokyo Electric Power Company. Iwata-Weickgenannt considers how the novel is a response to the disaster by it focusing on the margins of the event and on the effects it had on the already marginalized people of Fukushima. She calls upon reports naming the prefecture an "'energy colony' subjected to a 'system of sacrifice'" (2) by the imperialist forces of the Japanese and U.S. governments. Ruby Niemann elaborates on this line of thinking, that the migrant laborers are mostly responsible for Japan's growth, saying,

> Yū highlights that the contemporary modern democracy of Japan is founded on Kazu's body, and on the bodies of many like him – the manual laborers and precarious workers who literally and figuratively build and maintain Japan's existence as a global power in the twenty-first century (31).

Niemann and Iwata-Weickgenannt both illustrate the way the novel positions itself in specific places and times to comment on the broader history of a marginalized group in Japan. This sets the scene for a critique of capitalism, as it is presented as the root of these issues.

The 3/11 disaster complicated the already strained relationship between the marginalized Fukushima prefecture and the central Tokyo government. Interspersed in early parts of the novel are snippets of the conversations in the Japanese National Diet, which is the nation's legislative body, where members debate the safety of nuclear power and the response to the disaster. Yū herself has been critical of the government's response, and after the disaster she interviewed Fukushima locals about their feelings surrounding it. As reflected in the novel, she argues that

Japan has focused more on preparing for a potential Olympic Games in the 21st Century than rebuilding Fukushima, especially complicated by the fact that Northern Japanese migrant laborers like Kazu were the ones who built the 1964 Olympic Games but were helped little from the economic boom it left (Owatari).

The juxtaposition between Kazu's life and that of the Emperor is the subject of Davinder L. Bhowmik's critique of the novel. At multiple points in Kazu's homeless life, the local government evicts the unhoused from the park to prepare for a visit from the Emperor or his family, most notably ahead of a presentation for Tokyo's bid for a 2016 Olympic Games—which was eventually given to Rio de Janeiro. It is after one of these evictions that Kazu spectates a parade, where he sees the imperial family up close, only to go unnoticed by someone so like him, born in the same year and whose son was born on the same day, but with a life drastically less traumatic. This is what leads Kazu to choose to die by suicide. Bhowmik even notes that "It is no coincidence the narrator's suicide takes place on the Yamanote line, the route that encircles the Imperial Palace at the heart of Tokyo" (64). The novel further connects Kazu to the Emperor when Kazu builds a tennis court that, as Iwata-Weickgenannt and Niemann point out, is the place the real Emperor Akihito meets his future wife, meaning Kazu is also literally building the foundation for the imperial lineage's continuation. Bhowmik argues that the novel not only calls us to compare the positions of Kazu and the Emperor, but also challenges the imperial system, something she says is rarely done in fiction due to the "chrysanthemum taboo," or the Japanese cultural stigma around criticizing the Emperor.

The life of Kazu's ghost is also a focus of scholarly work, in particular since the novel jumps back and forth through time, with the reader never knowing at first whether events are

happening to Kazu camping in Ueno Station or ghost Kazu trapped within it. Jordi Serrano-Muñoz argues in "Absence, Change, and Empowerment in Yū Miri, Murata Sayaka, and Kawakami Mieko" that the distinction is insignificant, as Kazu is treated the same living as he is dead. He asserts that Kazu is "unable to project his agency nonetheless. A witness of his several misfortunes, the narrator is a mere spectator" (166), and that the connection is also physical: unhoused Kazu has no material belongings just as ghost Kazu has no physical body.

Niemann calls upon the theory of hauntology as a theme in *Tokyo Ueno Station*. Tokyo's Ueno Park itself is a site of multiple mass deaths, all of which are mentioned in the novel by the homeless intellectual man Shige: the 1868 Battle of Ueno, which memorialized by a monument in the park, and the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, and finally the firebombing of Tokyo in the Second World War by the U.S. This "haunting" of the past into the present, as Niemann describes, explains the coincidence of these many events being portrayed to Kazu while Kazu's own life is so traumatic. Mark Fisher describes hauntology as the not only the haunting of the past into the present but also the loss of potential futures, saying "the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live" (16). But Niemann describes the ghost as a way to subvert the loss of futures: "In the process of returning the ghost also offers the potential for change – something new, a way out" (27). But even so, becoming a ghost does not free Kazu.

Finally, *Tokyo Ueno Station* is also a combination of trauma fiction and crisis literature, a distinction discussed by Niemann. In this framework, a crisis affects a community while trauma affects one person, and both are central to the novel. Serrano-Muñoz also sees this in "A Shaking

Voice Can Shake It All: Representing Trauma as a Political Act," saying that "[Yū] seems to suggest that choosing to represent the trauma of particular episodes entails a responsibility towards its association with other struggles" (40). I believe that this is related to the magical realist move to describe historical events as a personal struggle for a single character, like Oskar in *The Tin Drum* and Saleem in *Midnight's Children*. How the personal becomes political is a theme in crisis literature because disasters force us to contend with issues beyond ourselves.

After Kazu's wife dies, his granddaughter regularly visits him to make him breakfast and keep him company, which causes him to feel guilty, leading him to abandon home and move to Tokyo to be homeless. This scene is punctuated by quotes from passersby in Ueno Park walking through a display of rose paintings by Redouté, contrasting his sorrow with idle comments from middle-class passersby. The life-changing decision to *do homelessness* is described in an ethnography of homeless people in Ueno Park, people who exist in real life, by Abby Margolis, who calls this act *subversive accommodation* and notes that the homeless in Japan are culturally unique and not just a product of idleness. Here, Kazu is deciding to reject the capitalism that never served him by living as neither a producer nor a consumer, and this is why his life as a ghost is so like his life in the park.

After becoming homeless, Kazu describes the measures through which he can make small amounts of money: selling scavenged magazines back to stores, gathering ginkgo nuts and drying them, and collecting aluminum cans. He notes that few, unlike him, choose to be homeless: "nobody starts off life in a hovel... and nobody becomes homeless because they want to be" (83). After this, homelessness becomes an inescapable reality for him, he says,

> If you fall into a pit, you can climb out, but once you slip from a sheer cliff, you cannot step firmly into a new life again. The only thing that can stop you from falling is the moment of your death. But nonetheless you have to keep living until you die, so there is nothing to do but continue working diligently for your reward (84).

Though, of course, death comes with no reward.

Being homeless returns him to the edges of society, just as his homeland of Northern Japan is stuck in a harmful cycle of exploitation, literally and figuratively marginalized, so being homeless offered no real escape. Nevertheless, Kazu believes death can free him from his life of misfortune. He writes, “I thought something would be resolved by death. I believed that at the final moment the meaning of life and death would appear to me... But then I realized that I was back in the park... I had understood nothing.” (108). He becomes an indefinite onlooker to other homeless people and middle-class citizens walking through the park, never truly escaping the park until the end of the novel.

A theoretical framework for understanding this is in Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*. Fisher presents his concept of capitalist realism, or the belief that capitalism’s end is unimaginable and finding a potential replacement is unthinkable, and that these notions are now thought of as common-sense and obvious. He notes how capitalism, which calls an “atmosphere,” absorbs the shock of critique easily, he says, “A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism” (16). He believes capitalism can present poverty and other societal issues as inevitable, and the idea that these problems can be solved is seen as naive optimism. This shock-absorbing power is clear in *Tokyo Ueno Station*, as Kazu tries several times to escape capitalism, to become

a homeless person and to die, but both are ineffective. The fact that he finds death to be the only way out reifies Fisher's notion of there being no alternative, as Kazu equates ending his suffering with ending *it all.*

Fisher himself, in an analysis of the novel *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, notes that the threat of a suicide is what forces an oppressive regime to step back, saying "where power has unquestioned dominion over life and death, then the last recourse for the oppressed is to die on their own terms, to use their deaths as a—symbolic as well as literal—weapon" (3). But even that threat, to exit the oppressive system through death, does not lead the main characters to see an alternative to that system. Kazu similarly tries to escape the capitalist system through suicide but, as escape is impossible, becomes re-confined to the station. In the station, he is forced to invisibly observe middle-class passersby talk about their middle-class lives that he never got to experience. The insurrection in *The Hunger Games* never materializes since Kazu simply has no power over his situation.

In "The Concept of Post-Pessimism in 21st Century Dystopian Fiction," Annika Gonnermann describes an application of capitalist realism to dystopian fiction, such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, whose main characters never try to escape a harsh fate because, as Gonnerman says, "their ability to cognitively process a life outside neoliberal capitalism is non-existent, leading them to accept the status quo in an almost stoic, even relaxed manner" (28). Jacques Derrida speaks against this acceptance of the capitalist status quo, but acknowledges its ability to absorb criticism, in *Spectres of Marx*, where he states that instead of "singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory

discourses" (106), he warns we should never lose sight the fact that human suffering under capitalism has led to people being "subjugated, starved or exterminated" in numbers higher than ever before. He goes on to argue that these harmful forces are nevertheless saturated by "spectres" of Marxism as they promote criticism of state intervention and bureaucracy while ignoring other Marxist themes like class struggle and the abolition of private property. This clearly inspired Fisher's capitalist realism and illustrates how the paradoxical use of death to end suffering seems logical to Kazu only because he is living in an absurd oppressive system to begin with.

Kazu in *Tokyo Ueno Station* doesn't stoically accept the status quo, he chooses to be homeless, although that doesn't let him escape the unfair conditions he was put under. Facing the Emperor before his suicide is what makes him realize this. Kazu walks through the train station, bumping into a woman too fixated on her phone to notice him. He ponders how comparatively easy her life must be, how much time she must have on her hands, before jumping in front of a train. After red fills his vision, it is at once replaced with the view outside a train window, as the ghost of Kazu is trapped in the station, a reflection of the traditional Japanese belief that those that die by suicide haunt the locations of their death.

Just before 3/11, Kazu is freed from the station and reappears on a beach in his hometown, where his granddaughter is reversing up a highway in a car to escape the tsunami rushing towards her. Kazu watches as the wave swallows the car. I believe in this scene, the tsunami, which is the starting point of a disaster profoundly worsened by capitalist greed, stands for capitalism itself. As argued by capitalist realism, the economic system has the power to wash over any criticism or challenge, absorbing resistance and making attempts to escape futile.

Kazu's choices in *Tokyo Ueno Station* to become homeless and die by suicide are clearly ineffective at escaping the Imperial or capitalist systems he lived in; he is made to experience oppression as an unhoused person and see inequality as a ghost. This relates to Fisher's concept that there is no real alternative to capitalism, just as the novel imagines no alternative. Kazu is born into abject poverty at the same time as the Emperor is born into wealth, and Kazu's sorrow follows him into the afterlife. Through the start and end of his life and after, capitalism is there to push him down at every attempt to get out.

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