NANZAN REVIEW OF AMERICAN STUDIES
Volume 40 (2018): 3-21

Transnational Japanese-American Ambiguities in Select Works of Murakami Ryu

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Abstract

The relationship between America and Japan spans more than two hundred years and is made up of numerous phases. From curious strangers, to partners, to bitter enemies, to important mutual model, the two nations have interacted with each other in both destructive and fruitful ways. Much of this complex history can be found in present-day cultural products.

Applying a transnational approach to a selection of translated writings of acclaimed Japanese writer Murakami Ryu, this article aims to illuminate the effect America has had on Japan, and what kind of image of the United States this has created in one such area of cultural production.

I reveal that America is presented as an ever-present and destructive force in the Japan that Murakami creates, resembling various historical phases. However, while the negatives, like amplifying violence, temptation, and increasing feelings of inadequacy, are more prevalent than the positives, there is always a glimpse of hope shining through. Ultimately, America is presented as a challenge for Japan to overcome and reflect upon. Even though this leads to many victims and sacrifices, it is made evident that surviving these imposed challenges offers Japan and its society a chance to grow beyond them.

Introduction

The relationship between the United States and Japan is a long and tumultuous one to say the least. First came seafarers like John Kendrick, arguably the first American to meet Japanese islanders in any official capacity, as early as 1791 (Johnson 1995, 23), and numerous castaways who found themselves on whaling ships or even the coast of California like Captain Jukichi (Schodt 1994, 18). Eventually, Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived on the shores of Japan in 1853, effectively ending Japan’s period of isolation by showcasing American firepower to open the Japanese islands for trading. Almost a century later, the adversity leading up to WWII culminated in the attack on Pearl Harbor and another showcasing of American firepower in the form of the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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However, contact between the two nations did not end there despite the mutual destruction and hurt. Instead, the Americans were strongly involved in creating the postwar government and constitution of Japan and therefore ensured future cooperation in manifold ways between the two countries. Today, Japan and the United States are important partners in business, diplomacy, the exchange of goods and services, and, most importantly for this essay, the exchange of ideas, culture, and entertainment.

The mutual influence of the two cultures on one another in a very specific arena is the topic of this article. In the words of Frederik Schodt, “English has had a profound effect not only on the way the Japanese speak their language, but also on how they perceive reality” (1994, 38). To examine one facet of this “perceived reality” of America, I will apply a transnational approach, inspired by Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s definition, to a selection of writings by acclaimed Japanese author Murakami Ryu.

Born in 1952 in Sasebo, Nagasaki, Murakami incorporates manifold autobiographical elements into his writings. Many of these are largely concerned with the numerous American influences he encountered during his youth and adolescence. American poetry, literature, film, and music are a constant in his life and therefore his writing. As such, Murakami’s works offer a perfect vantage point from which to examine certain facets of the American influence on Japan and its citizens. Furthermore, Murakami is known for not shying away from contentious topics in his works, like drug abuse, violence, sex, or criminal activities, in the process exposing a side of the Japanese-American bond that does not typically get much time in the spotlight.

However, one might ask what we can gain from this. How will looking at America from the outside be valuable to our understanding of the United States and why consider a transnational approach in doing so? As Fisher Fishkin, spearhead of the transnational movement in American studies, states, “The project of exploring what translations and adaptations of works by American writers can teach us about the cultures in which these works are translated and adapted has been a particularly fruitful one in recent years” (Fisher Fishkin 2004, 24). However, looking at it from the other side, at works by Japanese, or other foreign authors for that matter, that have been translated into English and are concerned to a degree with all things American, seems to be quite understudied and in need of consideration. The aim of this approach is to shed new light on how the United

States is perceived from a point of view that has been influenced by America in a unique way, as is the case with the Japan portrayed by Murakami.

A transnational approach in this endeavor seems the logical conclusion as transnational studies, among other things, "illustrates how cultures circulate through particular products—primarily literature, film, and music—and become emblems of evolving ways of perceiving the United States and its cultures from within and outside the country" (Davis 2013, 1). To illuminate this angle of American transnational studies I have chosen a select few works of Murakami Ryu for a plethora of reasons. First, the presence of American military bases in Japan plays a big part in many of the novels and stories at hand. These bases offer a great vantage point into Japanese-American interrelations, as they serve as a unique space in Japan, being under American jurisdiction on one hand, and physically bringing people from both countries together due to American military personnel being stationed there. Second, a number of characters in Murakami's novels heavily identify with cultural products imported from across the Pacific. Rock music, novels, poetry, and movies are recurring points of identification for characters such as Ryu in *Almost Transparent Blue* (1981). Lastly, the presence of American characters and the influence they have on others is an essential part of some of the texts, especially *In the Miso Soup* (2006). Therefore, Murakami Ryu's works offer a great entry point into how a culture that has dealt with the United States in manifold ways perceives them.

While Murakami has written and published close to forty novels and several short stories, articles, and essays in his native Japan, only a small percentage of them have been translated into English. In contrast to that, Murakami Ryu's arguably more well-known and studied namesake Murakami Haruki has seen almost his complete catalogue of works translated into English. Whereas "movies, TV shows, song lyrics, pure literature, pop literature, and trash are translated into Japanese today at a mind-boggling volume and speed" (Schodt 1994, 33), Murakami Ryu's situation shows that translation from Japanese into English seems less prevalent in general. This is another reason the study of his works is so appealing, as the sample size available in translation is smaller than one would expect from a country that produces so much raw intellectual content in one form or another. However, some of the admittedly few translated works by Murakami will form the basis of this article, specifically *Almost Transparent Blue*, *In the Miso Soup*, and the short story collection *Tokyo Decadence* (2016).

While the bulk of Murakami's work offers at least some insights on the Japanese perception of America, whether it is the real space of the United States or some vague idea of what "America" stands for, the aforementioned texts are especially rich in connections and allusions to the United States. *In the Miso Soup* features a main antagonist who is a tourist from New York coming to Tokyo to terrorize the city and gain some spiritual healing for himself. *Almost Transparent Blue* includes a variety of minor American characters, due to the ever-looming presence of a military base in Kyushu. Additionally, a wide array of references to American culture, from jazz music, to food, to films and television can be found in the collection *Tokyo Decadence*. Interestingly, employing many allusions to America in one's writing is not always well received by literary critics in Japan. Murakami Haruki's inclusion of a large number of American influences is often criticized because "the traditional literary critics regard his novels as un-Japanese and look askance at their Western influences, ranging from the writing style to the American cultural references" (Onishi 2005).

The aim of this article is to analyze this amalgam of perceptions of America in the works of Murakami Ryu and apply a transnational frame of reference to them. In doing so, this article aims to provide readers with a new way of perceiving the United States from the outside using one aspect of Japanese culture. This is a perception that is, unsurprisingly, full of contradictions, misunderstandings, myths, and differences, but also full of admiration and inspiration. Murakami's works show that "America" is often connected to excess in all its forms, whether it is consumption, sexuality, or even excess individual liberty compared to Japan, a force that permeates society in myriad ways, for better and worse.

In the words of Murakami Ryu himself, "my generation had parts of American influence that we liked and parts that we hated. We also understood the complexities and diversities of American culture" (Murakami 2013a). These diversities are repeatedly highlighted in his works and they paint a complex picture of America from the Japanese point of view that one would not necessarily expect. This is an America that is sometimes the saving grace and source of positivity and identity for characters, but sometimes also a harbinger of chaos and bad decisions. Together, these two sides of the U.S., and the grey area in between them, viewed from a Japanese perspective, illuminate some of the problems, complexities, differences, and good qualities that make up Murakami Ryu's transnational America.

I: Good or Bad: A Tug of War

In Roland Kelts' *Japanamerica*, author Susan Napier states an important opinion about Japanese society that applies to Murakami's depiction of America: "In the West we have Cartesian dualism. But in Japan, you don't have to believe in one thing or another. You can believe in multitudes" (2007, 134). The United States is repeatedly shown in a favorable and an unfavorable light at the same time in Murakami Ryu's writings, both not mutually exclusive, but existing simultaneously and enriching the bigger picture that is painted, lending credence to Napier's statement. Frederik Schodt argues a similar viewpoint by writing that

> Japanese attitudes toward the United States vary as much as American attitudes

> toward Japan. Generational differences play a large part, because those born before the war experienced heavy anti-American propaganda, while those born after did not. But one's wartime experience [...] is by no means the only criterion for liking or disliking America. Many Japanese people do like America but because America's influence has been so overwhelming in their lives the relationship is probably best described as love-hate. (1994, 146)

This oscillation between love and hate for America frequently also results in depictions in the fiction at hand that eventually lands in both extremes, where inspiring ideas and acts of kindness as well as destruction exist at the same time.

In *Almost Transparent Blue* one such moment can be found towards the end of the book that puts the main character Ryu's attitudes towards the U.S. in a slightly different context than what the rest of the book portrays. Ryu recounts a brief meeting with an American couple that lives upstairs of his own apartment. After a drug-fueled rainy night out, Ryu wakes up and notices his American neighbors throwing breadcrumbs out their window into the garden to feed a flock of birds. This inspires an act of kindness in Ryu who decides to give an old pineapple he kept in his room to the birds. While stepping out of the front door, the woman tells him to put it under a nearby poplar tree, so Ryu throws the pineapple there. A few minutes later, the woman goes for a walk with her dog, but not before having a short exchange with Ryu where "she nodded and chuckled, saying I think the birds'll be glad" (Murakami 1981, 87). As it turns out, the poplar tree and the pineapple are the setting for the very last scene of the book.

In a psychotic episode, Ryu cuts his arm with a glass shard and runs out of a friend's house. After briefly passing out he finds himself wandering towards his apartment at the break of dawn, and on the moist grass he has a revelation of sorts aided by the shard of glass and the aforementioned pineapple.

> As I walked toward my own apartment, I thought, [...] I want to reflect this smooth white curving myself. I want to show other people these splendid curves reflected in me. [...] Beside the poplar in front of the apartment lay the pineapple [...] I crouched down on the ground and waited for the birds. If the birds dance down and the warm light reaches here, I guess my long shadow will stretch over the gray birds and the pineapple and cover them. (Murakami 1981, 125–26)

Since the novel ends here, one cannot know what happens to Ryu and his friends afterwards, except for the fact that he apparently wrote the book at some point later in his life. However, it is significant that this last scene takes place next to the pineapple the American couple inspired him to give to the birds. As ambiguous as the ending is, it does incite a feeling of change in Ryu. He wants to "reflect this smooth white curving," (Murakami 1981, 125–26) in contrast to the ragged edges one might say his lifestyle projects up until this point. Whether he succeeds or not, and what the "white curving" actually does entail, is impossible to say, but Ryu finds himself at a crossroads. More importantly, this crossroads is metaphorically located right next to the pineapple that is connected to the U.S. Much like Japan itself, Ryu has experienced some very different sides of America. The one he is more used to is the one connected to the nearby army base and its soldiers. With them he experienced humiliation, self-destruction, degradation, pain, and sexuality, many of which could also be applied to Japan's encounter with the United States during WWII. However, the American couple has also shown him compassion by feeding the birds, carefreeness, and kindness. Again, connections can be made to the American occupation of Japan after the war and the continued role and influence of the U.S. over the country they defeated. Even though he only caught a glimpse of all this for a few moments, it triggered something in him that he seemingly wants to break out and spread to others. In these few deciding moments of his story, Ryu experiences something very important that is symbolic to the relationship between the U.S. and Japan, during the immediate aftermath of WWII especially, that Igarashi describes as follows: "Japanese people who only the day before had been crying out [...] 'American and British devils' now faced with the 'generosity' of the victor began to take a more obsequious stance toward their vanquishers" (Igarashi 2004). While Ryu did not curse at the Americans he encountered in his life, he too was the subject of aggression and violence, even if he willingly took part in it and did not understand it as such. His neighbors then showed him the American "generosity" Igarashi writes about, which forces Ryu to think differently, not only about America, but also about himself.

A recurring theme in Murakami's writing is the wish of numerous characters to visit America in the future, only to realize that they will most likely never have the means to do so. In the novel *69* there is a young girl, called Ai-chan, whose dream is just that. "Ai-chan had been a beautician whose dream was to go to America and see the Grateful Dead, but as the paychecks came in she began to realize that she'd never be able to save enough for the trip, so she became a street kid instead" (Murakami 2013b, 29). Then there is the young woman from the lingerie pub in *In the Miso Soup* who dreams of going to New York to shop at Niketown. Furthermore, there is also the novel's main character Kenji who also dreams of going to the United States but suffers the same financial difficulties as Ai-chan. Moreover, Reiko and Okinawa from *Almost Transparent Blue* paradoxically wish to be admitted to an American drug rehabilitation center at some point in their lives. Lastly, there is Akagawa Mieko from "Historia De Un Amor," featured in the collection *Tokyo Decadence*, who fantasizes of visiting America and Cuba because of her infatuation with a visiting dancer she has had a short affair with.

What all of these characters have in common is, on the one hand, that none of them ever make it to the U.S., and on the other, that because of this all of them have a picture of America in their heads that is exclusively their own. None of them ever sets foot there and experiences the “real” America for themselves. By failing to do so they keep living with an imagined America in their heads that they construct themselves, mostly through the pop-culture they consume and by their experiences with Americans visiting Japan, like the army base soldiers or the tourist clients Kenji leads around Tokyo. In an interview with Frederik Schodt, *mangaka* King Terry recalls a similar thing happening to himself: “I had a strong romantic image of the U.S. before actually going there, but seeing the real thing sort of destroys the dream.” Schodt then goes on to conclude that “in Japan, Terry can enjoy his own version of America” (2011, 143). This sentiment is reflected by the aforementioned characters Murakami created. All of them go on enjoying their own version of America, as they are never able to shatter their dreams by actually visiting. Because of this, their pictures of America revolve around the popular music they listen to, the limited interactions with Americans they have, the things they consume, or the drugs they were introduced to by American GIs.

However, there is one exception to this trope in the Murakami Ryu texts at hand: *In the Miso Soup*’s Kenji. While Kenji also states overtly that his dream always was to go to America, and he too realized that he will not be in a position to fulfill it anytime soon, his imagination of the country across the Pacific is violently shaken by his experience with American tourist Frank. Interestingly, at the beginning of the story Kenji recounts a conversation with the publisher of a small magazine that features an advertisement for Kenji’s services. The publisher tells him that

> The Japanese need to give people in other countries more information about themselves, and that sports and music and sex are the only types of information that have true international appeal, and that of those three the one that speaks most directly to people’s common humanity is sex. (Murakami 2006, 15)

As it turns out over the course of *In the Miso Soup*, the publisher is exactly right in his assessment. By means of sport, music, and sex Kenji and Frank exchange information about themselves and their home countries in a profound but sinister way. They share a lot by visiting sex clubs together, playing baseball, and looking for music in a wider sense as Frank is focused on hearing the New Year’s bells, which also marks the end of the story. However, the exchange of information between Kenji and Frank is not a peaceful one. Kenji is forced to go along with Frank’s killing spree out of fear, not only for himself but also for his girlfriend. Despite all this, the two do share important things with each other about their respective countries that would be hard to convey with words alone. Kenji boils this notion down to its essence after Frank starts his murderous rampage in a pub that also employs prostitutes.

> Before Frank had turned up, this pub was like a symbol of Japan, self-contained, unwilling to interact with the world outside, just communing with itself in every breath [...]. People who've spent their lives living in that kind of bubble tend to panic in emergencies, to lose the ability to communicate, and to end up getting killed. (Murakami 2006, 119)

Frank is a violent wake-up call for Kenji and Japan in general. By uncovering this insular nature with his presence, he forces anyone who encounters him to break out of their shells and try to communicate differently than they used to. Kenji is at the forefront of this, seeing those who lost their ability to communicate literally die violent deaths. However, while Frank's horrible deeds force Kenji to rethink his whole life, Frank, at first glance, also opens a gulf between the two nations, seeing as how his violence seems unprecedented and beyond understanding for the Japanese, but he is quick to close said gap himself by recounting a conversation he has had with a Peruvian prostitute in Tokyo that illuminates why he came to Japan in the first place.

> The Japanese had never experienced having their land taken over by another ethnic group or being slaughtered or driven out as refugees—because even in World War II the battlefields were mostly in China and Southeast Asia and the islands of the Pacific [...] so the people back home never came face to face with an enemy who killed and raped their relatives and forced them all to speak a new language. A history of being invaded and assimilated is the one thing most countries in Europe and the New World have in common, so it's like a basis for international understanding. But people in this country don't know how to relate to outsiders because they haven't had any real contact with them. That's why they're so insular. [...] Japan's just about the only country in the world that's been untouched, *except for the U.S.* [emphasis mine] [...] precisely because the Japanese have never experienced a real invasion, there's a certain gentleness here you can't find in other countries, and that they've come up with these incredible methods of healing. Like the bells. (Murakami 2006, 145)

By stating these things, Frank builds a bridge between the U.S. and Japan made out of their mutual history of never having been conquered by any other outside force. Instead of sharing the common denominator of having an enemy force take up their homeland, which according to Frank has become the basis of international communication, America and Japan share just the opposite. Frank effectively positions himself as the deciding factor that makes the two nations realize the unique place they share in the world. Moreover, he is the needle that makes Japan's, or at least Kenji's, insular bubble burst by forcing them to have some "real," visceral contact with America. Conveniently, Frank simply does not acknowledge the period of U.S. control over the Japanese islands after WWII in his assessment of their mutual history. This already serves as a hint for a later self-assessment on Frank's part that views imported destruction and violence as a necessary jump-start for growth and change.

Not coincidentally, he also seeks something in return from Japan, which is a method of healing that is unique to the country in the form of the New Year's bells he longs to hear. What Frank seeks to be relieved of by the bells is, according to Kenji, loneliness. However, it is not any kind of loneliness, but a special and grave one that Kenji immediately recognizes as something extraordinary and endemic to America:

> Americans don't talk about just grinning and bearing it, which is the Japanese approach to so many things. [...] I began to think that American loneliness is a completely different creature from anything we experience in this country, and it made me glad I was born Japanese. The type of loneliness where you need to keep struggling to accept a situation is fundamentally different from the sort you know you'll get through if you just hang in there. I don't think I could stand the sort of loneliness Americans feel. (Murakami 2006, 39)

According to Hamid Naficy, this loneliness does not appear out of nowhere with a character like Frank; "loneliness is an inevitable outcome of transnationality, and it finds its way into the desolate structures of feeling and lonely diegetic characters" (2001, 55). This loneliness is symbolic for practically every Murakami character who identifies or dreams of America in any way examined in this article. Characters like Ryu, Kenji, and others, all display a sense of loneliness that has its roots in them not belonging anywhere. However, in their peculiarity all of them start, in one way or another, to be exposed to America and long for the country across the ocean. This results in them neither feeling really at home in Japan, nor in America, as most of them never even set foot there in the first place. Frank, on the other hand, is the opposite case. He is someone that obviously does not fit in in either place because of his murderous nature, but as an American he dreams of Japan as the place that would help him escape his loneliness. Moreover, in contrast to the Japanese characters, Frank actually does manage to reach his destination, and it seemingly does not destroy the dream for him. Instead, Frank finds purpose, and his only friend, Kenji, there. However, what Frank understands as a "friend" is just as twisted as the sense of purpose he creates for himself:

> I see myself as a virus. [...] No one knows how many viruses there are, but their real role, when you get right down to it, is to aid in mutations, to create diversity among life forms. [...] I can tell you that if it weren't for viruses, mankind would never

> have evolved on this planet. [...] I'm a man who consciously commits murders and scares the hell out of people and makes them reconsider everything, so I'm definitely malignant, yet I think I play a necessary role in this world. (Murakami 2006, 179)

This self-characterization is symbolic of the grey area between the strictly positive and strictly negative influences America has on Japan in the writings of Murakami Ryu. The picture of America and Frank as a virus that aids evolution is applicable on more than one level. Going back to the dream many characters have of visiting the U.S., one can see how an image of America spread through Japanese society like a virus. Media in particular spreads popular culture imported from across the Pacific at a mind-boggling speed, "infecting" more and more people that then continue to spread it even further. It should be mentioned though that this spread of culture is a two-way street, with Japan exporting more and more of their own cultural products overseas too. However, it cannot be denied that America's market share in this regard is on another level. As Frank mentions, not all of these viruses are strictly harmful. Ryu in *Almost Transparent Blue* comes into contact with the bad and the good variety, the latter of which truly does help him evolve. Some are infected by a harmless variety that neither influences their lives noticeably for better or worse, like the young hostess in *In the Miso Soup* who dreams of shopping at Niketown. Others only encounter the bad strain of said American virus. Frank himself, like the American weapons used in another Murakami novel, *Popular Hits of the Showa Era* (W. W. Norton, 2011), or the drugs and abuse in his other texts, are the bad kind of virus that corrupts, and even kills, its host many times. However, even among those exposed to the bad virus there are some that survive and overcome it, subsequently growing and evolving because of it. Typical examples are Kenji, who literally survives Frank's killing spree, and Ryu, who supposedly manages to escape the vicious cycle of drugs, sex, and violence he is caught in. Through their continued and violent exposure to the "bad" strain, they develop a kind of immunity to it, strengthening their system.

In this context, the United States can be interpreted as a challenge to overcome for Murakami's Japan. American imports are shown as deceiving, superficial, even deadly at some points, but always show at least a glimpse of positivity that forces many of those subject to them to take a long, hard look in the mirror and reevaluate themselves. For Murakami Ryu's Japan, America is a test of endurance that is there to be overcome and learn something about oneself while facing it. While this might seem like a further strengthening of the United States' unilateral power over the Japanese islands it is important to keep in mind that the process, if successful, leads to a stronger self and identity for the Japanese characters and therefore, society. Spurred on by an inescapable American influence after WWII, Murakami Ryu's protagonists use the cultural influences they are necessarily exposed to and have become normalized in Japan, and around the globe, and grow through them. Instead of just succumbing to the virus, Japan's incredible "methods of healing," the metaphorical New Year's bells, trigger a mutation that leaves them better equipped to deal with the future and carve out an independent living for themselves that resists exterior pressure. However, there is one more thing important to the American-Japanese relationship that appears repeatedly in Murakami's writings: baseball.

II: The Curious Case of Baseball

Baseball, or *yakyū* in Japanese, is so popular in Japan that the Japan National Tourism Organization features it under "traditional Japanese sports" on their homepage and even states that "fans are surprised to hear that Americans also consider it their 'national sport'" (Japan National Tourism Organization 2018). The sport was introduced to the country in 1872, shortly after the modern rules were established in the U.S., by Horace Wilson, a professor of English at the forerunner of Tokyo Imperial University. Wilson was brought in as an advisor to the Japanese to help reform their education system during the Meiji Restoration. However, soon after his arrival, Wilson shared the sport of Baseball with his students and sparked a national phenomenon (Solloway 2007). Today, the Nippon Professional Baseball League (NPB) is the Japanese counterpart of the North American Major League Baseball (MLB) and consists of twelve teams divided into two leagues, Pacific and Central.

Seeing how popular baseball is in Japan and how deeply ingrained it is in society, it is no surprise that Murakami frequently adds elements regarding the sport into his texts. Circling back to Kenji and Frank from *In the Miso Soup* again, one can see quite early in the book that they share an intriguing scene in a batting center late at night. Frank tells Kenji that he very much enjoyed playing baseball when he was growing up, and that he is still following the Major League as much as possible. Eventually, they come across a batting center with several cages and attached pitching machines. However, Frank does not want to play at first and leaves Kenji to it while he only watches. Kenji misses the first few balls and Frank starts to criticize him for it which riles Kenji up. In his anger, Kenji agrees to a bet: if he manages to hit one home run out of twenty tries, Frank will pay double the agreed fee for the tour, and if not he will only get half. Kenji ultimately loses the bet, but during his twenty tries of hitting a home run, memories start to surface about his father who taught him to play baseball.

This creates a connection between Kenji and Frank in the midst of a tense scene wherein Kenji is becoming more and more angry and disgusted by his client's behavior. Both have fond childhood memories closely connected to playing baseball with their respective families. For Frank it was playing with his brothers, while for Kenji it was playing with his father. It is this connection that Kenji eventually uses to challenge Frank for a double-or-nothing round, only this time Frank is the one who has to hit a home run. As it turns out, something is very wrong with Frank, as he loses his bat on the first swing, and just stands there while the ball machine assaults him. Kenji is dumbfounded by this, as not only does it open up cracks in the persona Frank has presented him, but it also does not fit into Kenji's ideas about America: "I was watching an adult American male stand in the path of a speeding baseball with nothing in his hands. That familiar, everyday concept—the batter's box—had transformed into something alien" (Murakami 2006, 55).

Symbolically, this scene offers a number of interesting revelations about the Japanese-American relationship and Japan's view of the United States as presented in Murakami's writing, considering the publisher of Kenji's advertisement saying that sports are one of the only things with true international appeal. The first important thing to notice is Kenji's preconception of Americans naturally enjoying and being able to play baseball. For him, an American man playing baseball is something like a law of nature that he did not even consider could be false in any way. Of course, Frank also claimed that he is a baseball enthusiast and that he used to play a lot when he was younger, enforcing Kenji's belief, which makes his monumental failure at the batting range even stranger. Still, Kenji felt connected to the U.S., and to Frank, by their mutual love for the sport, a connection that was then shattered in a moment's notice. Second, the scene hints at the Japanese simply being better at baseball than Americans. A few cages next to them, another young man is batting alone, and both Frank and Kenji notice that he is an absolute master of his craft, hitting almost every ball beautifully and with conviction. Even Kenji himself, who does not show any kind of remarkable skill, manages to hit a few close balls, which is significantly better than what Frank accomplishes. Even though the Japanese apparently know that baseball is potentially more popular in Japan than it is in the U.S., the United States still serves as the birthplace and mecca for professional baseball across the rest of the world. After all, the MLB is the most lucrative, best paying, most well-known professional baseball league in the world and represents the main goal for almost every young player. Just entertaining the thought that another nation could be more skilled than the U.S. in the national pastime that is baseball borders on blasphemy. Lastly, it is exactly this thought that begins to shatter Kenji's picture of Frank, and to a wider extent America. While there are instances before this scene that already make Kenji suspect that something is off about Frank, it is this one that finally gives Kenji the first piece of evidence that he is actually right. During their short baseball exhibition Frank's idiosyncrasies break through his shell for Kenji to see which, as mentioned before, forces Kenji to slowly reevaluate his view of America and the opinions he has accumulated so far in his life. It is this most American thing of all, baseball, that betrays Frank the American as something special, and puts Kenji in a position to question everything he thought he knew about the U.S. for the first time. Additionally, from the perspective of the reader, this scene also shows Japan in a position of strength over America for one of the few times in the writings at hand. Initially, Frank seems in a position of power, mocking Kenji for his failure to hit a home run. It seems Frank firmly expected this outcome, for how could someone not born and raised in the U.S. ever hope to win a baseball bet against a true American after all? However, Frank's utter failure paired with the Japanese batter training next to them in impressive fashion effectively reverses the roles. Suddenly, the power dynamic shifts in Japan's favor, which is depicted as being more than able to hold its own in baseball, despite the fact that it was imported from America.

In the Miso Soup is not the only Murakami story in which baseball plays an important part, however. Among them are the short stories "I Am a Novelist" and "Each Time I Read Your Confession," also included in the *Tokyo Decadence* (1986) collection. The first one revolves around author Okutegawa who receives a call one day informing him that someone has used his identity at an exclusive club and accumulated a substantial debt. Looking into the matter, Okutegawa soon finds out that the impostor tried to impress a woman who is a big fan of his writings. Eventually, he meets the woman and falls in love with her. However, during a date they spend at a baseball game between the Hiroshima Carp and the Yokohama Whales (nowadays called Yokohama DeNA BayStars) something unexpected happens. While Okutegawa quickly falls in love with the woman, called Mutsumi, she is not quite as infatuated with him, even though she originally fell for the impostor. Seeing as both of them are fans of the Hiroshima Carp though, they start to develop more of a connection during the tense game—"We grab each other's hands, jump from our seats and cheer like mad" (Murakami 2016, 34). Afterwards, Okutegawa impresses Mutsumi with his analysis of the game when he predicts the bad decision of one of the Carp's star players, Takahashi Yoshihiko, of trying and failing to steal a base. Ultimately, the game goes to extra innings and the same situation as before is repeated, but before Okutegawa can say anything a man behind him shouts the exact opposite of his opinion. As it turns out, the man shouting is the impostor and upon seeing him Mutsumi is immediately drawn to him again. Ultimately, she does leave the real Okutegawa for the fake one, but we do get an explanation for this decision. During the game, Mutsumi reveals that her reason for being a Carp fan is because the "young guys on the team are really good-looking" (Murakami 2016, 34). She even states her opinion that one can judge others simply by the way they look and never be wrong when one trusts their own feelings. It is exactly this thought that comes into play when the shouting man behind them turns out to be the impostor and Okutegawa gets a first look at him. In his own words he states that "if I am a hamburger steak at Denny's, the impostor is veal filet en croute at Maxim's" (Murakami 2016, 36). Essentially, Mutsumi and the impostor are drawn to each other by their appearances and their mutual preference of appearance over substance, which is also showcased in the baseball game. Both of them root for the wrong decision that costs the Carp the game because they want Takahashi to run, simply because he looks beautiful when doing it.

"Each Time I Read Your Confession" strikes the same vein but delivers a quite comprehensive explanation of why the beauty of the athletes is so important. In the story an adolescent young male called Noriyuki is arrested and questioned for the murder of a man and his two children. In retrospect he reveals his motives behind the murder and the story leading up to it. Noriyuki describes himself as exorbitantly ugly and a social outcast. He is repeatedly bullied and beaten at school and has no real friends to speak of. Additionally, he also harbors a strong disdain for his parents whom he blames for his own bad looks. Eventually, he becomes interested in a mother of two that regularly visits his parents' pharmacy. He begins stalking her, making obscene phone calls and sending her inappropriate pictures out of a twisted conviction that she enjoys those things. The woman eventually figures out that it is Noriyuki stalking her and threatens to tell his mother about it, which forces Noriyuki to act. He goes to her apartment and brutally kills the woman's husband, as well as both their children, with a wrench. However, before he strikes the woman down too he suddenly stops and smashes the television set instead. The reason for this puzzling change of plans is a realization Noriyuki has while quickly glancing at the TV that is broadcasting Pro Baseball News:

> I understood why people make fun of me and push me around. It's because I'm fat and slow and stupid. Back in the Stone Age we were hunters, but people like me were too clumsy to catch any game, so everybody bullied us and shunned us. The Stone Age went on for thousands and thousands of years, so we've still got those memories inside. They say we're equal now, but it's not true. Those memories are why people like Ma and me always get picked on. Takahashi looked so beautiful running, it gave me goosebumps. Takahashi, Carl Lewis, John McEnroe, people like that, it makes you feel good just to watch them run. That's because they're the ones who used to supply us all with meat. [...] I [...] smashed the television set. I felt like I was smashing the whole world. (Murakami 2016, 66–67)

Like "I Am a Novelist," the sport of baseball is equated with physical beauty and prowess. Moreover, Noriyuki's mentioning of strictly American athletes and one that plays a quintessential American sport in his explanation of why people like him and his mother are constantly pushed around is no coincidence. Beauty, appearance, and physical competence are portrayed as essential prerequisites for acceptance in a modern society. He even goes so far as to equate these attributes with necessities for human survival in prehistoric times. Furthermore, these attributes are then directly connected with American athletes and American sports like baseball. In this sense, the U.S. is used as an example of power, physicality, and a spotless appearance that is aspired to by many and greatly praised and appreciated. On the flipside, however, it sets a standard one has to measure up to and failing to do so positions oneself as an outcast and undesirable.

In conclusion, it can be said that baseball in the writings of Murakami Ryu is a pendulum swinging between the U.S. and Japan, admiration and resentment, power and powerlessness, ambition and failure. In both countries baseball enjoys a tremendous popularity that firmly establishes it as a national pastime. This shared enjoyment further entangles the two nations, but it can also function as a wedge between them that cracks open any preexisting fissures, as seen in the previous examples. As a sport and spectacle, the athletes competing at the highest level are seen as role models and set the standards to measure up to. Their raw physicality displayed in a game is seen as the pinnacle of beauty in motion. As such, their bodies and movements become an ambition for other people to aspire to and the source of great enjoyment in watching from the stands or in front of a screen, as seen in "I Am a Novelist." On the other hand, if the standard is unreachable it breeds resentment and conflict, such as in "Each Time I Read Your Confession," where the athletes are stand-ins for perceived fundamental differences in humans in general. The role America plays in this is not hard to see as after all it is where the sport originated and from where it spread to Japan. Therefore, it brought this source of great enjoyment, as well as the standard to measure up to, across the Pacific. Moreover, in a transnational world, people not only get measured by the conventions of their immediate surroundings, but also by those of the dominant culture. In turn, they also get to enjoy a variety of cultural influences. Baseball represents both sides of this coin. It is immensely popular in Japan and the players are regarded as stars and idols, admired not only for their skill but also for their almost sublime movements and beauty. On the other hand, this makes people that cannot compare to them insecure and vulnerable in a society that often values appearance over substance. While the Japanese certainly made baseball their own over time, the admiration for players like Takahashi Yoshihiko or Willie Mays is still the same in both nations and their achievements and the beauty of their motion cast a long shadow over the people watching them from a distance.

Conclusion

Japan and America share a history that goes back more than two hundred years. Over the course of this time, the two nations have gone through many challenges and phases: isolation, partners, enemies, and friends. The legacy of this intriguing and complex history can nowadays be found in the cultural products of the two countries. By observing a selection of such products in the form of writings by Japanese author Murakami Ryu, this article has attempted to show what kind of picture and perception America's ongoing presence in Japan has created about itself in the author's texts. Additionally, by applying a transnational approach to Murakami's texts *Almost Transparent Blue*, *In the Miso Soup*, and stories from the collection *Tokyo Decadence*, I examined how the U.S. has been reimagined and branded in parts of a culture that they have had a large influence on. American social, political, economic, and cultural influences added to a unique and challenging perception of the U.S.

The texts that formed the basis of this analysis offered a variety of gateways from which to enter the sphere of American influences in Japan. Murakami's characters heavily identify with American cultural products and use them to form their own identities. American military bases in Japan are featured repeatedly, not just as settings but also as the primary point of origin for U.S. citizens in the region and the influence they spread. Moreover, American characters are frequently created by Murakami that symbolize the cross-Pacific relationship in many of its facets, e.g. they function as role models and sources of pleasure, they are the point of origin for violence, or they force the Japanese to question themselves and their society.

The positive side positioned America as a great source of pleasure for the Japanese. Characters repeatedly find joy and excitement in imports from the United States, be it movies, music, or everyday products like food and clothing. Indulging in American entertainment gives them opportunities to enjoy themselves they would not have otherwise. Additionally, these cultural products they consume, music especially, turn out to be an important contributor towards radical and critical thinking. Lastly, Japan draws a sense of validation from America and its appreciation of Japanese products and traditions.

However, the same sources of pleasure and validation turn out to be vulnerable to corruption and criticism. Pleasure coming from America is often achieved through consuming drugs, which are then closely tied to sexual abuse, self-harm, violence, and abuse in Murakami's works. At the same time America rewards Japan's enjoyment of their culture with accusations of mindless imitation and a voluntary subjugation to standards which lead to an approximation to the United States. Trying to measure up to these standards results in feelings of inadequacy and undesirability. Furthermore, America is also characterized as a source of physical violence, indirectly by supplying Japanese citizens with weaponry and inspiration to harm each other, and directly by bringing about destruction and death in the form of the serial killer Frank in *In the Miso Soup*.

The area in between the two extremes characterizes the U.S. as offering a chance to Japan for self-reflection and growth while also establishing a feeling of solidarity between the two nations. It shows that aspiring to American ideals and standards can be elevating and bring people together, by means of baseball for example, but failing to do so results in the role of social outcast. In sum, the United States is shown as a challenge for Japan and its citizens that is there to overcome and to make them aware of their shortcomings. By doing so it offers a chance for growth that, while hard to attain, seems well worth the effort.

Before reaching a final conclusion, I would like to address a few more things to consider about the observations at hand to dispel any problematic aspects that might surface about the cross-cultural nature of this article, specifically the danger of falling into categorizations of “us” versus the “other” when dealing with cultures that are not one’s own. Referring to the reverse case of this article, American cultural products presenting Japan, Robert Hamilton makes two important points: “Inaccurate portrayals are not so much misperceptions as alternate projections—choices that have been made [...] [which] construct a Japan that is an amalgam” (2002). The same holds true for my analysis of Murakami’s writings. While I extrapolate certain findings that are valuable for a better understanding of America from a transnational perspective, the source material is founded on choices by a single writer that creates an interesting amalgam of what he believes it to be. At no point does this article try to present either of the two sides, Japan or America, in all its entirety or complexity and posit ultimate truths. Therefore, E. Ann Kaplan rightfully states that “cross-cultural analysis [...] is difficult—fraught with danger [...] [since] we are forced to read works [...] through the constraints of our own framework/theories/ideologies” (1989, 42). While I do believe that the insights gained herein are valuable for a transnational study of the relationship between Japan and America, I do not claim that they are universally applicable, only that they offer a vantage point for further examination.

However, keeping this clarification in mind, I have shown that America is posited as an ever-present factor in Japanese life and society and that it seems immensely powerful in a variety of ways based on the aforementioned influences in the texts at hand. None of the characters or stories mentioned can get by with omitting America from them. Some form of the United States is always present, whether it is in a commercial or historical sense, political influence, imported culture like movies or music, or in a physical way by U.S. citizens. Furthermore, all these instances are meaningful in one way or another to the Japanese characters concerned with them. Some even die because of it while others profit from the exposure, and others are caught somewhere in between, battling America, turning Japan and their world upside down, trying to overcome it, and getting better by doing so.

Caught in a complex struggle between good and bad, Murakami’s America and Japan, much like their real-world counterparts, can hardly be separated from each other. While Murakami creates an America that looms with a dark shadow over Japan and which is more prone to present negative gestures than positive ones, there is almost always a positive undertone. By shaking up society in manifold ways, instilling radical thoughts, enabling hedonistic fulfilments of pleasure, or amplifying violence, it is ultimately depicted as a force of change and deliverer of alternatives to Japan. While the presence and influence of the United States demands many victims and sacrifices in Murakami’s Japan, it comes through as a stepping stone to a better future for the characters who manage to deal with it and bear it in the end. Much like the history of the two countries, America is an overpowering but worthy other that tears at the fabric of Japanese society before they get to rebuild it.

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