

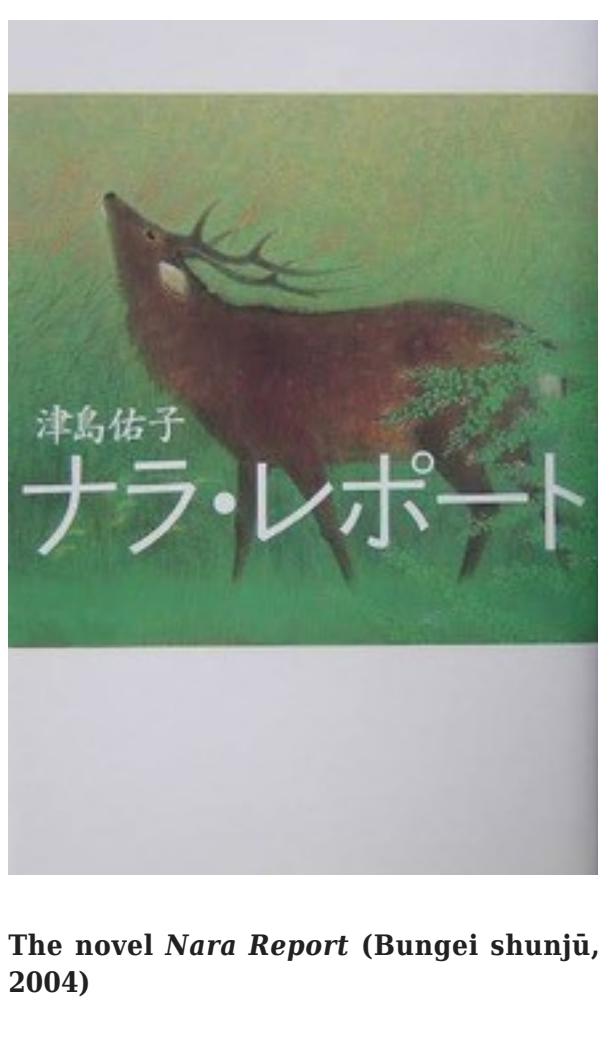
# Smashing the Great Buddha, Crossing Lines: Tsushima Yūko's Nara Report

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## Summary

With her 2004 novel *Nara Report*, Tsushima Yūko has presented us with a “report” through which memories borne by the dead come alive. This essay traces the ways in which the novel makes present day Nara emerge as a topos resounding with the voices of those subjected to Buddhist marginalization in pre-modern Nara— women, minorities, outcasts and animals— and considers how it creates space for reimagining this densely overdetermined place.

**Keywords:** Memories, Voices of the dead, Nara, Buddhist marginalization

In an interview on her 2004 novel *Nara Report* (ナラ・レポート), Tsushima Yūko describes the feeling she once had upon seeing the Great Buddha of Tōdaiji lit up during the Obon lantern festival: “It was oppressive and scary; I felt as if I were having a nightmare.”<sup>1</sup> If we imagine the Great Buddha with its shadow looming large behind it, her sense of fear is perhaps understandable, but her last remark about a nightmare sounds hyperbolic. Why nightmare? Tsushima could not locate the source of this trepidation, and this puzzlement, she explains, was her driving motivation to write a novel on Nara. In other words, what seized her with fear was not the Great Buddha per se but something more broadly concerning Nara which the Great Buddha epitomized. And writing a novel on Nara was her way of discovering its source. Tsushima relates that this is actually how she starts the writing process, something she has compared to the act of digging up potatoes. For the beginning always comes with an intuition telling her that there are “potatoes” in *this* place. She then starts to dig at the spot, after which materials emerge, one following another as they are tugged out one after the other. Seeing the Great Buddha in Tōdaiji, she intuitively sensed there was something about Nara beyond being an ancient capital and storehouse of cultural legacies, something eerily terrifying. If we use her metaphor of “potato digging,” what then corresponds to the earth she dug up in writing *Nara Report*? As the unusual inclusion of a long bibliography at the book’s end attests, what she actively bored into, I argue, were various texts, both historical and fictional. Chief among these were premodern popular tales, *sekkyōbushi* (sermon ballad) and *setsuwa* (parable-tales), as is evident from her following remark.<sup>2</sup>

If Buddhism, by establishing such measures as *nyonin kekkai* (holy sites off limits to women) has

existed alongside the official history made by men, we could read what is left out from the official history of politics and religion in works such as *setsuwa* and *sekkyōbushi*.<sup>3</sup>

This statement may lead one to think that Tsushima is setting up the opposition between popular orality and official writing, valorizing the former over the latter. However, as I shall show below, she does not fall prey to such a reified, monolithic approach to these premodern popular tales. *Setsuwa* and *sekkyōbushi* animate *Nara Report*, the latter more prominently than the former, but they do so not only as sources to be drawn from but more importantly as a channel through which Tsushima could access the voices of countless anonymous dead from the distant past, lurking behind and sometimes undercutting what these tales tell. Critic Andō Reiji has observed that “if there is something in *monogatari* (narrative) that is superior to history, that would be its ability to vividly bring back to life the memories borne by the dead.”<sup>4</sup> While Andō made this observation in his review of Tsushima’s 2013 novel *Wildcat Dome*, I believe it applies equally, if not more so, to *Nara Report*. I argue that *Nara Report*, in providing a unique “report” on Nara, brings to life memories of those subjected to Buddhist marginalization in premodern Nara, memories that continue to resound and echo in the present. These memories, rendered as immediate experience of the present, fundamentally delink Nara from the dense network of referents that through kanji and the hiragana syllabary can tie specific meanings to that space. Substituting the katakana syllabary for more commonly used kanji and hiragana reinscribes a different set of possibilities for how we might reimagine this place, its past, present and future.

In the pages that follow I illustrate how

Tsushima achieves this end, highlighting the ways in which she brings forth the voices of the past and renders palpable the claims put forth through the words of the novel’s disembodied narrator, “the dead *are right there* near [the living]. They dwell in another world, neither reality nor imagination.”<sup>5</sup>

## Setting the “Report” in Motion

Before moving onto my exploration of the novel’s content, I believe it would be useful to briefly explain the overall chapter structure of the book. The novel employs parallelism within a semi-circular structure, divided into a beginning and an end chapter called, respectively, “0” and “00,” while other chapters are conventionally numbered. Part I (Nara) is anchored in Nara, but has no sub-chapters, while Part II contains chapters 1: Mount Takamado, 2: Nara Slope, and 3: Yoshino. Part III (Kasasagi), returns to the sub-chapter-less structure of Part 1, and the book concludes with Chapter 00 (The Memorial Service for the Great Buddha). The unusual choice of the integer 0 for both the opening and closing chapters highlights their exteriority to the “reported” content found in I, II, and III. The beginning and end thus bracket off the text that is pre and post “report” on Nara; the double zero foreshadows the incomplete circular structure of the novel, which ends with a defamiliarized Nara after the “report” is made. Each of the three Parts I, II, and III bears a title that is an actual place name in Nara prefecture. Each title is written in katakana syllabary, a writing system whose difference in form hints at how Nara unfolded here is at odds with conventional images of the place. Part I reveals the present Nara as experienced by the novel’s protagonist, followed by Parts II and III where the protagonist and his mother, to whom readers are introduced in the preceding chapters, find themselves *becoming* others in the ancient and

medieval Nara. This, however, is not to say that they travel *back* in time. Rather, largely narrated in the present tense, Parts I, II, and III are laterally juxtaposed so that “another world” (29) of the dead seems to exist *alongside* the world of living, creating a strong sense of connections between the past and present, and the dead and the living.

Chapter Zero, titled “Very Ordinary Beginning,” sets in motion the “report” on Nara by establishing a twelve-year-old boy named Morio as the protagonist of the novel. The narrator’s pronouncement in the opening of Part I— “Morio thus, has begun to act as the protagonist of the novel” (28)— clearly confirms that the actions Morio carries out in Chapter Zero initiate him as “agent” of the report. These actions include the “sacrifice” of a sacred deer from Nara Park (considered messengers of the *kami* or god of Kasuga Shrine) and a *séance* to summon his dead mother’s spirit. Albeit unintended, his killing of the deer takes on the meaning of a sacrificial rite, owing to the manner of slaughter, involving a knife.<sup>6</sup> This meaning gets further reinforced when the *séance* proves successful, calling up his mother to the world of the living in the body of a pigeon. Thus, Morio is presented from the outset as someone attuned to the world of the dead with a keen sense of “‘something’ remain[ing] somewhere in the atmosphere” after someone dies (13). These two shamanic “rituals” were perfectly logical courses of action for him since he had reached a point at which he could no longer bear the “big hollow” left by his mother’s death and the unbearably oppressive “blue slime” of Nara, which he senses pervading the place. He senses its presence, for instance, when one group in his school bullies another. A non-native of Nara and living alone with his grandmother, he feels it necessary to remain on guard against this “blue slime” at all times. Morio was born in Tokyo as a result of an affair between his mother and a married man. His mother did not inform his father about Morio’s

birth until she was diagnosed with an advanced stage of cancer, when Morio was two years old. After the mother’s death, per her will, the father is entrusted with his care but, unable to tell his wife about him, he brings Morio to Nara and places him under the care of his own mother, with whom the father has little contact.

Morio’s mother, who has now returned to this world after the *séance*, asks Morio why he killed a deer. In response, Morio blurts out:

It’s Nara’s fault. I can’t say otherwise. Nara does not acknowledge me. I won’t acknowledge Nara either. But now I live in Nara. For now I cannot move elsewhere. If I do nothing, I will be crushed by Nara and fed to the deer. What else can I do but smash Nara to pieces? (37)

By killing the deer and proving its non-sacred nature, he thought he could wipe away the “blue slime.” Notably, Morio is aware that while there is a universal kind of “blue slime,” there is also one specific to Nara, where “very, very old time is flowing” (48). He tells his mother:

Someone has told me that this is a special place that has been protecting various gods and buddhas, which inevitably created “those who are better left undisturbed” (*sawaranu kami ni tatari nashi*) like myself now. People say this was a long time ago, yet, teachers are strangely touchy about the issue. I often hear people say one must not discriminate [written in katakana] against others, which makes me think it [discrimination] still exists today. So I asked my granny, but

she vaguely replied that *that kind of place* supposedly existed in the past. I don't understand it at all. But this place is caked with something like blue slime. I can smell it (48; emphasis added).

A college student once explained to Morio that those who were "better left undisturbed" in the old Nara were in charge of dealing with sacred deer: protecting them, taking care of their carcasses, killing those who stole or killed them. It is not hard to surmise that the people being referred to here are outcasts and what Morio calls "blue slime" refers to discrimination; however, the word "discrimination" is used only once, in the passage quoted above. I attribute this near absence to Tsushima's strategy to carefully place us readers as participants in Morio's sensory *experience* of Nara, momentarily suspending our semantic understanding. To be sure, unlike "discrimination," the word "blue slime" brings to relief Morio's palpable sense of the discrimination stealthily yet surely pervading Nara. Young as he is, Morio has a remarkably strong hunch that "the ordinary people of Nara have become just like those authorities of old days who valued deer more than humans" (50). Even if he does not clearly cognize it, Morio certainly *senses* the internalization and naturalization of the religious value system from the past in the mainstream residents of present-day Nara.

The careful depiction of Morio's interior shows how Tsushima is invested as much in the question of who can be the agent of this "report" as in its content. The agent is required to have sensibilities attuned to the presence of the past (and the dead) within the present. Further, by drawing the reader close to the intense feelings of love and longing between Morio and his mother in the opening chapters, Tsushima invites the reader's emotive identification not only with them but also with

the mother and son characters with whom they fuse in Parts II and III.

## Channeling the Voices of the Dead

Much to his disappointment, the killing of a sacred deer has virtually no effect on the "blue slime." Rather than give up, Morio thinks of another approach— the destruction of the Great Buddha. He tells his mother of his conviction:

If we destroy it, then this time for sure the "blue slime" of Nara will be wiped out. I have always feared and could not stand [the Buddha]. The Buddha regards those of us who have no place to go as nothing more than ants or flies. He is derisively laughing at us, thinking that ants and flies should just rot amidst the "blue slime." (50)

The mother, at her son's urging and propelled by her love for him, smashes the Great Buddha before his eyes. In this dramatic scene, unleashed along with metal and wood pieces, is a torrent of variously "colored voices" (92) of the past, singing songs and reciting passages from *setsuwa* and *sekkyōbushi* as well as historical records related to temples and shrines in Nara.<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, Tsushima didn't have any other choice but to *write* them, but these words strewn on the final pages of Part I actually comprise "fragments of people's voices" (92; emphasis added), and their acoustic materiality is made visible and sensible in the way they are scattered across the pages in all directions. Many of these words or the texts they are drawn from are woven into Parts II and III directly or indirectly, where Morio and his mother find themselves *taken within* the voices of different mothers and sons in premodern Nara. Here, I focus on Part II as



it brings to the fore these voices of the past in their immediacy, much more so than Part III, which enfolds them within a more plot-driven narrative involving a character with the name of a historical abbot from the Muromachi period (1392-1573).

The three stories included in Part II allude to popular medieval recited narratives (*katarimono*), *sekkyōbushi* and *Gikeiki* (*Yoshitsune: A Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle*).<sup>8</sup> The intertextuality we see here is similar to music sampling in that fragments from foundational texts are liberally incorporated into new stories. This is done with great imagination to bring forth the voices laden with the intense anguish of those marginalized by Buddhism—a woman, a member of a minority group, an outcast child, an animal. While these voices are not always directly inscribed in the alluded texts, given the secondary sources Tsushima consulted (all listed in her bibliography)—historical writings on women, outcast communities, and Buddhist institutions of medieval Japan—she most likely became attuned to the lurking presence of these voices. Furthermore, the allusion to popular medieval recited narratives links these stories to many layers of commoners' imaginations from the medieval period when Buddhist temples were at their most powerful.<sup>9</sup> Not only was it a time that saw the emergence of many influential Buddhist thinkers, but it was also a time when Buddhist temples held power and influence over various aspects of society in general.<sup>10</sup> In the first two stories *sekkyōbushi* plays a vital role.

*Sekkyōbushi* (*sekkyō*=sermon ballad; *bushi*=music) is a storytelling art in which a lay Buddhist preacher tells tales of the origin of famous Buddhist icons and the law of karma. Dating back to the early Muromachi period, *sekkyō* were chanted by lay preachers from the lowest social stratum for audiences of commoners, accompanied by a *sasara* (simple bamboo instrument). They used language

replete with dialects and vulgar phrases. Later, under the influence of early *jōruri* theater, the performance began to involve puppets and more sophisticated instruments. “*Sekkyō* chanters,” indicates R. Keller Kimbrough, “spoke to the heart, describing the torture, mistreatment, and suffering of children and other pitiful protagonists as a way of engaging their audiences and keeping them in their seats” (5). This characterization of *sekkyō* tales' captivating power can also be applied to the first two stories of Part II in *Nara Report*. Coupled with the portrayal of suffering, they depict the constant motion of the characters in a way that is evocative of journey scenes (*michiyuki*) in *sekkyōbushi*. In this way, the work draws readers in and builds tension that finally reaches a peak at the conclusion of each story.

In the first story, “Mt. Takamado,” sourced from the Mt. Kōya passage in the *sekkyōbushi* “Karukaya,” Morio's mother and Morio fuse with Akō and her baby son Kingyomaru (later Kūkai [774-835], founder of the Mt. Kōya monastery and progenitor of the Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism), sometimes completely, but sometimes retaining their separate consciousnesses.<sup>11</sup> While only a side story in “Karukaya,” in Tsushima's hands this section on Mt. Kōya receives detailed attention and elaboration, focusing specifically on Akō's plight in having to bury Kingyomaru because of his constant nighttime crying, which was deemed a bad omen by the villagers.<sup>12</sup> “Mt. Takamado” foregrounds Akō's/Morio's mother's lamentation at being a mother and woman fated to bury her son alive so that he can later be saved by a renowned monk and set on his path to become founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism, which is indeed what happens in “Karukaya.” Akō/Morio's mother is fully aware of the storyline in “Karukaya” and bemoans her fate of being a woman and mother tasked with burying Kingyomaru, not saving him. She repeatedly cries out, “Alas! being a mother, Alas! Being a woman!” Such a formulaic

repetition of an impassioned phrase is in fact one of the staple features *sekkyōbushi* used to produce a sorrowful mood. This pathos is further amplified by the gruesome portrayal of Akō's/Morio's mother's physical condition brought on by her long tortuous journey in the mountains, during which she was exposed to ravaging cold wind. Notably, Tsushima makes Akō/Morio's mother doubly marginalized by depicting her as a person of the *Tsuchigumo* (literally earth spider) clan, which resisted the control of the Yamato state and its religion.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the narrative effectively builds up Akō's/Morio's mother's resentment towards Buddhism, propelling her to cry out, "I hate Buddhism. I hate the sutras too. I'm from the *Tsushigumo* clan crushed by Buddhism" (122).

"Mt. Takamado" resounds not only with Akō's/Morio's mother's voice, but also with other voices of agony that linger in the surrounding mountains of Nara. Nara emerges as a place "wherever you go you hear the curse of those who died long ago, just as you hear the voices of insects underground" (118). The ominous presence of these voices is effected by the way Akō/Morio's mother weaves the dead into the natural landscape of Nara: "In Mt. Futakami there is a grave for a prince who was killed in power struggles. Mt. Katsuragi is haunted by the vengeful ghosts of *Tsuchiugumo*. Mt. Takamado is the burial place for the people of Nara who died of illness, who were killed in fights, who died of starvation or who were put to death, took their own lives or died accidentally" (118-119). In the end, Akō/Morio's mother joins in the disquieting echoes of the voices of the dead pervading Nara's landscape, as she painfully wails, "My child, My child! I won't pray. Because I gave birth to a child and lost him, I cry out. I'll go on screaming. My child! My child!" (130).

In the next story, "Nara Slope" (Nara zaka), Morio and his mother become Aigo and his mother from the *sekkyōbushi*, "Aigo no waka." Other than Aigo's dead mother returning to the

world of the living in the body of a weasel out of her strong love for her son, "Nara Slope" retains little of the foundational story at the level of content.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the first story in which we sometimes witness Morio's and his mother's consciousnesses separate from Ako's and Kingyomaru's, in this story Morio and his mother are, for the most part, fully merged with Aigo and Aigo's mother. Aigo is a deaf orphan, who, taken care by Buddhist monks of Hannyaaji, lives in the settlement in Nara Slope. The narrator tells us that the residents of this settlement are vaguely called "people of the slope" (*saka no mono*), (131) which was, though not mentioned in the story, another name for people termed "non-human" (*hinin*)-beggars, disabled, and lepers—used in the Kamakura period (1185-1333).<sup>15</sup> According to the historian Miura Keiichi, in the Kamakura period an outcast settlement called *hinin shuku* was established on Nara Slope (also known as Kitayama or Northern Mountain), the northernmost point of Nara under the authority of major temples. Its residents, functioning like subcontractors of temples in the vicinity, engaged in the work of disposing of the "pollution" associated with the death of humans and animals.<sup>16</sup> As a resident of Nara Slope, Aigo is charged with taking care of cows at the temple and with the disposal of dead sacred deer. The "place" Morio's grandmother vaguely referred to when asked about discrimination in Nara in Part I thus comes to the fore in this story.

Besides the obvious allusion to "Aigo no waka," the story also alludes to *setsuwa* concerning a miracle that occurred in a temple bathhouse. The tale usually goes that Buddha appeared before his followers as a leper (considered to be the ultimate embodiment of karmic retribution)<sup>17</sup> to test their compassion, and when permitted to bathe in a temple hot spring, reveals his divine identity.<sup>18</sup> Aigo, who has heard these tales of Buddhist philanthropy, believes that monks--especially those at Hannyaaji, the only temple in Nara that allows

the “people of the slope” such as himself, as well as the patients of *Jūhachikenko*, a final resting place for those with terminal illness, to bathe in their healing bathhouse--would extend their compassion to animals like his mother, now a weasel who is fatally wounded. While other temples also had bathhouses, the townspeople refused to share the bath water with the residents of Nara Slope and especially those of *Jūhachikenko*. Like Hannyaji and Nara Slope, *Jūhachikenko*, still exists today as a national historic site, though it is no longer in use. It was a care facility for lepers built at the top of Nara Slope in 1243 by the Buddhist monk Ninshō (1217-1303).<sup>19</sup> Avoiding the word “lepers” because of the present-day associations of the term, Tsushima guides us to witness with Aigo the degree of ostracism to which the patients at *Jūhachikenko* are subjected: “the patients in *Jūhachikenko*, due to their illness, could not even go near other temples’ bathhouses” (136), let alone bathe in them.

Much to Aigo’s dismay, the monks at Hannyaji flatly reject his plea to allow his mother to bathe in their bathhouse. This throws him into utter disillusionment with Buddhism which, until then, he respected “just as one would respect one’s father. He yearned for Buddha and Bodhisattva without really understanding what they were. They were light in themselves and like the vastness of open sky. But now the sky is closed and the light is lost.” (144) As if this weren’t enough, Aigo once more meets the monks’ firm rejection of his plea, this time to have his mother accepted as a patient in *Jūhachikenko*. For the monks, Aigo’s mother is “a mere beast. It does not know what it is to pray. Further, it doesn’t even have a soul to be saved” (138). The story thus highlights the inviolate line between humans and animals drawn by the Buddhist institutions. But it does not stop there. It goes on to provide a viewpoint radically external to the rigidly stratified human world to which both Morio and the monks are inextricably bound. This is

none other than Morio’s mother’s animal viewpoint as lucidly revealed in the passage below:

Beggars are controlled by the head of the outcast community, who is in turn controlled by the chief monk of a temple, who is controlled by a temple in Kasuga, which is in turn controlled by the emperor in the capital. Even the emperor, though seemingly free in all respects of life, is not so, as he is controlled by ill-willed gods. No matter how big a Buddha statue he builds, he is still subject to epidemics and will die when the time comes (152).

Seen from Morio’s mother’s perspective, distanced from human symbolic investiture, we could argue that what seems like Buddhist compassion, such as allowing certain groups of populations to bathe in a designated bathhouse, is nothing more than a way of maintaining the existing power structure, which is built on the subjectivation of a certain group of people as unambiguously “impure” subjects. The nonhuman and human perspectives are drawn in clear contrast again in the last scene where, prompted by his mother, Aigo takes her to the true (in her view) curative hot spring set deep in the mountains. Once there, however, legendary creatures known as *tengu* (heavenly dog), “demons that resist the laws of Buddhism” (166), forcefully snatch Aigo’s mother away from him, tearing his arm in the process. The *tengu* threaten to transform Aigo into one of them. While Aigo adamantly refuses to become a *tengu*, his mother finds solace in the idea of her son making an absolute break with the human world. In this final scene Aigo’s mother sings several songs, including a playful remake of a song from *Ryōjin hishō* which tells of the salvation of women, who are in Buddhism considered inferior beings unable to become



buddhas.<sup>20</sup> While keeping the revolutionary thrust of the original song, the mother in her version of the song sings of the salvation of weasels instead of women. The lighthearted tone of her song serves to highlight Aigo's contrastingly painful cries which at the close of the story, resound powerfully enough to "tear off all the red fruits of the surrounding forest. Groves in the mountains shook and birds were terrified and flew up in the sky. Insects dove underground" (167). If the *sekkyō* chanter's voice was "sorrowful to the extent it sounds lacerated," as famously characterized by a Confucian scholar of the Edo period, in both "Mt. Takamado" and "Nara Slope," sorrow and pain can be said to suffuse the central characters' voices.<sup>21</sup>

Voices carry equally gripping power in the last story, "Yoshino," the most lyrical and experimental of the three with rich imagery and loosely knit storyline. In this narrative, Morio's mother is a prepubescent girl "with no sign of breast forming" (199) and is thus referred to as a "girl" (*shōjo*) throughout. Though still a girl, she is searching for her missing son in the snow and ice-covered mountains of Yoshino, singing in clear, crisp voice, a love song from *Ryōjin hishō*. The song opens the story and is repeated throughout like a refrain, sometimes sung by Morio who, now incarnated in the body of the deer he killed, is looking for his mother at the foot of the mountains. The story contains little plot to speak of and the fluid narrative parallels the fluid boundaries between the different selves appearing in the story. The girl's memory seamlessly slides into the memory of the other who is introduced vaguely but repeatedly as "There once was a mother." From the details given, it becomes clear that this is Shizuka from *Gikeiki*, a famous *shirabyōshi* dancer who was a lover of the warrior hero Yoshitsune.<sup>22</sup> Morio's mother, who never became Morio's father's lawful wife, becomes Shizuka, who is likewise subjected to the tenuous existence of a "mere *shirabyōshi*,

which is not even counted as a social class" (191). Fusing with Shizuka, she remembers how she was left behind in Yoshino by her lover, who was on the run, accused of having betrayed his brother (Chapter Five of *Gikeiki*). Lest a woman's impurity (*kegare*) anger the spirits of the sacred mountains, the unnamed lover orders her to return to the capital. The mother could not understand the meaning of "impurity" but had no choice but to follow his order because "she was just a mistress" (175). For her, "impurity" is not intrinsic to her gender but rather a meaning externally imposed by men.

In my reading, Morio's mother's appearance in this story as a prepubescent girl signals her tacit resistance to this interpellation of women. This also explains why her memory of the time she spent with Morio, referred to here as "the memory of the woods," is comprised largely of dreamlike images of the natural world where "language has disappeared from her body," in contrast to the concrete everyday life she led with Morio in Tokyo (198). The segmented world of humans where language plays a vital role thus bears little significance for her. This is evident in the way she "defiles" the sacred mountain by giving birth to her son after being deserted by her lover, doubly "polluting" the sacred topos with birth and blood, two major "polluting" factors.<sup>23</sup> What is more, she peacefully lies on the blood-smeared icy ground with her baby, whom she calls "a child of the winter woods" (194), utterly unperturbed by the notion of the "impurity" of blood. The border between "sacred" and "impure" regulated and maintained by Buddhist teachings holds no value for her. That ideology of women's impurity associated with blood can perhaps be seen most clearly in the popular Buddhist hymns (*wasan*) that sing of how women, owing to the "pollution" that causes menstruation and birth blood, are fated to fall into a lake of blood after they die.<sup>24</sup>

The mother longs deeply for her lover (who also

becomes her son), which echoes powerfully with the girl's longing for Morio. The repeated phrase, "there once was a mother," evocative of *setsuwa* in the way it avoids using proper names, summons other mothers' resonant longing for their loved ones. And this longing is at once condensed and amplified in the song repeated throughout and with which the story ends: "I love you, you know/you know I love you/ I long for you, you know/I long to meet you, yes, see you/let you see me, watch you seeing me."<sup>25</sup> One of the important characteristics of *Ryōjin hishō* songs, as noted by Saigō Nobutsuna, is their abundant use of vernacular language rooted in everyday feelings, which adds traces of physicality to the songs.<sup>26</sup> This particular song belongs to the genre of love songs in *Ryōjin hishō* that deal with the love affairs of commoners and those on the margins of society like courtesans in the Heian period (794-1185).<sup>27</sup> Thus, in singing this song the girl invokes a chorus of countless other marginalized women's voices, which pulse through her words with a physical sonic force.

### Knowing Memories of the Dead in One's Bones

As we have seen above, the voices "reported" in Part II all issue forth from the wrenching despair or deep sorrow of mothers and sons whose longing to be with the other is thwarted by their subjection to social discrimination, for which the Buddhist ideology of "impurity" functions as a compelling rationale. The passage from "Yoshino" quoted below adeptly characterizes these voices:

Voices, being soundwaves, disappear once they reach a certain distance. No one could grab hold of a human voice with her hand. Yet, the voices that distill special feelings drawn from

a special time are different. They shake the stars in the night and tear the mountains and make rivers dance like sentient beings.  
(176)

Punctuation of each story's end with the protagonist's wailing or singing "that distill special feelings," with no hint of what happens next, accords a powerful lingering effect to each voice. They all seem to swell and spill over the narrative context as affective intensity. Especially as reported by Morio and his mother as *lived experiences*, these voices are forcefully brought into the immediate experience of the present. They pulsate in Nara as the voices of those who *are* dead, eclipsed by official history yet still present nonetheless. I suspect it was none other than the lingering presence of these voices that terrified Tsushima when she saw the Great Buddha in Tōdaiji. Not coincidentally, she had this unsettling experience during Obon, a time when spirits of the dead are said to return to the world of the living.

It is only such voices that have the power to shake the "blue slime" of Nara by leading readers to apprehend the weight of history and time. Morio and his mother's "report" on Nara makes *known* the origins of the thoroughly naturalized division between the "sacred" and "profane," as sensed by Morio in the present Nara. But this *knowing*, made possible by the singular "report," is decisively different from a detached mode of rational knowing rooted in cognition of empirical facts. It is akin to what critic Kobayashi Hideo has described as "knowing in the bones" (*kimo ni mejite shiru*). Though the set phrase "kimo ni mejiru" 肝に銘じる conventionally refers to a conscious act of bearing in mind, Kobayashi's usage here is more literal in that the object of knowing is deeply engraved in one's body. In the passage quoted below he relates what it is to know historical facts *in the bones* using the cogent example of a mother who has lost a child:

Concerning historical facts, it is not enough to know that there was a certain event. That the event is still ongoing must be felt....For a mother, the historical fact is not the death of a child. Rather it is the *dead child*. About a dead child, a mother knows it in her bones, but the empirical fact of a child's death cannot be known in the bones [*kimo ni mejite shiru*].<sup>28</sup>

In light of this passage, I argue that what is reported *through* Morio and his mother in Part II propels readers to know in the bones the pain and agony of those associated with "impurity" in the ancient and medieval Nara. This is so because the report is constructed in such a way as to make the past seem not as completed, bygone events but as memories borne by the dead still lingering in Nara today. And, this in turn makes palpable the link between the reported memories of the dead and the "blue slime" saturating the present-day Nara.

This knowing in the bones that *Nara Report* enables in the reader ultimately enacts what critic Andō Reiji considers to be the foremost potential of literature. That is, to allow readers to "relativize this world from another world, which is the world of the dead."<sup>29</sup> Tsushima, in the aforementioned interview, has cautioned against hasty association of a place with an overused label, such as "World Heritage," and called for an approach to history that includes multiple perspectives.<sup>30</sup> Based on the discussion here, by "multiple perspectives" she was, it would seem, not merely espousing multiple viewpoints easily conceivable to the living, but advocating for including the qualitatively different perspective of those who *are* dead.

## "Nara"

The potentially ominous image of the Great Buddha with which *Nara Report* comes to an end can be understood to symbolize Nara as relativized from the world of the dead. At the close of the final chapter Morio finds himself back in the Great Buddha Hall of Tōdaiji, where Part I ended. The Buddha sitting before Morio now bears no resemblance to his memory of how it looked. The plump face with calm, half-closed eyes has been replaced by a skeleton. This horrifying face with its jaw gaping open is attached to an emaciated torso, ribs showing and extending from which are arms and legs that are only bones. This is strikingly different from the familiar image of the Great Buddha usually associated with compassion. The novel does not end here, however. The final passage shows a pigeon's feather floating lightly in the dusty air being reflected in the corner of Morio's eye. Not only is this a sign that his mother had really been there with Morio, smashing the Great Buddha and merging with others in premodern Nara, it also calls attention one last time to the perspectives of the nonhuman, natural world. From Morio's animal sacrifice to the mother's affinity with the natural world, not to mention their transformations into animals, animistic spirits course through the novel like an undercurrent. This, in my view, is not Tsushima's nostalgia for the time before the introduction of Buddhism to Japan. Rather, I suggest this is a manifestation of how she found nonhuman perspectives to be another relativizing potential that can join forces with the perspectives of the dead in arresting and decentering the perspectives and sense of values of living humans. *Nara Report*, whose title is fittingly written in *katakana* script, opens a space for imagining what "Nara" could have been as well as what it will have been.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “*Tsushima Yūko and Nara Report*” (*Tsushima Yūko to Nara repōto*), *Yūrin*. December 10, 2004. Accessed August 8, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> *Setsuwa* are brief tales that are largely Buddhist and didactic, folkloric, and legendary. Paramount works in this genre are *Nihon ryōiki* (Miraculous Stories of Karmic Retribution of Good and Evil in Japan; ca. 823) and *Konjaku monogatari* (A Collection of Tales of Times Now Past; it dates from the late Heian period). I shall discuss *sekkyōbushi* in due course.

<sup>3</sup> R. Keller Kimbrough indicates that this practice became common around the ninth century “both in response to the imagined impurity of women and to the perceived threat that women posed to monks in their Buddhist practice.” R. Keller Kimbrough, “Voices from the Feminine Margin: Izumi Shikibu and the Nuns of Kumano and Seiganji,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 12, no. 1 (2001), 60.

<sup>4</sup> Andō Reiji, “*Wildcat Dome by Tsushima Yūko*” (Yamaneko dōmu: Tsushima Yūko cho), *Nihon keizai shinbun*, July 1, 2013. Accessed March 5, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> *Tsushima Yūko, Nara Report (Nara repōto)* (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 2007) 29. Hereafter citations of this novel are given in the body of the text.

<sup>6</sup> Morio cuts the deer’s ears, which invokes a legend concerning Suwa Shrine in Nagano prefecture, where split eared deer were used as sacrificial offerings. See the explanation of *Ontō* festival [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Included among these are songs from *Kagura*, *Ryōjin hishō*, *Kangin shū*, and the noh drama, *Jinen koji*. As I will discuss below, the *Ryōjin hishō* songs play a significant role in the third story of the Part II.

<sup>8</sup> War tales (*gunki monogatari*) from the Muromachi period centered on Minamoto no Yoshitsune, a half brother of Minamoto no Yoritomo who founded the Kamakura shogunate after defeating the Taira clan in *Genpei War* (1180-1185).

<sup>9</sup> Araki Shigeru explains that since *sekkyō* chanters had to tap into commoners’ emotions and imagination in order to appeal to them, the *sekkyō* texts we have today bear traces of their imaginations. See “Commentary” (*kaisetsu*) in *Sekkyōbushi*, eds. Araki Shigeru and Yamamoto Sachizō (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1973), 319. The same goes for *Gikeiki*, which grew from the orally passed down *setsuwa*-kind tales concerning Minamoto no Yoshitsune. See Kajihara Masaaki, “Commentary” (*kaisetsu*) in *Gikeiki, Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, 62 (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2000), 494-499.

<sup>10</sup> Inaba Nobumichi, *The Power Structure in Medieval Temples* (Chūsei jiin no kenryoku kōzō) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997), 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Tsushima* uses *Sekkyōbushi*, eds. Araki Shigeru and Yamamoto Sachizō, which includes versions of the text “*Karukaya*” published in 1631 and “*Aigo no waka*” published in 1670.



<sup>12</sup> The story is embedded in the main story so as to highlight the strict prohibition of women from entering sacred Mt. Kōya by calling attention to how even Kūkai's mother was barred from entering Mt. Kōya. *Wondrous Brutal Fictions: Eight Buddhist Tales from the Early Japanese Puppet Theater*, trans. by R. Keller Kimbrough (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 78-84.

<sup>13</sup> According to Matsumoto Yoshio, *tsuchigumo* was a general derogatory designation, rather than an ethnic group category, used to refer to those considered "other" by the people of Yamato state (fourth to seventh centuries CE) before it was subdivided into *emishi*, *kumaso* and *hayato*. "On Tsuchigumo" (Tsuchigumoron), *Shigaku* 25, no. 4 (September 1952), 434-455. In "Karukaya" she is depicted as a daughter of an emperor in Tang (China).

<sup>14</sup> It bears traces of another *sekkyō* tale, "Shintokumaru," which involves a journey of the protagonist afflicted with leprosy to a curative hot spring.

<sup>15</sup> Miura Keiichi, *The Studies of the History of Lowly People of Medieval Japan* (Nihon chūsei senminshi no kenkyū), (Kyoto: Buraku mondai kenkyūsho shuppanbu), 201.

<sup>16</sup> See Miura Keiichi, 199-204. Niunoya Tetsuichi, *Class and Society in Medieval Japan* (Nihon chūsei no mibun to shakai) (Tokyo: Hanawa shobō, 1993), 503-514. These two books are listed in the Bibliography included in *Nara Report*. See also Michele Marra, *Representations of Power: The Literary Politics of Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 62-65.

<sup>17</sup> Niunoya, *Class and Society in Medieval Japan*, 504.

<sup>18</sup> Two similar tales are alluded to here. One concerns the Empress Kōmyō (701-760) associated with the founding of Todaiji who, after receiving a divine message, established a curative bathhouse. There are multiple variant forms of this tale. See Abe Yasuro, *The Empress of a Bathhouse: Sexuality and the Sacred of the Medieval Period* (Yuya no kōgō: chusei no sei to sei naru mono), (Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 1998), 18-64. The other tale is Volume 19, Tale 2 from *Konjaku monogatari*shū.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Frédéric, *Japan Encyclopedia*, trans. Kathe Roth, *Harvard University Reference Library* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 531.

<sup>20</sup> Emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127-92) compiled these songs in a genre of the modish and popular between the mid-Heian and the early Kamakura period. They are deeply rooted in everyday feelings with abundant use of vernacular language. Saigō Nobutsuna, *Ryōjin hishō* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2004), 163. I'm using the English translation by Yung-Hee Kim from *Songs to Make the Dust Dance: The Ryōjin Hishō of Twelfth-Century Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). See song #116, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Araki Shigeru, "Commentary," 320.

<sup>22</sup> Itinerant entertainers who specialized in singing and dancing to songs in the genre of *imayō* while dressed in men's robes.

<sup>23</sup> This idea can be traced back to the ninth century. See Emiko Namihira, "Pollution in the Folk Belief System," *Current Anthropology* 28, no. 4, *Supplement: An Anthropological Profile of Japan*, S65-74.

<sup>24</sup> These hymns include *Ketsubonkyō wasan* (Blood bowl sutra hymn), *Nyonin ōjō wasan* (Women's salvation hymn), and *Chinoike jigoku wasan* (Blood pool hell hymn). They are based on the *ketsubonkyō* (Blood bowl sutra) introduced from China in the fifteenth century. See Jacqueline Ilyse Stone and Mariko Namba Walter, *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese*



*Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 176-179. Monma Sachio, “The Geopolitics of Implications and Discrimination of ‘defiling’ and ‘being defiled’” (‘Kegare’ to suru sareru koto no gan’i to sabetsu no chiseigaku) in Fukuto Sanae et al. eds., *Cultural History of Defilement: Narrative, Gender, Rituals* (Kegare no bunka shi: monogatari, jendā, girei). (Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2005), 216-235. Curiously, as pointed out by Monma Sachio, the sutra on which these hymns are based was until recently recited by monks during various folk events. See Monma Sachio, 220-221.

<sup>25</sup> Kim, *Songs to Make the Dust Dance*, 127.

<sup>26</sup> Saigō Nobutsuna, 163.

<sup>27</sup> Kim, *Songs to Make the Dust Dance*, 126.

<sup>28</sup> Kobayashi Hideo, “History and Literature” (Rekishi to bungaku) in *On Impermanence* (Mujō to iu koto). (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1982), 34. Emphasis added. I’m borrowing James Dorsey’s translation of the phrase, “kimo ni mejiru.” See James Dorsey, *Critical Aesthetics: Kobayashi Hideo, Modernity, and Wartime Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 175.

<sup>29</sup> Andō Reiji, *The Mandala of Light: On Japanese Literature* (Hikari no mandara: Nihon bungakuron). (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2016), 8.

<sup>30</sup> “Tsushima Yūko and Nara Report.”