

## Implicated Reading: Medoruma Shun's *Me no oku no mori* and the Ethics of Narrative Transmission

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyzes the animating potential of narrative in Medoruma Shun's Me no oku no mori (In the Woods of Memory, 2009). The novel's narrative structure embodies both the constant circulation of traumatic memories, particularly surrounding sexual violence, and the inevitable gaps in such memories. The text draws the reader in turn into its spiral of telling and re-telling, shifting the burden of narrating history onto countless new witnesses. Moreover, the act of narrating this violent past necessarily entails the acknowledgment of one's own complicity in its violent reverberations in the present.*

**Keywords:** *Medoruma Shun, narrative, war memory, the Battle of Okinawa, sexual violence*

What role does fiction play in the narration of history? In a political environment wherein even the plain facts, not to mention the deeper implications of history, are hotly contested, does fiction—which necessarily reshapes, appropriates, elides, or amends the story (or stories) of the past—simply further muddy the already muddied waters? Of what value is a memory created after the fact? Medoruma Shun (1960–), a novelist, activist, and outspoken commentator on contemporary

Okinawan affairs, offers his thoughts on these questions as follows:

Only those who experienced it first-hand [*taikensha*] can really know the pain and anguish of watching one's family be killed, or the sense of fear that pervaded the sites of the battle. But out of a need to at least attempt to understand or imagine that pain, I have used fiction to think through the Battle of Okinawa. Those killed in the war are not able to tell their stories, to bear witness. But fiction provides the imaginary space to allow the dead to speak. (Nishie and Medoruma 2016)

On the one hand, Medoruma acknowledges here a limitation of his literary project: that it is necessarily second-hand. And just as Medoruma wrestles with the ethics of narrating events he did not directly experience, his readers and critics share this sense of unease. Even beyond the Battle of Okinawa, the thorny question of who can or should bear witness is at issue in discussions of literary representations of the Holocaust, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and any number of historical traumas.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, Medoruma argues for the necessity of fiction on precisely the same terms. Because so many authentic first-hand accounts are irrecoverably missing from our collective historical memory, fiction is needed

to fill in these gaps. And as the generation of those who experienced the Battle of Okinawa first-hand (*taikensha*) reaches the end of its lifespan, this project takes on a greater sense of urgency.

In this way, both aspects of Medoruma's framing privilege the voices of the *taikensha*—those who directly experienced an incident—or, to offer another term frequently used in this context, the *tōjisha*—persons directly concerned or affected.<sup>2</sup> In this case the incident in question is the Battle of Okinawa: the bloody, months-long ground battle in the spring of 1945 whose military and civilian casualties numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Complicating matters, however, is the question of what constitutes direct experience or concern. Kyle Ikeda argues convincingly that the Battle of Okinawa is a generational trauma, and that Medoruma himself, despite being born after the war, is in fact exposed to the ongoing psychological effects of the battle (Ikeda 2014, 7-13). Moreover, Medoruma's own *Okinawa "sengo" zero nen* ("Postwar" Okinawa, Year Zero, 2005) points out that with ongoing American occupation of Okinawa via military bases, the Battle of Okinawa itself may be over, but Okinawa can hardly be described as "postwar" (Medoruma 2005, 16). Indeed, the steady stream of injuries and deaths resulting from the presence of American bases—including those due to traffic accidents and aircraft crashes in civilian areas, noise pollution, environmental destruction, and violent crime—create new *taikensha* and *tōjisha* of military violence in Okinawa across generations.<sup>3</sup>

The aspect of this continual violence that has outraged the Okinawan population perhaps more than any other over the years is the rape of Okinawan women and girls by American military personnel. The "Yumiko-chan Incident" of 1955, which refers to the rape and murder of five-year-old Nagayama Yumiko, sparked the first large-scale anti-American protests on

Okinawa (Serrano and Mitchell 2021). Forty years later, the abduction and gang rape of a twelve-year-old girl in 1995 brought thousands of protestors to the streets once again. Sexual violence has continued unabated throughout postwar Okinawan history and to the present day, with over 120 documented cases of rape since 1972 (Takazato 2016). This figure presumably represents only a fraction of actual incidents, as so many cases of sexual assault and rape go unreported. Social stigma and the effects of trauma mean that the epidemic of rape and sexual assault both during the Battle of Okinawa and in the years since has created another group, like the war dead, whose stories have not been told—and perhaps never will be.



**Figure 1. The site of a military surgery unit in use during the Battle of Okinawa. A grove of banyan trees recedes into blackness.**

Medoruma seems to have similar thoughts on survivors of sexual violence—that fiction is a space where their silent voices can be heard. As Murakami Yōko points out, many of his works of fiction have "sought to recover through literature the voices of victims of sexual violence" (Murakami 2019, 31-32).<sup>4</sup> However, unlike the voices of those killed in

war, *taikensha* or *tōjisha* narratives of rape are not wholly unrecoverable. Rather, the silence results from specifically gendered power dynamics, leading to the shaming and stigmatization of survivors of rape. In fact, Okinawan literature itself has at times contributed to a form of this gendered silencing, as rape is co-opted as a trope in male-centric narratives of colonization and occupation. In other words, even if rape and sexual violence are frequently represented in Okinawan fiction, rarely do such works center the experiences (much less the voices) of female survivors.<sup>5</sup>

Enter *Me no oku no mori* (*In the Woods of Memory*, 2009), Medoruma's most recent and perhaps most profound attempt to grapple with this problem.<sup>6</sup> *Me no oku no mori*, the first full-length novel of Okinawan literature to be translated into English, directly confronts the mediated and incomplete nature of history by presenting many accounts of events some sixty years removed from the present moment. The novel is comprised of ten chapters, each turning on the rape of an Okinawan girl, Sayoko, and the consequences thereof that unfold over the decades that follow. As the Battle of Okinawa rages on elsewhere, the anonymous island where the story takes place is already under American occupation and resistance by the Japanese military has effectively ended.<sup>7</sup> The precarious peace between the island's villagers and the US military is upset when Sayoko, then seventeen years old, is attacked on the beach by four American GIs while collecting shellfish with four younger girls. American soldiers continue to rape village women and girls until Seiji, a boy roughly Sayoko's age, stabs two of the GIs with a spear, seriously wounding one of them. Seiji hides in a forest cave where the villagers hid during bombardments prior to the occupation, but he is eventually betrayed by the village head, flushed out of the cave with teargas, and arrested.

Subsequent chapters retell part or all of this story from different perspectives. These perspectives encompass a range of moments in time and locations both within and outside Okinawa, and draw from both descriptions of events witnessed directly and second- or third-hand accounts of the story and its reverberations into the present. Missing, however, is testimony in Sayoko's own voice. Thus, it is possible to read the novel as one more in a long line of works in which rape is reduced to trope. Recent readings of *Me no oku no mori* have pointed to the masculinism inherent in elevating Seiji's story above Sayoko's, while also returning to the more fundamental question (raised by Medoruma above), of how to hear the missing voices (*koe naki koe*) of the traumatic past (Murakami 2019, Kuriyama 2020).

While I remain somewhat skeptical of Medoruma's seeming conflation of the silencing of rape survivors due to the stigmatizing effects of widespread misogyny with the more radical silence of those who did not survive the war—surely there is room for actual listening to women—his exploration of how to construct a history that is responsible for these missing voices is, I would argue, the most important contribution of his work. This is particularly true in the contemporary context of Japan and its former empire, where empiricism has been weaponized to dismiss subjective accounts of wartime atrocities, from forced group suicides to military sex slavery, even as the direct witnesses to this history are aging and dying. *Me no oku no mori* explores all kinds of ways that subjective accounts of a violent past might be lost, distorted, or erased altogether while nonetheless making a no less incisive ethical demand on those who hear (or fail to hear) them. Fundamentally, the novel is an exploration of the *transmission* of historical narrative, rather than an entry into the seemingly endless (and often bad-faith) debate over its legitimacy, authenticity, or truth value. *Me no oku no mori* does facilitate a

reconstruction of Sayoko's experience in the manner of Medoruma's stated goal of allowing the voiceless to speak through fiction. However, rather than simply presenting a first-hand, definitive, ostensibly unmediated statement of what happened to Sayoko, Medoruma explores what happens when such a statement is inaccessible or simply nonexistent. He makes a demand on his readers to participate in the constant reconstruction of history.

In this article, I hope to tease out, via a reading of *Me no oku no mori*, the ethics and politics of the transmission of narrative across time and space, particularly the *failures* such transmission often entails. As we face down a history that is necessarily incomplete and at least partially unfathomable, fiction offers a space not only to fill in such gaps, as Medoruma himself suggests, but also to explore our own implication or involvement in the traumas that gave rise to those gaps in the first place. I argue that even as speaking with and listening to the "voiceless voices" (*koe naki koe*) of the past have their place in this work, silence itself may serve a productive function as well.

### Authority to Narrate, Responsibility to Narrate

As noted above, each chapter of *Me no oku no mori* tells a part of the story of Sayoko's rape, Seiji's revenge, and the lifelong struggle of witnesses to these events to cope with its concomitant traumas. The structure of the novel (as well as its violent subject matter and its reference to the hidden space of the woods in its title) invites comparison to Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's "Yabu no naka" (In a Grove, 1922) and its reworking on screen by Kurosawa Akira in *Rashōmon* (1950). Early critics of the novel, including Suzuki Tomoyuki (2012) and Koshikawa Yoshiaki (2013), have made note of these similarities, but also point out the limited

utility of such a comparison: whereas Akutagawa's story presents a set of mutually contradictory narratives that cannot be reconciled into a single "true" version of the event, the facts of the story narrated and re-narrated in *Me no oku no mori* are not in question. Medoruma's novel is thus less concerned with the inaccessibility of objective, unmediated "truth" and more interested in the act of bearing witness itself, of telling and retelling the story. What distinguishes Medoruma's narrative structure is the specification of a particular interlocutor for each witness. Whereas "Yabu no naka" is narrated by a series of witnesses addressing the reader, who hears testimony from the objective position of the court, *Me no oku no mori* in almost all cases positions the reader as witness to the narration of events from one interested party to another. This has the effect of drawing into relief the power dynamics at play in the transmission of the story, in addition to calling into question the passive consumption of the story by an "objective" reader or listener. By picking up the novel, the reader herself becomes involved in the story and its retelling.

In other words, rather than telling their stories directly to an abstracted reader as judge of the facts, Medoruma's characters are all telling their stories to others with varying degrees of involvement in the case, rendering the reader a third-party witness to these transactions. The story is never simply narrated, but always explicitly narrated *to someone else*. Leaving aside the first chapter (to which I will return later), this pattern is present in each of the remaining nine chapters. In the second, Kayō, who served as ward chief at the time of the incident, is recounting the story to a young woman collecting accounts of the Battle of Okinawa for the Board of Education, simultaneously carrying on a conversation with himself inside his head.<sup>8</sup> The third and fourth chapters feature Fumi and Hisako, two of the girls who witnessed Sayoko being dragged

away by the soldiers. In these sections, Fumi helps Hisako to fill in the gaps in her memories of the event, and also passes the story along to her son. The fifth chapter is presented largely in Seiji's voice, addressed in its opening line to Sayoko: "Can you hear my voice? Sayoko..." (Medoruma 2009a, 103). However, it is frequently interrupted by voices addressing Seiji himself, either in the present moment or as echoes from the past. In the sixth chapter, the story takes a convoluted cyclical route through multiple narrators, as it portrays an unnamed novelist who has written about the incident watching a video recording of his friend telling the story he heard from an American friend, who hears it from his father and grandfather. The seventh is narrated by the grandfather, one of the four soldiers who committed the rape. In the eighth, a bullied middle school girl hears the story from an old woman who speaks at her school. The ninth is then narrated from the perspective of the old woman, Tamiko, who is Sayoko's younger sister. The tenth and final chapter takes the form of a letter, written by the Japanese American interpreter who was present at Seiji's interrogation, explaining the events to a friend who collects and records accounts of the Battle of Okinawa.

In most cases, the novel's depiction of the story passing from speaker to listener emphasizes what is forgotten, left out, or misinterpreted in the process. Kayō deliberately omits the parts of his story that would reveal his culpability for Seiji's capture and interrogation. He is also frustrated by his inability to recall certain details, including the name of the young woman interviewing him, possibly due in part to his advanced age. The blurry and fragmented nature of memory, especially as exacerbated by the process of aging, is highlighted in the following chapters as well, as Hisako can clearly recall the image of Sayoko's running and screaming figure, but cannot connect the image to its context without help from Fumi. The Japanese American interpreter who

narrates the final chapter references this same image, but explicitly demands that the reader of his letter not include this specific story in the compilation of war testimony being assembled. On the other hand, Tamiko, in addressing an audience of students, asks explicitly that they take her sister's story to heart and live free from the violence of war. In her case, however, the audience is largely unwilling to listen and perpetuates everyday violence despite her message.

This dynamic is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the sixth chapter, which juxtaposes the circulation of the story of Sayoko and Seiji with that of a physical object, the tip of Seiji's spear with which he attacks the American soldiers. Both the story and the tip of the spear are "blunted" as they move farther and farther afield from their original contexts, yet both still hold the potential to reanimate the story for new witnesses in other contexts.<sup>9</sup> This chapter is told from the perspective of an Okinawan writer who suddenly receives a package from an old friend, "M." The package contains the aforementioned spear tip, fashioned into a pendant, and a video recording, on which M explains his reasons for mailing the pendant to Okinawa out of the blue. The narrative voice oscillates between that of the Okinawan writer and M's video confession, with nothing to mark the shifts but the change in first-person pronouns from *watashi* for the Okinawan writer to *ore* for the mainland Japanese writer. This difference, in addition to the more colloquial style of the mainland writer's narrative voice, underscores once again the positionality of speaker and listener. M speaks from a position of greater power and freedom than "watashi," a configuration evocative of the subordinate position of Okinawa vis-à-vis mainland Japan. Still, the chapter continually reminds the reader of the embodied presences of both M and "watashi," neither of whom fully dissolves into metaphor.

On the tape, M first informs "watashi" that he

is in the final stages of a terminal illness, hence the urgency in sending this account and the object it concerns. Though he feels a written letter may have been more appropriate, he finds it physically difficult in his condition to write at his computer for any length of time, so the use of a video recording is a concession to his physical limitations. Throughout the chapter, the reader is reminded of the bodily struggle M endures to record his story, as the tape is occasionally interrupted by fits of coughing or M's announcement that he is too tired to continue and needs to pick up the story in a later recording session. Meanwhile, the narrative interweaves M's account with depictions of "watashi" listening to the account. These are also frequently disrupted as he stops to have dinner, shower, or retrieve another beer from the refrigerator. This framing of the confession, conscious as it is of the medium through which it is relayed and the bodily experience of both its author and interlocutor, heightens the reader's awareness of issues less overt but nevertheless present in other chapters throughout the novel. That is, the means by which a story is conveyed—and more importantly, the bodily responses it induces in both the giver and receiver—are not incidental to the circulation of traumatic memories of war.

The text repeatedly gives attention to the bodily responses of speakers and listeners as the story is told and retold. In the most basic sense, the urgency of M's storytelling while on the brink of death speaks to a larger concern surrounding Okinawan war memory (and the memory of World War II in general) in the twenty-first century, as its first-hand witnesses approach the end of their lives. This anxiety toward the imminent loss of memory is referenced by many of the narrators of *Me no oku no mori*, including most poignantly the former ward chief, who collapses immediately following his interview in the second chapter. The novel does not specify whether he survives the episode.

But even where human mortality is not the primary concern, Medoruma pays attention to the specific ways the telling of the story impacts human bodies. In the third and fourth chapters, Hisako feels the need to travel back to Okinawa from the Japanese mainland—and ultimately to the very cave where Seiji hid from the Americans—in order to recall the events haunting her dreams. Although Fumi remembers these events and re-narrates them to Hisako, the mutual physical presence of their bodies is necessary in order to properly reconstruct the story and the emotions it entails.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the bullied girl who listens to Tamiko's story in chapters eight and nine understands her message in a visceral way that textbook accounts of the Battle of Okinawa cannot produce. The everyday violence she endures—not only mental but intensely physical suffering—becomes the basis for her empathy with Tamiko, perhaps even Sayoko. This preoccupation with the embodied experience of transmitting these memories, often through non-linguistic or pre-linguistic means, seems to suggest a certain impotence of language, in and of itself, to communicate the trauma of the Battle of Okinawa.

Still, the chapter does not proceed with the actual content of M's story before further drawing attention to the conduit by which it is coming, as well as the power dynamics at play. "Watashi" explains that he met M in college, where they both participated in a writing group. At the time, M submitted a story about a love affair in the I-novel mode, which "watashi" found more sophisticated than his own writing. Nevertheless, his own story, based on the rape of a young girl by American soldiers following the Battle of Okinawa as related by his grandmother (a suggestion that this may be Sayoko's story itself), garners praise from M, who declares, "We [mainland Japanese] could never write this kind of thing" (Medoruma 2009a, 123). A few lines later, shifting back to M's voice on the recording, M reiterates this sentiment: "I've read all of your stories. If I'm

honest, they're not really my thing. But even so, they're interesting. It's like I said, they could only be written by an Okinawan. Maybe it's the climate, or even the language, but they couldn't be written except by someone who was born there" (ibid, 124). Couching M's praise for the novelist in these terms once again taps into questions of who can narrate a traumatic past, once again privileging the *taikensha* and *tōjisha*.<sup>11</sup>

Though this privileging is understandable, perhaps even an ethical necessity, the novel illustrates here a pitfall of assigning a kind of ownership to traumatic historical narratives. That is, within this framework, not only does the Medoruma-like "watashi" have the *right* to write about this trauma, he has a *duty* to as the only type of person who can. M's praise for the story rings somewhat hollow, falling short of actual investment in its characters and the witnesses to their trauma. He absolves himself and other mainland Japanese readers of responsibility to engage with the material on the basis of irreconcilable difference, attributed to "climate" or "language" rather than a violent history that would involve both Okinawans and mainland Japanese.<sup>12</sup> The question of whose voice is heard on the subject of violent history does not necessarily fall into a tidy binary wherein the dominant speak and the marginal are silenced. Just as the less powerful may be prevented from speaking, they may also be *burdened* with speaking. This burden, as we see over and over in *Me no oku no mori*, can cause the narrator of trauma to experience it anew.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, as M's story unfolds, the presence of a literal object in transit—the pendant made from Seiji's spear tip—serves to illustrate the spiraling fashion in which such a narrative may travel. M explains that he first encountered the pendant during a stint in New York. His neighbor there, J, wears the spear tip around his neck. One day, J asks M if he knows anything about Okinawa. M reports that he

responded with "whatever knowledge I had gotten from TV and magazines, and things I heard from you ["watashi"] during college" (ibid, 127). Here we see the knowledge "watashi" provides to M travelling all the way to the United States, as with Seiji's spear tip. However, as M quickly reminds us, the US is never very far removed from Okinawa: the main impression M shares with J about his own visits to Okinawa is the conspicuous presence of American military bases and personnel. This prompts J to open up about the origins of the pendant, revealing that his grandfather was the American soldier wounded in Seiji's attack. It turns out that J's grandfather's comrades (and fellow participants in the gang rape of Sayoko) fashioned the spear tip into a charm of sorts after the incident. He passes the pendant down to his son, who wears it as a soldier in the Vietnam War and eventually passes it down to J.

As the pendant travels, so does the story. Although the narrative voice continues to coincide largely with that of M on the video, here the chapter shifts largely to J's perspective as he retells to M the story he hears from his father, who hears it from J's grandfather, opening up many more layers of mediation within a section of the novel that already highlights its *mise-en-abyme* structure. At one point, the story proceeds for several paragraphs in the voice of J's father addressing *omae* (you), in this case referring to J. Despite the multiple layers of removal from M, the words are presented in the text as if repeated verbatim. J's father tells him that he heard very little from J's grandfather about his wartime experience (other than the origin of the pendant), and J's father in turn refuses to speak to J about his own experience in Vietnam. At the end of this segment, J's father asks that J return the pendant to the seas of Okinawa rather than passing it down to his own child, possibly as an attempt to arrest the cycle of intergenerational trauma. Despite or perhaps because of the conspicuous silence of the two

soldiers, it is now clear that they view the pendant as more cursed than charmed. Everywhere it goes, violence follows.

Indeed, the most troubling aspect of the spear tip's travel across the Pacific and back is the calamity that seems to accompany the object wherever it goes. It is passed first from Seiji to J's grandfather, in an act of violence that is itself a response to the violence of Sayoko's rape.<sup>14</sup> The next iteration, J's father's deployment to the Vietnam War, is not without connections to these events, as the US occupation of Okinawa—which begins in the turbulent moments retold in *Me no oku no mori*—allows for the staging of this and other “hot” wars in Cold War East Asia. In fact, it is not out of the question that J's father traveled through Okinawa en route to Vietnam, a common path for those deployed to take. Finally, we learn from one final narrative voice—that of a letter written to M by J's girlfriend—that J was killed in the 9.11 terrorist attack, the most recent link in the chain of generational violence. The direct line Medoruma draws from the Battle of Okinawa to 9.11 is perhaps the most provocative variation on a theme he repeats, often with identical phrasing, throughout the different chapters of the novel: that “the war is not over.” More than anything, it is this temporal suspension, enabled by a story characterized by its status as always already in transmission—lacking any fixed beginning or end—that animates *Me no oku no mori*.

The chapter is ultimately hopeful, however, in that it allows for the cycle of violence to be broken. Its seemingly perpetual motion may come to an end. M sends “watashi” the pendant, requesting that he return it to the Okinawan shore since M's illness will prevent him from fulfilling J's father's wish, just as J was prevented from doing so by his sudden death on 9.11. Although the burden of the pendant—and with it that of passing on one's knowledge of the continuing violence on

Okinawa—was temporarily handed off to J's grandfather, J's father, J, J's girlfriend, and finally M—it somehow finds its way back to an Okinawan character. However, M's choice to send the pendant and its accompanying story to “watashi,” a novelist and teacher and possible stand-in for Medoruma himself, implies that the circulation of the memories associated with the pendant need not come to an end, even if the violence does (in some imagined future). Up to this point in the chapter, violence has continued to circulate with the spear tip, even in the absence of the story. The transfer of the pendant to “watashi” and perhaps eventually to the oblivion of the ocean seems to ask whether the reverse is possible. Perhaps the story could continue to circulate without the accompanying violence.

Part of what allows us to imagine such an end, however, is the sense of closure offered by the return of the spear tip to its origins: the specific site of the Okinawan beach, with Seiji, who remains there, positioned as its original owner. This return to Seiji is possible even in a chapter that never mentions his name; indeed, the characters narrating and re-narrating the story have no access to his identity, much less his perspective on the story. If the nested, tangled, circulating narratives of this chapter allow us to hear echoes of Seiji without his ever being present, then that opens up the possibility of recovering a voice that is absent throughout the novel, not merely in this section: Sayoko's voice. It is to this more radical possibility that I turn next.

### Sayoko Speaks

Given the polyphonic structure of *Me no oku no mori*, narrated by voices of different generations, genders, nationalities, and relationships to the events of the story, the absence of direct testimony from Sayoko herself is conspicuous. Questioned on why Sayoko's voice is thus absent, Medoruma



explains that the omission is meant as a gesture toward the inability of survivors of war trauma and sexual violence to tell their own stories:

It's because the victim is not really in a position to speak. Sayoko continues to suffer even after the war, unable to put her experience into words. Who can even say how many shared such a fate. We have all these collections of testimony from the Battle of Okinawa, but in the end they only cover those who survived. Beyond that, there remains an enormous silence. (Nishie and Medoruma 2016)

Perhaps because the act of narrating a rape is akin to reliving it, or perhaps due to the stigma surrounding rape, the vast majority of reports of rapes committed by American soldiers in Okinawa have been second-hand (Ikeda 2014, 122). Combined with the traumatic and stigmatic aspects of recounting sexual violence, a tendency to delegitimize anything other than the *taikensha* or *tōjisha* perspective can, ironically enough, become an obstacle to having the survivor's experience narrated at all.

Nevertheless, if the novel is an imaginary space in which to reconstruct the voices of those who cannot speak (*koe naki koe*), one wonders why the fictional Sayoko still cannot offer her own testimony. Particularly in the context of Medoruma's larger body of work, with many stories (including *Me no oku no mori*) containing elements of the magical or uncanny, Sayoko's silence, while realistic in its representation of a collective failure to hear the voices of survivors of sexual violence, stands out for precisely this reason. If Medoruma sets out in his fiction to supplement the historical record with that which is necessarily missing, then the silences and absences that persist

even in the imaginary space of literature are particularly troubling. In fact, it is precisely the absence of Sayoko's testimony that haunts the acts of bearing witness presented throughout the novel. At times, what separates Sayoko from the witnesses who relay her story in their respective chapters is her relationship to language, which is to say her inability to put her story into words rather than her inability to share her experience at all.<sup>15</sup> Sayoko looks outside the bounds of language when the need to tell her story emerges, and as the novel demonstrates, this sometimes allows her impact to be felt much more widely.

This is perhaps most apparent in the third chapter, told from the perspective of Hisako, one of the four younger girls who witnessed the original rape. The chapter begins with a description of a recurring dream Hisako has been having since her husband's death. She sees a bleeding and disheveled girl running through a forest, her screams reverberating in the ears of those watching the spectacle. Notably, this same image haunts Kayō in Chapter 2 and the Japanese American interpreter in Chapter 10. Because Hisako knows that the dream is a memory, taking place during her time on the island as a little girl, she reconnects with Fumi, her fellow witness. She travels back to Okinawa, where Fumi helps her to recover her memories, and the woman in her nightmare is revealed to be Sayoko. From a description of Hisako's dream, we know that the Sayoko she remembers was neither silent nor passive:

From the darkness emerges the sound of footsteps approaching from behind. A woman, so young she should perhaps be called a girl, runs past. Her body quivers, her hair tumbling past her shoulders. Her *obi* is undone, revealing through the front of her open kimono her hardened breasts shaking and blood running down her legs

all the way to her feet. The woman comes to a stop in the center of the village square and cries out something unintelligible, then waves her arms around as if she is fighting some unseen enemy. (Medoruma 2009a, 68)

As is revealed later in the novel, the image of a bleeding and screaming Sayoko is not a direct result of her initial attack, but rather occurs after she is raped again by men in her village and beaten by her father. Her actions are a response not only to the direct sexual violence she has endured, but also to the rape culture that blames and stigmatizes *her* rather than the perpetrators of the assault. Both the visual and sound images presented here are burned into Hisako's fragmented memory. Though the visual of Sayoko's bloodied and exposed body is certainly striking, Hisako keeps coming back to the sound of her screaming, which she describes as "lingering in her ears" (ibid, 62). In this passage in particular, it is clear that Sayoko's screaming, while ultimately failing to transmit a verbal meaning, is not necessarily indiscriminate. When she "cries out something unintelligible," a more literal translation would have it that she cries out "words with no intelligible meaning" (*imi no wakaranai kotoba*). It is not that she has nothing to say, nor even necessarily that she cannot put her feelings into words, but rather that her words are not understood by those around her.

At the same time, the exposure of her brutalized body to onlookers is itself a kind of speech act, reminiscent of the anecdote Gayatri Spivak relates in the conclusion of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She recalls the story of an Indian woman, Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, who hangs herself while menstruating as a means of protest. In the absence of a language that enables her to speak, the female subaltern uses her bleeding body to "speak" in the only way she can. As Spivak (1994, 103-104) explains,

lacking a language other than that which already encodes her silence, this woman resorted to sending a message in the only way she was able: writing with her own bleeding body. Sayoko's running naked and bleeding past her neighbors recalls this practice, powerful as it is in its vulnerability. Furthermore, her act reverberates many years into the future, her ghastly figure haunting Hisako long past the point when she remembers anything else, even Sayoko's name. As the novel continues, other narrators recall this image as well. Although her words are not intelligible, Sayoko's bodily "speech" resonates more powerfully than any literal speech possibly could.

On the other hand, Sayoko's silence (at least in terms of language) points to a larger concern within the novel with that which is illegible or unintelligible, that which remains unspoken, misunderstood, or forgotten. As noted above, there are a number of gaps and distortions in the versions of the story narrated by the characters. For example, when the ward chief relates the story of the Americans discovering Seiji's hiding place in the cave and forcing him out, he omits his own role in leading the authorities to the cave. Seiji's narrative in the fifth chapter is broken, interrupted by the voices around him and unable to maintain a stable trajectory. Tamiko does not share with her middle school audience that the girl who was attacked in the story is her own sister. Other narrators are not privy to all of the details of the story, including the ultimate fates of Seiji and Sayoko. This is one more way in which the novel poses its central question: how can we responsibly retell a history that is incomplete, incomprehensible, or absent altogether? What ethical demands do the *missing* voices make? And are those demands reducible to the need for recognition and representation?

While it may be frustrating that Sayoko's point of view is not directly accessible in the novel

(unlike that of one of the perpetrators of the attack), it is precisely this omission that forces the reader to confront the fragmentary nature of history. At the same time, focusing on the transmission rather than the content of the narrative offers a chance to hear, in a way, the *koe naki koe* absented from history. Here I would suggest that we might think of Sayoko's direct narration of her own experience as a missing and irrecoverable original that enables all the retellings that make up the novel. Sayoko must be the first to tell her story in the village, even if only to her family. But more important than her status as the generator of the narrative is her haunting of it throughout its spiraling journey through time and space. Just as Sayoko's naked, running form appears in Hisako's dreams, she also appears to J's grandfather in his hospital bed after he has been stabbed by Seiji, and haunts Kayō after he tells his story, possibly causing his collapse. The Japanese American interpreter finds the image so enduringly disturbing that he wishes to expunge it from the historical record and declines the offer of an award for his wartime heroism, perhaps due to the guilt the image arouses. Though she does not speak in any of these cases—at least not in a linguistic sense—Sayoko's body maintains a powerful affective presence in the minds of the witnesses to her story. Sayoko maintains a ghostly presence in all of the narratives presented in the novel, always folding them back in toward herself. Again, this is not because she owns the narrative in an exclusive or privileged way, but because the ethical demands of her ever-present absence (or absent presence) keep it constantly in motion.

Furthermore, the novel opens up the possibility of “hearing” Sayoko's voice without its ever coming into our presence. Beyond the powerful “speech” constituted by the circulating image of her body, the most memorable of Sayoko's few lines of dialogue in the novel is her enigmatic response to Seiji's repeated query in the fifth chapter, “Can you hear me, Sayoko?”

(Medoruma 2009a, 103, 120). Heard, or perhaps not quite heard, apprehended as the faintest trace of a voice by Tamiko, Sayoko responds in the affirmative: “I can hear you, Seiji” (ibid, 202). Sayoko's answer to Seiji insists on the possibility of communication outside the normative modes that prevent Seiji from being “heard” in every other case. Seiji's voice is presented in the novel as garbled, interrupted constantly by the internalized voices of those around him who bully him and question his humanity. It is difficult for the reader to parse what is Seiji's voice and not the echo of someone else addressing him. That Sayoko insists that she can hear Seiji in spite of all this is a clear sign that, at least within the world of *Me no oku no mori*, the authentic and unequivocal content of narrative is less important than the voice itself.

The ambivalent space of fiction thus invites us to imagine possibilities for the transmission of war memory outside modes like educational curricula, academic research, journalism, museums, and other forms of official discourse that Medoruma juxtaposes with Sayoko and Seiji's mysterious connection across time and space. Sayoko's ability to “hear” Seiji may even point to non-linguistic modes of speaking and listening, since we have no guarantee that what Sayoko hears is Seiji's garbled words and not simply the sound—the affective quality—of his voice. As Medoruma suggests in *Me no oku no mori*, the latter may be as or more important in listening to voices from the traumatic past. The content is less crucial than the ethical relationship the story enables. If Sayoko's trauma sets the chain of relationality within the novel into motion, then the very absence of her voice—the novel's refusal to return to its point of origin—draws the reader as witness into this same ethical chain.

### The Reader's Burden to Re-narrate

Even in the only moment when Sayoko speaks,

declaring that she can hear Seiji, she is positioned as the recipient of Seiji's narrative rather than the narrator of her own story. Within a series of events and their aftermath in which Sayoko plays a central role, her voice is only present to confirm that she can hear that of another. The question becomes, if the novel opens up the possibility of her hearing Seiji's voice despite the distance between them, is there a similar possibility of recuperating Sayoko's voice—not simply her story—from the aporias of the narrative? In other words, could she be speaking to us from a space outside the pages of the novel, a space that is not constructed within the text but posited by it? Although Medoruma does not write such a voice into the text, he does conceive of a way we might hear her voice across the void. If she can hear Seiji, then perhaps we can hear her.

By way of conclusion, then, I want to shift focus from the politics of speaking to the politics of listening, considering in particular the demands the novel makes of the reader to bear witness. This is where the reader of the novel assumes a critical role in the circulation of the narrative. As noted above, the reader is almost never simply the recipient of a narrative directed at an audience that remains abstract. Instead, the reader is witness to both the giving and the receiving of the narrative as it passes from one character to one or more others, who may then pass it on to yet more recipients. This focus on the multidirectional, rippling character of narrative transmission (and its concomitant failures) raises the possibility of the reader's own eventual involvement in passing on or concealing the story as well as the violence it entails.

Murakami Yōko's *Dekigoto no zankyō: Genbaku bungaku to Okinawa bungaku* (*Reverberations of the Event: Atomic Bomb Literature and Okinawan Literature*, 2015) argues against the binary of *tōjisha/hitōjisha*—those involved and those not involved—that arises in the wake of catastrophic events. Instead, she points out

that “the memory of the event does not necessarily pass unilaterally from the *tōjisha* to the *hitōjisha*,” but rather circulates more broadly and complexly among actors whose belonging or non-belonging to the *tōjisha* category is not always clear (Murakami 2015, 277). In the absence of a clear divide between involvement and non-involvement, “we the readers may also acquire a level of involvement [*tōjishasei*]” (ibid). What I would add to Murakami's astute analysis is that in many cases, “we the readers” are already involved before we pick up the text. An ethical witness-bearing would require not only the willingness to take up the burden of narrating “the event,” but also the recognition of one's own complicity in the violence stemming therefrom.

Nothing is more damaging to collective memory in *Me no oku no mori* than the refusal to recognize one's own responsibility for harm, both past and present. Many of the chapter narrators are explicitly concerned with keeping the narrative alive and moving, extending to more and more remembering subjects and potential re-narrators. But their wishes for the preservation and circulation of their stories only serve to highlight what has been lost in their own telling. Tamiko ends her speech to the middle school, for example, by expressing hope that the students will “understand her feelings,” and that their generation will not repeat the violence of the war (Medoruma 2009a, 175-176). The irony of this line is brought into relief by the unfortunately mundane violence of bullying and suicide in the life of the girl who hears the speech. Similarly, the ward chief expresses thanks to the young woman who listens to his story and keeps the memory of the Battle of Okinawa alive for future generations (ibid, 50). Of course, he has left out the unflattering aspects of his role in the story, and even tries to prevent her from digging deeper into the history of the village. Perhaps most poignantly, the novel ends on a similarly ironic plea:

I am hoping that when you read my letter, you will understand. And I hope that your work to continue recording the battles we fought will carry on smoothly and will be rewarded. I want younger generations to read our testimony that you have recorded, and to work never to repeat that kind of war again. I doubt this wish will easily come true. But no matter how impossible, that is the earnest hope of this dying old soldier. (ibid, 220-221)

Here the Japanese American interpreter present at the capture and interrogation of Seiji has just finished requesting that his story be kept a secret, omitted from the historical record that he clearly recognizes as important. By ending the novel in this way, particularly after repeating a similar sort of plea throughout, Medoruma makes clear the ethical demand on the reader as witness. It is not to unearth the complete truth, nor is it to recover the voices of the dead or otherwise silenced—both noble, if perhaps ultimately impossible tasks. Rather, it is to keep our history alive, precisely by recognizing our own involvement in it. Thus, the duty to narrate shifts, in the end, to the reader of the novel herself.

In fact, just as *Me no oku no mori* effaces the origin of the narrative and picks up from various retellings of Sayoko's story, the novel also refuses to narrate its own ending. Instead, it adopts a circular structure that continues the narrative chain endlessly, even extending it outside the bounds of the text. What I am suggesting is that the beginning of the novel, the first chapter, told in the third person to no interlocutor but the reader of the text, becomes possible only after the reader has reconstructed the complete story from the fragments presented in chapters two through ten. Critics have had some difficulty situating

the opening chapter with respect to the shifting narrative perspectives of the following nine chapters. Both Koshikawa (2009, 435) and Suzuki (2012, 37) have created schematics for organizing the perspectives represented in each of the ten chapters, and both label only the first chapter as employing more than one perspective. Both also treat the first chapter as somehow closer to the events, more directly witnessed, situated more closely in time to the events themselves. With the first half narrated from the contemporary perspective of Fumi and the second half from that of Seiji, the opening narrative does perhaps take on the guileless and childlike quality of these characters.

However, I would like to suggest that this chapter can also be read as the reader's own repetition or re-narration. By reading the text and piecing together the events of the story, weaving together the narratives of all the different characters involved, only the reader of the novel has the breadth of knowledge and perspective necessary to narrate this more multifaceted version of the story. This gives rise to the circular and never-ending structure of the text, which ends with an appeal to the reader to keep telling the story, and begins with the retelling of that same story. The reader is thus co-opted into narrating and re-narrating the story, becoming one more conduit for the continued transmission of these memories. But again, this does not mean that the reader becomes an omniscient or objective narrator of these events. Instead, the entire structure of storytelling in the novel is built to insist that the reader can and should tell this story not because of her removal from it, but precisely because she is already involved.

When Medoruma points to the traumatized or the dead who find it impossible to tell their stories of the Battle of Okinawa, he is not seeking justification for "speaking for" a voiceless subject like Sayoko. What becomes clear when Sayoko's case is viewed in terms of the trauma and stigma surrounding sexual

violence is that the ability to speak is not determined merely by the power relations involved, but depends also on the ability to bear the bodily, affective toll of revisiting these memories. Thus, even if it were possible to determine once and for all who counts as the *taikensha* or *tōjisha*, and to grant them absolute authority over the narration of their stories, *Me no oku no mori* makes it clear that forcing these subjects to speak does not solve the problem, but rather compounds the burden they already bear.

Instead, the novel insists on a radical form of *listening* to such voices. The reader is asked to hear a sound that never actually comes into existence and to acknowledge one's own position within the spiraling transmission of that trauma and violence into the present. If the novel taps into the myriad unspoken traumas of the battle, it also questions the impenetrability of the line between the direct, bodily experience of those who witnessed the war first-hand (*taikensha*) and the necessarily second-hand collective memory of subsequent generations. It does so by calling into question the "peace" that is supposed to characterize postwar Japan. While Medoruma's generation may not share in the particular traumas of the Battle of Okinawa and its historical moment, to consider them removed from war is to ignore the ongoing traumas of life in the shadow of American military bases on the islands. As the many narrators of *Me no oku no mori* clearly express, what will prove the most painful aspect of bearing witness to this past is the duty it carries to narrate our own complicity in the violence that continues to spiral therefrom.

I will end, then, by raising the question of the audience for *Me no oku no mori*. Who exactly is being asked to bear witness to these events and to recognize their involvement in them? One answer is certainly Okinawans themselves. This novel, like many of Medoruma's works, includes portions presented in Ryukyuan language, suggesting a target audience of

Okinawan readers. Indeed, some of the novel's harshest critiques are directed at members of the Okinawan community who re-victimize and re-traumatize Sayoko after the initial attack. Still, this violence cannot be disconnected from the mainland Japanese expansion and colonization that preceded it, nor from the ongoing American military occupation that followed. As Medoruma has pointed out over and over, the Anpo system that has enabled Japan's postwar peace and supported the hegemony of the United States in the Pacific, brings anything but peace and security to Okinawa (Medoruma 2005, 14-16). Indeed, if Medoruma's work takes to task mainland Japanese readers for their complicity in the persistent violence of everyday life in Okinawa, then how much more involved in this militarized violence are his American readers? Translators of his fiction, including *Me no oku no mori*, have responded to the call to tell and retell the stories within.<sup>16</sup> In the process, this expansion of Medoruma's audience has raised the question of how English-language readers can ethically engage with his writing. We too must take responsibility for these stories, accepting the burden of bearing witness. Not because we have the power to appropriate the stories of others, but because this story is very much our own.

The most challenging task, as *Me no oku no mori* makes clear, is recognizing our ethical obligation to the voices we cannot hear, to the aporias of history. The novel suggests the necessity and the possibility of taking responsibility for the missing stories, the massive holes that remain—and must always remain—in our field of knowledge. As the case of Okinawa so clearly demonstrates, the past is immanent in present-day experience, not removed from it. The impulse to dismiss the voices of survivors due to inevitable holes in the story as memory fades with time is really an impulse to other oneself from them and from history. Countering this impulse with recognition and representation of those voices

from a distance is insufficient. It is only by seeing ourselves as *tōjisha*, as right in the middle of this violence, that we can hope to arrest its spiraling momentum.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ikeda 2014 discusses questions of legitimacy and authenticity surrounding narratives of the Battle of Okinawa with reference to the literature on generational trauma and the Holocaust. See especially the Introduction. Treat 1995 explores similar questions, particularly in Part One.

<sup>2</sup> Murakami 2015, Murakami 2017, and Ōta 2021 all read Medoruma's work in terms of its exploration of the impact of war memory on both *tōjisha*, those directly involved in the events, and those further removed (*hitōjisha*).

<sup>3</sup> McCormack and Norimatsu 2018 offers a thorough overview of the problems arising from occupation and military bases and their impacts on contemporary Okinawan politics.

<sup>4</sup> Such works include "Umukaji tu chiriti" ("Along with the Traces," 1999), *Gunchō no ki* (*Tree of Butterflies*, 2000), *Niji no tori* (*Rainbow Bird*, 2006), in addition to *Me no oku no mori* (*In the Woods of Memory*, 2009), which I focus on here.

<sup>5</sup> The most famous example of this is Ōshiro Tatsuhiro's "The Cocktail Party," which has been criticized for reducing rape to a trope of male victimhood (Molasky 1999, 40-54). Yoneyama 2016 introduces further complexity in her reading of "The Cocktail Party," stating that "while the subjugation of women and femininity in the symbolic reduction of rape needs to be fully problematized, such a single-axis gender critique of rape and patriarchal nationalism may risk prematurely writing off the story's complex engagement with Cold War formations and the potentially unraveling work that it can do" (54-55). *Me no oku no mori*, in my view, performs a similar "unraveling" function vis-à-vis gendered violence in Okinawa despite the absent voice of its primary *taikensha*.

<sup>6</sup> The novel is available in English translation by Kasumi Sminkey (Medoruma 2017). However, translations from the text are my own.

<sup>7</sup> Sminkey 2017 notes that though the novel does not make the setting explicit, the "island" clearly refers to Yagaji, just off the coast of the northern part of Okinawa's main island (11-12). On the other hand, Ōta 2021 argues that the anonymization of the island allows for a more flexible reading of the text, as potentially referring to any number of similar events (78).

<sup>8</sup> The accusatory tone of this chapter and its use of the second-person pronoun *omae* again calls to mind Ōshiro's "The Cocktail Party." See note 5 above.

<sup>9</sup> I would like to acknowledge Kasumi Sminkey for pointing out the connection between the literally blunted spear tip and the figuratively blunted impact of the story it represents.

<sup>10</sup> Ikeda (2014, 135-136), too, pays special attention to the sensory aspects of their engagement with memories of the past. The project of remembering is not merely linguistic, but involves the body's other senses as well.

<sup>11</sup> The nod to the I-novel (*shishōsetsu*) form here also raises the question of the impact of I-novel discourse within Japanese literary history on these same questions of who "owns" a story and the ethics of narrating lived versus imagined experience.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, Okinawa's violent colonial past (and present) cannot be reduced to a binary of mainland Japanese oppression and Okinawan victimhood. The United States, for one, is obviously deeply intertwined in this dynamic, as I discuss in the conclusion.

<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as "second rape." See Madigan and Gamble 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Much of the recent scholarship on the novel is concerned with the ethics of retaliatory violence and whether Medoruma advocates for the same. Seiji's actions, as a lone and ultimately futile enactor of violent resistance, echo those of characters in *Heiwa dōri to nazukerareta machi o aruite* (*Walking a Road Called Peace Street*, 2003) and more famously, "Kibō" (Hope, 1999). See Murakami 2017 and Onishi 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Holm 2015 discusses Sayoko's drawings as one of her primary means of expressing herself as well as healing from her trauma.

<sup>16</sup> See Medoruma trans. Molasky 2000, Medoruma trans. Selden and Freedman 2009, Medoruma trans. Ikeda 2011, and Medoruma trans. Mizuno 2016 in addition to Sminkey's 2017 translation of *Me no oku no mori*.