

# Seventeen's Battle with the Cult of Masculinity: Reading Ōe Kenzaburō's 1960s Critique of Rightist Resurgence in the Age of Abe

**Michele Mason**

**Abstract:** 1960 was marked by radical political and social upheavals as the Japanese wartime old guard returned to power after the end of the U.S. occupation (1945-1952). In May of that year, unindicted-war-criminal-turned-prime-minister Kishi Nobusuke (1896-1987) forced the controversial Japan-U.S. Security Treaty through the Diet in the dead of night after police removed members of the opposition parties. Over the next six months, millions of Japanese took to the streets to protest this subversion of the political process and the military alliance with the United States. The opposition included socialists, communists, radical student organizations, organized labor, peace and anti-nuclear proponents, and a wide swath of ordinary citizens who were still haunted by memories of wartime suffering. One particularly shocking episode punctuated this tumultuous year in Japan's postwar history: the assassination of the Socialist Party chairman, Asanuma Inejirō (1898-1960), by 17-year-old Yamaguchi Otoyā (1943-1960). On 12 October, Yamaguchi, a young man enamored with militant, rightist doctrine, mortally wounded Asanuma in Hibiya Hall, where he was participating in a political debate. It was in this turbulent post-war crucible that future Nobel Prize winner Ōe Kenzaburō wrote the provocative novella *Seventeen* (*Sebunchin*). This essay examines the controversy over the novel at the time and its place today.

returned to power after the end of the U.S. occupation (1945-1952). In May of that year, unindicted-war-criminal-turned-prime-minister Kishi Nobusuke (1896-1987) forced the controversial Japan-U.S. Security Treaty through the Diet in the dead of night after police removed members of the opposition parties. Over the next six months, millions of Japanese took to the streets to protest this subversion of the political process and the military alliance with the United States. The opposition included socialists, communists, radical student organizations, organized labor, peace and anti-nuclear proponents, and a wide swath of ordinary citizens who were still haunted by memories of wartime suffering. Although many fewer in number, pro-American and ultranationalist groups also marched and sometimes attacked counter-protestors. Demonstrations were met with severe police repression, and violent, bloody clashes became the staple of nightly news.

One particularly shocking episode punctuated this tumultuous year in Japan's postwar history: the assassination of the Socialist Party chairman, Asanuma Inejirō (1898-1960), by 17-year-old Yamaguchi Otoyā (1943-1960). On 12 October, Yamaguchi, a young man enamored with militant, rightist doctrine, mortally wounded Asanuma in Hibiya Hall, where he was participating in a political debate.

1960 was marked by radical political and social upheavals as the Japanese wartime old guard

**Short clip of the stabbing, "Inejiro Asanuma Assassination Footage 1960"**

Photographer Nagao Yasushi (1930-2009) captured the horrific moment immediately after Yamaguchi delivered the fatal stab to Asanuma's abdomen with a short-blade sword. In the stunning photograph, Asanuma's collapsing body hovers just above his own name, written on a political banner at the back of the stage. Japan's national public broadcasting organization (NHK) was covering the high profile event and the clip of the stabbing was later repeatedly broadcast on national television to millions of viewers. Police took Yamaguchi into custody directly. However, on 2 November the incident took another sensational twist when Yamaguchi committed suicide in his jail cell, leaving behind the message "Long Live His Majesty, the Emperor! Seven lives for my country" (*tennō heika banzai. shichishō hōkoku*) in toothpaste on the wall. Later Nagao's image won the 1960 World Press Photo of the Year and the 1961 Pulitzer Prize in Photography, further ensuring that this harrowing event would be seared into the Japanese collective memory.



**Nagao Yasushi's photograph of the fatal stabbing of Socialist Party Chairman Asanuma Inejirō**

It was in this turbulent post-war crucible that future Nobel Prize winner Ōe Kenzaburō wrote the provocative novella *Seventeen* (*Sebunchin*). *Seventeen* and its sequel *A Political Youth Dies* (*Seiji shōnen shisu*) were published in the 1961 January and February issues of *Bungakkai* and immediately incited a vitriolic reaction, including numerous death threats from the Right.<sup>1</sup> Later, a contrite apology printed by *Bungakkai*—without Ōe's permission—provoked another round of condemnation of the young author, this time by incensed leftists for his supposed cowardice and capitulation. Although *Seventeen* has been translated into English, Ōe, deeply troubled by the reactions, has long been wary of allowing a reprint or translation of *A Political Youth Dies*.<sup>2</sup>

By the time *Seventeen* was published, Ōe had already made an impressive, if charged, mark on the literary world. In 1958, at the age of 23, he was awarded the prestigious Akutagawa Prize for his novella *Prizestock* (1957), which depicted a Japanese village's disturbing treatment of a downed black American pilot during the war. Other early works, such as "Leap Before You Look" (1958) and *Our Times* (1959) established Ōe's penchant for productively disquieting admixtures of politics and sexuality. *Seventeen* offered readers a singular concoction of 1960s-style political struggle, provocative sex scenes, and holdover imperial ideology. In the years to come, Ōe sustained his commentary on the emperor and Japan's fraught wartime history with challenging, multi-layered novels such as *The Silent Cry* (1967), for which he won the Tanizaki Prize, and *The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears* (1972). In these works produced in his first two decades as a writer, we can identify the emergence of Ōe's preoccupation with the male psyche freighted with troubling and unstable anxieties and memories.

Ōe would go on to become one of the most prolific novelists of his era, but he has never

reserved his courageous and unflinching critiques exclusively for the pages of his “fantastic fiction.”<sup>3</sup> Today, he is recognized as a long-time activist, whose outspoken non-fiction works, speeches, and organizing activities have contributed to an impressive number of the most important progressive causes since the 1960s. In 1965, Ōe helped establish the Citizens’ Alliance for Peace in Vietnam (Beheiren)<sup>4</sup> and, almost three decades later in 1991, he played a key role in founding the Article 9 Society, which campaigns for the protection of Japan’s “peace constitution.” In the years between, Ōe wrote incisive essays on the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the threat of nuclear weapons, and the bloody history of Okinawa. His excruciatingly personal and profound pieces of fiction and non-fiction that treat his life and the life of Hikari, his composer-son with disabilities, have inspired crucial conversations in Japan and beyond. In the wake of the meltdown at the Fukushima power plant in 2011, he has advocated abandoning nuclear power at the same time that he continues to bring awareness to resurgence of the Right and to wartime responsibility in the age of Abe.

With a public figure as prolific and complex as Ōe, it is hardly surprising that it proves difficult to sum him up in a handful of words. When he won the Nobel Prize in 1994, scholar of modern Japanese literature and translator Michiko Wilson described Ōe as a “laughing poet and soulful healer.” She writes, “with his insistence on engaging the reader in a provocative dialogue on the human condition, [Ōe] is one of the most impassioned voices of conscience countering the country’s minimalist cultural tradition that puts imagery and aesthetics of silence above social and political concerns.”<sup>5</sup> After the prize announcement, the author himself declared “I am writing about the dignity of human beings.”<sup>6</sup> As moving as the moniker “laughing poet and soulful healer” is, we should not forget that Wilson also rightly described Ōe as a “novelistic gadfly” in the

introduction to her translation of *Pinch Runner Memorandum* that also came out in 1994.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Ōe does not offer up literary or intellectual pabulum. In both his fiction and activism he is an insistent, nettling critic. He can be understood simultaneously as a demanding, transgressive writer and committed humanist, a perverse provocateur and trusted voice of ethical reason.

The maelstrom that erupted after the release of the second part of *Seventeen* initiated Ōe into the scourge of controversy that has plagued his professional and private life thereafter. Notably, Ōe’s response to this baptism by fire was marked by both devastation and invigoration. Attacks by the right and the left initially plunged the young author into a severe depression that lasted two years.<sup>8</sup> However, in 1966, with renewed energy and purpose, he wrote candidly about his reflections on the *Seventeen* incident and his frustration with the taboo on depicting or speaking of the emperor. In an essay titled “Can an Author Remain Absolutely Anti-political?” (*Sakka wa zettai ni hanseijiteki tariuru ka*), Ōe critiqued “the intrinsic singularity of the Japanese intellectual milieu that constrains a writer to avoid the Emperor System [*tennōsei*] as subject matter.”<sup>9</sup> Consistently since and even now at the age of 82, he is a sharp and sagacious “voice of conscience” for multiple generations that are keen to maintain Japan’s postwar commitment to peace. As an outspoken critic of Japan’s imperial history, a reflective survivor of war, and a champion of peaceful, democratic ideals, Ōe continues to tirelessly call on the leaders and citizens of Japan to grapple honestly with its wartime legacy. Given the long arc of this theme in Ōe’s critical career and the haunting echo of the unsettled 1960s in Japan’s current politico-historical moment, it seems a fitting time to re-read his *Seventeen*.

*Seventeen* follows the transformation of a confused, young man, who becomes enraptured by the rhetoric of a rightist group. Ōe’s first-

person narrator, known only as “I,” (*ore*, hereafter referred to as Seventeen) is tortured by teenage angst, replete with self-loathing for his weakness, ugliness, loneliness, and “addiction” to masturbation. Readers must navigate Seventeen’s mercurial psychic landscape and unstable internal musings. Through the portrayal of his responses to a series of humiliating experiences with central figures in his home and school life, Ōe imparts an intricate texture to the emotional turmoil of the protagonist. Unable to find a role model in his indifferent father, humiliated by his older sister, and publicly emasculated by a male teacher, the youth finds refuge under the wing of a charismatic leader of an organization called the Imperial Way Party (*kōdōtō*). In the ecstatic ending, Seventeen revels in his newfound masculine persona, which is forged out of his fervor for aggressive “battles” on the streets with his perceived enemies and the celebration of violent sexual fantasies.

Ōe, as an author, has inspired voluminous scholarly analysis, critical commentary, and biographical accounts. *Seventeen* has not been overlooked despite the contentious reactions to it and Ōe’s reticence to republish *A Political Youth Dies*. A number of studies elucidate the role of subjectivity, sexuality, and politics in the work in various combinations. The 1990s gave us Susan Napier’s comparison of *Seventeen* and Mishima Yukio’s “Patriotism” and Kawaguchi Takayuki’s study of both *Seventeen* and *A Political Youth Dies*, each providing multifaceted readings of Ōe’s depictions of the emperor.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Takahashi Yuki presents a fresh look at the text and the way it lays bare the “fabricated logic of the realistically captured political subject” through a compelling historicization of the postwar popularization of the Emperor through new forms of visual media, especially TV.<sup>11</sup> Murakami Katsunao’s cogent examination focuses on the animalistic motifs that shape the Other in Ōe’s strategic criticism of fascism.<sup>12</sup>

Still, this novella has yet to be examined through the tropes of masculinity, which I argue play a central role in Ōe’s trenchant critique. Through the main character Seventeen, Ōe fashions a complex portrait of the ways personal and national identity intersect with a legacy of wartime power-enhancing masculinity in this agitated moment of Japan’s history. The repeated focus on male-dominated worlds and perspectives is evident across Ōe’s long career, and the disconcerting and suffocating physicality of his male characters is consistently linked to the weightiness of memory, meaning, and identity.<sup>13</sup> With this in mind, below I interrogate Ōe’s dissection of the persistence of ultranationalist discourse in postwar Japan as it is embodied in Seventeen’s destructive cocktail of imperial devotion, “hate and malice” toward Others, and sexual violence against women in the first half of the work. The “battle” at the core of my close reading below functions on two levels. At the *textual level* there is the “battle” the protagonist, equipped with the “armor of the Right,” imagines he wages against women and Leftists. In an attempt to overcome his feelings of impotence, the young man defines his masculinity through visions of himself as a heroic warrior—one who embraces “the right to commit any atrocity.” On the *critical level*, Ōe excavates and illuminates the dangerous alchemy of the Right’s nationalistic, imperialistic, and misogynistic rhetoric through his representation of the disturbing intersection of masculinity, domination, and violence in the youth’s emerging identity. By intimately linking Seventeen’s belligerent bravado and the cultish Right, Ōe offers a searing condemnation of the pernicious effects of the hyper-masculinity endemic in Japan’s wartime imperial system as manifested anew in Japan’s volatile postwar period era.

It seems an especially fitting moment to revisit this work as Kishi Nobusuke’s grandson, Abe Shinzō, takes the political stage by storm and, in disturbingly uncanny ways, recapitulates

elements of the history of his familial and ideological patriarch. Resonances can be found in the successful enactment of the State Secrets Law in 2014, Abe's vows to change fundamental aspects of Japan's postwar "peace" constitution, and the increased harassment of journalists and museum curators who do not portray Japan's wartime aggression in the *r/Right* light, especially as it regards Japan's history of sexual slavery and the use of words such as "invasion" (*shinryaku*) to describe Japan's aggressive policies in China and Southeast Asia in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>14</sup> With the passage of the so-called Security Legislation (*anzen hōan*) amid dramatic national protests, the echoes of Kishi's reign are too clear to ignore.<sup>15</sup> Recent photographs that take bird's-eye views of the massive crowds demonstrating before the Diet building seem like color copies of those that captured the stunning resistance to Kishi's high-handed manner of pushing through similarly unpopular policies 45 years ago.<sup>16</sup> Far from being a musty, fictional footnote from a historical moment wholly dissimilar to our own, Ōe's *Seventeen* offers a prescient message that speaks directly to the current "battle" to define the meaning and significance of Japan's imperialist war history and the contours of Japan's contemporary identity.



**Protestors speak out against the "Security Proposal" in front of the Diet Building, 2015**

### **Battles between Debilitating Shame and Potent Masculinity**

Seventeen's confused emotional landscape is established in the early passages of the text through the depiction of his disjointed and conflicted musings while masturbating. We first meet the protagonist on his seventeenth birthday. Hurt by his family's inattention to the special occasion, he retreats to the bathroom to indulge in this comforting habit. His understanding of his relationship to masturbation, however, swings rapidly from guilt to acceptance and from rapture to repulsion. He admits that while earlier he thought masturbation might be wrong, after consulting several sexological texts, he "made the liberating discovery that the only bad thing about masturbation is feeling guilty about it" (2). Seventeen relishes both the intense sensory experience and emotional sanctuary as in this description of one of his orgasms: "Peach flowers bloom everywhere around me, hot springs bubble up, the giant lights of Las Vegas glitter. The fear and doubt, the insecurity, the sadness and misery, that all dissolves now. What bliss it would be if my whole life were one long orgasm" (27). This does not prevent the youth from quickly falling into despair over his ostensible pathological addiction. One minute he is dazzled by his erection—"with the powerful beauty of a rocket" (3)—and the next he is overwhelmed by depression and mortification over his "obscene" predilection, promising to "repent."

Seventeen's anxiety over what he perceives to be his weak and feminine body, moreover, highlights his sense of shame and fantasies of an all-powerful masculine self. This is intimately linked to his obsession with what we would call "the gaze." He is persistently anxious about *if* and *how* people see him, plagued by the fear of being "a chronic masturbator who'll always be *naked* to the eyes of others" (7). (*Italics added.*) During one masturbatory session, he conjures up a vision

of his muscular body, fantasizing that “by next summer my body will be solid, developed everywhere it ought to be. It’ll catch the eyes of girls at the beach, and plant fervent roots of respect in the hearts of the boys in my class” (3-4). Seventeen imagines his idealized masculine body evoking twin reactions; one by *female* classmates who will turn their desiring gaze to his strong body and the other by *male* classmates, whose admiration will be inspired by his obvious virile strength. While conceptually Seventeen may appear to be the object of the gaze, in the daydream his body is the subject of the sentence. It is his imagined manly physique that works its power over the girls to summon their sexual longing and over the boys to claim their respect. However, the post-masturbatory look in the mirror reveals the truth of his “girlish” features and unappealing body—that he is “nothing but skin and bones” (5). As he examines himself, he laments, “my face seems to be ashamed of its flabby, girlish look” (6). Spiraling into despair, Seventeen once again is seized by the fear that everyone can “see through” him and know his dirty secret. “At school and in town maybe I’m actually a walking advertisement for the fact that I’m always masturbating” (6).

In these early scenes of masturbation, Ōe also illustrates how Seventeen’s internal battles are mercurially transmuted into reveries of outwardly directed violence, which serve as a micro mapping of the protagonist’s transformation within the novella’s narrative arc. At one point, he contemplates “the friendship I felt for people I didn’t know from Adam, the feeling of life lived in common” (5), which emerged in a transcendent orgasmic moment. Yet, with disturbing speed his self-consciousness re-asserts itself, and he thinks, “They probably look at me and spit, like they are seeing something disgusting. I’d like to kill them. I’d like to machine-gun them to death, every last one of them” (7). Later, hiding out in a garden shed as he struggles to control his cascading emotions, he takes out a sword with

an inscription by a famous swordsman. Suddenly, he enacts a battle, “With all my might I thrust it into the darkness between the piles of junk, again and again. It must be blood lust, a feeling that fills the shed and thrills my heart.... The day will come when I’ll stab the enemy to death with this Japanese sword. The enemy who I, like a man, will skewer” (17-18). With the weapon in his hands, channeling the spirit of the earlier warrior, Seventeen is buoyed by “a fierce confidence” (18) that confirms his manliness. Yet again, moments later he is “falling into a pit of loneliness” (22). “I’m so ashamed I want to die.” (23) In this case, he is unsure at whom to aim his rage: “It makes me want to put out the eyes of those others, or snuff myself out the same way” (23). If the recurring sense of being penetrated by the judgmental scrutiny of those around him evokes an uneasy vulnerability in Seventeen, in ecstatic moments he is able to momentarily transform his despair by imagining the decidedly penetrative acts of stabbing and skewering his perceived enemies. Still, his consuming self-consciousness—exacerbated by his isolation—muddles his conviction, and he occasionally aims the violent fantasy toward himself.

As a means of combatting his debilitating shame, Seventeen attempts to conjure up a vision of a potent masculinity, one defined by an absolute independence of thought and action. After a devastating defeat at the hands of his sister, as explained below, a tearful, lonely Seventeen takes refuge in a dark garden shed, where he projects a heroic identity onto an alley cat he has tellingly named “Gangster.” This “monster tomcat” is a “real bastard,” who “is always raising hell in the neighborhood” (21). Seventeen finds Gangster’s unapologetic and stoic demeanor particularly appealing. “He’s a perfect villain: a barbarian, the incarnation of evil, ungrateful and shameless, explosive, a lone wolf. He trusts nobody, and steals whatever he wants. And still he’s so dignified that he arouses a feeling of respect in

me” (22). The stray is the conduit through which Seventeen channels an aspirational image—a self-reliant, indifferent maverick. At this point in the narrative, Ōe highlights Seventeen’s conception of unqualified self-reliance through the young man’s identification with the feral Gangster, free from constraints and concerns.

### **Becoming the “Son of Japan”**

The Gangster scene functions as a point of contrast to the nature of Seventeen’s later adoption of a masculine identity within the ideologically narrow, yet ultimately comforting, confines of an ultraconservative political group. Far from pursuing the life of a loner, Seventeen discovers both belonging and value as a man in a new kind of family. This is precipitated by his biological family’s indifference to his seventeenth birthday, which heightens the youth’s sense of alienation and desperation. In the evening, Seventeen gets into an argument with his confident older sister, who works for Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF) as a nurse. He has put little thought into the particulars of the pressing political debates of his day. Seventeen’s high school is dominated by leftists, and so, without a compass or conviction, he throws out a thoughtless criticism of the imperial family and SDF. His sister, however, eloquently and firmly takes apart the points that he merely parroted. He tries to spur himself on so he will not be beaten by the “wisdom of a woman” (12), but he cannot help but think that the scene is one of “a cat playing with a mouse it’s knocked flat” (13). When Seventeen becomes overwhelmed, feeling like an “ignorant fool” (13) and crying, his sister “puff[s] up with victory” (15). So unnerved by his confusion and powerlessness and unable to control the “swirl of angry humiliation and shame” (15), he explodes with violence, turning over the table and kicking his sister in the head. Notably, Seventeen’s demoralization in this scene derives not just from the fact that he lost the verbal sparring,

but that he was defeated by his sister—a woman. Increasingly in the novella, Seventeen’s understanding of his masculine identity is linked to his assertion of domination—and in particular violent domination—over women.

Seventeen’s masculine identity is also shaped by his relationships with key men. For instance, Seventeen’s frustration is exacerbated by his father’s nonchalant attitude, which Seventeen characterizes derisively as “American liberalism,” a philosophy he finds “irresponsible” (14). Although he understands that his father worked hard to educate himself to become a teacher at a private high school, Seventeen is repulsed by his father’s fear of making trouble at work. He has heard his father is “hated and despised” for his completely hands-off approach and inability to offer his students any meaningful support and mentoring, namely a “firm shoulder to lean on” (14). As the argument with his sister heats up, his father’s only response is a “cool, derisive smile” (15-16). Just before his violent outburst, he thinks, “My old man and brother, who are ignoring our argument with utter indifference, also give me the feeling of being pushed into a gulf of explosive rage and misery. His son is in tears, and the old man just sits there bathing in complacency” (14). Wishing his father would get involved in his life, Seventeen bemoans that his “old man” is “more like a stranger than a father” (15). Yearning deeply for his father to become a stern masculine role model, Seventeen even entertains hope that his father would punish him violently. Seventeen’s disdain for American-style liberalism as embodied in his father’s detached, passive, and aloof demeanor makes him susceptible to the persuasive, enthusiastic, and self-assured certainty projected by the Right.

Seventeen’s culminating humiliation that significantly intensifies a self-consciousness and insecurity about his masculinity, however, occurs at school, precipitated by a gym teacher

and witnessed by female and male classmates. The stage is set for this scene of abject degradation in an earlier episode when Seventeen remembers fainting from fear in a physics class. “I screamed, and I dirtied myself with piss and shit. When I woke up there was shame and hatred for my stinking self, and there was the unbearable look of the female students” (24). To his mind, this was just one of the many painful incidents on horrifying public display at school, which reinforced his contemptible and wretched status. Against this backdrop, on the day after his birthday during a physical education class, Seventeen struggles to complete the eight-hundred-meter run while fellow classmates look on. In stark contrast to his summer beach fantasy, wherein the gaze of his female and male classmates signals their desire or admiration respectfully, in this scene his feeble and pallid body is wracked with pain as “everybody watch[ed his] sad, farcical stumbling” (43-44). Suddenly the coach screams out “*act like a man. And stop that pigeon-toed dog trot!*” (43). (Italics added.) Seventeen’s agony crystalizes in a panic-induced vision of everyone being able to see his pathetic, naked self. He imagines them saying, “We can see all the way through to your indecent fetid crotch! You’re nothing but a lonely gorilla, masturbating in front of our eyes” (44). Just as Seventeen crosses the finish line, the coach cruelly points to the liquid trail left by Seventeen who has urinated in his pants. The spectacle is greeted with the “sneering laughter” and “howls” of “a world of Others” (45). The male figure who delivers the crushing blow to Seventeen’s fragile psyche is a coach who displays physical strength and self-possession—hallmarks of the masculine ideal. In contrast, Seventeen’s powerlessness, accentuated through the loss of control over basic bodily functions, further fuels his sense of abasement and despair. Seventeen’s immediate response is to rouse up the courage to hate. The text reads, “I make up my mind to stop hanging on and trying to find some good in this world of Others. Why? Probably because if I

don’t kindle an enemy spirit, if I don’t rake up hatred for them, I’m afraid I’m going to break down and cry” (45). In this watershed moment, Ōe depicts Seventeen’s growing resolve as an emotional conversion that crystalizes his internal disgrace and ambivalence into an “enemy spirit” and outward hatred of Others.

Seventeen’s realization of this aspiration begins when he encounters a right-wing group, the Imperial Way Party, and finds everything he is seeking in the charismatic leader Sakakibara Kunihiko. From this point on, Ōe explicitly deploys battle metaphors and repeats the phrase “malice and hate” to underscore how rightist rhetoric bolsters a sense of belonging and pride through the pugnacious denigration of others. As Seventeen watches Sakakibara give a speech, he initially sees a “raging old lunatic” who is “raving, incoherent and alone” (48). But then Seventeen has an epiphany: his wretched self-loathing could be transformed if turned outward. He conceives of himself as an innocent victim—a puppy—that naturally lashes out to protect himself, proclaiming,

I bark and bite at the others who treat me, the puppy, with cruelty.... Before long, like it’s a dream, my ears start to pick up words of malice and hate which I myself am slinging at the others of the real world. In fact, it is Sakakibara who’s speaking these words, but his expressions of malice and hate are exactly the same as those in my heart. Sakakibara is my soul screaming. (52-53)

Seventeen’s enthusiastic response to Sakakibara’s vitriol garners the leader’s attention, and soon he becomes his protégé. Thus, Sakakibara fulfills Seventeen’s desire to be recognized and appreciated. He tells the youth, “I’ve been waiting for a pure and brave



patriotic youngster like you. You are the son of Japan who can fulfill the Heart of His Majesty the Emperor. It is you, the chosen boy with the true Japanese soul” (56). Comforted by the idea of Sakakibara and the emperor as proxy father figures, *Seventeen* attempts to overcome his feelings of impotence through reveries of newfound purpose and importance. As the “son of Japan,” *Seventeen* finally finds the sense of belonging and manly pride for which he has been searching.

### Echoes of Wartime Violence

At a historical crossroads, Ōe aimed his sharp pen at the Right through a disturbing depiction of hyper-masculinity that recalled Japan’s wartime practice of sexual slavery, imperialist domination, and atrocities in Asia. Moreover, a critique of an enduring imperialist, belligerent mindset that lived on in democratic, postwar Japan is underscored in Ōe’s text through the depiction of *Seventeen*’s dramatic conversion under the guidance of Sakakibara. *Seventeen*’s fragile ego is transformed through the adoption of an extremely aggressive demeanor, masculine sexual privileges, and demeaning conduct toward groups he feels are inferior. A strategic alloy of the ability to command fear, perpetrate violence, and provide devoted service to the emperor composes the protagonist’s masculine persona. This particular crystallization was a disturbing reminder of the lingering legacy of Japanese imperial aggression as colonial cronies took the political helm in Japan’s ostensible democratic postwar era.

Japan’s wartime past emerges first in Sakakibara’s personal history in the military. Sakakibara, the text explains, has been a “personal friend of the Prime Minister” since they met in Manchuria during the war, where Sakakibara served in a “special brigade.” The mention of Sakakibara’s wartime buddy, Prime Minister Oka (*oka* meaning “hill”), is a thinly veiled reference to another man with a single-

*kanji* surname, Kishi Nobusuke (*kishi* meaning “shore”), who was in fact head of state at the time Ōe wrote *Seventeen*. Mark Driscoll, scholar of Japanese imperialism, offers an incisive discussion of Kishi’s “necropolitics” in Japan’s singular imperial outpost, the puppet-state of Manchuria in the 1930s. He singles out Kishi as one of a new brand of powerful colonial bureaucrats “who were beneficiaries of the multiple modes of expropriation—*kempeitai* looting of money and valuables, state and non-state drug trafficking, military land grabs—that were required to get the state up and running.”<sup>17</sup> Deeply inspired by the National Socialists on his multiple tours to Germany, Kishi lived out his fantasy of omnipotence in Manchuria, where he implemented his fascist economic model through the innocuous-sounding Five Year Plans by any means necessary, devastating the lives of millions of Chinese.

Even as Kishi held the reins of political power in 1960, most Japanese adults would not have forgotten that he had been an unindicted war criminal in the Tokyo War Crimes Trial (1946-1948). The prime minister’s history as a frequent procurer of women for sex was apparently not understood to be a cause for shame as he bragged while in prison in 1946, “I came so much, it was hard to clean it all up” (267). In later years, Kishi was anything but reticent about how he had laundered money in Manchuria (264) and revealed no discomfort with his role in the abject dehumanization of untold numbers of Chinese, claiming that “ordering Chinese to act like robot slaves was considered the most appropriate ‘Japanese lesson’” (266). His most famous postwar act—underhandedly pushing the security treaty through the Diet in the midnight hours—had all the hallmark traits of a maneuver made by a man who believed his power should go unquestioned and unchallenged. By invoking Kishi in this riotous historical moment, Ōe forced readers to grapple with the disturbing truth of the administrative and ideological

wartime holdovers.

The novella, moreover, repeatedly emphasizes the assumed natural nexus of masculinity, martial prowess, and the incitement of fear through the portrayal of Seventeen's infatuation with the Nazi-inspired uniform of the Imperial Way Party.<sup>18</sup> In several passages, "armor" is used interchangeably with "uniform" to reinforce the battle theme. At one point, Seventeen proclaims gleefully, [the uniform] "gives me strength when I walk the streets, and an intense, memorable joy. I feel like I've gone to heaven, and my body is covered with an unyielding armor" (Ōe, 66). His earlier impotence is replaced by strength and jubilation. The youth is particularly besotted with the uniform-cum-armor's power to demand attention and invite the respectful gaze he has always dreamed of.

When people looked at me before, I'd blush in fright. I was captured by a timorous, miserable self-loathing. I was bound hand and foot by self-consciousness. But now, instead of seeing what's inside me, others see the uniform of the Right. More than that, it instills them with fear. Behind the impenetrable curtain of the right-wing uniform I can hide forever the soul of an easily wounded young man. I am no longer hurt by the eyes of others. (66)

In his transformation, it is suggested that the impervious battle gear shields him from the hitherto painful, penetrating gaze of others. Seventeen's previous frightened, constricted, helpless, and self-hating identity is exchanged for one that engenders fear and outwardly evokes power and pride.

However, Ōe repeatedly undercuts the superficial aspect of Seventeen's sartorial

marker of power by reinforcing the fact that his protective armor merely covers over the young man's insecurities. The text forces us to stay with an unresolved tension created by the juxtaposition of Seventeen's exaggerated external projection of potency and the persistent references to his inner, secret inadequacies. The block quote above reveals that the uniform merely "*hides* the soul of an easily wounded young man" (66). (Italics added.) In another example, although the uniform is compared to "the carapace of a beetle," the next sentence reads, "the tender, weak, vulnerable, unshapely creature inside is invisible to others" (66). As we have already seen, Seventeen has a profound fear of the transparency of his most private and vulnerable self and the critical scrutiny of what he calls "the others." In one instance he boasts,

These others no longer see the wretched me who wets his penis in masturbation, giving it the moist look of a green stem of grass that's just been snapped off. They no longer see the lonely, miserable, timid Seventeen. They don't look at me with the threatening eyes of those others who, after just one glance, say, 'We can see right through you.'" (55)

His language here seeks to counter and erase his earlier abject humiliation on the high school track, which was suffused with the combined horrors of physical weakness, emotional vulnerability, and sexual exposure. Thus, the novella presents Seventeen's susceptibility to Sakakibara's invective and his transformation as a reactionary, self-protective strategy. In this way, Ōe lays bare the disquieting truth of the undeniably powerful force of the Right's rhetoric of "malice and hate" to those who long for comforting fixity and belonging in times of personal and national turmoil.

As the narrative unfolds, Seventeen's emerging sense of masculinity becomes ever more explicitly defined by hyper-sexualized notions of manhood and celebrations of violence. Ōe's *Seventeen* contains a textual reference to a female slave, the fantasy of extreme violence against women, and linkages between sex and the emperor, which forcefully recall the wartime practice of sexual slavery whose victims are sometimes euphemistically referred to as "comfort women." One day Sakakibara takes Seventeen to a Turkish bath to initiate the youth into his "manhood." Whereas before his nakedness evoked shame, a sense of impotence, and even femininity, now he fantasizes that his naked body—and specifically his erection—is a weapon used to dominate and violate a woman's body. His fantasy of the sexual act with the sex worker is marked by visions of brutality. "I have an enormous erection. It is I, a man with his manhood... like a red-hot skewer ready to pierce through the virgin vagina of a newly wed bride" (68). In his ecstasy, Seventeen experiences an unmitigated and everlasting omnipotence. "It was precisely the miracle I had wished for on my seventeenth birthday, when I was smeared with pitiful tears. All my life will be an orgasm. My body, my soul, all of me will continue to stand erect" (68). In the dramatic conversion portrayed in this scene, Seventeen, who imagines himself variously as a king and as a god, is confident he has embodied the power of the Right. "I see my semen splattered on the girl's cheeks like glistening tears. Instead of feeling the usual post-masturbation depression, I'm lost in a triumphant joy. I don't say a word to this *female slave* as I put on my Imperial Way uniform. That's the correct attitude" (69). (Italics added.) If it was Seventeen who was weeping when his sister's superior arguments led him to explode with a pitiful and uncontrollable rage, now the symbolic tears are on the face of the female victim of his targeted (if imagined) aggression. The description of Seventeen's splattered semen—described as "glistening tears"—on the sex worker's face

disrupts the narrative that celebrates the youth's ecstatic affirmation of his masculinity and the climax of his power to dominate others by calling to mind the pain and suffering caused by sexual violence against women during the years of Japanese military expansion.

At the same time, *Seventeen* points to other atrocities committed in Asia, explicitly underscoring that such acts were carried out in the name of Emperor Hirohito. Not only does Seventeen scream out "His Majesty the Emperor!" as he orgasms at the brothel, but he also enthusiastically enumerates the three lessons he has learned from the sexual encounter. "I, the rightist young man, have completely conquered the eyes of others; I, the rightist young man, have the right to commit any atrocity on the weak others; and I, the rightist young man, am a child of His Majesty the Emperor" (69). These three proclamations speak to Seventeen's most sensitive fears. The first counters his distress and shame over being scrutinized and judged by others and the next celebrates his assertion of power through violence, which allays his feelings of powerlessness. The final entry confirms a sense of belonging. As the son of the emperor, at last Seventeen has a father figure who can teach him how to live properly as a "man," the word repeated in the phrase "I, the rightist young man." Through this alliance, Seventeen imagines that he has gained an ecstatic power that allows him to "conquer" the critical gaze of others that has so plagued him. His bravado is merely another incarnation of the uniform/armor that invigorates him and protects him from his own fear of their perceived criticisms and loathing.

Emboldened by his post-coital revelations—his newfound ardor for emperor-sanctioned violence—the young man takes to the streets, enters a group of demonstrators, and fights like a "hero." "I wield my stick of malice at the students, I swing my nail-studded wooden

sword of hostility into a group of women” (72). *Seventeen* relishes pursuing, trampling, attacking, rampaging, and killing leftists and especially women. He brags that he is the most heroic and ferocious of the Imperial Way Party members. At one point, he hallucinates the “*radiant emperor appearing with a golden halo from the darkness of this gloomy, intense night of insults, screams, and cries of pain and fear*” (73). (Italics added.) Soon after, in the last paragraph of the work, Ōe references an actual historical event of June 15, when a young university student, Kanba Michiko (1937-1960) was killed amidst a protest melee. In both real life and the text, the news of the death of a female student killed in a demonstration prompts an impromptu moment of silence. In the climactic last lines of the novella, *Seventeen* exclaims, “When the weeping students hold a silent prayer, drenched by the rain and crushed by discomfort, sadness, and pain, I experience the orgasm of a rapist. To my golden vision I promise a bloodbath. I am the one and only blissful *Seventeen*” (73). This exceedingly disturbing final scene intricately threads *Seventeen*’s pleasure with unbridled aggression, extreme sexual violence, and zealous devotion to the emperor. In this way, Ōe simultaneously builds on his earlier implication that *Seventeen* is the living offspring of the imperialist project—the “son of Japan” and the “child of His Majesty the Emperor”—and assigns responsibility to the emperor for the wartimes atrocities committed in his name over the many decades of Japanese imperial subjugation in Asia. Importantly, the work also manifests an unspoken proclamation, “The imperialist war is over. Long live the imperialist war,” by pointing to the ways in which the wartime attitudes and values still held sway, not only in the halls of power with Kishi and his ilk but also in the minds of some Japanese who searched for a clear and comforting identity in unsettled postwar Japan.

In particular, with the dramatic contrast between the masculine rampage and the

somber response to Kanba’s tragic death in the closing scene of *Seventeen*, Ōe compelled his readers to make the links between this provocative work of fiction and their explosive historical-political moment. In what might be more than a mere footnote, Kanba was at the heart of Kishi’s downfall, who, under severe pressure after her death, resigned July 19, soon after the treaty went into effect. This incident may have brought an end to Kishi’s reign, but he nevertheless succeeded in strong-arming the Ampo security treaty into law. Media and cultural studies scholar Setsu Shigematsu calls attention to the significant emblematic power invested in Kanba. She states, “Kanba’s death was the apposite symbol of the death of democracy for her life represented an ideal image of the democratic hope.”<sup>19</sup> Ōe was one voice, albeit a particularly powerful one, among millions who protested Kishi’s gross disrespect for the democratic process and the postwar constitution’s spirit of reform.



**A Memorial with Photograph of Kanba Michiko. Photo by Hamaya Hiroshi**

### Conclusion: History Repeating

Today, as Japanese citizens nervously witness Prime Minister Abe’s aggressive attempts to turn back the clock on much of Japan’s postwar democratic progress, it seems appropriate to

revisit Ōe's cautionary tale of the rise of the Right. In the era of Abe, we can recognize the hallmark issues that Ōe critiques in *Seventeen*: a defensive, pro-militarization posture, the resurgence of nationalist, pro-imperial rhetoric, and the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal system. Ever cognizant that the rules of acceptable discourse have changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Abe cloaks his radical political agenda in the language of Japan's security, pride, and independence. Regardless of the seemingly innocuous packaging of protecting national interests and sovereignty, the platform and policies forwarded in the Abe era mark a troubling shift.

Given that Abe publically and proudly harkens back to his grandfather and, in many ways, emulates his strong-arm tactics, it should not be surprising that *Seventeen's* critical view of Kishi's historical moment resonates eerily today. In May 2015, when Abe presented a speech before a U.S. Joint Session of Congress, he received a standing ovation after quoting a line from Kishi's 1957 address in the very same venue: "It is because of our strong belief in democratic principles and ideals that Japan associates herself with the free nations of the world."<sup>20</sup> This paean to democratic principles notwithstanding, Abe deployed heavy-handed maneuvers to push through the State Secrets Law in December 2013 despite widespread public protests.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, as Christopher W. Hughes, a scholar of Japanese international politics, notes, "security policy has progressed rapidly for Abe, culminating thus far in the ramming of collective self-defense legislation through the National Diet's Lower House in July 2015."<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to overlook the choice of words here, namely "ramming," the most common description of Kishi's actions that confirmed the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty in 1960. Through his disregard for constitutional and democratic processes, especially as it pertains to "security," Abe has confirmed that he follows in his grandfather's steps.<sup>23</sup>

If the character Seventeen dons the military uniform—what he calls his armor—to cover over inner insecurities and project power outwardly as a means to intimidate others, Abe's attempts to "re-armor" and restore pride in Japan functions much the same way. In addition to the parliamentary moves, Abe's ruling party has ambitious plans for revising Japan's postwar constitution in such a way that makes rearmament and potentially belligerent actions easier to justify. In 2012, the Liberal Democratic Party published a draft that neatly lays out the proposed edits of and additions to the current constitution in a parallel text format. In this proposal, the chapter now titled "Renunciation of War (*sensō hōki*) is renamed "Securing Stability" (*antei hoshō*).<sup>24</sup> In a decidedly Orwellian move, the famous Article 9—Japan's peace provision that has been the basis for restrictive precedents on military engagement for well over 40 years—is newly subtitled "Pacifism" (*heiwashugi*) even as the LDP adds language that affirms Japan's right to "self defense" with no clarification of what would constitute necessary and sufficient warrants for the use of military action (4). The draft also reveals plans to designate the prime minister as the commander-in-chief of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and expand the duties of the SDF to collective defense, which will draw Japan into global conflicts and arguably only further threaten its stability. Okazaki Hisahiko, sometimes referred to as Prime Minister Abe's "brain," repeatedly encourages Japan to reject the "starry-eyed pacifism" of the Left and "normalize" according to international standards.<sup>25</sup> Okazaki mourns that Japan no longer has active, radical rightwing groups as it did in 1960—exactly the year in which Ōe's novella *Seventeen* is set—calling today's groups "essentially moribund (18)."

Yet, the increase of anti-Korean hate-speech and crimes and contentious skirmishes over the Senkaku Islands in the last decade suggests that such groups are anything but moribund. This is further confirmed by ever more

numerous and bald public denials of Japan's wartime sexual slavery and atrocities by various rightwing associations as well as Abe's frank resistance to repeating apologies for Japan's wartime transgressions.<sup>26</sup>

Prime Minister Abe and his ruling party, moreover, have been forthright about shoring up nationalist, pro-imperial sentiment in a multi-pronged mission to revise Japan's postwar constitution and secondary education textbooks. The constitutional revisions include reinstating the emperor as "head of state" and mandating "respect" for the wartime Rising Sun flag and pro-emperor anthem "Kimigayo."<sup>27</sup> Some have noted Abe's attempts to reinvigorate Shintoism, which cannot be disentangled from its troubling modern connections to emperor worship and imperial expansion.<sup>28</sup> The mission statement of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, which Abe used to head, emphasizes the need to instill pride (*hokori*) in Japan's youth and release them from the "masochistic tendency" (*jigyakuteki keikō*) of having to reflect on Japan's wartime history. Their official position laments, "as for modern history in particular, Japanese are fated to apologize like criminals for generations to come."<sup>29</sup> In December of 2015, Abe took a step toward curtailing such apologies by concluding an agreement with the Korean government on the so-called comfort women issue. With this deal, Japanese officials hope to stem Korean criticism of Japan for its extensive system of sexual slavery and to prompt the removal of a statue commemorating this tragic history.<sup>30</sup> In Ōe's novella the main character compensates for his perceived weakness and humiliation with a reactionary stance. He revels in moments when he is convinced that he has "conquered the eyes of others" and maintains the right to "commit any atrocity." Abe may not currently swing a physical "sword of hostility" as does Seventeen in the final scene, but we can recognize Ōe's allegorical trifecta in Abe's attempts to project potency, rebuff criticisms of Japan's wartime

aggression, and codify the power to commit violence.

Seventeen's fraught relationship with his sister, targeted attacks on female protestors in political rallies, and a disturbing encounter with the sex worker highlight the ways this youth attempts to construct a masculine identity through the domination and abuse of women. Abe's era exhibits similar masculinist inclinations, which are demonstrated by both his disregard for the victims of sexual slavery, as addressed above, and the failure to address the socio-economic inequities that affect Japanese women. Keenly aware that today's public will not swallow the pithy mantras of yesteryear, such as "Good Wife and Wise Mother" (*ryōsai kenbō*), Abe and his colleagues have, for the most part, avoided openly rolling back women's rights. Instead, while paying lip service to "womenomics," they allow systemic discrimination to work quietly in practice. The outspoken scholar of Japanese wartime aggression Yuki Tanaka situates Abe's record within "Japan's social formation of hegemonic masculinity."<sup>31</sup> Tanaka cites numerous indicators of the hostile and challenging environment for Japanese women. These include women's lack of economic equity, their marginal representation in parliament (for instance, only 8% of legislators in the Lower House), and the increase in reported incidents of domestic violence (14-15). In some cases, progress has even been openly hindered, for example when the Supreme Court upheld a Meiji-era law that legislates patriarchal norms through the same-surname law, which forces women to take their husband's name.<sup>32</sup> These trends and the proposed constitutional insertion of the clause "The family is esteemed as a natural and fundamental unit of society" serve to reassert the primacy of the family as the foundation of the nation. These, together with the vigorous policies that incentivize having children, compel us to question whether the specter of wartime sexist and patriarchal ideology is just under the surface.

These ways that Abe and his supporters are working to manifest a proud and militant Japanese identity based on a grossly sanitized and imaginary vision of the imperial, wartime era are precisely what call for a re-reading of Ōe's provocative portrayal of a wayward youth who embraces insular, reactionary regression rather than collective, democratic progress. And just as in that turbulent historical moment that inspired Ōe to write *Seventeen*, today we witness unprecedented numbers of ordinary citizens participating in sustained and vigorous protests decrying Abe's policies nationwide. Ōe has long been on record about his own severe disillusionment in the immediate postwar period and his painful realization of how thoroughly he, as an elementary-school student, had been indoctrinated by imperialist propaganda during the war.<sup>33</sup> As an adult in the postwar period, Ōe's critical understanding of the power of the indoctrination of imperialistic devotion deeply informed his writings and personal convictions. Nothing illustrates this better than his decision to reject the Japanese Order of Culture (*bunka kunshō*), an honor recognizing the highest advancement of Japanese art, literature, and culture. In 1994, after Ōe was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Japanese government

announced he had been named to receive the Order of Culture. Despite the accompanying lifetime annuity that comes with the order, Ōe refused to accept since it was granted by the emperor, stating, "I do not recognize any authority, any value, higher than democracy."<sup>34</sup>

Now in his 80s, Ōe continues to speak out. In March of 2015, he delivered a speech in which he asserted that the very period that formed his own vital, critical awakening is one that "Abe most hates to remember and feels most ashamed of."<sup>35</sup> Ōe candidly criticized Abe's "refusal to acknowledge Japan's terrible past," emphasizing "Japan needs the imagination to forge a new reality through profound reflection on the war." He further vowed, "I will spend the last of my days pleading and thinking on those lines." Ōe has shared his thought-provoking insights and inspiring entreaties with us in fiction, essays, and activism for more than four decades. With his excavation of the dangerous combination of reactionary shame and entrenched masculinity in *Seventeen*, the "novelistic gadfly" bequeaths us a critical lens through which to assess Japan's current state of political affairs and a productive prod to forge an inclusive national identity and robust democratic future.

**Michele M. Mason** is an Associate Professor of modern Japanese cultural studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is author of [Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan: Envisioning the Periphery and the Modern Nation-State](#) and co-editor, with Helen J.S. Lee, of [Reading Colonial Japan: Text, Context, and Critique](#). Mason also co-produced the short documentary film entitled [Witness to Hiroshima](#) (2008, dir. Kathy Sloane).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The quotations herein are from Luk Van Haute's translation in *Seventeen and J: Two Novels*, Foxrock Books (NY, 1996), 1-73. *Seventeen* in Japanese can be found in "*Ōe Kenzaburō shōsetsu Vol 1* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1996), 387-425. Some refer to the two novellas as one text by the name *Seventeen* because they were originally titled *Seventeen and a Political Youth*

*Dies: Seventeen Part II*. The reading herein focuses on the first work.

<sup>2</sup> Masao Miyoshi's introduction to Van Haute's translation explains that due to ongoing harassment and death threats from the Right, Ōe has never allowed the reprinting of *A Political Youth Dies*, the sequel to *Seventeen*. Miyoshi writes, "Ōe's cautiousness must be respected and, therefore, *A Political Youth Dies* is not included in this volume." *Seventeen and J: Two Novels*, x-xi. It should be noted that Ōe has recently granted permission for *A Political Youth Dies* to be reprinted in Japanese and translated into German. The work includes historical and literary introductory materials as well as commentary on the translation. See Irmela Hiiya-Kirschner and Christoph Heid. *Drahtseilakte: der junge Kenzaburo Ōe* (München: ludicum, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> For more on "fantastic fiction" and Ōe, see Susan Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity*, Routledge, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Yuichiro Onishi, "The Presence of (Black) Liberation in Okinawan Freedom: Transnational Moments, 1968-1972" in *Extending the Diaspora: New Histories of Black People*, eds. Dawne Y. Curry, Eric D. Duke, and Marshanda A. Smith (U of Illinois Press, 2009), 184.

<sup>5</sup> Michiko Wilson, "[Kenzaburō Ōe: Laughing Prophet and Soulful Healer](#)." *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 26 Jan 2007. Accessed May 28, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> James Sterngold. "Nobel in Literature goes to Kenzaburo Ōe of Japan. *New York Times*. October 14, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Ōe Kenzaburō, *The Pinch Runner Memorandum*, Trans. Michiko N. Wilson and Michael K. Wilson, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994, xi.

<sup>8</sup> "Introduction," *Seventeen and J: Two Novels*, viii. For more on Ōe's experiences during this time see *Letters to the Memorable Year (Natsukashī toshi e no tegami)* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1987). Also of note is the fact that Ōe was again the target of vociferous criticism in 2006, when he was forced to fight a libel case over his 1970 essay *Okinawa Notes*, addressing the forced mass-suicides of Okinawan citizens by the Japanese military during the Battle of Okinawa. After a two-year ordeal, the court ruled in favor of Ōe.

<sup>9</sup> Michiko N. Wilson, *The Marginal World of Ōe Kenzaburō* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc. 1986), 78.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Napier, *Escape from the Wasteland: Romanticism and Realism in the Fiction of Mishima Yukio and Ōe Kenzaburō* (Cambridge Mass: Council on East Asia Studies, Harvard U. 1991), 148-160. Kawaguchi Takayuki, "A Study of *Seventeen* and *A Political Youth Dies*: An Archeology of the 'Pure Emperor'" ("*Sebunchin*" "*Seijishōnenshisu*" ron: "*junsui tennō*" no *kōkogaku*), *Kokubungaku kō*, Vol. 153, 1997, 33-44.

<sup>11</sup> Takahashi Yuki, "'The Political Youth' in Front of the T.V.: A Study of Ōe Kenzaburō's *Seventeen* and *A Political Youth Dies*" (*terebin no mae no "seijishōnen": Ōe Kenzaburō "Sebunchin" "Seijishōnenshisu" ron*), *Showa Literary Studies*, Vol. 60, 2010, 27-38.

<sup>12</sup> Murakami Katsunao, "Narrative Resisting Fascism: On the Animal-like Voice of the Other in Ōe Kenzaburō's *Seventeen*" (*Fuashizumu ni teikōsuru katari: Ōe Kenzaburō "Sebunchin" ni okeru dōbutsuteki tasha no koe*), *Showa Literary Studies*, Vol. 67, 2013, 39-50.

<sup>13</sup> There may be room to criticize Ōe for this penchant, but that remains to be done within a deeply contextualized discussion of his oeuvre.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Seaton, "[The Nationalist Assault on Japan's Local Peace Museums: The Conversion of Peace Osaka](#)." *Japan Focus*. July 26, 2015. Volume 13. Issue 30. Number 2. See also the



writings of Lawrence Repeta on the National Security Legislation, the State Secrecy Act, proposed changes to the constitution, Article 9, and more [here](#).

<sup>15</sup> Opposition groups have consistently called this the War Legislation (*sensō hōan*). See the newspaper published by the Communist Party, *Akahata*, and the newsletter produced by Japan's only national advocacy group for survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organization, for examples.

<sup>16</sup> In looking at such images, one cannot help but think of the now disbanded but recently vibrant student movement known as Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs). Although different in tenor, tactics, and scale to their 1960s counterpart, one can recognize the common goal to "aim to rethink and enact democracy." See English website [here](#).

<sup>17</sup> Mark Driscoll. *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque: The Living, Dead, and Undead in Japan's Imperialism, 1895-1945* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2010), 264.

<sup>18</sup> Another linkage between the Imperial Way and the Nazis appears toward the very end of the novella. "The steel code of ethics of our Youth Group is based on the speech the Nazi Himmler delivered, roaring like a lion, at a congress of SS officers at Poznan on the fourth of April, 1943" (72). If one thinks Ōe's repeated reference to the Nazis is rather overdetermined, I would direct them to Prime Minister Aso Tarō's 2013 public statement that Japan could learn from what the Nazi party accomplished in parliament in 1933. "Germany's Weimar Constitution was changed into the Nazi Constitution before anyone knew. It was changed before anyone else noticed. Why don't we learn from that method." Jake Adelstein, "[Jeers, Apologies, and Silence: Japan 2014 in Quotes](#)." *Japan Times*. Dec 22, 2014. Accessed August 13, 2015. Accessed March 20, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Setsu Shigematsu, *Scream from the Shadows: The Women's Liberation Movement in Japan* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 2012), 36.

<sup>20</sup> Kerry Smith, "['History is harsh': Prime Minister Abe, the Joint Session of Congress, and World War II](#)." *Japan Focus*. May 15, 2015. Accessed January 26, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> This law went into effect on 10 December 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher W. Hughes, "[An 'Abe Doctrine' as Japan's Grand Strategy: New Dynamism or Dead-End?](#)" *Japan Focus*. July 21, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> For more about the critical response to Abe's "attack on the key principles of constitutionalism and the rule of law" from constitutional scholars, see C. M. Rubin. "[Japanese Scholars Say No to War](#)." *Huffington Post*. July 11, 2015. Accessed January 26, 2016. .

<sup>24</sup> *Nihonkokukempō kaisei sōan*. Jiyūminshutō. April 27, 2012. p. 4. The side-by-side comparison of the LDP's revised proposal and the current constitution aids greatly in identifying the drastic and troubling changes.

<sup>25</sup> Hisahiko Okazaki, "[Japan's Step Toward Normalcy](#)," *Okazaki Institute*, February 26, 2013. Accessed June 11, 2014. Okazaki counters critiques of Abe's platform, arguing, "The change we are witnessing is not a swing to the right but a gradual shift toward normalcy" (2). Offering unsubstantiated evidence, he states that 80% of people around the world are willing to fight to defend their country while in Japan it is less than 50%.

<sup>26</sup> "[Enough with WWII Apologies: Japan PM Sees no Need to Reinforce Remorse](#)." *RT*. April 22, 2015. Accessed January 26, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> *Nihonkokukenpō kaisei sōan*, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Holtz. “Reviving Shinto: Prime Minister Abe Tends Special Place in Japan’s Soul.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. October 5, 2015. Accessed March 20, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> “Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho wo tsukuru kai: Shuisho.” *Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho wo tsukuru kai*. January 30, 1997. Accessed January 20, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that this agreement is effectively rendered void due to the impeachment proceedings of President Park.

<sup>31</sup> Yuki Tanaka. “A Critique of Prime Minister Abe’s Policy on the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue and Japan’s Social Formation of Hegemonic Masculinity.” *Hiroshima Peace Institute*. Accessed July 05, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> While for some time now there has been the informal practice of women using their birth names in professional settings, recent incidents indicate that the Supreme Court ruling is making this harder. See [here](#).

<sup>33</sup> Weston, Mark, *Giants of Japan: The Lives of Japan’s Most Influential Men and Women*. NY: Kodansha International, 1999, pp. 294-295. Ōe remembers being repeatedly prompted by a teacher to affirm his commitment to “cut his belly open and die” for his divine emperor.

<sup>34</sup> To this day, Ōe remains the only person to refuse acceptance of this order.

<sup>35</sup> “Kenzaburō Ōe Urges Abe to Reflect on Japan’s Past” *The Hankyoreh*. March 13, 2015. Accessed March 20, 2016.