
Canon Breeds Canon: Murakami Haruki, World Literature, and the Hegemonic Representation of Japan in the United States*

Jordi Serrano-Muñoz

Abstract

In this article, I explore the relationship between the reproduction of hegemonic discourses of national representation in the reception of literature in translation and processes of canonization. I argue that World Literature as a paradigm hinders our efforts to overcome the burdens of canonization. As a case study, I analyze the implications of building and reproducing a canon of Japanese literature in translation in the United States for the way Japan has been represented in public discourse in the last thirty years. I will focus on the reception of Murakami Haruki as the contemporary representative of the canon of Japanese literature in translation. My goal is to examine how the circumstances of Japanese literature in translation perpetuate mechanisms of canonization in their engagement and legitimation of an ongoing logic of representation that is non-confrontational with respect to agents in power. I aim to test the extent to which studying the reception of East Asian literature in translation can help us promote a broader discussion on the appropriateness of such frameworks in our understanding of contemporary literary phenomena.

Keywords

Japanese literature | East Asian literature | canonization | world literature | translation

* *Jordi Serrano-Muñoz (jordi@serranomunoz.com) is currently a guest researcher at the Colegio de Mexico and an associate professor at the Open University of Catalonia and the University of Granada.*

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INTRODUCTION

In a topographic representation of literary relationships, the space one would devote to describe the joints and clashes between canonization and market dynamics could appear as a rhizome: bonds come and go between the nodes in a way that hints at correlation but cannot be elucidated. What comes first? Does becoming a bestseller beget canonization? Does a book sell well because it has a canonical nature? Does canonization equal success? And how can one measure literary success? In a recent Literary Lab pamphlet, J. D. Porter used a huge corpus of literary works to study whether the key element that makes a book enter the canon was prestige (that is, recognition among specialists) or popularity (in the case of her analysis, measured by the number of ratings on the website Goodreads).¹ Matthew L. Jockers, one of the founders of the Stanford Literary Lab, started working in the late 2000s on a model for the identification of linguistic and stylistic patterns that would foretell canonization (the “canonizer” as he called it) using data science and text mining techniques. He ended up instead writing a book with Jodie Archer proving through a series of algorithms how the most recent commercially successful books share a high degree of closeness to a set of common traits.² These two efforts can be framed as recent attempts to break down the relationship between canon and commercial fame—in their case, using quantitative approaches that freshen up the debate. Disentangling this relationship becomes a bit more complicated when we add a third axis: translation. The number of works in translation has increased in the last fifty years to a degree that has permanently changed the landscape of literary phenomena. The advent of World Literature and the World Literary Space in contemporary discussions is mainly a reaction to this paradigm of shifts and flows of literary influence brought about by the expansion of the book trade. There are certainly many different ways of approaching this issue, like gleams of light that each illuminate a portion of a huge canvas displayed in a dark room. Michael Emmerich explored, for instance, the different changes in editions and translations of the *Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語 and how they belong to a process of canonization of this work into a national (and international) classic.³ Sarah Brouillette, on the other hand, has studied the framing of

¹ J. D. Porter, “Popularity/Prestige,” *Literary Lab Pamphlet* 17 (2018). Accessed on May 15, 2021. <https://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet17.pdf>.

² Matthew L. Jockers and Jodie Archer, *The Bestseller Code Anatomy of the Blockbuster Novel* (London: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2017).

³ Michael Emmerich, *The Tale of Genji: Translation, Canonization and World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

postcolonial writers' biographies as elements of marketability that fit within a logic of what she calls "strategic exoticism."⁴

The research objective of this piece is the exploration of how a critical reading of the reception of literature in translation can help us to better understand the role of hegemonic discourses of representation in the material structures and processes of canonization. I selected a particular case study to explore these issues. In this article, I am going to investigate how the reception of literature in translation by Japanese novelist Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (Kyoto, 1949) can help us problematize canonization within the debates surrounding World Literature and the World Literary Space. I argue that the reproduction of hegemonic discourses of national representation from the reception of literature—particularly bestselling authors such as Murakami Haruki—fits right into the dynamics of canonization within a World Literature paradigm.

Loved and despised by readers around the world, Murakami Haruki has been the most popular Japanese author alive for over twenty-five years. Murakami's relationship with Japan and the way it became represented in his work veered from ideas of detachment and apathy that marked his literature during the early stages of his career towards commitment and veiled social criticism at the turn of the millennium. Murakami's characters work hard across all his texts in their search for meaning in a society desensitized by consumerism and selective amnesia. They all have in common a need to establish meaningful relationships outside the socioeconomic logic of late capitalism.⁵ While the protagonists of his early works could find hedonistic and apathetic shelter in the windfalls of Japan's 1970s and 1980s economic bonanza, his post-1995 heroes are aware that change is needed to overcome their tribulations.⁶ Since their discontent fails to morph into activism, private mediation appears to be their only path to find peace and meaning in their lives. No other Japanese author has aroused as much attention and discussion as Murakami does today. His widespread popularity means that the moment his novels get out, they receive reviews in newspapers and magazines, a phenomenon that also pushes scholars to analyze his work in the search for the key to his success and what it represents for Japan and Japanese literature. Murakami's fame has grown in

⁴ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7.

⁵ Matthew Strecher, *Dances With Sheep: The Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies/University of Michigan, 2002), 4; Murakami Fuminobu, *Postmodern, Feminist and Postcolonial Currents in Contemporary Japanese Literature*, 57.

⁶ Matthew Strecher, *The Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2014), 6.

parallel to the setting up of a new discursive paradigm where cultural exports have a more significant mediating role.⁷

My decision to analyze a body of texts accounting for the reception of Murakami particularly in the United States is based on three main factors. First, the United States still exerts a strong cultural influence over the Western world, while hosting the most significant amount of Japan-related literature outside of Japan. Moreover, it has had an important role in the global canonization of Murakami, especially during the first half of his career in translation. Finally, once Murakami became widely available in other languages, differences started to appear that expose more clearly the material and discursive structures of his process of canonization and the evolution of its relationship with the idea of Japan held in the West via the mediation of the US publishing ecosystem (editors, translators, and reception) during the last thirty years. I use the terms “West” and “Western” in this paper with some skepticism. I work with the premise that “the West” emerges in the construction and reproduction of narratives regarding World Literature as an acritical and indeterminate but operationally valid identity that serves to bind a shared space of discursive interaction.

Choosing to analyze the national narrative of Japan offers an exceptional opportunity to enrich this study of the relationship between literature, discourse, and hegemony with a test of resistance to the existence of “the West” as a cohesive discursive space that feeds on the canonization of so-called “peripheral” literatures while including them in the project of World Literature. The sway of projection of a so-called cohesive West, even when it is not explicitly assumed, is ingrained in Pascale Casanova’s construction of the World Literary Space, a point that other postcolonial authors have criticized before and that I will develop later on. Japan occupies a singular position in a mechanism of identifying the circuits of global literary transmission as parallel to those of hegemonic reproduction of national identities in a system of center-periphery. In this piece, I intend to explain how Japan’s non-Western/non-colonized identity in a national narrative of identification can be grasped from the way Murakami’s literature is received abroad. The elements from this narrative open up many different debates. I will focus, however, on how these tropes relate to debates over canonization and World Literature.

In my study, I first look at the way in which Murakami Haruki fits into a history of Japanese literature in translation. In the second part of my study, I analyze the reception of Murakami’s works in translation. My corpus is composed of newspaper and magazine articles, academic journals, academic books, and

⁷ Iwabuchi Koichi, “Pop-culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding and the Question of ‘International Cultural Exchange,’” 422.

reviews by non-specialized readers. These are texts that meet two criteria: discussing Haruki Murakami at length and establishing a relationship between his literature and the idea of Japan or the idea of World Literature. I call this body “critical texts.” For the selection of academic texts, I have limited my scope to representative monographs. I have filtered texts intended for wider audiences according to a combination of wide-spanning market reach and a tradition of featuring cultural criticism. My analysis is based on eighty-nine pieces published between August 1985 and April 2021 in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The New Yorker*. *The New York Times* provides the largest number of texts with a total of forty-eight articles, followed by *The Washington Post* with twenty-five, *The New Yorker* with ten, and *The New York Review of Books* and *Los Angeles Times* with four and three pieces respectively. I will look at two things when analyzing these critical texts: first, how reception and canonization are entangled in a dynamic of self-reproduction and justification. I want to expose how discourses of representation emerging from reception correlate with processes of canonization of translated literature. What is published is canonized to legitimate its worthiness, and in this process, there are material and discursive structures at play, from editorial decisions to literary interpretations put into circulation in print. The second element that I will extract from these texts is a study of the correlations between how literature is articulated to extract discourses of national representativeness (in this case of Japan), and how this idea of representativeness emerges as capital for the construction of value within the World Literature paradigm. By combining both analyses, my objective is to take a look at how contemporary literature in translation perpetuates certain logics of canonization within the grammar of World Literature, and how these logics can be explored and studied by paying closer attention to its reception rather than to the literary texts.

WORLD LITERATURE AND THE WORLD LITERARY SPACE

The work of three authors has been hailed as representative of the present understanding of World Literature: Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch. Casanova offers her idea of the World Literary Space as an arena of literariness, a space and set of traits where literature can be, grow, and evolve outside of a materially and politically contingent world. She defends, therefore, the notion that literary evolution has happened beyond national lines and beyond political divisions, although, of course, it is not unaffected by them.⁸

⁸ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, xii.

Moretti also engaged with an understanding of World Literature as a cohesive but intrinsically unequal system of internal dynamics that emulate global relations. In his seminal piece “Conjectures on World Literature,” Moretti argues that the discussion should move beyond what is comparative literature or world literature to focus instead on its methodological conundrum: how to do comparative literature and how to approach World Literature.⁹ His suggestion that scholars change the scale of the unit of analysis from the text to larger objects (like tropes, devices, or networks) in what he called “distant reading” sparked controversies that have cooled down with the years and with the naturalization and the spread of tools for quantitative analysis in the humanities. David Damrosch’s main thesis is that there is nothing intrinsic in a literary work that provides it with ontological “World Literariness.” The inclusion of a work within the paradigm of World Literature is instead set on its capacity to move around different markets. A literary work, according to Damrosch, therefore becomes a part of World Literature when it is sold and translated. World Literature is seen “not [as] a set canon of texts but [as] a mode of reading,”¹⁰ or rather, a mode of putting books into circulation.

The rise and spread of translation practices is one of the main reasons why World Literature is a topic of discussion at all. As Damrosch posits, it is in the act of translating and moving around the translated book that it can acquire world literariness. Translation practices and dynamics, however, are not free from the power structures conditioning global literary phenomena. Emily Apter hailed the position of suspiciousness towards any universalistic aspiration of World Literature based on the promise of boundless translation by discussing the matter of the “Untranslatable.”¹¹ These are terms, concepts, or ideas that resist untroubled translation, and which reveal the difficulties of aspiring to a model of horizontal equivalence and substitutability. The act of translating is, at the same time, an exercise of power: when a dominant culture decides to translate, it is providing a work with cultural capital that may or may not be related to any other considerations of subjective quality. In a world where there is a tendency for corporate concentration, the decisions made by a narrower cohort of publishing firms, the majority of them located in the Global North, have a consequential role in shaping not only what is read, but also how, when, and where it is read.

This is one of the main theses of Sarah Brouillette in her study of the material structures of World Literature as a system of market dynamics. In her

⁹ Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” in *Distant Reading*, edited by Franco Moretti (Verso, 2013), 43–62.

¹⁰ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 281.

¹¹ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York: Verso, 2013).

view, what matters the most is not that World Literature is a business or that it commodifies literary works, but that it is a system based on unequal relationships that naturalize oppressive and unfair international power structures. She suggests that merely literary criticisms, like those offered by Apter when pointing at the Untranslatable as the alleged weak link of World Literature, fail to properly address neoliberal logics.¹² Pieter Vermeulen agrees with this view, noting that Apter's criticism, while still valid, falls a bit short as "it may underestimate the machine it rages against: it undervalues the power of contemporary capital to convert singularities into marketable differences, and to design niche markets for experiences that may initially seem too insignificant to count."¹³ I believe discussing the reception and construction of discourses of representation can be included within this critical approach to the structures of World Literature as a machine that reproduces via legitimation relationships based on inequality between different partners.

How does reception fit into these debates addressing canonization and World Literature? I argue that the discourses of national representation reflected in critical texts engage with processes of canonization and a paradigm of World Literature as a material structure that reproduce unequal relationships. In the case of Japanese literature in translation, by looking at how Japan is described from the reception of the literature of Murakami, I suggest two outcomes. First, discourses of national representation legitimate publishing decisions and perpetuate the logics of canonization. A circular logic is established in which translation creates a canon, the canon is considered representative of a nation, and reception extracts national representation from the translated, now canonized works, ensuring prospective translations' place within this mechanism. Second, discourses of national representation are inscribed within a logic of center-periphery where the West (that is, the center) dictates certain patterns of description out of literary interpretation that are based on a grammar of domination and inequality. I will develop the details of this discourse of representation and how it engages with questions of epistemic inequality in my analysis.

¹² Sarah Brouillette, "World Literature and Market Dynamics," in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, edited by Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 97.

¹³ Pieter Vermeulen, "On World Literary Reading," in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, edited by Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 80.

MURAKAMI HARUKI WITHIN THE HISTORY OF JAPANESE LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

To properly understand the context surrounding the reception of Murakami Haruki, the creation of discourses of representation, and how this relates to the logics of World Literature and canonization, it is worth giving a brief tour of the history of Japanese literature in translation and the role of the US publishing ecosystem. According to Edward Fowler's exhaustive analysis of the history of Japanese literature in translation after the war, the appearance in the market and relative success of authors like Kawabata Yasunari 川端康成 (1899–1972), Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫 (1925–1970), and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō 谷崎潤一郎 (1886–1965) are the result of a mix of serendipity and historical convenience.¹⁴ The US literary market has traditionally granted little room to non-Western works in translation and has conventionally left their circulation to small publishers with little reach in terms of audience. The case of Japanese literature in translation is different, however. To study the success and popularity of Japanese literature in translation, one must not downplay the importance of a powerful editor's tastes. In this case, Harold Strauss (1907–1975), editor-in-chief of Knopf from 1942 to 1966, knew Japanese, had visited the country, and was friends with the most important Japanologists of the time—people like Ivan Morris (1925–1976), Donald Keene (1922–2019), or Edward Seidensticker (1921–2007). During his time in office, Strauss used his influence and power to push for the translation of contemporary Japanese authors into English. Fowler argues that this canonized corpus reinforced through the themes and personality of these writers the hegemonic national narrative of a perceived-as-exotic, pre-modern Japan whose depoliticization would ease the way for the transition of the Japanese from enemy to ally.¹⁵

Larry Walker's work on the so-called Knopf Program, which spanned from 1955 to 1977 and introduced to the market thirty-four books in hardcover, is an outstanding piece of insight into the inner workings behind the process of conducting such a project. He explores the habitus of editors, translators, and authors in creating certain market logics that defined the establishment of Japanese literature abroad. Walker disagrees with Fowler, however, in assessing Strauss's motivations. He claims that there is no evidence in the editor's personal and professional archives when it comes to the process of selecting and editing a book that has exoticization as a prime objective.¹⁶ The program was a

¹⁴ Edward Fowler, "Rendering Words, Traversing Cultures: On the Art and Politics of Translating Modern Japanese Fiction," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 18, no 1 (1992): 1–44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ Larry Walker, *Unbinding the Japanese Novel in English Translation: The Alfred A. Knopf Program, 1955–1917*, PhD Thesis (University of Helsinki, 2015), 110.

security and economic asset for the US at the time, but it would be overstating its agency to say that it fully represented American views on foreign policy toward Japan, which were more complex and multifaceted.¹⁷ Both authors nevertheless agree on the impact of Knopf's program on shaping academic curricula (many of the translators were or would become scholars of Japanese) and in Strauss's ability to commission reviews in major newspapers to promote his books and generate public discussion.

The outcome of what Roland Kelts calls the "third wave of Japanophilia" resulted in the largest foreign engagement with Japan on record.¹⁸ Murakami fits right into this process: he first appeared in translation at the end of the 1980s, and throughout his prolific career he has been riding the wave of canonization as the most popular of contemporary Japanese novelists of the past thirty years. In his book *Who We're Reading When We're Reading Murakami*, David Karashima explores the behind-the-scenes story of how Murakami got published and acquired fame in English up until 1998, through interviews and archival work. His work catalogues a similar process to that described by Fowler and Walker, in which a mix of individual preference, serendipitous timing, and institutional backing propelled Murakami's fame beyond initial expectations. As acknowledged by Elmer Luke, Murakami's editor at Kodansha International (the first publishing house for his works in English), his works appeared in translation at the best possible moment, just before the burst of the economic bubble and with the yen in a very strong position. Kodansha was at that time flush with money, but ten years later it would have been more difficult to promote an unknown author to the US market.¹⁹ Luke's connections with the press in New York eased the way for a warm reception of Murakami's early novels in the US.²⁰ The decision by *The New Yorker* to start publishing his short stories also greatly boosted Murakami's cultural capital.²¹ During his stay in Princeton in 1991, Murakami attended a panel for the Association of Asian Studies that became, according to one of his later translators, Ted Goosen, a turning point for his position in Japanese literary studies.²² Material and discursive structures were at play early on in his rapid canonization as a writer of so-called World Literature.

The turn of the century saw a relative democratization of publishing houses engaging with Japanese literature in translation. In a moment of business con-

¹⁷ Ibid., 121.

¹⁸ Roland Kelts, *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture has Invaded the U. S.* (New York: St. Martin Press, 2006), 179.

¹⁹ David Karashima, *Who We're Reading When We're Reading Murakami*, 60.

²⁰ Ibid., 63.

²¹ Ibid., 198.

²² Ibid., 97.

glomeration, independent firms like Tilted Axis or New Directions attempted to release onto the market alternative contemporary Japanese writers. This process was possible thanks to the multiplication of translators from Japanese, an inheritance from the first postwar translator-Japanologists who worked with Knopf and who occupied new departments in different universities across the US. Best-selling authors like Murakami, however, still sign for big firms. According to Gisèle Sapiro, this phenomenon is not unique to Murakami but actually quite common in the contemporary publishing world, where small firms make risky bets and big publishing houses later reap the benefits and launch authors into fame.²³ By material means, Murakami reached other Western markets ready to be canonized, stewarded by some of the best editors and translators and covered by the media. The process, however, is not that straightforward. While some publishing houses in Europe followed the criteria established in the US, hence enhancing its canonization powers, others decided to approach Murakami using their own standards. This division revealed in turn the dimension of translation practices in the process of canonization. Translations into English have been heavily edited in terms of language and even content, with entire passages of some of his novels cut out. The reasoning behind these decisions (made by both Kodansha International and Knopf, and suggested or agreed upon by Murakami's different translators) is that it would make his novels more appealing in terms of familiarity and especially the pacing of the narration for Western readers.²⁴ As the English translations were considered hegemonic,²⁵ translations into other languages that were made from the English blueprint preserved this editorial filter, re-domesticating the original work and transmitting the changes made to appeal to the US reader as if they were part of the source material. The debate surrounding the appropriateness of these decisions is engaging but it extends beyond the scope of this paper. Zielinska-Elliott points out how today's conditions for the easy exchange of points of view and versions between translators have made it easier to escape from the English hegemonic model and enter into a conversation that creates in turn a more collective standard.²⁶

It is fitting to point out that even for those cases in which translations were made from the original in Japanese and therefore escaped editing in English, Murakami's fame and popularity was not seen as being too severely affected. As a matter of fact, it is because editions in multiple languages have proliferated

²³ Ibid., 150.

²⁴ Ibid., 54.

²⁵ Anna Zielinska-Elliott, "No Translator is an Island," 13.

²⁶ Ibid., 19.

that he has been able to reach a truly global audience. English editions were essential for Murakami's success and entry into the canon, but not necessarily for his endurance there. For Zielinska-Elliott, this has to do precisely with Murakami's embedding of Japanese references in a way that is identifiable but not nationally exclusive: "If these qualities are not always reflected in the English versions of his work, that has more to do with translatorial and editorial approaches than with the character of the original Japanese."²⁷ Recently, English translations have moved towards cultural accuracy and edits have become less common. In any case, either through domestication or faithful rendering, despite Murakami's constant labeling as a World Literature author, the fact that Japan is seen, read, and interpreted in his literature remains an important element of his process of canonization. It becomes important, therefore, to understand how Japan has been described in the country and the market that launched Murakami to fame and which is still its main source of cultural clout.

REPRODUCING JAPAN FROM MURAKAMI HARUKI

I move on to focus on the empirical part of this work's main research objective: the study of the relationship between discourses of representation that emerge from the reception of Murakami's literature in translation and questions of canonization within the debates surrounding World Literature. I organize my interpretation around the description and development in the United States of tropes, common associations, and questions that arise from conflicting readings in texts about Murakami Haruki, contemporary Japanese literature, and Japan. I illustrate, justify, and legitimate these themes through a selection of the most suitable quotes extracted from the selected texts.

Murakami is presented as a bestselling author, first one of the most and then *the* most popular writer in Japan, from the first article and throughout all the rest. This serves the function of emphasizing his work's representativeness and to a point *auctoritas* as a gateway to understand the depicted reality—be it Japanese or, as is the case in Murakami, also a greater global contemporary identity or sensibility,²⁸ as he "appeals to a vast number of readers around the world."²⁹ These appraisals, more common at the beginning of his success, allow many pieces to take the chance to discuss the state of Japanese literature. Regardless of the place or time of the text's publication, the central points of the debate are

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²⁸ David L. Ulin, "Book Review: '1Q84' by Haruki Murakami."

²⁹ Christian Caryl, "Gods of the Mall."

the same. Murakami is constantly associated with what is considered a change of paradigm in Japanese letters: the replacement of, and even break in style from, the postwar generation of authors (Mishima, Kawabata, and even Ōe). He is portrayed as leading this generational replacement along with other best-selling authors like Hiromi Kawakami 川上 弘美 (*1958), Murakami Ryū 村上 龍 (*1952, no relation), and Yoshimoto Banana 吉本 ばなな (*1964). Elisabeth Bumiller called them “The Japanese Brat Pack,”³⁰ a nickname popular during the early 1990s.³¹

This fame is also commonly attributed to his popularity among younger generations, a consideration that seems to hint at lasting representativeness. Although taste and approval in youth may change with age, desires and preferences for new generations are indicative of changes and rifts in society. A profiling exercise of his readership based on what the article authors believe leaves us with an image of the Japanese youth as urban, modern, predominantly white-collar, and alienated from and dissatisfied with social conventions:

More recent books are populated with introverts and social outsiders, the kind of character with whom an alienated younger generation of Japanese can increasingly identify.³²

A lot of people are quite lonely [...] In Japan he [Murakami] serves as a father figure to young readers [...] a lot of young Japanese don't have close relationships with their father figures.³³

The great Japanese author Haruki Murakami grew famous writing about the tender melancholy of youth. (“Norwegian Wood” made him so recognizable in Japan that he left.)³⁴

Along the same lines and based on this consideration, the fiction of Murakami Haruki is treated as a mirror of the Japan of his times. It is an urban and cosmopolitan country, a mix of new and old, a postmodern hub where cultural references from all over the world merge and coexist: “Murakami echoes the state of mind of the ordinary Japanese, caught between a fading old world and a new one still being invented.”³⁵ Many of these articles are published along

³⁰ Elisabeth Bumiller, “Japan’s Fiction Turns a Page.”

³¹ T. R. Reid, “Japan’s Brat Pack”; Bruce Sterling, “Down a High-Tech Rabbit Hole.”

³² Todd Zaun, “Tokyo Tales Onstage.”

³³ Roland Kelts quoted in Julia Carpenter, “Haruki Murakami’s Advice Column...”

³⁴ Charles Finch, “Haruki Murakami Turns His Gaze Toward Middle Age.”

³⁵ Alan Ryan, “Wild and Woolly.”

with pictures of Tokyo and other urban landscapes, reinforcing this idea that Murakami's literature holds up a mirror to cosmopolitan contemporary Japan. *The New York Times* website combined Sam Anderson's travel story, for which he travelled to Tokyo to interview Murakami, with an interactive piece with scenes and settings of Tokyo. These are accompanied by short audio clips in which Anderson explains how these scenarios are linked to Murakami's life and work. These pictures include the Jingu Stadium (where he reportedly had the epiphany that led him to become a novelist), a Denny's franchise restaurant, a Prada store in Aoyama, the luxurious Hotel Okura, or a Nakamura Café in Shinjuku.³⁶ Kim Choon Mie, one of Murakami's translators into Korean, and Sato Koji, deputy director of the Japan Foundation, also endorse this image of Japan (and other modern countries) as defined by consumerism.³⁷

Japan transitions throughout these texts from being considered a politicized entity throughout the first half of the twentieth century to becoming a country solely understood as the paradigmatic model of late-capitalist society during the 1990s. The placement of Japan in a contemporary global landscape is marked by the tension between internationalist and particularist approaches. Tokyo becomes a synecdoche for the whole of Japan. The city is described as a supposed melting pot of East and West and a hyper-technological city that works as a window display for consumerist attitudes: "The melancholy soufflé Murakami whips up in these pages is decidedly masculine, a rainy Tokyo of unfaithful women, neat single malt, stray cats, cool cars and classic jazz played on hifi setups like the one described in dudeular detail."³⁸ Tokyo is introduced as a "multinational location for the postmodern experience,"³⁹ a city that we are reminded is part of the global village. We are invited to approach Tokyo—and, by extension, Japan—through the elements it has in common with our own urban, cultural, and contemporary daily experience instead of trying to shoehorn in uniqueness and exclusivity as has been the convention for decades.

Consumer goods and industrial imagery are consubstantially associated with Japan. The capital is presented as an ambivalent place, "a disconcerting space" as Janice Nimura puts it,⁴⁰ "more international than specifically Japanese,"⁴¹ exchangeable for any other modern megalopolis like London or New York. This consideration strengthens the argument in favor of presenting Japan as part of the global village: "If it weren't for the author's name, and our awareness that

³⁶ "Murakami's Tokyo."

³⁷ Kay Yokota, *A Wild Haruki Chase*, 36.

³⁸ Jay Fielden, "News From Murakami."

³⁹ Matthew Strecher, *Haruki Murakami: Challenging Authors*, 87.

⁴⁰ Janice Nimura, "Rubber Souls."

⁴¹ Janice Nimura, "Separate Souls."

we're reading a work translated from the Japanese, it might never occur to us that the action takes place in Japan."⁴²

There are no claims of uniqueness in the landscape exhibited by Murakami. His international success is attributed precisely to this ambiguity of space which allows for the action and characters to be effectively replaced by individuals living in any other metropolis of the world with the same empathic force. Murakami has claimed on different occasions that he writes about Japan and the Japanese, so the fact that his fiction pulls strings in many different countries is not his explicit will but most probably a consequence of describing life in a globalized society. Ambiguous or not, there is a consensus on claiming that Murakami's settings are placed in Japan, a space that emerges with a need for redefinition.

Despite this representativeness and perhaps due to it, Murakami is depicted as a constant critic of the late-capitalist model. His characters are always described as regular everyday Japanese who function within this system but are openly dissatisfied with it. This portrayal makes the heroes appear estranged, "adrift in a postmodern, postatomic world," wounded by a sense of "displacement and dislocation," where "identities are provisional," as Michiko Kakutani describes it.⁴³ Murakami's individuals are framed as being excluded from a society described as marked by a strict group mentality⁴⁴ that entraps them and from which many people dream of breaking out: "unremarkable men, less driven by the ethic to succeed and less enmeshed in the powerful webs of family and business and community than most Japanese,"⁴⁵ a blatant renunciation of the frenetic, male-dominated ethos of modern Japan."⁴⁶

The discontent of Murakami's characters fails to morph into activism and remains a search for individual mediation. This social model is based on the sacrifice of self-determination by trading it for the false sense of empowerment and security induced by indulgence in conspicuous consumerism. Change only happens from within and on the level of the individual. The sense of community, meanwhile, is lost in the exchange. In his work *Murakami Haruki: the Simulacrum in Contemporary Japanese Culture*, Michael Seats believes Murakami's quest is not to create a renewed contemporary Japanese identity, but to criticize modernity as a process that remains incomplete in Japan. Japan emerges in this text with a set of already common associations, most of them related to the idea of the late-capitalist country in crisis that suits Seat's argument of social criti-

⁴² Caryl, "Gods of the Mall."

⁴³ Michiko Kakutani, "Worlds Where Anything Normal Would Seem Bizarre."

⁴⁴ Tim Parks, "The Charms of Loneliness."

⁴⁵ Jay McInerney, "Roll over Basho."

⁴⁶ Jamie James, "East Meets West."

cism. Japan is already described in the introduction as “the most information-alized and mediatized of post-industrial societies,”⁴⁷ an idea that is reinforced further into the book by the depiction of the country as “the affirmation of late-capitalist orthodoxies of consumption” and “the complete ascendancy of systems of social control based on technology, information and irredeemably corrupt political practices.”⁴⁸

This resistance to social conventions, even if only from the personal point of view, is greeted with surprise in the articles. The idea of Japan functioning as if it possessed a hive mentality has been rooted in the national narrative since the Pacific War. A reading that subverts this order is therefore accepted with reluctance. It is unclear whether the target of this criticism is the economic system itself or the social model it produces. Any attempt to pull Japan and the Japanese closer to ideals of individualism would consciously or unconsciously be taken up by hegemonic discourses as a triumph of Western ideals, especially US-centered narratives of Cold War victory. A critique of the capitalist recipe for societal configuration, however, fails to be categorized in the vacuum produced by the alleged defeat of communism. In the end, these depictions seem to boil down to the idea that, for now at least, individuals may complain, but the system regrettably prevails.

This exercise of criticism is one of the main points sustained throughout the national narrative. Japan is defined as a country in crisis, haunted by mistakes past and present, where the Japanese try to look for a new identity that would escape the disaffecting consequences of late capitalism. Most authors translate Murakami’s acceptance by young readers into an expression of the desire by future generations of Japanese to achieve a greater degree of individuality, bending the frame without formally breaking it. The effects of the Japanese financial crisis in the country became more evident as the years passed. The number of texts that identified social criticism in Murakami’s plots and style increased concurrently. This change is particularly evident after the events of 1995 and the publication of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Underground*, and *after the quake*.

The shift is meaningful. Murakami goes from representing Japan through his fiction to critically commenting on it. Ian Buruma’s “Becoming Japanese,” written in 1996, studies Murakami’s process of exploration and reencountering Japan, to conclude:

His political engagement would probably enrich his fiction. For he can look at Japan from the inside, and he also knows what it looks like from the outside. He

⁴⁷ Michael Seats. *Murakami Haruki - The Simulacrum in Contemporary Japanese Culture*, xi.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

is detached from Japanese society, yet committed to it. He can fix a cool, dry gaze on his wet native soil. The time for escaping is over. He is closer now to where he came from.⁴⁹

Murakami's literature expresses, according to this narrative, a generational sense of disapproval of social conventions while revealing aspects of what Elizabeth Ward calls the Japanese "dark society" or "parallel wastelands."⁵⁰ In another piece, Buruma labels this state of crisis "the Japanese malaise."⁵¹ From the start of the new century, Japan appears in the texts as a lost nation ashamed of its consumerist excesses. This interpretation holds weight precisely because Murakami himself supports it. If 1995 was the beginning of his shift towards commitment, I would like to highlight how seminal the year 2011 was for the establishment of Murakami as a social commentator.⁵² In March, the Tōhoku natural disaster and subsequent Fukushima Daiichi meltdown deepened the breach that had been opened fifteen years before and emphasized the nation's sense of generational crisis. Murakami, who spent the year abroad promoting the translation of *1Q84*, openly attacked the Japanese system. This entity is built discursively as a loose signifier of everything that seems to go wrong with Japan: an unapologetic government, big corporations and their uncontested power, and the institutional promotion of a culture of living only to work and consume.

Murakami's criticism positively shocked his adversaries in the Japanese old guard, made foreign scholars reconsider their definitions of intellectually committed Japanese literature, and justified a political and national reading of his work by anyone who was commenting on it. Just four months later, Sam Anderson went to Japan to write a long piece for *The New York Times* on Murakami, *1Q84*, and Japan after the crisis. When asked about his kinship with Orwell, he replied: "I guess we have a common feeling against the system." When questioned about his statement above, Murakami's answer contained the same message he had shared back then:

I think many Japanese people think that this is a turning point for our country. [...] After 1945, we have been working so hard and getting rich. But that kind of thing doesn't continue anymore. We have to change our values. We have to think about how we can get happy. It's not about money. It's not about efficiency. It's about discipline and purpose. What I wanted to say is what I've been

⁴⁹ Ian Buruma, "Becoming Japanese."

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Ward, "The Long Sayonara."

⁵¹ Buruma, "The Japanese Malaise."

⁵² Deborah Treisman, "The Underground Worlds of Haruki Murakami"; David L. Ulin, "Review: Haruki Murakami's 'Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki' paints haunting picture."

saying since 1968: we have to change the system. I think this is a time when we have to be idealistic again.⁵³

Japan emerges from this discourse as an urban, late-capitalist country in existential crisis, populated by a generation of Japanese more and more openly dissatisfied with the way things have been imposed on them. This generation's discontent identifies a systemic structure that impedes the creation and nurturing of healthy social and emotional dynamics outside the logic of neoliberalism. Murakami's characters establish themselves on the margins of such a society to test their borders and explore the challenges of personal and discrete resistance.

So far, these are the fundamental aspects of Murakami's oeuvre that have found agreement across authors, sources, and countries. I move on now to a discussion of conflicting aspects and debates that produce disagreement among reporters. The first and most complex subject is the way authors try to frame originally Western cultural references into the national narrative of Japan. The schism appears when determining the cultural ownership of these elements. This decision reveals a lasting conflict between defining cultural globalization as actual Westernization and trying to restrict cultural affinities to national particularism. There are two streams of interpretation with respect to this matter. The first insists on the foreignness of Western cultural references in the context of Japanese society. Authors like Mitgang or Nimura believe Murakami borrows these references and uses them to appeal to US audiences through the familiar and Japanese audiences through the exotic. They usually refer to Murakami's role as a translator of US novelists (mostly Raymond Carver and Raymond Chandler) as one of the main reasons for the inclusion of such references, suggesting they would otherwise be alien to Japan.⁵⁴

Murakami actively disdains the national naturalization of cultural references. When he was asked in a recent interview by *The New York Times* whether he believed *The Great Gatsby* could be interpreted as a tale about the limits of the so-called "American dream," he replied by defending the idea that Scott Fitzgerald's novel is

a book about a dream—and how people behave when the dream is broken. This is a very important theme for me. I don't think of it as necessarily the American dream, but rather a young man's dream, a dream in general.⁵⁵

⁵³ Sam Anderson, "The Fierce Imagination of Haruki Murakami."

⁵⁴ Herbert Mitgang, "Looking for America or is it Japan?"; "Pronouncements, Critiques, Catcalls and Plaudits."

⁵⁵ Sarah Lyall, "Haruki Murakami Says He Doesn't Dream. He Writes."

The second group of authors defies foreignness and is closer to Murakami's interpretation of the role of popular culture in Japan. Instead of naturalization, they defend a model of assimilation articulated in the shape of the hybrid country. Cultural references still bear a label of origin as "Western" or "Japanese," but their presence is thought of as the result of a combination of different sources, which are entwined but distinguishable from each other. Christian Caryl asserts that "no other non-Western culture has endured and embraced Western-style modernization for as long and as deeply as Japan"⁵⁶ and Matthew Strecher believes that "the reason Murakami has done so well in and out of Japan is the fact that he has brought Japan up to date, offering an alternative picture of Japanese culture that shows how one can affect foreign cultural icons and still be 'Japanese.'"⁵⁷ In *The Music of Words*, Jay Rubin, one of Murakami's translators, argues that the country has been permeated by foreign references for decades already, so it should not be surprising if Murakami reflects this reality with ease in his fiction: "Murakami has been called the first writer completely at home with the elements of American popular culture that permeate present-day Japan."⁵⁸

In the debate over cultural belonging, Rebecca Suter is quick to label US or Western cultural references as superficially alien to Japanese society but concedes that they possess a familiarity that can be understood as relative integration. Western cultural references are present in everyday Japan, and while their status is apparently recognized as non-native by Japanese, their presence is not perceived as exotic but is described instead as friendly and part of a common custom. For Suter, it is precisely this middle state between foreign and indigenous that makes Western cultural references a powerful tool to define and redefine contemporary Japanese identity through estrangement.⁵⁹ These authors contribute with these readings to the prevalent use of Japan to remodel and re-signify foreign ideas in order to legitimize their appropriation.

There is consensus on indicating the absence of traditional Japanese features in Murakami's display of his country regardless of whether or not journalists consider originally Western elements to belong to contemporary Japan. Murakami's explicit framing of his literary settings and characters as Japanese is treated with disdain and skepticism. The network of references that constitute the cultural environment is declared to be not conventionally Japanese

⁵⁶ Christian Caryl, "Gods of the Mall."

⁵⁷ Matthew Strecher, *Haruki Murakami's The Wind-up Bird Chronicle: A Reader's Guide*, 83.

⁵⁸ Jay Rubin, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, 17.

⁵⁹ Rebecca Suter, *The Japanization of Modernity*, 133–39.

because it fails to meet the expectations Western readers have of what has been Japanese:

In these books, there are no shoguns, no tea ceremonies, no *hara-kiri*. The stories and novel excerpts here deal with the daily stuff of today's Japan.⁶⁰

Haruki Murakami is a Japanese writer. Of his generation [...] he is the most famous, and perhaps the most important, Japanese writer. Yet there is something curious about his work: the almost complete absence of references to Japanese culture. Murakami's characters eat steaks, pizzas, or pasta. They listen to Ella Fitzgerald or Rossini.⁶¹

This interpretation regarding the usage of cultural references echoes two of the most prevalent tropes employed when describing Japan, also present when discussing Murakami: the tension between old and new and the mix of East and West. Cultural references present in Murakami are both “new” (icons of popular culture and consumerist behavior) and “Western” (independently of whether they have been integrated or not). The failure to meet expectations is not translated into a rejection of the new setting and definitions as not Japanese. In the end, Murakami's Japan may not be traditional, but it is approached and understood using very similar conventional temporal and spatial tropes.

This debate feeds the discussion of the next two major conflicts: the perception of Murakami as culturally Japanese, and whether Japan is a unique country or part of the global village. Murakami's nationality is never openly contested, and he constantly reaffirms in interviews his identity as Japanese: “I don't want to write about foreigners in foreign countries. I want to write about us. I want to write about Japan, about our life here.”⁶² These texts reflect, however, a hesitation when it comes to defining the level of affinity and “Japaneseness” of Murakami. For instance, some authors either separate him from or frame him ambiguously within the literary canon when compared to former generations of Japanese writers.⁶³ In some other cases, the task of questioning his “Japaneseness” is attributed to and to an extent legitimized by external sources, mainly from within the Japanese literary establishment. Some authors take for granted reported doubts and assume that there are actually grounds to hold suspicions, regardless of how undescribed they might be, instead of trying to define “be-

⁶⁰ T. R. Reid, “Japan's Brat Pack.”

⁶¹ Ian Buruma, “Becoming Japanese.”

⁶² Tim Parks, “The Charms of Loneliness.”

⁶³ John Updike, “Subconscious Tunnels.”

ing Japanese” and then justifying their hesitation in applying that definition to Murakami.

Murakami’s “Japaneseness” is constantly contested precisely by the virtual impossibility of properly defining such a label without falling into a questionable and at this point hardly tenable sense of cultural particularism. If “Japaneseness” has proven to be a term that cannot be centered exclusively on traits that are considered native to Japan—regardless of whether this perception would be accurate following a more critical study of their nature and origin—what is it exactly? Again, authors seem to have trouble defending a stable and consistent idea of Japan that would be compatible with their place in a globalized world where the transfer of cultural influences has been established as a multidirectional process of exchange. On this point, Strecher says:

Part of the reason for this lies in his fondness for images of popular culture familiar to the Western world [...] but does this make Murakami “un-Japanese”? Is it really fair to say that these images, though they originate in Euro-American culture (primarily American) have not become Japanese in the sense of being internalized by the Japanese by now?⁶⁴

In those instances in which they stress the influence of US literature on Murakami’s style, suggesting that he is a pupil of Western education, authors infer that cultural endogamy and autarchy are the only true ways to identify the Japanese artist. At the very least, they advocate that there are limits to the foreign influence that a particular national identity can endure before being engulfed by it. Where these limits lie and how to measure the proposed purity in both means and content is an uncomfortable step that authors avoid making, most probably because it is impossible to complete. Japan’s particularism and uniqueness seem indefensible, and perhaps more importantly, it appears time and again to be practically undefinable. However, that does not stop many authors from claiming and insisting on its existence.

This is not a unanimous position. Many authors believe that Murakami’s use of ambiguous cultural landscapes is precisely what makes his novels so close to a contemporary rendition of Japan. Some authors make an effort to highlight the point that props and scenarios are just a carcass, a theatrical setting that is contingent on the historical moment in which the work is set. These authors defend the idea that one should look for underlying themes and marks of style to find a presumably Japanese sensibility. Murakami’s approach allegedly re-

⁶⁴ Matthew Strecher, *Dances with Sheep*, 1.

fuses to mimic traditional conventions. He is regarded as a modernizer of canonical subjects and aesthetic concerns.⁶⁵

There is an even larger group of critics that interpret his culturally ambiguous landscape as a way to represent a global sensibility. According to this reading, Murakami shows how Japan has overcome cultural isolation and exoticism to become an example of the triumph of transnationalism and globalization. The equation is simple: if Murakami can both represent the Japanese and depict Japan while being a success around the world it is not because Japan has become “Westernized” or because the world has somewhat become “Japanese,” but rather because we are all located in a space in between, a point of “international identity.” This is what critic Yomota Inuhiko called “cultural scentlessness.”⁶⁶ The late-capitalist, urban, reactive-to-an-oppressive-system profile used before to define Japan emerges here too as a common denominator across readers and sympathizers. In this process, cultural ambiguity and representativeness become perfectly compatible.

I would like to close this analysis by commenting on the potential sunset of Murakami’s fame in the near to mid-term future. The attention he receives upon the release of a new book, either a collection of short stories or a novel, has become less eager and the reception more mixed. Although he has always been subjected to criticism, the reasons behind it have changed over the years. While at the beginning of his career he was framed as popular because of his outsider status, canonization has erased that inherently subversive nature of the new and different. Murakami’s works are notoriously formulaic (a matter he has never denied), so he is turning back to his original status as a niche writer in the sense that his works are more appealing to those with an acquired taste than to readers wishing for something new. More critical, however, than fear of redundancy, is the unraveling of Murakami’s depiction of women as inherently sexist. This debate jumped into the public discussion after a rare but consequential interview with novelist Kawakami Mieko (1976–) in 2017. Then, Kawakami pointed out to him how many of his female characters were mere vehicles for the progression of the male characters. Murakami’s answer was tepid and evasive.⁶⁷ In her tough review of his latest book, *First Person Singular*, published in April 2021, Hillary Kelly accuses Murakami of not having learned from that admonition.⁶⁸ It is worth noting how David Means’ review in the *NYT*

⁶⁵ Richard Bernstein, “An Obsessive Attraction that Cripples Two Lives”; John Updike, “Subconscious Tunnels”; Hari Kunzru, “In Haruki Murakami’s New Novel, a Painter’s Inspiration Is Supernatural.”

⁶⁶ Kay Yokota, *A Wild Haruki Chase*, 36.

⁶⁷ Literary Hub, “A Feminist Critique of Murakami Novels, with Murakami Himself.”

⁶⁸ Hillary Kelly, “Review: How Murakami Fell Down a Literary Well.”

tiptoed around the issue.⁶⁹ His fixation on his formula makes incorporating change and reacting to criticism even more difficult. Whether he can dodge this wave of disapproval and stay within the canon is yet to be seen, but he is facing a challenge different from any other before, spearheaded by a younger, female Japanese author popular in translation who is virtually his generational replacement. Time will tell.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Throughout this piece, I have explored how a critical interpretation of discourses of representation that emerge from the reception of Murakami offers clues to the relationship between hegemonic processes of canonization that are inscribed in the practices of publication of works in translation and the changing geopolitical needs conditioning the unequal arrangement of power agents in the World Literature paradigm. Murakami has unquestionably been framed within the dominant canon of Japanese literature. Is it then surprising that the discourse generated by commentary on his work is so close to the hegemonic national narrative? By agreeing to work based on the artificial—albeit nevertheless operational—parameters of the canon, this study was revealing but also reproducing its structures of enshrinement. However, acknowledging the close relationship between hegemony and processes of canonization does not necessarily imply the automatic validation of power's interpretation by discourses that discuss canonic literature. The apparent interdependence between canon and power must be exposed and accounted for. It would be dangerously reductionist, though, to assume correspondence without analyzing the circumstances of the original texts and their reception and placement within the greater frameworks of literary tradition and national narrative construction.

To test to what extent the state of canonization of literary works determines the hegemonic affinity of their derived discourses, a suggested approach would be to conduct a separate study of creation and reproduction of a literature-based national narrative. This time, the researcher would put together a body of critical texts based on the work of non-canonic writers. By following a methodology similar to the one employed in this article, it would be possible to compare the outcomes of the two investigations to find out to what extent the position in relation to the canon of a literary source text influences the shaping of

⁶⁹ David Means, "Eight Ways of Looking at Haruki Murakami."

an intertextual discourse. In principle, this would help to clarify in more detail the relationship between canon, power, and discourse.

There is, however, an additional layer of complexity to this experiment that has to do with the particular conditions of working with a canon in translated literature. Alongside the controversy already associated with the creation, upholding, and regular revisiting of a “national” canon, it is important to take into account the potential *décalage* between canonization by domestic and foreign national communities. Not every author who is deemed part of a national canon gets translated and made available for other communities of readers. Instead, literature in translation forges its parallel canon via the mediation of translators and publishing houses in choosing what (and whom) to translate. There are indeed spaces of correlation and overlap between domestic and translation-based canons, but in the end, to the foreign reader, only what is made available can become representative.

Therefore, we need to accept the state of inevitable intervention in the shaping of a canon that is connatural to the structures of publishing literature in translation. Being subject to this intervention, the previously suggested comparative study is also biased by design. Any selection of literary texts in translation would be part of a canon—either a “national” canon or one molded by the logic or conditions of the publishing circuit, commercial or otherwise. Literature in translation also engages in the shaping of domestic national canons in ways that blur distinctions. It questions the extent to which the concept of a national framework or the idea of a canon of World Literature can be useful in cataloguing culture if they disguise transcultural transference. The role of canonization in the articulation of national narratives therefore remains a challenging topic to the researcher and a subject that would benefit from further development and analysis.

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