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Reading heterotopian spaces in Murata Sayaka's *Convenience Store Woman*

LINDA M. FLORES

Abstract: Murata Sayaka's *Convenience Store Woman* (*Konbini ningen*, 2016) portrays Keiko, an unmarried, childless thirty-six-year-old woman and long-time convenience store employee. Aware that her behavior and deviation from the social norms of marriage, motherhood and the family profoundly disturb her friends and family, Keiko takes refuge in the convenience store, where she can minimize social friction. A distinguishing feature of the novella is precisely its capacity to disturb, defamiliarize and unsettle, processes which occur both at the level of the plot and at the level of the text. Taking this unsettling aspect of the novella as its focal point, this article reads *Convenience Store Woman* through the lens of Foucault's 'heterotopias', sites which draw us outside of ourselves, sites which are somehow 'other' within society and which both mirror and disturb the society they reflect (Foucault [1967] 1984). In Murata's novella, the convenience store functions as a 'heterotopian space', reflecting and refracting social norms by presenting Keiko's internally focalized narrative. Locating the reader squarely within Keiko's narration unsettles the reader, who experiences the world – thoughts, perceptions and ideology – through her eyes. The article traces this unsettling feeling, enabled by the heterotopian space of the convenience store and by Keiko's narration, to the novella's dramatic and disconcerting final vignette, with an extended analysis of that closing scene.

Keywords: Murata Sayaka, Convenience Store Woman, Michel Foucault, heterotopia, narration, focalization, Rimmon-Kenan, reader

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Introduction: *Convenience Store Woman* as an unsettling narrative

Murata Sayaka's Akutagawa Prize–winning novella, *Konbini ningen* (*Convenience Store Woman*; Murata 2016)[1] is fundamentally an uncomfortable and unsettling narrative about 'normality', 'difference' and the complex critical spaces in between. Its protagonist, Furukura Keiko, is a thirty-six-year-old self-described social misfit and long-time convenience store worker who is keenly aware that her deviance from the norms of marriage and motherhood is a source of profound discomfort for her friends and family. Even as a child, Keiko was frequently singled out for her seemingly unusual or inappropriate behavior and reactions to social situations: shocking her teachers and classmates by attempting to stop a fight between two boys by striking one of them with a spade or upsetting her mother by suggesting that they barbecue rather than bury a dead bird they discover in the park. Recognizing that she was a source of discomfort to others, young Keiko learned to subvert her natural inclinations and to imitate those around her to conform to society's version of 'normality'.

At the age of eighteen, Keiko takes refuge through employment at a convenience store as a way of alleviating both her own social discomfort and that of others. The work force in this curious microcosm is populated by transient employees who, like herself, are marked by difference: part-time or short-term workers, 'freeters', foreigners, divorced women – those who comprise the burgeoning class of the 'precariat' in contemporary Japan – 'outsiders' whose very existence is unsettling to society. In the convenience store, everything operates according to a manual, so Keiko no longer has to worry about behaving improperly or making others feel uncomfortable. With actions and words carefully scripted for her, Keiko finds relief in finally becoming 'normal', just another inconspicuous cog in the well-oiled machine of the convenience store. For Keiko, this is the safest place for her to exist, a place where she can minimize any friction between herself and the outside world, as Iida Yūko has noted (Iida 2019, 51). At first, her parents are relieved, but eighteen years later Keiko is still working in the very same convenience store and living alone in a filthy, roach-infested apartment. Her sister and friends have pursued 'normative' lives through marriage, children and careers, but Keiko remains a static entity in this liminal space. Moreover, despite her best efforts to the contrary, her life choices, perhaps even her very existence, continue to make others feel ill at ease. There is a certain symmetry between Keiko and the convenience store in this unusual arrangement: she occupies a liminal space in society through her non-normative lifestyle and the convenience store represents an 'in-between' space that exists in the social web of people's daily lives.

Keiko's ordered and predictable convenience store lifestyle is suddenly disrupted by the arrival of Shiraha, a misanthropic and misogynistic fellow part-

time worker. Shiraha rails against the homogenized world of the convenience store and criticizes Keiko and her coworkers for their conformity, decrying their scripted responses and mannerisms as 'just like a religion' (Murata 2018, 47). He is soon fired from the convenience store for deviating from the employee manual. Shiraha convinces Keiko to enter into a mutual agreement whereby they will pretend to have a romantic relationship to avoid the scrutiny of others. For Keiko, patently uninterested in either a romantic or sexual relationship with Shiraha, the arrangement promises to release her from the social pressure from her family and friends and lessen their feelings of discomfort towards her. Unsurprisingly, Keiko's family and friends universally rejoice that she has finally become 'normal'. Shiraha convinces Keiko to quit her job at the convenience store and seek out a more lucrative source of employment so that she can support them both financially. Her separation from the store, however, plunges her into darkness and depression, and her asexual, non-emotional relationship with Shiraha proves to be no substitute for the deep connection she had with the *konbini* (convenience store). Now it is Keiko who, without the comforting presence of the convenience store, feels unsettled.

En route to a job interview, Keiko stops at a different convenience store and finds her body responding to its presence. Immediately at ease in its familiar environment, she automatically begins tidying products on the shelves according to the operations manual, even intuiting and anticipating its needs. The subsequent sequence of events, however, makes for a rather disconcerting scene. Keiko's reaction to the store constitutes a fully embodied 'calling': she hears its voice and senses the store within the very cells of her body. The rather frenzied scene portrays her as being in a state of near-religious ecstasy. She declares that she is not a human being, but a 'convenience store human', who exists solely to serve its needs. Overriding Shiraha's vehement protestations, Keiko abandons the interview and decides to seek employment at another convenience store. Outside the store window, she catches a glimpse of her reflection and imagines herself reborn. This closing image unsettles the reader and upsets boundaries – between normativity and non-normativity and between comfort and discomfort – as Keiko is depicted simultaneously as exhibiting an authentic sense of self and as a strange and unnerving presence.

This pervading theme of unsettling and discomforting in *Convenience Store Woman* forms the focus of the present article. The novella portrays multiple layers of discomfort: Keiko's lifestyle choices and behavior disturb her family and friends; their discomfort in turn fuels her own discomfort; after deciding to feign a 'normative' cohabitative existence with Shiraha, Keiko is unsettled by her separation from the convenience store. This capacity to unsettle, destabilize and discomfort occupies a central role in the novella, and importantly, it is enabled by its setting: the convenience store. The narrative portrays the convenience store as a kind of Foucauldian 'heterotopian space', a space which

disturbs boundaries, foments discomfort and creates sites for critical reflection. Narrated by Keiko and through her perspective, *Convenience Store Woman* destabilizes the 'normality' (*seijō*) of society and its roles for women and opens up sites for the expression of Keiko's 'difference' (*ijō*). By placing the reader squarely within the heterotopian space of the convenience store, which allows Keiko to express her 'difference', *Convenience Store Woman* serves to defamiliarize, discomfort and unsettle the reader. The novella takes Keiko's discomfort and transfers it to the reader, upending whatever expectations they may (or may not) have brought to their reading of the story. Viewing the world through Keiko's perspective, her world becomes our world, her discomfort, our discomfort. Following, I will discuss Foucault's concept of heterotopias and their role in disturbing norms and creating spaces of discomfort. The article then turns to an examination of the internally focalized narration employed in *Convenience Store Woman*, drawing on theories of narratology. Finally, I turn to an extended analysis of the closing vignette of the novella, a notoriously disturbing scene. I argue that this scene profoundly unsettles the reader, who has grown accustomed to Keiko's internally focalized narration and the sense of intimacy it engenders. The final scene reverses polarity, expanding the distance between the narrator and the reader, and in doing so, recalls the function of heterotopias to create discomfort and establish spaces for critical reflection.

Foucault's 'of other spaces: utopias and heterotopias'

The theme of creating spaces of discomfort and disturbing boundaries that is prevalent in Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* resonates powerfully with one of Michel Foucault's most influential pieces, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias' ('Des espace autres'; Foucault [1967] 1984, 3). Based on a lecture that he delivered to a group of architects in 1967, 'Of Other Spaces' addresses the historical development of the concept of space with particular attention to its relational aspect:

> The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another (Foucault [1967] 1984, 3).

In the above passage, Foucault identifies space as something which is heterogenous, relational and potentially transformational. He posits a definition of space that he terms 'heterotopias', a concept which arises in several interviews and publications, including *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (*L'archéologie du savoir*

1969). To identify an exact definition of 'heterotopias' is to navigate a rather slippery slope; the term itself means 'other places', and it is distinct from the term 'utopia', a term coined by Thomas More which itself means 'no place' or 'nowhere', describing a perfect imaginary world. Foucault contrasts heterotopias to utopias; whereas utopias are imaginary, unreal sites, heterotopias are localizable.

Foucault offers six principles of heterotopias to illustrate his point. The first principle he proposes is that every world culture constitutes heterotopias. He then posits the existence of what he calls 'crisis heterotopias', which are privileged, sacred or forbidden spaces for individuals in a state of crisis within their respective environments. In terms of 'crises', he includes states such as old age, pregnancy or adolescence, etc., but he also cites related heterotopias such as hospitals, military service and boarding schools. The latter type of heterotopias, he argues, are vanishing in society and being replaced with 'heterotopias of deviation', such as care homes and asylums. The second principle of heterotopias is that societies can cause heterotopias to function in different ways. To illustrate this, he notes that over time, the locations and configurations of spaces such as cemeteries and tombs have changed; this occurs as a consequence of shifting conceptions of death, illness and the body. According to Foucault's third principle, heterotopias have the potential to juxtapose multiple, seemingly incompatible spaces within one single, localizable space. Here, he cites gardens, theaters and cinemas as representative sites. Time is of central importance to Foucault's fourth principle of heterotopias, and he refers to two types of time-related heterotopias: those where time accumulates (such as libraries and museums) and so-called 'chroniques', spaces where time can be described as fluid, in particular, the festival. The fifth principle of heterotopias relates to the issue of accessibility: heterotopias operate according to systems of opening and closing which render them simultaneously penetrable and isolating. This can entail a compulsory aspect (prisons, for example) or a voluntary one (religious buildings, which may have rituals necessary for entry). The sixth principle of Foucault's heterotopias can be termed the 'heterotopia of compensation', which has a specific operation in relation to other spaces; its function is to 'create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled' (Foucault [1967] 1984, 8). It is this sixth principle that speaks most poignantly to Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*, as the novella presents something of a 'world within worlds' both through its presentation of the microcosm of the convenience store and how it enables Keiko's articulation of her 'difference'.

In some ways, Foucault's pronouncements on heterotopias are as confounding as they are illuminating. Nevertheless, the concept of heterotopias has informed discourse on topics ranging from architecture and urban planning to literary studies. Most useful here for the purposes of reading Murata's

Convenience Store Woman are the characteristics of relationality and heterogeneity that permeate his six principles of heterotopias, as well as the possibilities engendered by these 'other' or 'different' spaces. He writes: 'But among all these sites, I am interested in certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (Foucault [1967] 1984, 3). In fact, Foucault uses the very example of a mirror to explain the function of heterotopias. He indicates that a mirror can be characterized as both a utopia and a heterotopia. It is, on the one hand, a 'placeless place' that 'enables me to see myself there where I am absent'; however, it fulfils another related function: 'it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy' (Foucault [1967] 1984, 4).

Heterotopias are frequently read as 'counternarratives', although Peter Johnson's reading of Foucault's heterotopias emphasizes that they do not delineate clean boundaries of inside and outside; Johnson draws attention to Foucault's own focus on the heterogeneity and relationality of the concept. Referring to Foucault's heterotopias, Johnson points out that they 'are not separate from society; they are distinct *emplacements* that are "embedded" in all cultures and mirror, distort and react to the remaining space. Rather than being static, Foucault's account seems to celebrate the discontinuity and changeability of existence' (Johnson 2013, 794). Like the metaphor of the mirror Foucault employs to discuss heterotopias, Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* functions to reflect and refract the 'normality' of society that Keiko so vehemently resists on the one hand but seeks to imitate on the other. Taking a cue from Johnson and his interpretation of heterotopias, this study does not read the novella as a simple counternarrative which draws our attention to alternative ways of seeing and being. In fact, in Murata's novella, the convenience store is represented as a space for critical reflection, but also as one which is malleable and changeable. The convenience store may reflect and refract the norms of society, but it is by no means a static entity. Offering insight and relationality to the concepts of 'normality' and 'difference' as presented in the novella, it is, in short, a heterotopia.

The convenience store

There is no escaping the irony that a convenience store, a space associated with commercialism, capitalism, consumerism and popular culture, represents an unusual choice as a setting for a novella which seems to challenge and indeed subvert dominant social norms. In Japan, convenience stores occupy a unique position and are very much part of the fabric of society. Marc Steinberg identifies convenience stores as ubiquitous entities in the fabric of Japanese

society, as spaces thoroughly embedded in the daily lives of the Japanese people:

> In commuter towns proximate to urban agglomerations, convenience stores are clustered around train stations, where commuters drop in on their way to work to buy a coffee or energy drink, children and teenagers come to buy snacks and peruse magazine racks, and workers stop off en masse at the end of the night for prepared foods as they return home. In densely populated urban areas, they are spread throughout the landscape: in train stations, on street corners, and inside office towers. In rural areas, they equally form a central stopping point for those on bikes or cars (Steinberg 2019, 239).

Steinberg demonstrates that Japanese convenience stores are not only sites for the consumption and exchange of goods, they also function as important spaces for the circulation of popular culture such as character goods, video games and the like. In Gavin H. Whitelaw's study of convenience stores and the role they play in modern Japan, he highlights the meanings associated with convenience stores for consumers, noting, '[…] I felt that the stores were a place between places. They were anonymous, silent, and distancing, but also close, comforting, and possessing a certain affect of their own' (Whitelaw 2018, 85). This intermediary space of the convenience store that both Steinberg and Whitelaw have identified provides the ideal setting for Keiko's narration in *Convenience Store Woman*. For Keiko, the convenience store functions as a retreat from the outside world, where she can mask her deviance from its norms, but also as a space of possibility, where she can express her difference. It is juxtaposed to the outside world while simultaneously being embedded within it. The convenience store not only functions as the physical backdrop for the novella, it is a space which enables the expression of Keiko's narration and, more importantly, its capacity to unsettle the reader. In what follows, I examine how narrative space in *Convenience Store Woman* operates as a kind of heterotopia – a space which disrupts and disturbs social norms. I argue that like Foucault's analogy of the mirror in 'Of Other Spaces', *Convenience Store Woman* draws the reader out of themselves, constructing an 'other space', a space of difference which interrogates the coherence and 'normality' of the outside world, presents Keiko's 'difference' and draws these two elements into a critical relationship.

Narrative space as heterotopia: internal focalization in *Convenience Store Woman*

Readers will note that one of the dominant features of *Convenience Store Woman* is its intense focus on the perspective of Keiko. From the first page of the novella, the reader is permitted privileged access to Keiko's interiority as the story is focalized through her perspective. Narratological theorist Gérard

Genette proposed the term 'focalization' in order to distinguish between two important questions with respect to narratives: 'who sees?' (referring to perspective, the lens through which we perceive the story) and 'who speaks?' (referring to the act of narration, the narrative voice)[2]. He indicates that when a narrator or a character speaks, they do so from a particular perspective or through a particular lens, which he defines as 'focalization'.

Genette divides focalization into three discrete types: zero focalization, external focalization and internal focalization. A non-focalized narrative, or narrative with zero focalization, of which the omniscient narrator is one example, occurs when the narrator knows more than the characters who populate the narrative; external focalization usually emphasizes the actions, behaviors and settings of the characters; and internal focalization highlights the thoughts and emotions of the characters or the focalized object of the narrative (Genette 1980, 189–94). According to Genette, when, as in the case of *Convenience Store Woman*, a text is narrated from the subjective interiority of a particular character, it can be regarded as an internally focalized narrative. He notes that focalization can shift in the course of a narrative, and this is especially relevant with respect to the closing scene of Murata's novella, where I argue there are degrees of internal focalization at work.

Genette's theories draw our attention not only to what is narrated in a text but the lens or prism through which it is told. As an internally focalized narrative, *Convenience Store Woman* is told through Keiko's perspective, which means that she operates as the filter through which the reader understands the narrative and experiences her world. Moreover, the reader does not have access to the thoughts or emotions of other characters except through Keiko. Consider, for example, a passage where Keiko reflects on her perceptions of people who look down upon convenience store workers like herself:

> I find the shape of people's eyes particularly interesting when they're being condescending. I see a wariness or a fear of being contradicted or sometimes a belligerent spark ready to jump on any attack. And if they're unaware of being condescending, their glazed-over eyeballs are steeped in a fluid mix of ecstasy and a sense of superiority (Murata 2018, 65–66).

Here, Keiko's judgment is premised on her visual perceptions and impressions. This prism or lens functions in the novella as a heterotopian space, effectively opening up a location for Keiko to articulate her subjectivity in a society where that expression has been foreclosed.

Building on Genette's theories of focalization, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan goes further with respect to the questions he raises regarding 'seeing' and 'speaking'. Rimmon-Kenan designates what she terms a 'character-focalizer', a case where the focalizer – the prism through which the story is told – and the focalized – the object of perception in the story – are the same entity. As a 'character-focalizer', Keiko narrates the story and filters it through her own

individual perspective. This process of narration is complex, and Rimmon-Kenan identifies three separate but interrelated aspects to internal focalization: perceptual, psychological and ideological[3]. The perceptual aspect, according to Rimmon-Kenan, refers to what the character-focalizer perceives of the world around them. In *Convenience Store Woman*, the perceptual aspect of internal focalization is particularly prominent as sensory perception, and its multifarious expressions emerge as central to the reader's experience of Keiko's world.

The novella in fact begins with Keiko's auditory perception of the convenience store:

> A convenience store is a world of sound. From the tinkle of the door chime to the voices of TV celebrities advertising new products over the in-store cable network, to the calls of the store workers, the beeps of the bar code scanner, the rustle of customers picking up items and placing them in baskets, and the clacking of heels walking around the store. It all blends into the convenience store sound that ceaselessly caresses my ear drums (Murata 2018, 1).

This oft-quoted opening passage to the story firmly establishes Keiko's relationship with the convenience store as one mediated by its sounds and their associated meanings. The auditory experience of the store is presented as familiar, soothing, even pleasurable or sensual, employing language such as 'caressing' in her expression. Keiko describes the employees' mechanical greetings and the chimes signalling the arrival of a customer as sounds that elicit in her feelings of contentment: 'I love this moment. It feels like "morning" itself is being loaded into me. The tinkle of the door chime as a customer comes in sounds like church bells to my ears' (Murata 2018, 30). Even on her days away from the convenience store, her auditory memories remain poignant: 'When I closed my eyes and pictured the store, in my mind its sounds came back to life. That sound flowed through me like music' (Murata 2018, 124).

Keiko's sensory experience of the convenience store is by no means limited to the aural; visuality and touch also play a key role in the reader's experience of her world. With respect to vision, detailed observations of her surroundings are frequently narrated from Keiko's sightline. In many cases Keiko describes her environment in fine detail – both the people and objects that populate it – as though from the perspective of a camera panning a scene. Consider, for example, the closing pages of the novella when Keiko enters another convenience store on her way to a job interview: 'I was startled to see the open refrigerated display case with an ad announcing 30¥ OFF ALL PASTA! The pasta dishes were all jumbled in with the yakisoba and okonomiyaki and didn't stand out at all' (Murata 2018, 157). This description sits alongside several others which depict in detail the layout of the store and Keiko's real-time visual experience of it. Importantly, as readers, we see what Keiko sees, nothing more, nothing less. Touch is also significant as Keiko describes with emotive language sensations such as the keys of the cash register beneath her fingers and the

feel of her hand 'disgustingly sticky from Shiraha's sweat' (Murata 2018, 162–63). Additionally, there is an interoceptive aspect to Keiko's narration. The interoceptive system relates to the physiological sensations experienced by the body; examples of interoception include feelings of thirst, hunger, muscle tensions, respiration, waste elimination or a rapid, racing heartbeat. In *Convenience Store Woman,* Keiko senses the store not just *with* her body, but *within* her body; her experience of the convenience store can be therefore classified as profoundly corporeal. Keiko describes her body responding unconsciously and automatically to the store, a kind of 'body-in-service' existing to serve the needs of the store and its customers. As we shall see, this interoceptive response to the store is most pronounced in the final pages of *Convenience Store Woman*.

The prominence of Keiko's sensory perceptions (sight, touch, sound, etc.) in the novella makes the experience of reading the work a fully immersive one. Moreover, it establishes a sensory ecosystem which gives voice to Keiko's internal perspective, contributing to the creation of a 'world within worlds', as Foucault has argued of heterotopias. In *Convenience Store Woman*, this sensory element, or perceptual aspect, as Rimmon-Kenan has termed it, operates in concert with the second and third facets of internal focalization.

The second aspect of internal focalization according to Rimmon-Kenan is the psychological facet, which can be defined as how the focalizer is oriented to the focalized object both cognitively and emotionally (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 79). The cognitive component relates to access to knowledge, which Rimmon-Kenan divides between 'restricted' and 'unrestricted'. As Keiko is both the focalizer and the focalized in *Convenience Store Woman*, in this case her knowledge is restricted. An external narrator would possess information that is not accessible to the focalizer; Keiko's knowledge, on the other hand, as part of a 'represented world', has fixed parameters. Keiko expresses what Rimmon-Kenan describes as aspects of cognition: 'knowledge, conjecture, belief, memory' (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 79). Take, for example, Keiko's assessment of the lineage of convenience store managers:

> Manager #2 was always slacking off, while #4 was dependable and liked cleaning, and #6, who was rather eccentric and generally disliked, had caused a scandal when the entire night shift walked out on him en masse. Manager #8 is comparatively popular with part-timers and is the type who engages in physical tasks, so I like watching him at work (Murata 2018, 41).

The passage demonstrates that Keiko's cognitive experience of the world, like her judgment of the succession of store managers, has discrete limitations; it is bound by her experience within the convenience store. This also follows with the emotional component of the psychological facet of internal focalization, according to Rimmon-Kenan. With *Convenience Store Woman*, the reader is only privy to Keiko's subjective experience of the world around her, be it the

microcosm of the convenience store or her family and friends as representative of broader society. There is no 'objective' truth purveyed by an omniscient narrator, so our entire experience as readers hinges on Keiko's perspective. These cognitive and emotive aspects contribute to the intensely personal feel of Murata's narrative, the sense of occupying a space which is radically inside Keiko's consciousness. This brings the reader closer not only to Keiko's sensations and observations but also to her ideology, that is, her belief system as presented in the story. For readers, occupying a position in such close proximity to the character-focalizer is, at times, a discomforting experience, as her perspective, like Foucault's mirror, frequently involves an element of distortion.

The topic of ideology raises interesting and important questions regarding Keiko's perspective as presented in *Convenience Store Woman*, and Rimmon-Kenan's definition of the ideological facet of internally focalized narratives is illuminating in this respect. Following Boris Uspensky, she defines the ideological facet as the norms established by the text or 'a general system of viewing the world conceptually' (Uspensky 1973, 8, quoted in Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 81–82). Rimmon-Kenan points out that the ideological facet can manifest through the narrator-focalizer's singular perspective, which emerges as either dominant or authoritative. In *Convenience Store Woman* this occurs through the presentation of Keiko's singular perspective, which contravenes the prevailing norms established for women within contemporary Japanese society, particularly marriage and motherhood. What is striking about *Convenience Store Woman* is that, largely because of Keiko's internally focalized narration, Keiko's ideology (if we are to define it as such) manifests as the dominant narrative and in doing so, it effectively 'queers' normative womanhood and motherhood in the process.

Iida Yūko's scholarship on Murata Sayaka's oeuvre sheds light on the representation of Keiko's ideology in *Convenience Store Woman*. In particular, she has commented on the polarization between dominant social norms or 'normality' and 'difference' that frequently characterizes Murata's fiction. This ideological chasm, I suggest, contributes to the sense of discomfort that permeates *Convenience Store Woman*: not only does the novella portray Keiko's interiority as an 'other' space or a 'world within worlds' through the presentation of her sensory ecosystem, her version of 'normality' and society's version are also frequently depicted as ideologically disparate. Further explaining the interplay between 'normality' and 'difference' in Murata's works, Iida notes that several of her literary works (for example, *Hoshi ga sū mizu*; *Hakobune*; *Tadaima tobira*; *Shiroiro no machi no, sono hone no taion no*) narrate 'normality' from the perspective of 'difference', whereas others (*Satsujin shussan* and *Shōmetsu sekai* in particular) posit a different kind of 'normality' (Iida 2017, 92–93). Iida points out that within Murata's broader corpus of works, many of which can be described as within the genre of 'speculative fiction', some depict societies that are external to the ideology

of the family but cannot be described as straightforward dystopias[4]. Instead, they depict an alternative form of 'normality', one which deviates from the heterosexual norms of the conventional family system. Iida notes that in *Convenience Store Woman*, Keiko is radically othered (*ibutsu-ka*) by the family system; Keiko's 'difference' or 'otherness' (*ijō*) represents a dramatic departure from the existing model of cisgender sex and the family, that is, from society's shared understanding of 'normality' (Iida 2019, 51). Iida's emphasis on the shared understanding of 'normality' is instructive here as Keiko's internally focalized narration in *Convenience Store Woman* naturally lends itself to the empathetic engagement of the reader. To put it another way, Keiko's narration intrinsically implies a form of shared readerly experience. Indeed, Iida indicates that *Convenience Store Woman* does not simply constitute an escape from the 'normative' model of the cisgender, heterosexual family system; it also narrates the process by which the reader is gradually drawn into this escape (Iida 2017, 92–93). Iida suggests that this strategy is employed not only in *Convenience Store Woman*, but also in *Satsujin shussan* and *Shōmestu sekai*: the stories reverse polarity and designate the 'normality' of society as 'madness'. This, she contends, shatters the reader's sense of stability, thereby enabling their transformation to the protagonist's world view. The execution of these ideological shifts and the interplay between what is considered 'normal' and 'other' both challenge and unsettle the reader.

Iida identifies Keiko's 'difference' as fundamentally constituted by a deviation from the shared sensibility of society regarding its norms and expectations for women: marriage, childbearing, motherhood. Through the perceptual, psychological and ideological facets of Keiko's internally focalized narration, the text presents dominant social norms as aberrant, and the reader comes to share in Keiko's version of 'normality'. This creates a sense of narrative empathy in the novella, which narratology scholar Suzanne Keen has defined as 'the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition' (Keen 2014, 521). However absorbed in this shared feeling produced by the text's internal narration the reader might be, they cannot fully align with the narrator's perspective; and it is this oscillation between immersive and critical reflection which continues to produce feelings of discomfort. As we discover in the final pages, Murata's novella has one final trick up its sleeve for the already unsettled reader.

While *Convenience Store Woman* alerts us to the possibilities engendered by narrative empathy, its closing vignette serves as a powerful reminder of its limitations. After placing the readers in the somewhat discomforting position as witness to Keiko's internally focalized narration, the foundation of that shared feeling shifts, again unsettling the reader. Iida argues that the final scene of

Convenience Store Woman eradicates family-system related elements such as marriage, the family, sexual desire, love and reproduction, and that Keiko is metamorphized into an extreme and disturbing existence (Iida 2019, 54). For Iida, Keiko's refusal of 'normativity' in the final scene signals that Keiko is again 'queered'; this would certainly account at least in part for the novella's unsettling conclusion. Here I posit two further theories which speak to the work at a textual level: one is that the reader's relationship with Keiko dramatically shifts in this scene, effectively breaking – or at the very least altering – the terms of the contract that the text has forged with the reader up until this point. The plot twist in the final scene requires the reader to recalibrate their position with respect to Keiko as narrator. Secondly and related to the first point, it focuses our attention to reading Keiko as a fallible or unreliable narrator.

Unsettling the reader, yet again: Keiko as an unreliable narrator

Wayne Booth distinguishes between reliable and unreliable narrators, stating that a narrator is classified as *reliable* when 'he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), and *unreliable* when he does not' (Booth [1961] 1983, 158–59). The plot twist, coupled with Keiko's seemingly erratic behavior in the final scene of *Convenience Store Woman,* again casts doubt on the integrity of Keiko as a reliable narrator. Crucially, the ending of the narrative does not come as a complete surprise to the reader, but rather returns them to the same feeling of discomfort they had at the beginning of the story.

This interrogation of Keiko's integrity as narrator brings the role of heterotopian spaces in *Convenience Store Woman* into sharp relief and recalls their function in the narrative: to destabilize our expectations and force us, as readers, to occupy positions of discomfort. A close reading of this final scene will illustrate how this complex process is played out.

It is worth bearing in mind that prior to the closing scene, the reader has languished alongside Keiko in the morass of the depression she experiences as a consequence of leaving the convenience store and acquiescing to Shiraha's demands to placate her friends and family. Consequently, the tone of the narrative following her departure from the store had been bleak and the pacing slow. Importantly, the reader has been privy to Keiko's emotional and psychological state through her internally focalized narration. Reentering the convenience store, however, Keiko is suddenly revivified. The tinkling of the door chimes and the buoyant, welcoming greetings of the store workers awaken something within her. Her reaction to the store's presence is visceral: 'And then the store's voice began streaming into me. All its sounds quivered with meaning, the vibrations speaking directly to my

cells, like music to my ears, I knew instinctively what this store needed without even having to think about it' (Murata 2018, 156–57). Her sensory experience is even more extreme than before, hearing not only the 'sounds' of the store, but also its 'voice': 'I couldn't stop hearing the store telling me the way it wanted to be, what it needed. It was all flowing into me. It wasn't me speaking. It was the store. I was just channeling its revelations from on high' (Murata 2018, 160). Keiko's relationship with the convenience store in this scene is qualitatively different from before; not only does she *hear* the voice of the convenience store, she '*cannot stop hearing*' it; she feels she *must* heed its voice.

Keiko's reentry to the space of the store heralds an epiphany: she is not a 'normal' human being, but rather a '*konbini ningen*', a 'convenience store human' which we might also translate as '*Homo convenience*', a species decidedly distinct from *Homo sapiens*, from whom she has long felt estranged. For Keiko, this realization is euphoric, bordering on a state of rapture. Noting that the novella initially uses the term 'sound' and transitions to the use of the term 'voice', Abe Tomoko and Luei Qing contend that the voice Keiko hears in the final scene resembles a 'divine oracle'; it awakens her consciousness, ushering her back into the welcoming embrace of the convenience store (Abe and Qing 2017, 173). Ronald Saladin argues in a similar vein, stating that Keiko regards the convenience store as a kind of 'sacred space' (Saladin 2022, 115). It is indeed portrayed as a sacred space, but perhaps more importantly, the scene is excessive in every respect: the frenzied pace, the elevated tones, the words Keiko utilizes all imply a form of religious ecstasy – a cult-like embracing of the directives of the convenience store and an irrepressible desire to obey those commands.

Even for the reader who celebrates Keiko's revelation that her existence as a 'convenience store human' is, in fact, the truest version of her identity, there is something unnerving about the scene. At this juncture, the critical distance between Keiko and the reader expands, and whatever sense of intimacy Keiko's internally focalized narration had previously engendered begins to collapse. James Phelan's modification of Booth's theories on unreliable narration subdivides the category into two typologies: 'estranging unreliability' and 'bonding unreliability'. 'Estranging unreliability', he argues, refers to 'unreliable narration that underlines or increases the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience'; 'bonding unreliability' refers to 'unreliable narration that reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience' (Phelan 2007, 223–24). In these final pages of the novella, there is a perceptible shift in the narration which ushers in Phelan's sense of 'estranging unreliability'. The sum total of Keiko's pronouncements about being non-human, hearing 'voices', her frenetic behavior and the unexpected nature of the ending further destabilize the

narrative, creating a rift between the reader and the narrator, who, up until this scene, have been in close alignment through the internally focalized narration. The final scene, however, gives the reader cause to doubt the integrity of Keiko as a narrator, and arguably, of their own experience of the narrative as a whole. According to Booth, much is at stake when it comes to the reliability (or unreliability) of the narrator: 'If he is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed' (Booth [1961] 1983, 158). As the narrator withdraws from the reader, the reader again finds themselves in an unsettled state.

Foucault's mirror

The closing vignette of *Convenience Store Woman* returns both Keiko and the reader to Foucault's analogy of the mirror as a heterotopian space, a space which reflects, refracts and disturbs. After confirming her resolve to find employment at another convenience store where she can fulfill her destiny as a 'convenience store human', Keiko observes her own reflection in the store window outside. In a dopplegänger moment, she sees herself reflected in the window and hears a bright voice, resembling her own – presumably the voice of another convenience store worker – ring out. This mirroring recalls Foucault's 'Of Other Spaces', in which he describes a mirror as both a utopia (as a place without a place) and a heterotopia (insofar as the mirror really does exist). As a heterotopia, the mirror instigates a kind of 'return effect' which at once unsettles and reconstitutes the self. Foucault's ruminations on this effect shed light on the final scene with Keiko considering her reflection in the window:

> Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am (Foucault [1967] 1984, 4).

To put it another way, the moment of reflection simultaneously foments an interrogation of the self, reorienting it into a new configuration. When we read the window scene at the end of *Convenience Store Woman* through this lens, we are reminded of what Foucault has suggested of the metaphor of the mirror: that these moments of literal reflection should also be interpreted as moments of self-reflection, moments of self-discovery.

This mirroring effect of heterotopias can also be extended to include the reader's experience of Murata's work. Keiko's internally focalized narration initially draws the reader into her perceptual, psychological and ideological perspective, refracting social norms (*seijō*), and normalizing Keiko's difference (*ijō*). When, in the final scene, however, Keiko as narrator withdraws

the intimacy fostered between herself and the reader, the critical distance between the two expands accordingly. Rimmon-Kenan also reflects on this critical relationship between the text and the reader:

> Just as the text pre-shapes a certain competence to be brought by the reader from the outside, so in the course of reading, it develops in the reader a specific competence needed to come to grips with it, often inducing him to change his previous conceptions and modify his outlook (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 118).

Her observations about the role of the reader in the practice of consuming a text suggest something powerful with respect to our judgment of the focalized object of the text, Keiko. That is, just as Keiko regards her reflection in the window at the end of the story, the text arguably turns the mirror on the reader – on their expectations, their preconceived notions regarding social 'norms', on their judgment. The text is complicit with this mirroring: the exaggerated effect, the heightened tones and the abrupt shift in Keiko's mindset together contribute to the reader's perception that the rug is suddenly being pulled out from beneath their feet. Arguably, *Convenience Store Woman* continues to unsettle the reader to its very conclusion.

This, I argue, leads the reader to pose further questions regarding the issue of reliability or unreliability of Keiko as narrator. That is, rather than asking, 'Is this a reliable narrator?', the reader must turn the mirror on themselves and contemplate another question, 'Why do I think the narrator is unreliable?' The latter question forces the reader to examine their own ideologies and belief systems, which impose judgment on the text itself. Murata herself has commented on the ending of *Convenience Store Woman*, and her words are instructive with respect to the integrity of the narrator. Reflecting on Keiko's choice in the finale as well as on her own process of writing, Murata states that as an author, she has no control over Keiko's actions as, 'Keiko is the one who decides' (Murata quoted in Buritica Alzate 2020, 152); in other words, for Murata, Keiko's return to the convenience store clearly constitutes a happy ending. Murata's comments raise the possibility of reading the novella's final pages in a positive vein: we can see Keiko as liberated not only from the expectations of society but also from the expectations of the reader, even from the expectations of the text. Perhaps this 'liberation' constitutes the final disturbing and unsettling act on the part of the text: in the novella's finale, Keiko appears to be not only free but somehow unhinged, or untethered by the strictures of social norms. The final scene reminds us of the possibilities engendered by Foucault's heterotopias and their potential to reflect, refract and disturb the status quo, acts which occur at the level of the plot, the text and ultimately the reader in Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*.

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Notes

1. Murata Sayaka's *Konbini ningen* was first published in the June 2016 issue of *Bungakkai*. The English translation by Ginny Tapley Takemori was published by Grove Press in 2018.
2. For an extended discussion of focalization, see Genette 1980, especially pages 189–211.
3. For detailed explanations of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's concept of focalization, see Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 71-85.
4. Murata's fiction is characterized by complex portrayals of sexuality, reproduction and the family, which elude categorization into discrete literary genres. For example, in her analysis of Murata's *Satsujin shussan* (Birth murder), which portrays a society in which killing one person is permissible if they give birth to ten, Anna Specchio classifies it as a 'reproductive eutopian dystopia' (Specchio 2018). Specchio refers to Murata's *Shōmetsu sekai* (*Vanishing World*), which depicts a society where sex is no longer the norm for reproduction, as a 'utopic feminist (or LGBTQ+) work of fiction' (Specchio 2020). This illustrates the difficulty in labeling Murata's fiction into simple categories.

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