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Introduction: ‘Other Spaces’ and Dark Places: Reading Heterotopia in Japanese Literature and Culture

LINDA M. FLORES  AND THOMAS GARCIN 

Abstract: This special issue of the Japan Forum titled “‘Other spaces’ and dark places: reading heterotopia in Japanese literature and culture’ takes inspiration from Michel Foucault’s theory of ‘heterotopia’ to examine sites that, while closely tied to the temporal and spatial network of Japanese contemporary daily life, also stand apart from the everyday. The spaces we examine vary in nature and across time periods: from the geospatial to the metaphorical, the real to the imagined, the Occupation period to fictional futures. The special issue contains the works of the following scholars: Stephen Dodd, Filippo Cervelli, Thomas Lamarre, Seiji Lippit, Thomas Garcin and Linda Flores. In our explorations of diverse sites such as nightclubs, futuristic societies, university clubs, black markets, convenience stores and narrative space, we demonstrate methods for reading these spaces which are closely intertwined with everyday society but also serve to critique or offer respite from the very society they mirror or represent.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Michel Foucault, space, modern literature, utopia, dystopia

This special issue, “‘Other spaces’ and dark places: reading heterotopia in Japanese literature and culture’, was initially inspired by a Tanaka Symposium in Japanese Studies held at Pembroke College, Oxford, titled ‘Utopia and the everyday in postwar and contemporary Japanese literature’. Recognizing that Japanese postmodern space contains sites that, while closely tied to the temporal and spatial network of working life, also stand apart from the everyday, we set out to explore ways of interpreting these spaces. From this starting point, we expanded our investigations both temporally and conceptually to

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incorporate a diverse array of spaces. The works under consideration in this special issue embrace sites that are at once geospatial and metaphorical, real and imagined; they include black markets, projection rooms, futuristic utopian worlds, the underworld of Japanese society, convenience stores, school clubs and others. The objective was to attempt a reading of these spaces as narrative components of Japanese literature and popular culture. Our primary interest lay in an examination of these inherently contradictory spaces, sites which are both a part of everyday society but which seem to attempt to subvert, reflect or refract social norms and/or represent a critique of society. Such spaces are frequently labeled as subversive, yet this characterization seemed insufficient to capture the complexity of their role in our analyses. Above all else, these spaces appear to be transactional, often enabling the interplay of sometimes antithetical ideals.

We began with an exploration of Michel Foucault's theory of 'heterotopia'. Foucault uses the word *heterotopia* for the first time in *The Order of Things* in 1966 to describe the feeling of uneasiness created by a text deviating from the usual use of syntax and linguistic order. The word takes on a more spatial meaning in two lectures, roughly similar, delivered on December 7, 1966, and March 14, 1967. The latter was first published in October 1984 in the journal *Architecture, Mouvements, Continuité* and later translated into English by Jay Miskowiec (*Diacritics*, spring 1986). Foucault defines heterotopias as places that 'are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (Foucault [1967] 1984, 3). Foucault qualifies the term 'counter-sites' in his definition of heterotopias, and this is crucial to our apprehension of the term. These spaces, we argue, constitute opportunities for relationality, comparison and destabilization, interrogating the very nature of the worlds, both real and fictional, they at once mirror and critique.

Each contribution to this special issue represents a critical investigation of these sites of contestation and the possibilities they engender as 'heterotopian spaces'. Notably, the sites and spaces we identify in the six articles which comprise this volume are themselves diverse, including physical, localizable sites (bars, night clubs, a projection room and black markets) as well as metaphorical ones (school clubs, education, thought and narrative space). Encompassing heterotopian spaces both real and imagined, our special issue seeks to bring into sharper focus what Foucault's theory of heterotopias might contribute to a reading of such spaces—both tangible and imaginary—in the works and worlds under consideration by our contributors.

Stephen Dodd's article 'The pleasure of dark places: heterotopia in Mishima Yukio's *Inochi urimasu (Life for Sale)*' addresses a work that has received little attention, critical or popular, since its publication in 1968. The novel was

largely dismissed as a tawdry and superficial work rather than ‘pure’ literature; Dodd resurrects it from obscurity and presents it as a narrative worthy of serious critical consideration. Mishima’s novel embraces so-called ‘dark places’ in postwar Japanese society and the shady figures who occupy them: prostitutes, drug addicts, mobsters and even vampires. In his examination of *Life for Sale*, Dodd deploys Foucault’s theoretical lens of heterotopias across several planes in the narrative. First, he reads the author Mishima himself as a literary and physical heterotopian body, a site of multi-layered meanings that are at times paradoxical. Next, Dodd argues that Mishima utilizes heterotopian tropes—cloaked in nihilism—as a means of launching a scathing critique of Japan’s postwar ethos, which he exposes as narrow and ideologically bereft, turning the mirror of society on itself. The article constitutes an important contribution to existing scholarship on Mishima through Dodd’s reading of heterotopian spaces in this lesser-known work of fiction, *Life for Sale*.

In ‘Mindless happiness: presentism, utopia and dystopian suspension of thought in *Psycho-Pass*’, Filippo Cervelli’s article also examines a work which launches a critique of society, albeit a futuristic one within an authoritarian framework. *Psycho-Pass* (2012–13), a popular Japanese anime series, portrays a futuristic, autarchic version of Japan in which everyday life is completely controlled by a centralized government. Classifying citizens into roles and occupations according to their ability, the government maintains the veneer of a utopian society achieved through dystopian measures. Cervelli investigates the complex interplay between utopian and dystopian representations both inside and outside of Japan depicted in the series, teasing out the nuances of how citizens might resist the rigid regime that demands they suspend critical thought in the interest of maintaining the social order. In doing so, his article demonstrates how the characters’ attempts to exercise their capacity for individual thought despite this repressive system constitute a heterotopian space of resistance and criticism of the coercive governmental regime.

The next article in our special issue is by Thomas Lamarre, titled ‘Paratopia: anime, school clubs, and the aims of education’. Lamarre highlights the complex symbolic significance of space in anime and manga that center on school life (*gaku*en), and specifically on school clubs (*bukatsu*). Essential to the constitution of a given society and yet functioning within its own specific and sanctuaried space and time, school, as Lamarre aptly shows in the case of Japan, often embodies social tensions and multiple contradictions. Within the school, school clubs might be the quintessential expression of these tensions: on the one hand, school clubs eschew the culture of discipline; on the other, they reiterate it under the guise of leisure or sporting activities. Exploring these contradictions, Lamarre offers a detailed analysis of the poetic imaginary of the school and of school clubs through the notion of paratopia, which identifies the specific functioning of a place that is alongside or akin to another. Culture clubs, writes

Lamarre, aim ‘neither to realize the yet-unrealized ideals of school society, nor to escape them’ (Lamarre 2023, 21). This paradoxical dimension of school clubs makes them a privileged place for the development of a poetic imagination. A perfect example of that is given by the clubrooms themselves, which, as Lamarre argues, bring together spaces that ordinarily function separately.

In “‘All of Tokyo is a black market’”: postwar black markets as spaces of representation’, Seiji Lippit, drawing on a rich and varied body of works, highlights the complex semantics of black markets in postwar Japan as illustrated by novels, short stories and films by key artists such as Ishikawa Jun, Shiga Naoya, Tamura Taijirō, Kurosawa Akira, Hotta Yoshie, Kim Talsu and Hayashi Fumiko. Portrayed as ephemeral and carnivalesque in various works of postwar Japan, black markets are also depicted as opaque and shadowy in others. These conflicting visions are often intertwined within the same work of fiction, emphasizing the heterochronic facet of black markets, concurrently ‘sites of rupture and renewal’ and ‘repositories of historical memories’ (Lippit 2025, 17). Lippit points out that it is not only temporalities which collide in black markets: distant spaces and various ethnic groups also intersect there. Black markets therefore constitute a critical contact zone between the occupier and the occupied, both during wartime and in postwar Japan. Former Japanese soldiers, Korean workers and American GIs rub shoulders in these complex spaces, bringing with them their own memories and painful histories of the Pacific War. Black markets represent the coalescence of these tensions and divisions, as illustrated in the plot of Hayashi Fumiko’s *Floating Cloud* (*Ukigumo*, 1951).

Thomas Garcin’s ‘In between the writerly and the readerly: utopia and metafiction in Abe Kazushige’s *Individual Projection*’ explores the parodic use of semantic tropes associated with the notion of enacted utopias. Through its narrator, a young, disoriented male, the novel ultimately suggests that it is the search for a stable place of meaning that is itself utopian. Heterotopia, understood as a non-place undermining fixed and stable meanings, here cuts across different levels of the text: non-place is the main theme of the novel while also functioning as a stylistic and narrative device. *Individual Projection* thus appears as a highly open-ended work, bestowing agency to the readers in their act of reading. The novel may illustrate an ideal of esthetic consumption that was championed by a few Japanese intellectuals who sought to bridge post-structuralism and popular culture. Azuma Hiroki, for example, saw in *Individual Projection*’s openness another illustration of his own theory, which both described and advocated a free consumption of fiction, relying more on the logic of recycling and recombination than on the linear path of the plot. But Garcin shows that Azuma’s interpretation fails to apprehend the potentially critical message of the text. Abe’s novel also suggests a pessimistic view of the contemporary world, destabilized by a superabundance of ready-to-read stories and narratives corroding reality.

Linda Flores' article, 'Reading heterotopian spaces in Murata Sayaka's *Convenience Store Woman*', similarly draws our attention to narrative space as well as to the heterotopian space of the *konbini*, a Japanese convenience store. First, it addresses the tense relationship between utopia and dystopia through its examination of the setting of the novella. Furukura Keiko, the protagonist of Murata's narrative, attempts to escape the social pressures of normative womanhood by taking refuge through employment in a convenience store; with well-established norms for procedures and behaviors, it is an orderly, predictable and seemingly utopian space. While providing Keiko with a space of respite from the pressures of society, the convenience store also has its dystopian aspects: uniformity, conformity and endless repetition of norms. It is perhaps this tension between utopia and dystopia that creates a feeling of discomfort in the novella, and this capacity to disturb, defamiliarize and upset is a distinct feature of the work. Flores further argues that this unsettling feeling is experienced by the reader through Keiko's narration, which draws the reader closer to her perspective at times and then retracts that intimacy, placing the reader in a position of judgment. Drawing on theories of narrativity by Shlomoth Rimmon-Kenan and Gérard Genette, Flores demonstrates how the movement between different modes of narration in the novella creates an unstable and, in fact, destabilizing relationship with the reader. Murata's work thus manifests 'heterotopian spaces' on at least two levels: the convenience store and the space of narration. Moreover, the tensions—between 'normality' and 'difference', utopia and dystopia—inherent in Murata's narrative reveal the complexity of these heterotopian spaces. In this sense, *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) recalls Foucault's 'heterotopias' as a text which both mirrors and disturbs the very society it seeks to reflect (Foucault [1967] 1984).

As these articles remind us, heterotopia, unlike utopia, does not involve an ideal society, antithetical to the existing order. All the spaces, real or fictional, explored in the works analyzed in this issue—black markets, school clubs, convenience stores, etc.—are closely intertwined with a preexisting social order. They symbolize and materialize tension without destroying the order in which they are embedded. Hence, arguably, the narrative function of these heterotopian places: just as there is no story without tension, there is no social and spatial regime without heterotopian places both denying and preserving the existing order. As a country that rebuilt itself as a nation-state after the war, it is perhaps not surprising that contemporary Japan is also full of heterotopias, both real and fictional.

Disclosure statement

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