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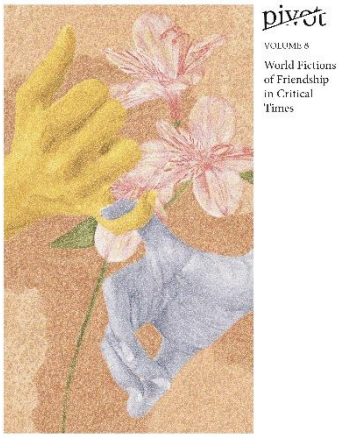

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From Collective Amnesia to Shared Responsibility: Bridging Trauma in Haruki Murakami's Kafka on the Shore

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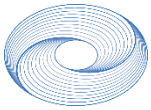
Abstract: In Kafka on the Shore (2002/tr.2005), Haruki Murakami explores the ambiguities surrounding Japan's traumatic history and its lingering impact on contemporary generations. In the form of two parallel narratives, Kafka on the Shore juxtaposes the story of Kafka Tamura, a fifteen year-old runaway searching for his mother, with that of sixty year-old Satoru Nakata, a man who lost his memory in a strange episode during WWII. Initially isolated, both characters leave Tokyo for Shikoku (the smallest of Japan's main islands), only arriving at their destination after accepting the support of others. Reaching across generational shores, friendships are used in the text to bridge the gap between past and present, personal trauma and collective amnesia. As affective gestures established outside traditional communities of belonging, these friendships teach characters new ways of interpreting their painful past, while allowing readers to reflect on their own sense of shared responsibility.



In the article "Friendship as a Way of Life" Michel Foucault discusses the possible ethical implications of alternative modes of relating to those around us, modes of engagement that stand outside institutionalized communities of belonging. As social relations reaching across boundaries of family, generation, religion, sexual orientation, gender, the affective bond created among friends has the potential to act as sites of resistance that challenge the status quo. Focusing on the global reach of Haruki Murakami's fiction, and the border-crossing capabilities of his novel Kafka on the Shore (2002), this article proposes to take the many bridges connecting the islands of Japan as metaphors for the in-between spaces established through friendships. Exploring the ambiguities surrounding Japan's traumatic history, along with its lingering impact on contemporary generations, I will begin by exploring the role played by these new alliances in each protagonist's journey, continuing with a discussion of the devices used by Murakami to link the novel's two parallel narratives. Questioning the often perceived escapist nature of the author's fantastic rhetoric, I will conclude my discussion with an analysis of the ways in which the dialogic spaces of friendship are performed through the novel's magical realist mode of narration. Focusing on the textualization strategies (Jon Thiem) of the magical realist genre, it is my argument that Kafka on the Shore fosters a reading experience grounded in an ethics of shared responsibility capable of reaching the world beyond the page.

In the form of two parallel narratives, Kafka on the Shore juxtaposes the story of Kafka Tamura, a fifteen year-old runaway, with that of sixty year-old Satoru Nakata, a man who lost his memory in a strange episode during World War II. At the young age of four, Kafka is abandoned by his mother, arriving at his fifteenth birthday without "any recollection of what she looked like" (11). Raised by an abusive father who "cursed" him with an Oedipal prophecy, Kafka experiences 'black-outs,' periods of time completely erased from his memory. While still a child during the Second World War, Nakata and his classmates were on a mushroom gathering field-trip when they saw a

"silver light far up in the sky" that caused all sixteen children to "[lose] consciousness," a scene the teacher claims looked like "a battlefield" (14, 18). When Nakata wakes up from a three months coma, he no longer knows how to read, or is able to remember anything from his previous life.

Initially isolated, both Kafka and Nakata leave Tokyo for Shikoku (the smallest of Japan's main islands), only arriving at their destination after accepting the support of others. Choosing Shikoku for "no particular reason," Kafka feels drawn to a private library that has recently been opened to the public (11). It is at The Komura Memorial Library that Kafka meets Oshima, a transgender young man who teaches Kafka much about literature and about life. Nakata, on the other hand, has no idea where he is going, only knowing he must cross a very large bridge in order to get there. His inability to read, however, poses an immense challenge to his journey, a challenge he overcomes with the help of Hoshino, a young truck driver who was once trained as a soldier by the Japanese army (its Self-Defense Force). Even though Kafka and Nakata never meet during the course of the narrative, the setting of The Komura Memorial Library bridges the separate storylines, marking the start of Kafka's healing, and the end of Nakata's search.

As places of reading and of learning, libraries store not only information, but also the memories of past generations, connecting us to our shared human history. Property of the Komura family for generations, The Komura Memorial Library is described as a "Japanese-style house" that specializes in "old books by tanka and haiku poets" (34, 37). Even though the library itself may be fictional, a quick google search reveals that Keizo Komura (1896-1978) was a navy officer during World War II, who served as a commander during Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour. Another notable member of the Komura family, Masahiko Komura (born 1942) is a political activist currently serving as Japan's minister of foreign affairs. Through the family name Komura, the novel juxtaposes the present-day image of Japan as a pacifist nation who once fell victim of the mushroom clouds of two atomic bombs, with the memory of the country's violent and aggressive past, a history that perhaps the Japanese people have worked hard to forget. This historical amnesia serves to obfuscate the country's ambiguous past, a past where the distinction between victim and victimizer can no longer be so clearly established.

This engagement with Japan's ambiguous history is mirrored in the two parallel storylines. In its initial chapters, our protagonists are described as victims of a traumatic past, Kafka as victim of his mother's abandonment, and Nakata as victim of the strange incident in the mushroom field. Through their relationships with others, however, this position slowly changes. On his journey to Shikoku, Kafka meets Sakura, a young girl he thinks might be the older sister he lost along with his mother. Once at the library, he meets Miss Saeki, the librarian he theorizes might be his mother. Fulfilling his father's prophecy, Kafka has sex with both women, whether in 'reality' or only in his dreams is never fully explained. What the reader does understand, however, is that the sexual encounter with Sakura was not consensual ("stop already, get it out of me" 370). Completing the Oedipal prophecy, Nakata murders Kafka's father in a scene filled with war imagery. Performing a mode of violence that can only be described as unavoidable, Nakata is forced to kill in order to save the life of his friends. Following the logic of 'kill or be killed,' Tamura senior tells Nakata that "when a war starts people are forced to become soldiers" (143). Blurring the line between metaphor and 'reality,' dreams and conscious experiences, Kafka's rape and Nakata's murder demonstrate the ease

with which victims turn into victimizers. Enlarging our understanding of psychological interconnectedness, these episodes challenge modern notions of self-enclosed identities, proposing instead a more collective and participatory model of subjectivity that helps sustain the grounds for shared responsibility.

Reaching across the ever-changing limits of Kafka's shore, the abundance of multicultural allusions in the novel further signal the global reach of Murakami's metaphorical bridges. Starting with our protagonist's chosen name, Kafka of course alludes to Franz Kafka, the German-speaking Czech author of Jewish descent. While at the library, Kafka's reading choices are quite prolific, moving from "Burton translations of The Arabian Nights" and "Plato's Symposium," to Shikibu Murasaki's "The Tales of Genji" and "Natsume Soseki's complete works" (38, 39, 225, 105). In Nakata's storyline, references to American capitalism are made through allusions to the brand of whisky Johnnie Walker and to Colonel Sanders of the fast food chain KFC. The global scope of these references signal the extent of Murakami's connections to literary traditions that stand outside more customary Japanese narrative modes, thus continuing the novel's exploration of the effects of bridging, this time across languages and across cultures.

Hence, while at The Komura Memorial Library, Kafka reads world literature. When he goes to Oshino's cabin in the woods, however, he feels drawn to more historical texts. Borrowing from his friend's bookshelf, Kafka selects a volume about the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. Tasked with designing a "final solution" for the "Jewish question," Eichmann sets out to investigate the most effective ways to exterminate the Jewish population. A practical man, Eichmann carried out his task quite successfully, never questioning the morality of his actions. Claiming no responsibility, Eichmann argued he was simply "doing his job," only following orders, while acting in accordance with the law. Eichmann's inability to think for himself reminds Kafka, as well as the reader, of the dangers of blind alliance to possessive communities of belonging.

Inside the book about Eichmann, Kafka finds a note where Oshima quotes W.B. Yeats' expression: "in dreams begin responsibilities" (132). Reaching across differences in age and gender identity, the bond between Kafka and Oshima is grounded in the partial connections they discover through their experiences. Oshima's intrusion in Kafka's individual reading practice shifts his perception of Eichmann, connecting the power to imagine with a person's sense of moral duty, while simultaneously propelling Kafka's journey towards psychological healing. Because of his memory lapses, Kafka is never certain about the role he might have played in his father's murder. Through the imaginative thinking proposed in Oshima's note, Kafka is finally able to bridge this loss of history, engaging with a sense of radical responsibility that brings him closer to self-understanding. Imaginative understanding is again evoked when Kafka reflects on his relationship with Miss Saeki, which in turn gives him the opportunity to reconcile with the mother from his memories. Acknowledging the similarities between Saeki's reasons for running away, and his own ("[they] had to leave or else [they] wouldn't survive"), Kafka's feelings of empathy for Miss Saeki allow him to see his mother from a different perspective, helping him realize that leaving her son might have been the mother's only choice, and that perhaps we are all simultaneously victims as well as victimizers (291). While the fact of Kafka's abandonment can never be changed, his relationship with the mother from his memories acquires new meaning, demonstrating the permeability of the

boundary between past and present. Kafka's meaningful commitment to Oshima, paired with his singular experience of reading, establish a zone of contact that teaches our young protagonist an important lesson pertaining to our social commitment to others.

Proposing associations between fiction and 'reality' from its very title (the choice to name the protagonist Kafka), the formal structure of Kafka on the Shore directly confronts readers with questions about their own imaginative processes. The reflexive quality of the reading experience seems to be in accordance with what critic Jon Thiem describes as the "textualization of the reader in magical realist fiction" (235). Calling attention to the ethics of our reading responses, textualized reading is described by Thiem as "the state of being in two worlds at once, in the book and outside of the book" (238). Upsetting the balance between detachment and identification readers of more traditional modes of narration have grown accustomed to, the reflexive nature of Murakami's magical realism blurs the line that separates the world of the novel from the world of the reader. Questioning conventional definitions of 'reality,' Kafka on the Shore fosters a dialectic reading experience that repositions readers with respect to truth-claims, thus forcing us to reflect on our own sense of moral responsibility in the construction of social meaning.

Rejecting the "fantasy of realism," and its naïve "reality effect" (Barthes), Murakami's novel compels readers to tend to the real thoughts, emotions, and moral conundrums that arise during the imaginative process of reading fiction. A mode of writing suited for transgressing boundaries, magical realist texts exist in the dialogical space established between different narrative registers. Encouraging resistance to authoritative modes of discourse, while refusing simplistic dichotomies such as 'good self/bad other,' the magical realism of Kafka on the Shore acknowledges the potential of imaginative practices to bridge the gaps that separate us, thus allowing readers to affectively interact with others from within such subversive spaces of un-belonging.

Thematically, structurally, and rhetorically, Kafka on the Shore actively involves readers in the protagonist's process of recovery. The new friendships Kafka makes along the way help ground the novel's shifting narrative systems, while proposing a mode of social engagement quite valuable to our current interconnected world of fluid borders. As an active, dialogical presence, the alterity performed in the text is not one that needs to be managed, interpreted, or deciphered. Thinking through images, the novel's many metaphors are never explained, this way remaining personally evocative to each singular reader. Refusing to erase difference, the bridging effects of the friendships I have discussed here establish an in-between space that forestall the possibility of interpretative closure, while establishing meaning through lateral associative links. Connecting individual moral subjectivity with the enactment of social justice on a broader scale, Kafka on the Shore forces readers to reflect on their own complicity as beneficiaries of the victimization of others. Bridging the gap between past and present, personal trauma and collective amnesia, friendships teach Kafka and Nakata new ways of interpreting their painful past, while allowing readers to consider their own sense of shared responsibility.

Carolina De Souza is a PhD candidate in the English Department at York University. She holds a BA in Psychology from her home country of Brazil, and an MA in Literature from York University. Carolina specializes in contemporary world literature, focusing on the intersection between Latin American and global expressions of magical realism.

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