Droplets, by Medofuma Shun: Personal Guilt as Collective Responsibility

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In 1997, the Japanese writer of Okinawan descent, Medoruma Shun, was awarded the Akutagawa prize for his story Droplets (Suiteki). In this tale, Tokushô, a veteran of the Battle of Okinawa, wakes up one day to find his leg turned into a gourd melon. His toe bursts, and water slowly drips from it. Every night Tokushô is visited by the ghosts of his war comrades, who take turns sitting down to drink from his appendage. Tokushô is now forced to revisit those memories of the war he had been repressing for over forty years. This paper studies how Droplets functions as a work on personal trauma and on collective memory. Trauma and collective memory are addressed from two parallel perspectives: the narrative and the metanarrative. On the one hand, the story of Tokushô involves traumatic experiences and war memories in postwar Japan. On the other hand, this paper argues that Medoruma constructs his short story using particular devices to engage with the problematic issue of representing traumatic experiences and discussing war memories in postwar Japan. Specifically, these devices include fantastic elements to represent trauma and the use of culturally symbolic and referential to discuss war memory narratives in Japan.

It was during a dry spell in mid-June, the rainy season, when Tokushô's leg suddenly swelled up. He lay napping on a steel-frame army cot in the back room, away from the scorching sun of the cloudless sky. The heat had subsided down now that it was past 5:00, and he was sleeping comfortably when he was awakened by a feverish sensation in his right leg. He looked down and he saw that the lower half of his leg had swelled up bigger than his thigh. Frightened, he tried to sit up, but his body wouldn't move, nor could he speak. […] Tokushô's leg had already swelled to the size of an average gourd melon and turned pale green. His toes reminded him of a family of poisonous habu, the mother snake lying beside her offspring, spread like a fan. The sparse hair on his leg made it look lewd. [1]

Medoruma sets off his short story Droplets (Suiteki) with quite an unusual conundrum. A start that seemingly recalls Kafka's Metamorphosis, the similarities between the two tales go beyond the transformation of the flesh after the defenselessness of sleep. In the wake of such transfiguration, the mutated hero questions not how this impossible change happened, but what he can do under this new condition and, especially, why it has occurred. Is it fate's arbitrary malice? Is he being punished? If so, by whom? And for what reason?

While the identity of Gregor Samsa remains rooted in the uncanny of the familiar yet ambiguous, the reader of Droplets gets to know Tokushô better throughout the story. He cultivates a small piece of land in a village on the islands of Okinawa. He has lived for sixty years, give or take. He has a wife, Ushi, with a strong temper. He has a good-for-nothing cousin who pesters the poor family for money. The couple has no offspring. Tokushô likes to drink and gamble, too much for his own good. And the first night after the transformation, Tokushô is visited by the ghosts of Japanese soldiers who died during World War II. Tokushô recognizes them as his deceased

[1] Medoruma Shun, "Droplets." In Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa. Ed. by Michael S. Molasky and Steve Rabson (Honolulu, HI: U of Hawai'i, 2000), 255.

comrades, and from that we learn that Tokushô fought during the Battle of Okinawa in spring of 1945. He was 16 years old, drafted to defend the islands from the invading American troops.

The toe in Tokushô's melon gourd leg bursts and water slowly drips out of it, sliding down his foot. During their nightly visits, the ghosts take turns sitting down and sucking the water that springs out of Tokushô's toe. The specters disappear at dawn, only to return again after midnight. With every visit Tokushô unveils memories of the war kept buried for decades. Tokushô had a friend during the battle of Okinawa, Ishimine. This friend died, and he feels responsible. Tokushô struggles with these memories, with active recollections and impossible reminiscences. He begins describing those final days of combat. He has fought the burden of carrying traumatic experiences for years, having rejected dealing with them until they surface out of his control. He also reflects on his relationship with the war during the postwar period. He conducted speeches on his war actions to students at local schools, but was led consciously and unconsciously to embellish them and to portray himself as a tragic hero, a hardened victim, a courageous survivor. This public persona helped in his desire to keep concealed a different narrative for his war memories, the traumatic experience.

The private and the collective are intertwined in Droplets. This is a story of personal trauma that echoes issues on collective memory. This paper studies how Droplets functions both as a work on personal trauma and as a work on collective memory. Trauma and collective memory are addressed from two parallel perspectives: the narrative and the metanarrative. On one hand, the story of Tokushô involves traumatic experiences and war memories in postwar Japan. On the other hand, I argue that Medoruma constructs this short story using particular devices to engage with the problematic issue of representing traumatic experiences and discussing war memories in Japan. In particular, Medoruma uses the fantastic to represent trauma, and the culturally symbolic and referential to discuss war memory narratives.

In this paper I first introduce key points and general ideas on war memories in Japan, focusing on the representation of the war and war memories through the 1990s. Plenty of work has been done on this issue, and my objective is not only to sum up the most essential and most common characteristics of war memories in Japan, but also to highlight the most relevant traits among them in relation to my analysis of Droplets. I then move on to a close reading of this story, engaging with my two research questions: How Droplets functions as a work on trauma and cultural memory, and how Medoruma's employment of the fantastic and the referential function as devices for engaging and discussing broader issues on trauma and cultural memory articulation.

THE REPRESENTATION OF WAR MEMORIES IN POSTWAR JAPANESE DISCOURSE

The principal defining aspect of Japanese war memories is the lack of an agreed cultural discourse on how Japan should address this particular historical episode and its consequences. The void produced by a missing dominant narrative is filled with a clash of different interpretations. The existence of counternarratives in constant dispute with each other impedes the settlement of social and personal conflicts, the closure of wounds, and perpetuates the myth of Japan as an amnesic country that avoids addressing the past. Japan has been struggling since the end of the war from this lack of a unified discourse that would clearly articulate war memories.

There is no clear consensus among scholars when it comes to classifying these different discourses, but I find Philip Seaton's categorization the most useful among the sources consulted. I will synthesize his view with some clarifications of my own.

Since the end of the war, the Japanese state has tried to impose an official narrative on war memories based on portraying itself as the unique carrier of war remembrances. The Japanese state has attempted to convince its people to accept that the only way to articulate war memories is through official institutions. This approach is ideologically conservative in the sense that it proposes a static and uncontestable interpretation. State commemoration sites reflect the "official" narrative position and its inherent contradictions: A rendition to military service (the ever polemic Yasukuni shrine as the most prominent example) and Japanese victimhood and repentance (the Hiroshima Peace Museum). The Achilles'

heel of this "official" narrative approach is the inability to recognize and incorporate opposing interpretations. Social dynamics are ignored for the sake of portraying an image of national cohesion. [2] Historic revisionism and peripheral narratives are silenced in a failed attempt to sustain the illusion of having a unique, centralized, state managed interpretation of war memories.

The "official" narrative is confronted by multiple and independent narratives articulated through groups and associations outside and against the state monopoly over war memory. Called "the social agency approach" by Seaton, [3] it consists of highlighting the existence of activists that work towards healing, reconciliation, and recognition of issues and themes that have been left outside of the state's narrative. These civil groups have proved their strength several times in the past when contesting and destabilizing the official war memory narrative. [4] The most famous of these movements are perhaps the fight against censorship in secondary education history textbooks and the struggle to force the Japanese government to recognize the so-called "comfort women" (women in occupied areas forced into prostitution during wartime). [5] Okinawan writers focused on articulating a local narrative of war memories for a great part of the second half of the twentieth century. Medoruma has a particular involvement with this movement and is reluctant to be identified as a member of a writer's group, preferring instead to engage with this issue autonomously.

These alternative narratives are criticized by their inability to create a cohesive discourse that could eventually become normative. Their agents lack the structural framework of state institutions. In addition to these practical predicaments, alternative narratives also have ideological confrontations. Even though they are usually portrayed as liberal, some ultraconservative groups share the same means – public discussions – and goals – confront the official narrative and propose historical revisionism, while conveying diametrically opposing messages (military glorification, playing down war crimes).

Japanese have a vacillating relationship with war memories. Seaton coins this phenomenon "memory rifts:" ideological fault lines within Japanese society that signal the existence of an underlying conflict. [6] Depending on the historical moment, these faults clash and the dispute reemerges temporarily to dominate the agenda. Almost seventy years after the end of the conflict there is no assertive narrative, and a situation of constant conflict seems to constitute the status quo. As posed by Seaton, "war memories become openly confrontational as groups struggle to turn their disparate versions of the past into the dominant cultural memory. War memories become an issue of national division rather than national unity."

[7]State and alternative discourses clash over the interpretation of two main themes that characterize Japanese war memories: responsibility and victimhood. These two topics are two sides of the same coin, the edge of which bears the name "guilt." Each interpretative community ascribes the label of "responsible" or "victim" to each case depending on whether there is "guilt" involved. Here I would like to make an important remark. When addressing Japan's relationship with the Second World War, we should differentiate between legal, diplomatic, and even moral implications and consequences of the conflict and war memories. The former concerns the study of debates such as the adequacy of war reparations or the honesty of Japan's institutional apologies. The latter involves ways through which the war and postwar periods are remembered and articulated discursively. Both are related but still different. The superposition of one over the other should be avoided, and in this paper I will only refer to war memories.

Victim consciousness or victim mentality (higaisha shiki) dominates war memories once Japanese actions are not only analyzed and recognized but also judged. The Japanese individual bears multiple and contradictory identities: the roles of perpetrator and victim, re-

[2] Philip A Seaton, Japan's Contested War Memories: The 'memory Rifts' in Historical Consciousness of World War II. (London: Routledge, 2007), 7.
[3] Ibid., 11.
[4] Kamila Szczepanska. The Politics of War Memory in Japan: Progressive Civil Society Groups and Contestation of Memory of the Asia-Pacific War, (Routledge, 2014), 7.
[5] For a better insight into these two controversies and how activist groups work in Japan see for instance The Politics of War Memory in Japan, by Kamila Szczepanska, who reviews these two episodes at length from different angles throughout the process of protest.
[6] Seaton, Japan's Contested War Memories, 9.
[7] Ibid., 15.

sponsible and blameless. The lack of a dominant narrative over war memories force the Japanese individual to drift between roles depending on the time and whether there is a public or private display of identities.

There is no consensus over the extent of Japanese responsibility. The Japanese have adopted a predominant attitude of taking the blame for their actions during the Second World War as a group, as a nation at war. Individually, however, responsibility fades away to be replaced by victimhood. To avoid guilt, the Japanese individual is portrayed as a victim of greater powers that pushed him or her to act beyond the limits of the morally questionable. This is described by Maruyama Masao as the "ladder of guilt." The guilty and the responsible were always the hierarchically superior. In the military, the private blamed the sergeant, the sergeant the lieutenant, the lieutenant the captain, the captain the colonel, and so on, until the top of the ladder – those generals prosecuted, imprisoned, or executed as war criminals, officially taking to their graves the blame of the entire nation. The civil population was expected to be exonerated through the reprieve granted to Emperor Hirohito. Hideki Tôjô, general of the Imperial Japanese Army and Prime Minister from 1941 to 1944, was held liable instead, even though technically he answered to the emperor. The shift of the perception of America from enemy to ally happened too quickly, leaving the memory of the war as an enemy-less conflict, and Japan as a country of victims. [8]

To encourage this reasoning, the state promoted the open circulation through media and commemoration sites of personal stories that would endorse the image of the Japanese as victims. Seaton calls these people "worthy victims," and he argues their stories were potentiated to construct a narrative through empathy and relatedness. Outside of this model were left those stories that portrayed the Japanese as guilty, the "unworthy victims."[9] The voice of the "unworthy victims" were articulated by activist movements that denounced the presence of other war memory narratives. The framework proposed by the 'official' narrative based on collective responsibility and personal blamelessness ended up failing to represent and articulate Japanese war memories. It seeks to silence personal guilt and falls short of closing the debate over war responsibility.

In this situation, private and public memories intertwine, balancing and counterbalancing any interpretive discourse. Recognizing the war as an "aggressive conflict" would make the veterans responsible for their actions and would turn their families into accomplices, opening the wounds of personal guilt. Individuals lack any cultural framework of reference to work through guilt, as the Japanese state had to deny such feelings to face the sudden change of paradigm that transformed the United States into an ally. The state does not recognize PTSD victims, and veterans were invited to take defeat as a "good loss," a release from the temporal collective madness that according to the official narrative suffered the Japanese nation because of some wicked leaders.

Under these circumstances, the traumatized individual has no cultural memory narrative that would recognize his existence. He is expected to reshape his experiences to fit into the proposed cultural pattern. Moreover, traumatic experiences, as Pierre Janet explains, resist integration into any meaningful scheme. [10]The lack of any working framework makes the trauma virtually unrepresentable. The subject is unable to recall the traumatic experience at will and under normal conditions. [11] The traumatic experience happens outside of space and time in the sense that the subject is unable to situate it as a past event and is condemned to revisit it as an ongoing incident, an undisclosed episode.

After the war, Japanese writers and visual artists engaged with the representation of the conflict and its consequences. Several subgenres emerged during the 1950s and 1960s around the issue of war memories: soldier diaries, wartime and postwar civilian life, and "atomic" literature were the most popular themes in literature. Most of these authors were interested in how Japanese adapted to the end of the war and their relationship with

[8] Maruyama Masao, "Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism," in Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics, (Oxford University Press, 1963).

[9] Seaton, Japan's Contested War Memories, 27.

[10] Ernst Van Alphen, "Caught By Images." Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought, (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2005), 168.

[11] Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma", in Trauma: Explorations in Memory, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 160.

the conflict. Some of these works were translated into English and were acclaimed by foreign readers and critics – works like Fires on the Plain (Nobi) [1951, 1957], [12] by Ôka Shôhei; The Setting Sun (Shayo) [1947, 1956], by Dazai Osamu; and Black Rain (Kuroi Ame) [1965, 1966], by Ibuse Masuji. These stories, like many others, had film adaptations. [13]

The large amount of artwork produced around the theme of wartime and postwar life adds a new layer of complexity to the study of war memory representations. As Stahl and Williams discuss in their work, language and images articulate cultural memory so it may be shaped, recognized and worked over. [14] The way the war and the postwar are represented has an effect on how Japanese construct their memories over time. In literature, many writers have shown their commitment with reaching a better understanding of society by departing from the "official" narrative and "objective" histories to focus on excluded episodes, with a particular interest in traumatic experiences and traumatized individuals. This interest has a two-fold objective: Address issues untreated by the "official" narrative to provide as much of a meaningful framework as possible and to act as a moral reminder. By embracing the issue of individual responsibility and guilt and presenting the conflict as it was, belligerent and aggressive, this literature functions as group conscience.

Form determines content. Art embodies the experience, stressing the communicative part, and it becomes a form of confession, both for the author as an individual and for his or her own cultural group. Art also creates and reifies tropes that articulate cultural memory and blur the distinction between historical fidelity and historical representation.

The survivor must survive in order to tell, but at the same time he survives due to telling. The necessity of narration reassures survival; otherwise the survivor is trapped in a never ending conflict without closure. We should avoid considering confession literature as a way to 'treat' or 'cure' the traumatic experience. For instance, the writer Nosaka Akiyuki struggled throughout his life to reconstruct his past experiences in the war in order to overcome the sense of guilt that came from letting his little sister starve to death during the last days of the conflict. [15] Even though Nosaka addressed literature at a confessional level, he was unable to overcome his trauma. For Nosaka, writing was the only way to feel as if he were engaging with his past and with the traumatic experience, albeit attempting the impossible of representing trauma. [16] Art is a device for the individual and society to address an issue, independently of whether it is possible or not to solve the problem.

This step, however, wasn't possible after the end of the war. As with Holocaust representation, both the individual and society as a whole need a buffering period. During this period, the victim seeks to come to terms with an identity unsettled by uncontrollable reasons, since trauma may not yet have materialized. As time elapses, the widening generation gap casts light on the way the Japanese engage with memories of the war. Artists who have lived through the war revolve around the two roles of victim and victimizer, reflecting on this dichotomy from their own experiences. Second generation artists, however, can only relate to the war through the way it is remembered socially. Their works expose the discursive and artificial nature of cultural memory. The engagement with memories of the war made by second-generation artists casts light on which topics, themes, and dynamics have been integrated as cultural memory.

Family dynamics have been a force that has sustained the "official" narrative. It is hard to see your relatives as perpetrators and victimizers. The family is also one of the main vehicles through which the individual connects with cultural memory. The way memories of the war are presented is partially influenced by how families have engaged with it. In this context, the concept

[12] Year of original publication, year of first publication in English.

[13] Fires on the Plain was adapted twice, once in 1959 and the second time in 2014. The Setting Sun became a film in 2009, and Black Rain was brought to screen in 1989. As we can see from these dates, the interest for war representations has prevailed throughout time.

[14] David C Stahl and Mark Williams, Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 6.

[15] He described his ordeal in a semi-autobiographic story called Grave of the Fireflies (Hotarku no haka), published in 1967. It became a popular animated film in 1988, and in 2005 and 2008 it was remade into two live-action productions.

[16] For more on this example, see the chapter dedicated to Nosaka in Igarashi Yoshikuni. Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP), 2000.

of postmemory can be useful in understanding second generation artists' involvement with memories of the war. [17] Postmemory, according to Marianne Hirsch, is a structure of transmission of memories that connects second and further generations with the previous generation through the creation of affective bonds between individuals and within groups. The goal of postmemory works is to establish affective, trans-generational bonds using the already emotional frameworks of family memories. That is, the creation of an aesthetic and consciously mediated way of both linking particular memories to a narrative of cultural memory – the broader group – while at the same time asserting a particular uniqueness confined within the realm of the family - the closer group.

Christopher Nelson cautions that by engaging with a conflictive past, second generation artists risk stirring past ghosts and endangering their present, unrightfully appropriating an incomprehensible loss. [18] In the case of the Japanese, however, the conflict is not confined to the past but is understood as an ongoing struggle, a present dispute. Second generation artists that deal with memories of the war, like Medoruma Shun, denounce the unsettledness of this issue. As Stahl and Williams indicate, by talking about war memories, Medoruma (and by extension, second-generation artists) builds a bridge between the generation who lived through the conflict and those did not, yet still bear the cultural consequences, reaching out for empathy and understanding and creating emotional bonds. [19]

A CLOSE READING OF DROPLETS, BY MEDORUMA SHUN

Medoruma Shun represents in spirit second-generation postwar Japanese artists while remaining an exception in the particularities of his style and approach. Born in 1957 in Nakijin, a remote district in the northeastern part of Okinawa, his first literary attempts were a claim to defend his local dialect from the imposition of standardized Japanese language. Through this act of cultural demonstration he connected with the grassroots Okinawa writers' movement. These artists portrayed themselves as nativists and made it their quest to defend Okinawa's particularities from mainland Japan's cultural imperialism. Medoruma soon became disenchanted with this movement. He has always refused to be labeled a writer of Okinawan literature, since he believes this grassroots literary movement is merely exoticizing the land and creating reified categories.

Medoruma's literature is concerned with the residual reminiscences of the war in Japan, the effects of the Battle of Okinawa on the individuals who were affected, and its cultural presence in subsequent generations. He seeks to illustrate that the war is not completely over as long as people continue, even years later, to suffer from the inability to disclose their experiences, and as long as Japanese society is unable to provide a meaningful framework for them to work it out. Medoruma's stylistic distinctiveness is his use of fantastic and imaginative elements in familiar and quotidian settings. I would like to avoid calling this "magical realism," as most scholars do without giving it much thought. "Magical realism" is the inclusion of the fantastic as diegetic in a setting otherwise almost naturalistic and close to costumbrist. In Medoruma's fiction, "magic" invades reality and is considered a foreign and irrational element, infused with a message and a meaning the characters must unveil.

In 1997, Medoruma received one of Japan's most prestigious literary awards, the Akutagawa prize, for Droplets. It was the first time an Okinawan writer received such distinction, a detail particularly remarkable given the fact that it is partially written in local dialect. From then on, Medoruma became quite popular in Japan, and he has continued to publish short stories, novels and plays to this day. Droplets contains the key elements to understand Medoruma's engagement with both war memories in Japan and with fictions of memory and trauma. It also casts light on the ways Japanese second-generation artists are relating to postwar memories.

I argue that Medoruma's use of the fantastic is aimed at helping a wider audience avoid the debate surrounding the tension between historical fidelity and historical

[17] See Marianne Hirsch. "The Generation of Postmemory." Poetics Today 29.1, Photography in Fiction (2008): 103-28.
[18] Christopher T. Nelson, Dancing with the Dead: Memory, Performance, and Everyday Life in Postwar Okinawa. (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), 4
[19] Stahl and Williams. Imag(in)ing the War in Japan. 227.

representations. This discussion has haunted the representation of problematic cultural memories since Adorno's famous predicament on the impropriety of writing poetry about the Shoah. The problem lies in the fear of transfiguration, of loss of truth and meaning by means of its literary or artistic representation. The anxiety to appear truthful creates what is called "rhetoric of fact:" if an artist wants to persuade his audience of his moral integrity, he must present his artwork with a sense of realism and reject the subordination to aesthetic conventions. [20] Medoruma avoids this issue altogether by including the fantastic in his fiction, reinforcing fiction's sense of suspension of disbelief. He is not interested in historical consistency but in the historical and cultural narratives that have articulated war memories in Japan and that are represented through cultural tropes. His fiction reveals how these cultural conventions have articulated Japanese war memories regardless of whether or not they are historically accurate.

In my close reading of Droplets I will focus on two aspects: How Droplets functions as a work on personal trauma and cultural memory, and how fantasy and the referential function as symbolic ways to expose how war memories are articulated in contemporary Japan. I engage with this story by studying the ways Droplets serves as a piece on trauma and memory, and by examining the most relevant cultural references reflecting on their presence.

Droplets is, first of all, a tale of personal trauma. Tokushô, a veteran of the Second World War, is forced to face the memories of a traumatic episode that happened at the end of the conflict – one he had been trying to forget and repress for fifty years. During the last days of the Battle of Okinawa, Japanese soldiers and civilians took refuge from American shelling in the caves spread across the island. Cut off from the rest of the military, without supplies and technically defeated, they went from one point of the island to another, risking being torn apart by bombs, gunned down by stray bullets, shot by either side or, in the best scenario, captured by their enemies. Most starved to death or perished from their wounds. Amidst this chaos, Tokushô's duty was to treat his injured comrades and raid the jungle and deserted towns for water. He was only a sixteen-year old student, drafted in the general levy announced at the end of the war. Tokushô abided by his duties, mostly because his best friend Ishimine was among the wounded. In the end, however, Tokushô abandons him and escapes the caves to wander the jungle until he is detained by the invading troops.

The reader of Droplets uncovers this story through Tokushô's recollections. His memories are not presented right away in a complete and coherent fashion, but appear in the work as fragments, set in a more or less chronological order. Tokushô goes through a process of memory recall that resembles a journey into the depths of his own mind. The reader knows only what Tokushô's memories allow. Even though the story is narrated in an almost omniscient third person, Tokushô's past is only accessible through his filter. The reader is never given a historically accurate or official version of the Battle of Okinawa. The episode is presented through the mediation of memories, which at the same time are patchy, incomplete, and altered by time and Tokushô's feelings of guilt.

Besides the fragmentary and sketchy features of his memories, there are other indications of trauma. Tokushô is unable to recall the memories of the war at will. This is a symptom of traumatic experience. Narrative memories are mental constructs that humans use to give meaning to experience. When meaning is impossible, the experience cannot turn into memory but becomes a traumatic experience instead. As Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart point out in their analysis of Pierre Janet's work, "Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of these experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions." [21]

The traumatic experience appears suddenly and without apparent motivation after years of attempted,

[20] Ernst Van Alphen, Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory. (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 94-95.

[21] Van der Kolk and van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" 160.

yet impossible, atonement. The fact that Tokushô took so long to face his traumatic experience is also part of the nature of traumatic reenactments. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart discuss this, [22] as do Stahl and Williams. [23] Nelson puts it beautifully:

> The past can even return without any apparent prompt, the result of some chthonic process, slipping through the deep rhythms of repression. It arrives unexpectedly, urgently, stirred by the silent call of an ancestral spirit or deity ... These are remembrances that are wrenching and traumatic, tearing the fabric of daily life, plunging those who experience them into despair and even madness. They demand attention. [24]

Medoruma embodies this rush of traumatic experience as fantastic elements: Tokushô's leg swells up to take the shape of a gourd melon, leaving him convalescent and unable to communicate with the outside world. The ghosts of his comrades come every night to ritualistically drink from his foot, in an obvious performance that symbolizes Tokushô's need to address his past. Despite the evidence of this message, Tokushô tries to resist this obligation, unprepared as he is to give meaning to these memories:

> 'What did I do to deserve this?' Tokushô lamented dozens of times each day, yet he never sought the answer. He was afraid that once he started to think about it, all the things he had kept buried deep within him over the past fifty years would burst out like floodwaters. [25]

Slowly, and almost as if drifting down a river of memories, Tokushô digs deeper into the episode and takes a less detached and more judgmental approach to it. During the first recollections, the ghosts are just regular soldiers, most of them from mainland Japan (yamatonchu). Once Ishimine appears among them, Tokushô recognizes the rest as the ones "who have been left behind that night in the cave." [26] This impersonal point of view changes in the last fragments. Once Tokushô starts feeling guilty about what happened he becomes the subject responsible for the event, declaring that he "left them in the cave." [27]

Tokushô's first reaction is fear: he feels the ghosts have come to kill him. Then he changes his mind and comes to the conclusion that letting them drink the water "was the only way to atone his sins." [28] The reason behind his guilt changes and evolves through the story due to his engagement with the repressed memories. Tokushô's first interpretation of the symbolism behind the apparitions is linked to his actions during the war. His cowardice led him to not abide by his duty of bringing water to the wounded in the caves, so they have come back in the present to remind him of this misdeed.

The wrong, however, is not in the failing of his duty, but in Tokushô's attitude of repressing the past. The soldiers' thirst is for Tokushô to embrace that past and come to terms with it. Both aspects are related: Tokushô buries these memories because there is no functional and meaningful framework that would recognize an identity with guilt as an aspect of the experience of war. His greatest fear is if people were to discover that he left Ishimine (and the rest of his comrades) behind in the caves, so he conceals that from everyone and lied about his actions. For ten years after the end of the war he is a sullen figure. He marries Ushi mostly to comply with social conventions.

One day around that time, a discovery surprises him and worsens his relationship with his war memories. During those days back at the caves, he has another friend, Setsu, a member of the Himeyuri Gakutotai (Lily Corps), a unit made of high school girls that acted as nurses for the Japanese army in Okinawa. Ishimine is too badly wounded to keep moving from one cave to the other, so Tokushô hides with him from the rest of the troops. Setsu spots them, but instead of reporting them she gives them water and supplies and rejoins the front. Once the war ends, Tokushô guesses that Setsu had gone with the rest of his platoon to the south, with an uncertain fate. In reality, however, Setsu and some other Himeyuri Gakutotai decided to halt their escape. They went to a nearby cliff and blew themselves up with

[22] Ibid., 163.
[23] Stahl and Williams, Imag(in)ing the War in Japan, 6.
[24] Nelson, Dancing with the Dead, 3.
[25] Medoruma "Droplets." 270.
[26] Ibid., 265.
[27] Ibid., 270.
[28] Ibid., 270.

hand grenades. Once Tokushô discovers Setsu's fate, he stops sulking and starts silencing his pain with a life of alcohol and vice. In addition to the sadness of her unjust death, he feels even more guilty about his decision over Ishimine, because no one is left who knows the truth of his actions besides himself, and the burden of his memories was put solely on his shoulders. This gives him slight relief, but curses him with a life of constant fear and resentment:

> Sadness and then rage welled up inside him, and he was suddenly overcome by a desire to kill those who drove Setsu to her death. At the same time, he was forced to acknowledge a sense of relief that no one was left who knew the truth about Ishimine. Tokushô wanted to sob, yet no tears would come. It was then that he began drinking heavily. Since that time he thought he had succeeded in forcing the memories of Ishimine and Setsu from his mind. [29]

During those decades of repressed memories, Tokushô tries to comply with the "official" narrative that portrayed veterans as blameless and dramatic heroes. At the request of local authorities, Tokushô starts making speeches describing his experience during the war to high school students. Even though he is at first reluctant to partake in this, he gets drunk with recognition and embellishes his tales in order to comply with the public's expectations. He is aware of the manipulation, but the money and the fame are too good to pass up. Ushi warns him of the consequences and foretells the curse if he keeps on with the lies, but Tokushô, although uneasy and to some extent repentant, keeps on conducting the lectures. While lying in bed convalescing, some children come to bring him flowers, and he feels the need to confess his misleads, but cannot bring himself do so: "For a moment Tokushô was ready to apologize for all of his lies, and he almost confessed about what he actually did on the battlefield. Almost, but not quite." [30] Tokushô is unable to effectively structure his memories and work through the traumatic experience with the framework provided by the "official" narrative since guilt and responsibility, the two feelings Tokushô feels the most, are not part of it.

Tokushô's redemption eventually comes when he wholeheartedly embraces his need to address his past. The ghost of Ishimine is sucking his foot, and all his repressed memories have been dug up. Tokushô acknowledges all his suffering throughout the years and asks for forgiveness. The scene is painted with an unexpected homoerotic tone, which could be related to the overwhelming power of emotions. Ishimine notices the change of attitude in his friend and decides to leave:

> 'Ishimine, forgive me!'
>
> The color had begun to return to Ishimine's pale face, and his lips regained their luster. Tokushô, despite his fear and self-hatred, grew aroused. Ishimine's tongue glided across the opening on his toe, and then Tokushô let out a small cry with his sexual release.
>
> The lips pulled away. Lightly wiping his mouth with his index finger, Ishimine stood up. He was still seventeen. A smile took shape around those eyes that stared out beneath the long lashes, on the spare cheeks on the vermilion lips.
>
> Tokushô burst into anger. 'Don't you know how much I've suffered these past fifty years?' Ishimine merely continued to smile, nodding slightly at Tokushô, who flailed his arms in an effort to sit up.
>
> 'Thank you. At last the thirst is gone.' [31]

Tokushô recovers from his condition, but this is not the same as being "cured" from the effects of his traumatic experience. His success lies in opening up his past to confront the repressed memories. Tokushô starts visiting the caves, but he still feels disconnected from other Japanese people. He feels unable to explain his past even to his wife. With this ending, Medoruma reflects on the necessity to facilitate a functional narrative for veterans where guilt and responsibility are addressed. Individual triumphs are not enough if the subject cannot relate to his cultural background.

Droplets is also a work on cultural memory and memories of the war for second-generation Japanese. Tokushô is a fictional character, and his story is not based on Medoruma's personal or familiar experience. The author directly or indirectly shows how cultural

[29] Ibid., 281.
[30] Ibid., 272.
[31] Ibid., 281.

referents from war memory tropes can be put together to give a sense of authenticity in a story with fantastic and paranormal elements. These symbols come from the cultural memory depository, and demonstrate how the Japanese articulate memories of the war with themselves, independent of whether or not these are historically accurate. Droplets can be read in this light as a reflection on the cultural mediation of memories. These references are never explained because identifying them is in most cases an unconscious act for the Japanese reader.

In Droplets nothing seems arbitrary. Right from the beginning, the action is set "in mid-June" [32] 1945. The Battle of Okinawa ended the twenty-first of the same month. It was during that time that Tokushô's traumatic experience occurred. Tokushô's leg turns into a gourd melon. This vegetable, endemic to Okinawa, appeared in unprecedented numbers in the years after the end of the Second World War, this abundance attributed to soil richly fertilized with corpses. The swollen foot echoes the secondary effects of failing to die from ingesting rat poison, a decision some Japanese families made when news of the defeat was broadcast. The transformation of the body is in itself a postwar trope, as argued by Igarashi Yoshikuni. Igarashi's thesis is that Japan remembered its war memories discursively through the bodily trope. Bodies are used to articulate Japan's understanding of the war, from the suffering and decay of the direct aftermath, to the will of promoting a healthy body that came during the 1960s and 1970s, to the return of the rotting body when addressing repressed memories and traumatic reenactments:

> The malnourished and lice-infested bodies present immediately after Japan's defeat were physically and discursively recast as clean and productive by the late 1960s; bodies were detached from the memories of Japan's loss and cleanness of the nation's dirt, its memories of war. [33]

The water that springs from Tokushô's toe is analyzed by the town's doctor, who comes back with results that indicate the liquid is just water "with some lime," like the water in a cave. The doctor suggests taking Tokushô to the hospital, but Ushi refuses. She is convinced that old people are used as guinea pigs in hospitals, a rumor that echoes the medical experiments the Japanese military conducted during the Second World War. The caves and the Himeyuri Gakutotai are the most popular tropes related to the Battle of Okinawa, present in virtually any depiction of the episode.

Parallel to the main story, Medoruma develops a subplot with Seiyu, Tokushô's good-for-nothing cousin, as protagonist. Seiyu discovers the water that sprouts out of Tokushô has miraculous powers and starts selling it to the locals. Once Tokushô awakens, however, those who have benefited from its properties start experiencing weird rashes and physical deformations. This story line symbolizes the double-edged economic strategy of Okinawa in profiting from the American presence on the islands and living through war returns. It may have given the island some initial benefits, but in the long run it becomes cystic and hazardous. Droplets ends with Tokushô discovering a huge gourd melon in his back yard, where Ushi had been throwing buckets of the "leg water." The gourd would not bulge when hit by a stick. A vine connected it to a hibiscus whose yellow flower shined strongly in the sun to the point of blinding Tokushô. The hibiscus is the symbol of Okinawa, and the gourd melon, fattened by the memories of war, is feeding it, reinforcing the criticism expressed in Seiyu's subplot.

CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the lack of a dominant cultural narrative but the existence of working tropes and structural schemes, Droplets emerges as a reflection on cultural memory and memories of the war from the perspective of a second-generation artist. Medoruma shows that the reification of these tropes is culturally normative. Included in this is also the object of criticism, the traumatized veteran. By telling a story of personal trauma on a stage made out of consciously crafted cultural references, Medoruma denounces the inclusion of unsettled issues as another element of the cultural landscape. Instead of being a subject deserving active involvement, the traumatized element becomes another

[32] Ibid., 255.
[33] Igarashi, Bodies of Memory, 199.

trope.

Medoruma aspires to raise concerns over this issue. Personal trauma cases can only be engaged with through social processes that include them in cultural memory not as unavoidable and marginal consequences, but as an unresolved debt, a call of duty. Personal trauma, according to Medoruma, should be addressed as a collective responsibility.

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