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Care as resistance and care as hope: ecocritical affect in Tawada Yōko's *The Emissary* and Fernanda Trías's *Pink Slime*

JORDI SERRANO-MUÑOZ 

Abstract: This paper explores how representations of nonhegemonic politics of care intersect with environmental degradation to reimagine human-nature relationships. Through transpacific comparative analysis of Tawada Yōko's *Kentōshi* (*The Emissary*) and Fernanda Trías's *Mugre rosa* (*Pink Slime*), I argue for comparative literature between Japan and Latin America as a decolonial methodology for Japanese Studies. My goal is twofold. First, I examine to what extent we can approach alternative modes of care as a way to understand the ongoing call to transform our relationships with the environment caused by the climate emergency. Second, I will argue how understanding this production in ways that defy the boundaries of area and discipline strives to put into practice an approach to Japanese studies that is organically decolonial. By integrating methodologies from transpacific comparative literature, ecocriticism, and ecofeminism, this paper contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonise Japanese Studies through expanded geographic and methodological frameworks.

Keywords: ecocriticism, climate crisis, dystopia, ecofeminism, decolonisation, tawada yōko, fernanda trías, transpacific

Introduction

In this article I put forward an ecofeminist reading of *Kentōshi* (translated into English as either *The Emissary* for the US edition or *The Last Children of Tokyo* for its circulation in the UK; I will refer only to the US edition) by Tawada

Yōko, and *Mugre rosa* (in translation as *Pink Slime*) by Fernanda Trías, to explore how nonhegemonic manifestations of care emerge in relation to environmental degradation in contemporary speculative fiction. I weave together this ecocritical examination while reflecting on the promises of producing transpacific comparative literature as a means to challenge the boundaries of area and discipline and implement an organically decolonial approach to Japanese studies. I defend the position that decolonisation should not be taken as a single definable goal. Instead, decolonisation is a process through which we might work towards the attainment of its inherent promises of epistemic and social justice. As the title of this special issue suggests, the act of decolonising is a practice that is more effective when conjugated in the present continuous than when perceived as an essential trait or a *fait accompli*.

In so doing, I work to unravel the entanglement between representations of nonhegemonic care and a reimagination of a critically altered natural world in these two novels. *The Emissary* is set in a not-so-distant future Japan that has shut down after mysterious disasters have altered human and non-human life in uncertain ways. It follows the daily struggles of Yoshiro in taking care of his great-grandson Mumei while the boy, who is very sickly as has become the norm for their generation, is being secretly screened to be sent abroad by an underground group of activists. Tawada's work is characterised by the exploration of questions associated with the hybridity of language and identity. She has explored the effects of writing both in Japanese and German in her essay *Ekusofonī* (*Exophonie*), in which Tawada argues for a literature where the author is a foreigner to their own mother tongue and the creative process can become a way through which to problematise cultural restrictions (Young 2021, 8). It is no wonder then that her works abound stylistically in wordplay and neologisms, and thematically in themes of exile, belonging, and subjects on the threshold who transit between identities while questioning their presumed categorical stability. Doug Slaymaker claims that there are four aspects crucial to understanding Tawada's writing: '1) the constitution of subjectivity, 2) the relationship of individual identity to national identity, 3) the nature of the body, and 4) the shape of space and place' (Slaymaker 2019, viii). *Kentōshi*, published in 2014, fits with the rest of Tawada's work along the same general lines. Despite not being a central focus of the plot, discussion of language looms over the whole book, with foreign words banned in her fictional Japan, forcing the characters to come up with localised versions of imported terms and the casual mention to how at some point the Japanese government tried to sell the Okinawan language to China. Questions of border-crossing and hybridity take up a more prominent role in this work, as I explore later in this piece.

In *Pink Slime*, an unnamed female protagonist is employed as the caregiver of Mauro, who suffers from an eating disorder, while she struggles to survive in a coastal city of Uruguay recently affected by periodical gusts of a life-

threatening red wind. Between her trips to the hospital to see her ex-husband and to the abandoned suburbs to visit her estranged mother, she must confront the rapid deterioration of the environment, her growing sense of isolation, and an exposure to hazards caused by the need to nurse a boy who suffers from an endless appetite. Fernanda Triás works as an English teacher and translator and has published five novels and two short story collections between 2001 and 2025. *Pink Slime* was published in 2020 and received one year later the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz prize at the International Book Festival of Guadalajara, an award she received again in 2025 for *El monte de las furias* (*The Mountain of the Furies*). Triás probes in her literature questions of female agency in urban settings, the oppression of gender expectations imposed and reproduced by close communities, and the malleability of bodies (Domínguez 2017, 826). Her debut novel *La azotea* (*The Rooftop*) explores the function and dysfunction of structures and institutions of care, questions that are also revisited in *Pink Slime*. In *La azotea*, the protagonist decides to lock herself together with her father and their daughter in their flat in an act of rebellion and self-empowerment through an attempt at autarky. While there are some similarities between the two works, *La azotea* focuses on the process of isolation and alienation brought upon the protagonist in an external setting almost unknown to the reader, which Anna Forné (2013) has read as a way to process reality in post-dictatorship Uruguay. *Pink Slime* goes a step beyond this premise to create a link between an analogous process of entrapment and the degradation of the environment. This produces a shift in perspective that is also central to my argument in this article by creating a parallel between the process of environmental decay and the development of alternative dynamics of care that emerge as a response to it.

Nonhegemonic care comprises bonds of affection, support, and attention for the well-being of humans and non-humans that clash, contradict, or defy hetero-patriarchal structures of kinship, gender roles, and dynamics of affection. I refrain from defining these models as *counterhegemonic* because they vary in their subversion of the norm, including in their limited capacity to overcome its impositions effectively. Despite their limitations, these alternative modes of care call into question the salience, adequacy, and permanence of hegemonic norms when set against scenarios of community alteration by environmental degradation, a point made by others (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Bauhardt and Harcourt 2018; Pulé and Hultman 2021) and which I develop here through its literary representation.

Throughout this article, I use ‘nature’ while remaining aware of its problematic construction of a human/nonhuman binary that ecocritical scholarship has productively challenged (Iovino and Serpil 2014, 9). Following posthumanist thinking, I understand nature not as an autonomous realm separate from culture or human agency, but as fundamentally entangled with human practices

and discourses. In the speculative fictions examined here, however, this entanglement becomes literal: the novels depict environments transformed by human activity that in turn reshape human bodies and social relations, collapsing any pretence of nature as separate ‘other.’ When I refer to ‘altered nature’ in these texts, I mean both the physical-material transformations of ecosystems and the imaginative work of rethinking human-environment relations beyond conventional binaries. The novels establish a time before and after substantial changes in the environment the natural world, placing the development of the plot in a present where humans and non-humans face adaptation challenges. The manifestations of alternative care and the description of an altered nature are speculative: they are imagined and fall within the expected conventions of fiction. As such, they represent an opportunity for exploring potential avenues regarding contemporary concerns. I define this relationship as an entanglement because changes in nature and changes in care and affection are not linked exclusively by causality. This rhizomatic shape that defies linear causation, what Timothy Morton (2013) calls ‘the mesh,’ has been the preferred form to describe the relationship between humans and the non-human at a time when awareness of the Anthropocene is shifting the general understanding of nature. This concept of the mesh/rhizome/an entanglement has also been put forward as the model through which we can approach econarratological structures and ecocritical attempts, as Marco Caracciolo suggests (2021, 15).

Both *The Emissary* and *Pink Slime* have plots that develop around new forms of care that arise from scenarios of environmental degradation. As such, these are productive works in themselves when it comes to exploring the point of connection between ecological and feminist struggles (a juncture usually branded as ‘ecofeminism’ (Vakoch and Mickey 2018)) and the representation of the climate crisis in fiction. In the cases of *The Emissary* and *Pink Slime*, the climate crisis is not explicitly mentioned as responsible for the diegetic changes. However, the two works establish a basis of human responsibility for this deterioration that fits with the Anthropogenic essence of the current predicament. As I argue, these narratives show how interpersonal relationships are transformed by changes in the environment in ways that defy the heteropatriarchal model that has also dominated, as Greta Gaard denounces (2017, 147), the canon of climate fiction so far.

Despite the global nature of a system of material and epistemic oppression affecting how the world is interpreted, its subjects described, and legitimate from illegitimate sources of knowledge defined (Lugones 2010, 745; Quijano 2000), decolonial struggles are not homogeneous, synchronous, or equally salient across the different landscapes and communities involved in them. One of the main reasons why this struggle is so challenging is the difficulty of identifying communities in East Asia, especially their nation-states, as injured parties within this system. This suggestion is particularly complex when it comes to

discussing Japan's role in decolonisation debates. Not only was Japan never formally colonised, but the country even operated as an imperialist colonial power. Given its position as the third-biggest economy in the world and its historically recent geopolitical alignment with the interests of Western countries, Japan is more often than not bundled with the rest of the so-called Global North powers. Hesitance to mix decolonising struggles and Japan is understandable, but overlooking the shades of grey involving the position of relative epistemic oppression constitutes a dangerous mistake that hinders efforts to transform our intellectual practices and positions. Decolonial work done in and about East Asia, and Japan in particular, integrates this call for the re-examination of an imperialist past and a post-imperialist present (Chen 2010) while simultaneously putting into question the ways in which its production of knowledge is restricted to so-called area studies.

I believe a productive approach to combining these approaches lies in moving beyond the anxiety of the object that Harry Harootunian (1999) and Shu-mei Shih (2019, 38) identified at the heart of area studies to focus on the method, on how to produce research as a conversation between transnational phenomena in a way that respects particularities. By doing so, it is possible to open the pressure valve and release the steam associated with relying on national or regional borders as selection criteria. Area studies can be the field that exposes the arbitrariness of these borders instead of reifying them, adopting critical stances without having to live in a constant state of cognitive dissociation between a potentially ideal social world—less dependent on hard borders, material and epistemic—and having to live with the pragmatic factuality of the current geopolitical arrangement. This transition from critique to method is a necessary debate, for it helps us break away from the magnetic attraction of self-referentiality and the reification of decolonising struggles as somehow a brand and not a complex, uncomfortable, unsolved source of transformation.

Ecocriticism is in a quest to overcome its foundations as the concern of white, privileged scholars situated in the Global North. Contemporary ecocritics wish to expand the discipline's so-far Westernised interpretations of the environment to put more focus on the diversity of ways to define our relationship with the non-human. Ecocritics in and beyond Japan are becoming more comfortable conceiving the environment as a politically charged arena, historically conditioned by the past and present evils of colonialism and global capitalism and beyond fetishised ideas of nature as something that can be analytically dissociated from culture (Cooke and Denney 2021, 5; Wake, Suga, and Yuki 2018). This task is not limited to changing the corpus of works to be studied to include more examples from the Global South, although that is indeed essential.

This shift towards reclaiming the importance of localised understandings of nature and the relationship with the land and the non-human is challenged

simultaneously by deterritorialization and a realisation of how a sense (and a materiality) of the global have an unavoidable impact on environmental action and imagination. Instead of feeling trapped by this tension, opting to reject globalisation, or embracing it uncritically, Ursula K. Heise proposes to balance them out by seeking to understand how specific communities envision themselves as simultaneously part of their local environments and part of a diverse array of ways to relate to the concept of the global (2008, 62). This transition can only be achieved by expanding the reservoir of case studies and producing ecocritical work that draws from a more diverse range of sources. In that sense, then, ecocriticism needs Japanese studies. It is not mandatory to discard the local to favour the global; it is possible to use the local to understand the global better and more fairly.

Feminist scholars have arguably done the most work so far in integrating the need to change their basis and practices and open themselves up to decolonial transformations and interdisciplinary work. Ecofeminism pushes for the reconsideration of the relationship with nature by establishing a direct link between extractive industries and violence against women, linking them together in criticism against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, and proposing 'synergistic solutions' where productive and reproductive work strives to be at peace with our environmental ecosystems (Mies, Shiva, and Salleh 2014, ix). The success of this circuit of permeation has much to thank the closeness and sensitivity to social movements and multi-party strategies shown by feminist scholars. As Anna Bedford suggests, ecofeminism needs the influence of grassroots activism to inform the direction and identify its purpose as an academic practice (2018, 197). Scholars in Japanese studies and ecocriticism could do well to identify which approaches to learn and emulate to strengthen a commitment with ongoing decolonising efforts.

In this article, therefore, I explore how the two selected works dare to speculate and imagine environmental degradation incorporating a reassessment of patterns of affection, exposing the linkage between questions of care and our relationship with nature. I defend that a critical approach to the relationship between nature and care feminism must incorporate, on the one hand, narratives on the body, and on the other, discourses on the economic reality of reproductive work that incorporate but go beyond the role of women (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 3–4). These two elements, body and labour, constitute two of the main axes upon which I organise my study of the manifestations of non-hegemonic care. First, I question whether these representations can challenge the idea of care as hegemonically reproductive work without reproducing neoliberal models of privatisation. I also explore how bodies act as a surrogate to discuss the degradation of nature: corporeal changes and transformations mirror environmental alterations and become a bridge that closes the gap that emerges from the conceptual difficulty of grappling with the enormity of the

climate crisis. Finally, I look at the trope of food and the procurement and management of nourishment as an allegory for consumption. Food acts here as a gateway to discuss extractive industries through the perspective of gender and the challenge of resource administration as a dimension of affective care directly affected by environmental degradation. This analysis explores how imagining changes in nature from a critical perspective that integrates a call to human responsibility implies a reimagination of modes of care that challenge their current patriarchal, colonial, and resource-exploitative foundations.

Changing roles in a changing nature

Recent research shows the extent to which rapid environmental degradation is linked to the alteration of gender structures and dynamics, be it in Uganda (Nagasha et al. 2019), Chile (Schuster 2021), Vietnam (Pham and Doane 2020), Indonesia (Riviwanto and Basuki 2019) or, indeed, Japan (Koikari 2020). Many of these changes involve worsening the status and well-being of those already most affected within each community, but the way these alterations occur is not homogeneous. In some instances, advances in terms of gender equality are eroded. In others, the traditional distribution of productive and reproductive work is abruptly overturned without a proper and conscious transition of roles. In any case, gender structures, in their flimsy and artificial arbitrariness, are exposed for their fragility and malleability when faced with environmental degradation. As Christine Bauhardt suggests, a redefinition of care and affection is a necessary and unavoidable step in the rejection of our dominant differentiation between productive and reproductive work as gendered and linked to the exploitation of nature (2018, 32).

The two works presented here explore modalities of nonhegemonic care in their promises and faults. Even though the plot in the two novels is set at a moment when nature is already altered from a previous status quo that would correspond with the reader's present, the adult characters have memories of a previous time that is marked by a different set of gender expectations and rules. Both *The Emissary* and *Pink Slime* share a similar conflict: the clash between normativities, particularly regarding caregiving tasks and parenting roles, with the evolving needs of an uncharted scenario brought by environmental degradation. The protagonists depart from apparently stable and relatively hegemonic roles, both being middle-class hetero-cisgender individuals. However, their journeys to face this challenge are different, and this variance shows the plurality and complexity of the issue.

Yoshiro's extremely long lifespan, unnaturally extended by the changes in the ecosystem brought by the mysterious disasters, has allowed him to experience different roles and positions within a system of familiar care. As a young man, the idea of marrying unnerved him as he feared the loss of his autonomy,

but he eventually gets married to Marika, who lives at the institution for run-away kids she founded, thinking that ‘marriage with someone who was often absent might be bearable after all’ (Tawada 2018, 64). By the time of the diegetic present, their partnership is marked by separation. Yoshiro’s parenting style with their only daughter Amana had been strict and controlling, creating a resentment which has lasted for years. Amana move to Okinawa to work as a temporary worker with her husband, further estranges her from her father.¹ Amana’s son, Tomo, has always been a source of worry and concern for Yoshiro. From a very young age, Tomo showed an attitude of rebellion, addiction, and delinquency that is suggested to have emanated from a lack of honest affection in his household. Untrained and unable to give the care that Tomo needed and only educated to discipline and reprimand, Yoshiro describes Tomo as ‘a tree that bore only the fruits of anxiety, leaving little time for love, unconditional or otherwise’ (2018, 75). So, as it happened with his grandmother and mother, Tomo too eventually disappears, leaving Yoshiro to wonder whether this desire to break away was genetic and not an outcome of faulty dynamics of care.

However, this alienation pattern is broken when Mumei, Tomo’s son, is born. Yoshiro decides to nurse his great-grandson with the father out of the picture and the mother having died during childbirth. Unlike his previous experiences, Yoshiro’s caretaking attitude is one of complete devotion. He dedicates most of his time and effort to care for Mumei’s physical, intellectual, and emotional needs with a sensibility and patience that were absent before. Part of this change of attitude can be attributed to learning from his mistakes, as Yoshiro’s seemingly eternal life is presented as a curse that forces him to face his and his generation’s errors. However, and more importantly, the key element that differentiates Yoshiro’s transformation of dynamics of care is the pressure put on by changes in nature. Mumei, like his generational peers, is severely affected by environmental degradation. He needs assistance for practically every task, but unlike his predecessors, Mumei is kind, patient, and warm, an attitude that deepens the bond between him and his great-grandfather. Yoshiro realises the need to elevate care and affection as a top priority if he wishes Mumei to survive.

In *Pink Slime*, the narrator assigns herself the role of caregiver for several people who do not reciprocate her emotional investment and who are, in turn, different prototypes of hegemonic subjects within a traditional family structure – a structure represented as disintegrating in the novel. Her relationship with her biological mother, who lives holed up in the decadent uptown area of the dwindling city, is characterised by the coldness and judgmental disposition cast upon the daughter. Her ex-husband, Max, is hospitalised as a special patient for surviving the ‘red wind’. In their encounters, he toys with her emotions, rejecting any responsibility, hiding his fear of emotional commitment, and

excusing his violent outbursts behind a traditionally masculine daredevil façade. In contrast to these two characters, Mauro's general indifference to anything that is not food does not seem intentional. His medical condition makes him disconnected from the world around him, but from time to time, he seems to recognise the narrator's affection and responds, albeit in his own unique way.

The protagonist receives very little love from the people she cares for, and this callousness is mirrored by the violence of environmental changes and the cynicism of the status quo in relativising the magnitude of the tragedy and its attempts to turn it into profit. The ultra-processed meat factory, symbol of their last and desperate attempt to control nature, is described by the narrator as a providing mother, a parent that binds its offspring with ties of guilt and moral debt: people are but flesh as pink and pitiful as the cubes of edible tissue produced at the factory (Trías 2023, 83–84). Despite the harshness of this situation and her attitude of apparent detachment, the actions of the narrator are, in essence, strictly motivated by love and care for others, even when they go against her interests or instincts of self-preservation.

The idea of the family unit is disputed and recast in both works. Their fictions question the standard narrative of a household composed of members of the immediate family (parents, children, and on occasion grandparents), united by bonds of genetic kinship which operates as a central unit for the management, production, or subrogation of capital, and includes a gendered division of labour that intensifies inequality. The crisis of this model has been trumpeted for the last seventy-five years, with the rise of nonnormative family models that come from the pressures of productivity, like single-parent households or same-sex households in many developed countries, including Japan (Tsutsui 2020, 61). Both *The Emissary* and *Pink Slime* introduce diverse and nonhegemonic models of family structures that have risen from the ashes of formerly heteropatriarchal models: Yoshiro and Mumei are great-grandfather and great-grandson, while Trías' protagonist from time to time fosters the very child she is paid to take care of as a nurse. The two key aspects of these changes are, therefore, an embrace of the concept of the extended family – which includes members from outer, more distant branches of the metaphorical family tree – and an idea that care can be for people not related by bonds of blood or kinship. As such both expand the concept of care to reach beyond the household and to integrate a flexible, malleable and in some instances frail understanding of community. Remarkably, these nonnormative family units are not the exception in the diegetic worlds of the two novels. The reader sees glimpses of other configurations and they all show some level of divergence from the norm, where none are presented as traditional nuclear families. In these fictional scenarios, therefore, environmental change has also brought changes to the organisation of households and created new normativities that are more plural and

diverse, even if they do not automatically translate to a more balanced distribution of reproductive responsibilities in these structures of care.

The novels also toy with the question of whether and to what extent two people can be considered a community. Despite a suggested potential increase in the role of communities who might manage care if and when the normative family model is problematised, the communities in these novels contain family structures which are very much reduced, almost atomised, or which rely on a one-to-one dynamic of affection. Another agent that generally has a role in administering the necessities of care is that of public institutions. However, the welfare system in these two novels is either absent, weakened, or has been privatised following the neoliberal trend that began in the 1970s. The reported changes in the environment have also worked to degrade the public safety net. They have forced the perpetuation of a model of individual care that proposes as the solution for the lack of balance in (traditionally gendered) reproductive roles society's conversion to privatised productive work. This transformation is conceptually tricky because while it is in some senses preferable that reproductive roles have become recognised as valued labour, the privatisation of care in turn risks the commodification of affection.

Although the two works hint at this danger, they defend a relationship of care that is not conditioned by market mandates. In the case of *The Emissary*, Yoshiro can combine productive and reproductive roles without feeling that he must renounce any of them. In *Pink Slime*, the narrator, despite being in a contractual relationship with Mauro's mother, breaks the illusion of the neoliberal caregiver when she keeps nurturing the Mauro despite not knowing whether his parents are ever going to come back to pick him up or not. In this decision it is possible to see the influence of her childhood nanny, Delfa, who acts as a mother figure, both in the way she carries out her daily responsibilities and in the love she demonstrates towards the narrator. She is thus a key example of how cumulative acts of care create longer-lasting dynamics of affection than blood ties:

My mother says that when I was three or four years old, I used to cry every time she went to work. She says that one time I grabbed her ankles to try to keep her from leaving, that she dragged me all the way to the elevator. She says that another time, I asked her to marry me. I don't remember any of that. I remember Delfa letting me form little sausages with the extra dough when she made pastel de fiambre, and cutting out dresses for my paper dolls with me, letting me brush her wig while she sat on the couch [...] But I never told my mother; I've never confessed that I don't remember a single thing from those years when she was supposedly the centre of my world. (Trías 2023, 96–97)

This fragment shows how the privatisation of care leads to a change in the distribution of affection that goes beyond the primacy of bonds of blood. The ambiguity, which the novel encapsulates, continues to be sceptical towards the

capacity of the state to solve the same issues. For instance, Silvia Federici (2016) has put forward an understanding of the commons that would work to empower the role of broader communities in the construction of a more equal economy of care. Such proposals can be understood as an effective source of inspiration for the construction of decolonial structures of care that are more resilient to environmental degradation which *Pink Slime* produces.

Bodies blending with the non-human

The majority of the scholarly work done in the past twenty-five years on the body has been on its discursive reality and how its roles are created and performed based on a series of cultural cues and codes (Alaimo 2008, 244). While this work is essential in understanding the social mediation of our bodies, especially when it comes to gender performativity, focusing on the material reality of the body can help us connect with the positivist dimension of how we are intertwined and inextricably enmeshed with the environment. This realisation of interconnection helps unravel the different layers of how care is not only a social function conditioned by economic needs, but also opens up the space for discussing our current debts and responsibilities with other humans and with the non-human. Affective ecocriticism offers an invitation to question boundaries between the corporal and the emotional as a false dichotomy to green thinking. It is neither possible to separate bodies from the environment in which they are found, nor can we diminish our presence in favour of a greater non-human plane that erases our material reality (Bladow and Ladino 2018, 3–4). By linking body and environment as something that changes, flourishes, decays, can be hurt, maimed, and responds to stimuli, it is possible to create bonds of affection and understanding that can bypass binary separations and help us imagine actions and decisions freed from the shackles of limited subject-object schemes. As these two novels show, the body becomes a helpful literary trope for exploring these connections and speculative imagination.

In *The Emissary*, body transformations are linked by clear but unexplained pathways with environmental degradation. We learn that older people can potentially live forever, their strength and vigour maintained and even improved, staying active as the de facto productive labour force in Japan's future. On the other hand, younger generations, like that of Mumei, are born sickly, weak, and are vulnerable to many environmental inputs: temperature, pressure, the textures of the ground, gravity, or diet. Their muscles and bone structure are stunted, but they retain their cognitive functions and sense of self intact. Perhaps more shocking for the reader is the suggestion of their gradual process of hybridity with the non-human. In the beginning, Tawada, who is known for her fondness of wordplay, seems to deploy the many comparisons between characters and animals as a metaphorical device. However, the reader

eventually realises that she also means it in a very literal sense. Right from the very start, Mumei is described either as a bird, with a head too large for his tiny body and thin legs, or as an octopus, to the point that Yoshiro believes this to be the future of human evolution (Tawada 2018, 14). Mumei also experiences bouts of identification with the whole of the natural world, seeing himself as the atlas of planet Earth, its biodiversity, his humanity dissolving in the process of blending with the non-human that bends time and space:

This map is definitely my portrait, he thought. The Andes Mountains curve outward then inward again, just like the bone of my right leg from my hip to my ankle. The bones in my torso curve inward toward the top, until they meet that mountain range rising from the left at the Bering Sea. All my bones are curved. Not that I bent them, they were just like that to begin with if – this is what’s called pain, it was there from the start, for no particular reason. Water from a melted Arctic glacier; the cold ocean; my brain. The earth is full of complicated wrinkles. My lungs are the Gobi Desert; the stretched-out palm next to it is Europe. The African continent has a big, broad chest but small hips. It’s like a dancer standing on one leg. My neck, which connects Africa to Europe, is twisted, with swollen thyroid and swollen tonsils, screaming for help. Australia is my gut, a big bag. There’s lots of food in the bag. But I can’t eat any of it. (2018, 123–24)

This process of merging with the environment reinforces the openness of identity that the character embodies, especially when we take into account that Mumei is not a proper noun, but rather a placeholder appellation that literally means ‘No-Name’. Japan in *The Emissary* has lost almost all its wild animals, the flora is either extinct or has mutated to acquire large or unusual sizes, and there is widespread fear that the soil is toxic and contaminated. Children, in this context, are represented as closer to this process of transformation than Yoshiro and the older generation, who instead seem akin to remnants or fossils from a world in which humans and nature are separated entities at odds with each other and who seem destined for extinction.² Kids, on the other hand, even have the ability, albeit involuntary, to change their sexual organs, shifting back and forth between having male or female bodies. Mumei is no exception to these new transformations, which reinforce the idea of gender fluidity as a new norm:

The night the moon came back, the breasts of young boys grew round and firm while the fragrance of ripe figs wafted up from between their legs, thrown wide apart, their knees raised slightly as they slept. Mumei, too, awoke to a sweet aroma and, realizing that his sheets were damp, got out of bed to discover that red juice had left a large stain. Feeling as if someone were watching him, he flung the curtains open to find a huge, yellow full moon, low in the sky, staring at him. Why was the moon so big tonight? (2018, 126)

In this passage, the moon functions not merely as witness but as catalyst. The agentive verbs (‘coming back,’ ‘staring’) position it as the environmental force directly triggering Mumei’s bodily transformation. This moment crystallises

the novel's vision of human bodies as radically permeable to and reshaped by nonhuman agencies.

Pink Slime also presents us with a world without wild animals. The disappearance of the non-human in the form of the mass deaths of fish and birds is the first bad omen for the hazardous environmental conditions that end up causing immense suffering to the human characters. This idea of inevitable doom, foreshadowed by the demise of organic life, resurfaces throughout the novel. For instance, we sense it in the childhood flashback of a cave burial of a living dog (Trías 2023, 70–71) and in the pieces the narrator writes for a magazine about the world's most short-lived animals (Trías 2023, 88). Like Mumei, Mauro is also described with his humanity degraded in favour of animal traits: a dinosaur, a piranha, an insect, all of which are described as wild and ravenous. Another key way in which humans are represented as bound with the non-human in *Pink Slime* is through the use of meteorological elements, not as background, but as characters. The constantly oppressive fog and the dangerous red wind that rises from time to time to lock everyone inside the precarious safety of their homes develop a scenario whereby humans and the non-human realm are gradually forced into integration. Willingly or not, environmental degradation tears down the artificial and arbitrary walls set by Western modernity between humans and nature. This process of blending with the non-human forces characters, and vicariously, the readers to acknowledge the fantasy of our control over nature and invites us to embrace an unreliable present and 'an uncertain future where the fate of human and non-human societies seems to merge' (Caracciolo 2022, 89–90).

The two novels also problematise discourses on health, ableism, and normativity. They do so, too, through the direct or indirect mediation of nature and use generational differences as a means through which to emphasise its transitional condition. Yoshiro and *Pink Slime*'s protagonist, as representatives of a time before environmental degradation, are normatively able-bodied and healthy. In the context of general deterioration of nature and people, however, it is precisely their sturdiness that which stands out and is, to an extent, a rarity, an abnormality that Yoshiro in particular inhabits with shame. Mumei's altered body is a direct result of the damage done to the environment: his illness is defined by his body's inability to adapt and take part in the world that surrounds him, from food to weather. Since the source and the outcome are unknown, Mumei's disability can be read as a vehicle to process the uncertainty of environmental changes, particularly the epistemic inaccessibility of the climate crisis. Mauro's medical condition is so overpowering that it becomes his sole personality trait: he relates to others and to his surroundings primarily through this condition, which makes him vulnerable and requires constant supervision. However, in both cases, the people who appear to have issues with the so-called disabilities are not the ones afflicted by them but their respective

caregivers, who judge their circumstances from standpoints which balance genuine worry with a sense of shame and guilt. By contrast, Mauro and Mumei shift between a sense of awareness of their disabilities and a projection of transcendence that puts them in direct contact with their environment. This *décalage* between bodily difference and a refusal to respond to expectations that determine their disabilities enacts a powerful ecocritical approach. It also puts into question ideas of human agency and pushes the reader to accept limitations and embrace uncertainty (Alaimo 2008, 249–50).

Understanding bodies as vehicles for a journey to connect the human and the non-human through ideas of affect and integration of care is not necessarily an alien concept within Japanese epistemology. On the one hand, the framing of a Japanese cosmology as closely associated with nature has been exoticised in its academic treatment within Japanese studies. This is because it clashes with a Western positivistic view that still departs from an artificial separation between humans and nature that mirrors a subject-object relationship. However, beyond the decolonial benefits of plural positionality and against Western discourses on the exclusivity of nature and bodies that emerge from a transpacific comparison, as I have shown here, effective ecocriticism and ecocritical disability studies can help inform Japan's critical discourses without repackaging *nihonjinron* (discourses of Japanese exceptionalism) or other nationalist or nativist impulses.

Food and the crisis of consumption

The politics of food production, distribution, consumption, and disposal are layered through complex structures of power and inequality and operate across multiple dimensions, from individual choices to transnational markets. Indeed, as Tom Hertweck points out, food, forces us to reconcile positions that reveal our dependency on our material reality, that is, the need to appease hunger, with desires to transcend ideological pressures, for instance, an uneasiness against market inequalities or the sway of advertisement (2018, 134).

Emotional connections with particular dishes, cooked according to culturally or personally ingrained patterns of affection, learned or instilled, are balanced against a superstructure that we may or may not be aware of, but which remains inescapable. In the contemporary stage of late global capitalism, the structure that brings food to our plate in the Global North is predominantly resource-intensive, predatory towards ecosystems, and disproportionately impacts communities in the Global South and, within those, primarily women (Holz and Pavez 2022). That is, of course, when subjects are not faced with the pressure of scarcity or contaminated food. These conditions lead to the following questions: what is the affective role of food when its material reality becomes tainted and corrupted by human hands? Can nature remain nurturing

and caring when it can no longer provide nourishment? In essence, is it possible to provide care without food?

In the two novels, food plays an important role in describing the dynamics of caregiving and how such dynamics have had to adapt to alterations in the environment. The two key elements shared between Mumei and Mauro's circumstances are scarcity and toxicity. Food is framed within the dynamics of feeding children, an act that is presented as a challenge of management due to a lack of quality or quantity. It is also situated in a context of privacy, and in every instance, imbued with a sense of anxiety and apprehension. The affective dimension of food is notably absent in these novels. Mumei's body is unable to process food properly, so eating for him is an excruciating task. Mauro's condition transforms his relationship with food from one of enjoyment to one of distress and agitation, where he is only satiated when eating (2023, 197). Their two caregivers are seldom, if ever, shown eating, and therefore, their relationship with food is defined by the fact of it being an essential resource for the sustenance of those in their care. The narrator of *Pink Slime*, for whom food is forever associated with her mother and the lack of care received by her, severs her emotional ties with it. The reader is shown how the protagonist dispassionately accepts the scones made by her mother, only to promptly forget that they are in her pocket until they have turned as hard as rocks (2023, 96). She also recalls her mother forcing her to eat the pink blobs of nondescript meat when she was a child:

The pieces were swimming in a pool of mustard but I still refused to eat them and she forced them into my mouth. She dug her freshly painted fingernails deep into my cheeks and stuck the fork inside. I began to cry. That hurt, I said between sobs. I know it did, she said. Why? I shouted. Why? And she replied: because I'm your mother. (2023, 146)

Symbolically, her final act before leaving the city, after relinquishing custody of Mauro and confronting complete solitude, is to eat the cans of tuna she had previously foraged to share with him on her own. While doing so, she feels as if it is Mauro who is eating the food, and her body is transformed into a proxy for his never-ending hunger:

I took a can of tuna from my backpack, pulled the tap on the lid, and ate with my fingers. My hunger was an ache deep in my head and my bones that had silenced every other thought. When I finished slurping up the oil I threw that can into the river, which was as calm as a pond, its murky reddish foam lining the base of the seawall. The can floated for a moment until the water found its way in and dragged it to the bottom. I opened another. I chewed and swallowed, but it was Mauro eating, not me. Mauro swallowed and his stomach was grateful for a second before demanding more. (2023, 209–10)

The representation of food as scarce can be read as a means to reflect the likely problems of consumption that would occur within a degraded environment.

The global capitalist approach to food as a natural resource has hitherto prioritised the maximisation of production and the optimisation of distribution to sustain a system of ever-increasing demand, regardless of the capacity of any given ecosystem to support this model. It is, therefore, a system that makes food fit into a logic of consumption and commodification, rather than attempting to understand it as a source of nourishment or a vehicle for care. *Pink Slime* emphasises this tension through Mauro's medical condition. His perpetual hunger functions as an allegory for expansionism and extractive industries: he is not in control of his desire, and his affective bonds with nature are severed by an illusion of want that is not grounded in biological need. Mauro does not require the caloric intake he begs and cries for all day. He can only relate through the pleasure of eating, and this impulse overrides all else: the boy can feel no pain to any harm inflicted on him if food is the reward. As such, the narrator fears at several points throughout the novel that Mauro might even attempt to eat himself, a metaphor which works to critique the fragility of a system built on exploitation. His insatiable need for food blinds him to other forms of affection, and the protagonist is left to grapple with the conflicted emotions that arise from caring for someone in an environment that cannot sustain him. In the background, the looming presence of the new factory that produces nondescript meat called 'carnemás' ('Meatrite' in the English translation, the pink blobs that are sold as the remedy to scarcity), operates to devalue food, and with it, feeding as an act of care (2023, 83).

In contrast, food in *The Emissary* is surrounded by the constant spectre of toxicity. Although never directly addressed, and only ascertained through fears and suspicions which characters' express; the reader is nevertheless led to believe that the disasters of Yoshiro's generation have rapidly altered land, sea, and air to the point where nature in mainland Japan no longer provides the necessary resources for human nourishment:

Though Yoshiro had assumed that only babies without mothers were given formula, he now saw that all the mothers were bottle-feeding their babies. No breast milk was guaranteed to be safe, one of the nurses explained. Breast milk contained, along with its life-giving nutrients, a high concentration of poison. There was no cow's milk in the formula, either. (2018, 73)

Tragically, the same disasters have altered the genes of Mumei's generation so that their bodies are unable to process the food that this new environment, their environment, provides. *The Emissary* is peppered with domestic scenes of Yoshiro trying to feed Mumei different foodstuffs. In every instance, feeding takes a long time, it requires preparation, and although Mumei is patient and adaptable, being used to frugality and endurance, Yoshiro suffers and cries out in frustration:

Mumei's generation could never be deceived by such a silly trick, originally meant to fool children. No matter how they ate fruit, alarms went off throughout their bodies. When Mumei ate kiwi fruit he had trouble breathing; lemon juice paralyzed his tongue. And it wasn't just fruit. Spinach gave him heartburn, while shiitake mushrooms made him dizzy. Mumei never forgot for an instant that food was dangerous. (2018, 45)

Toxicity is thus something shared between food and the body via the environment. This constant blurring between that which is human and that which is non-human through the understanding which arises from food being potentially toxic augments our affective connection to our environments and the dangers of polluting them (Alaimo 2008, 264). Moreover, the idea of toxic bodies has had a strong connection with fights for social rights, particularly gender and sexual rights (Seymour 2013, 94).

Contemporary Japan is no stranger to discourses on toxicity, food, bodies, and the environment. Discrimination against the *hibakusha* stretches from the victims of the atomic bombs to the residents of Fukushima after the triple disaster of 11 March 2011. The fight for the recognition of the rights of victims of Minamata disease, where thousands of people died or became severely impaired by eating fish and seafood poisoned by industrial waste dumped into the sea by Chisso Corporation between the 1930s and 1960s, still stands as a clear example of the fear of the relationship between environmental degradation, toxic food, and Japan's industrial model. Japan's resource dependency and the pressures of global capitalism to ensure supply and demand chains harm or destroy sustainable food production and distribution models. Food sovereignty binds Japan and Latin America as two ends of a shared rope that has enough length to hang them both. Japan is, on the one hand, increasingly dependent on imports from a few countries (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2022) and Latin America, on the other, determines their agricultural production by the needs of global markets, leaving significant numbers of their own population without access to food of quality, while creating a devastating impact on the ecosystems of the region (Macaroff 2021). Put together, the connections between these two novels show a potential pathway to decolonising Japanese studies: they work to frame the role of Japan within this system of food sovereignty and its responsibility, both at the national level and towards the Global South, regarding food security and environmental degradation as well as the latter's responsibility to the same.

Conclusions

This article has presented two objectives. The first was to explore how speculative fiction that dares to imagine issues of environmental degradation exposes the enmeshed, rhizomatic, and entangled transformation that occurs to structures and practices of care when nature is altered in ways that either defy or

diverge from hegemonic hetero-patriarchal expectations. First, I have argued how transformations in gender roles, in this particular case, concerning care-giving tasks, are forced by a need to adapt to a degraded nature: when the environment changes, care does too. This raises the question of whether manifestations of care would have departed from the norm had the environment were not to change, delving into the links of correlation (though not causation) being explored within ecofeminism and ecocriticism. Second, I have explored how altered bodies can be read as gateways to connect affectively with the daunting prospect of an altered nature. Imagining the spaces of blending and erasure of borders with the non-human, especially animals, foments affective ties that introduce ideas of care to nonhegemonic logics. Similarly, the presence of bodies with disabilities offers the invitation to become more used to questions of uncertainty and to assume the limits of a sense of human agency. Finally, I have considered food as a device for the mediation of affect and care. Within the context of environmental degradation, food appears associated with ideas of scarcity and toxicity, bringing to the forefront challenges linked with food sovereignty and food security.

The second objective has been to explore a case of organically decolonial comparative literature based on the principle of exposing a North–South transpacific connection that can assist in imagining ways to decolonise Japanese studies without being lured by excessive discourses on self-referentiality. This paper demonstrates the possibility and benefits of discussing ecofeminism in a way that bypasses the pressure to erase the national or regional particularities that have inspired the literary texts, while also avoiding essentialist interpretations of them. A way to decolonise Japanese studies can lie in a similar formula: aspiring to diversify objects of study and the combination of comparative partners, but with the goal of addressing issues that concern agents and subjects who are epistemically and materially oppressed, like questions of environmental or gender justice, beyond Japanese borders. Such exercises in comparative literature reveal concrete transpacific resonances with policy implications. *The Emissary's* critique of Japan's neoliberal care model, over-reliant on privatised, household-based structures that have failed to address demographic challenges despite two decades of policy prioritisation (Soma and Yamashita 2011, 140), finds potential answers in Latin American shifts towards rights-based welfare frameworks that integrate climate mitigation strategies (Acosta, Picasso, and Perrotta 2018; Grugel and Ruggirozzi 2018). These cross-regional resonances suggest how Japanese gender studies might productively draw inspiration beyond traditional Global North interlocutors when reimagining care and problematising patriarchal structures. My work nonetheless reveals methodological questions that I have been unable to resolve. I will only mention two. The first one is the language gap. In order to create a bridge between Japan and Latin America, many specialists still

depend on English as lingua franca, both to access source materials or to disseminate research findings. The second concerns the state of the field. Ecocritical scholarship still needs to break free from its Eurocentric matrix and avoid the exoticisation or idealisation of the Other in ways that might breathe new life into old vices within area studies.

Finally, I want to offer some concluding thoughts regarding genre. The two novels offer up fictional dystopias based on the prospect of a degraded environment, but despite this scenario, they present glimpses of hope and use their settings not only to denounce the ills of our present but also to propose alternative solutions through alternative behaviours. Such hope, however, does not stretch to the extent where they could be considered solarpunk literature, which is a genre that ‘imagines new futures in the shadow of and in opposition to environmental change and collapse, then works to create those futures’ (Wagner and Wieland 2020, 14), for their utopian promise is short-circuited by the ambiguity of optimistic closure. This absence underscores the limitations of relying on traditional frameworks of agency and highlights the necessity of embracing more distributed, relational, and uncertain forms of care. Despite the bleak outcome of both novels, their display of alternative modes of care as a reaction to environmental changes opens up the possibility to think and project unconventional modes of relating with the self, others, and the non-human other. Seen through this lens, nonhegemonic care rises as a way to rethink dystopias as a potential source of hope and a laboratory for alternative modes of imagining relationships with each other and with the non-human that also integrates the struggle against socio-political and epistemic oppressions denounced by decolonial thinkers. Against bleak imaginings, dare to care differently.

Notes

1. Okinawa, now a rich and attractive region of Japan because of its supposed capacity to grow fresh produce, only accepts in the story married couples (both heterosexual and same-sex ones) and single women, excluding single men. Tawada makes the effort to point out that, in her vision of these policies, trans men are also allowed as an exemption if their transition happened after arriving to the islands (Tawada 2018, 47).
2. Animal hybridity also has a tradition in Japanese folklore, for instance in the shape of the kitsune, and it is identified as a trope that problematizes the borders between the human and nonhuman world while putting stress on the need of humans to recognize their responsibility in maintaining a stability with nature (Holca and Săpunaru Tămaş 2020, 8).

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