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Lost in Dystopia? Practices of Resistance in Japanese Speculative Fiction: Murata Sayaka's *Vanishing World* and Li Kotomi's *Celebration of Life*

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Anna Specchio

Thursday
2026-05-07
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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This presentation brings together two readings of contemporary Japanese speculative fiction to examine how reproductive dystopias negotiate the tension between biopolitical control and practices of resistance. Situated within the broader critical framework of twenty-first-century dystopian studies, and particularly within the tradition of critical dystopias that combine systemic critique with residual utopian possibility, both texts are read as interventions in ongoing debates around gendered governance, bodily autonomy, and the limits of liberal agency.

The first part focuses on Murata Sayaka's *Shōmetsu sekai* (*Vanishing World*, 2015), a speculative uchronia in which artificial reproduction has rendered sex obsolete, and the heteronormative family structure has been supplanted by the genderless, computer-regulated Eden System. Drawing on Foucauldian frameworks of discipline, biopolitics, and resistance, I argue that the novel's female protagonist enacts a form of sacrificial, instinctual defiance against a society that treats bodies as databases. Rather than a straightforwardly dystopian text, *Vanishing World* is reframed here as a reproductive utopia, a hybrid

form in which undisciplined bodies resist power.

The second part turns to Li Kotomi's *Sei o iwau* (*Celebration of Life*, 2021), a near-future narrative governed by a Consensual Birth System that relocates reproductive agency from women to juridically recognized fetuses. By drawing on Guattari's ecosophy, I show how the novel reconfigures rather than dismantles biopolitical hierarchies, encoding environmental precarity, parental identity, and heteronormative legibility into probabilistic metrics of anticipated happiness. Yet Li's text resists nihilism: through the protagonist's ethical acceptance of her fetus's refusal to be born, *Celebration of Life* articulates a counter-ethic of care grounded in relationality, non-proprietary kinship, and a reimagining of life as process rather than possession.

Read together, these two novels illuminate a shared preoccupation in contemporary Japanese speculative fiction: the entanglement of reproductive politics, algorithmic or bureaucratic surveillance, and the stubborn persistence of resistance – bodily, instinctual, or ethical – within systems that seek to foreclose it.



Anna Specchio is an Associate Professor of Japanese Language and Literature at the University of Torino, where she coordinates the MA Programme in Translation Studies. She is also a member of the board of the Interdisciplinary Center for Women and Gender Studies (CIRSDe) of the same University and of the Italian Association for Japanese Studies (AISTUGIA). Her research focuses on contemporary Japanese women's writing, with particular attention to representations of women, feminism, posthuman, dystopia and utopia. She edited 『現代女性作家読本② 村田沙耶香』(2024) and *Nel nome della luna. Origini, Rivoluzioni ed eredità di Sailor Moon* (2025). As a translator of Japanese literature into Italian, she has worked on authors including Sakuraba Kazuki, Hayashi Mariko, Matsuura Rieko, Kashimada Maki, Iwaki Kei, Ono Miyuki, Yagi Emi, Li Kotomi, and Murata Sayaka.

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