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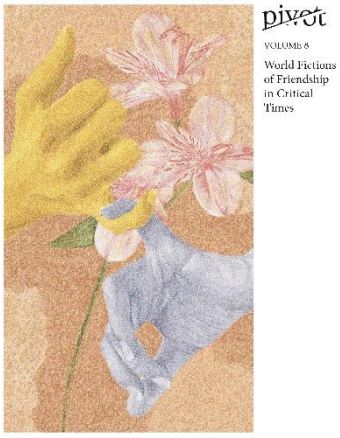

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Spoiled Friendships and Perverted Foods in Yōko Ogawa's *The Diving Pool*

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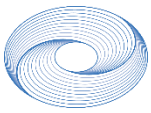
Abstract: This essay analyzes Yōko Ogawa's *The Diving Pool*, in which the woman characters' 'improper femininities' are expressed through the rupturing of commensality. Ogawa's protagonists cause direct harm to those around them as a direct response to patriarchal norms of motherhood and child-rearing, as the novel explores how patriarchal capitalism and alienation destroy possibilities for female solidarity.



This essay analyzes works of fiction by female writers that centre on commensality—the performance of sharing a meal—to investigate the way in which food and friendship can become perverted and twisted. In Japanese author Yōko Ogawa's *The Diving Pool*, all of the women exhibit some form of an "improper femininity" (that is to say, they are not stereotypical housewives and mothers). As a direct response to patriarchal male violence and its manifestation in particular food practices, the central figures of *The Diving Pool* use commensal moments to directly cause harm to others. In Ogawa's stories, food becomes a weapon wielded by characters to draw attention to themselves, cause harm to others, and disrupt patriarchal norms. Food is a hotly contested site of social meaning and is understood metonymically as a representation of the alienated body, making it rife with political commentary. As such, Ogawa's novel works through the politics of consumption to uncover the ways in which patriarchal capitalism and alienation destroy possibilities for friendship—and, in particular, female solidarity—as friendship operates as a pretext for violence and femininity gives way under the weight of sadism.

Ogawa's novel and the violence of her female characters are often repulsive to the reading public. One reviewer comments, "Well, if I ever want acid indigestion, I know just the book to turn to" (Kay), while others call the stories "disturbing, warped and lovely" (Teresa). It is certainly disturbing—intentionally so—and sits in sharp contradistinction to other works on sharing, love, community, and food (see Goldstein for examples). Ogawa's text attempts to grapple with and overcome the presuppositions made under dominant ideological structures. For the characters of *The Diving Pool*, sharing is often a deadly act that contains within it a seed of violence or rebellion.

Yōko Ogawa's *The Diving Pool*, written in 1990 and translated into English in 2008, consists of three novellas, "The Diving Pool," "Pregnancy Diary," and "Dormitory," that all revolve around female friendships and their dissolution by patriarchal capitalism.[1] Ogawa places these relational developments at critical periods in human life—first love, pregnancy, and marriage, respectively—which makes each narrative particularly tragic and visceral. These stages always remain unreachable, and the characters instead turn to cruelty and brutality. The deep psychological horror involved in these stories is, importantly, part of Japanese female writing that depicts the "horrific femininities of daily life" to subvert cultural norms of women as domestic, passive, and maternal (Ting). These women often depict situations of daily life—a girl with a crush on a boy, a woman taking care of her pregnant sister, and so on—but heighten the scenarios through a violation of their norms. Generically dramatic and narratively homodiegetic, they focus more on building elaborate scenes of

[1] Due to the ambiguous ending of "Dormitory," which focuses more on subverting reader expectations than on overcoming commensal norms in the narrative, this essay only analyzes the first two novellas.

everyday existence than on spectacular or magical scenarios. Simple plots with relatable scenery, it seems they find, lend themselves better to a destruction of the ideological underpinnings of those idyllic scenes. "During the 1960s, … Japanese society was experiencing a resurgence of the prewar 'good wife and wise mother' ideology" and therefore female writers depicted "female protagonists who were unapologetically bad wives and even worse mothers" in order to challenge "'commonsense' assumptions of motherhood as woman's 'natural' role and [attack] binary models of gender" (Bullock 2). The story must be read in this context—as a direct attack on, and attempt to subvert, those traditionalist understandings of womanhood. In particular, the theme of food recurs as a method of subverting norms of femininity—an act of caregiving, feeding another person (and especially breastfeeding) is perverted, often used to harm another female. These violent acts are explicable primarily as reactions to motherhood and other normative conceptions of female life.

In the first story, "The Diving Pool," the narrator, Aya, lives in a Christian orphanage run by her parents. Not being an orphan herself, she believes this fact has "disfigured [her] family," as she finds herself to be a neglected odd-one-out amongst the children (Ogawa 11). She is obsessed with a boy, Jun, who is a teenage orphan that lives with Aya's family. He is part of the diving team, and Aya goes to watch him, surreptitiously, at every practice. She has clear sexual interest in Jun despite their pseudo-familial connection, and this interest is paralleled by an increasing cruelty to another orphan, a toddler named Rie. She finds disturbing pleasure in hurting Rie, leaving her alone in order to make her cry and then further tormenting her by trapping her in an urn. Eventually, Aya feeds Rie a moldy cream puff in order to see what happens, and Rie becomes ill and has to be hospitalized. In the story's final scene, Jun approaches Aya after his practice at the titular diving pool and tells her that he knows both that she has been watching him and what she has been doing to Rie. Jun's nonchalance in their discussion, interestingly, offers Aya no solace. This final inversion—watcher becomes the watched, knower becomes known—destroys, for Aya, any potential for a relationship.

This story is frightening and jarring on many levels, as a young girl's sadism is related in such matter-of-fact and simple discourse that it seems almost inevitable. Aya's straightforward narration allows her to be open about her cruelty and other socially unacceptable feelings, while clearly feeling no sense of remorse or guilt. The story is eerie, a tone performed primarily through Aya's matter of wading through the world as fundamentally isolated and lonely. The first act that she says inspired her cruelty is an episode in which she mimics breastfeeding Jun by feeding him the juice from a fig branch. The "milky" maternal substance that flows out from the branch that she has broken off makes him move "like a baby at the breast," which immediately brings in Aya a "strange and horrible sensation," the beginning of her "cruel impulse" (Ogawa 10, 25). Aya finds herself sublimating her sexual desire through the prosthetic branch, directly connecting destruction and maternity—the breaking of the branch and the feeding of a baby—in a way that structures her relation to this feminized concept.

All of the female characters are hated by Aya. Her mother, for instance, is described as over-talkative to an annoying and neurotic degree. The only other girl at the orphanage that Aya could have a real connection with, named Reiko, is verbally abused by the narrator. Aya pokes and prods at her, constantly asking if her parents, both in mental institutions, want to see her (Ogawa 22). Aya's own perception of her failed family and her fear of motherhood preclude her ability to make connections with other girls, inciting and driving her cruelty to every interpersonal level. In many ways, sexuality and motherhood are intertwined in Aya's mind—forcing her to act violently towards the children present around her in order to thwart the possibilities of maternity that lurk just around the corner from eros. This produces a negative feedback loop in Aya, who resorts to progressively more and more violence over the course of her narration.

Eventually, Aya decides that torturing Rie is the only way to feel better and finds "comfort"

in making Rie cry (Ogawa 50). She traps her in an urn and feeds her a rotten cream puff, setting off a frantic series of events in which Rie eventually goes to the hospital—Aya says her mother clearly feels the situation is "almost thrilling," pointing to either Aya's own distortion of her mother or the terrible role models that perhaps produced her negative relation to feminine identity (Ogawa 41). Aya's personality is written in direct contrast to Jun, who is calm and collected in the face of emergency. Aya later wants Jun to "wash [her] clean" via his diving, as if a baptism by proxy. However, she begins to realize that all of her memories of Jun "began to cause [her] pain" once she thought of interactions beyond their childhood (Ogawa 41). Aya believes that the passage into adulthood will be traumatic, as it marks a shift in the connection that she personally has to motherhood—no longer a child, she now sees herself as the potential site of childbirth. Inasmuch as women are seen by Aya only in relation to others (and in relation to children, in particular), she finds that the only path to circumvent the transition into motherhood is through violence. "By bullying the baby, symbolically, Aya also attempts to extinguish her motherhood in herself. She bullies someone who is weaker and more fragile so that she would not wake motherhood in herself" (Yuko Ogawa 79). As a reflection of Japanese society more broadly, it is clear that the combination of gender roles and capitalist workforce norms—that is to say, the doubled labor that women face in everyday life—becomes unlivable. Ogawa's characters react to this discomfort by performing shocking acts of violence against the symbols of feminine norms, which has the unfortunate collateral consequence of destroying any chance of interpersonal relationships between women.

Children, mothers, and other women are, in Aya's understanding of patriarchal norms, ineluctably linked with oeconomics (that is, the management of the household). Inasmuch as mothers are therefore *chefs de cuisine*, food and the destruction of commensality organize the failures of friendships between women. Food is generally connected to nourishment and comfort, connections between families, and motherhood. Dirty food in particular takes on a cultural valence: "in a culture in which the cleanliness of food is sacred, the notion of feeding an infant a rotting cream puff would not just be mean-hearted. It would be sacrilege, an unthinkable transgression" (Woerner). Aya's use of food is therefore a violent response to the androcentric culture that, as a girl, associates her with cookery. Quite simply, her revulsion and cruelty to the signs of womanhood turn these norms on their head.

The second story of the novel, "Pregnancy Diary," continues many of the same thematic elements—the subversion of femininity and caregiving in favor of sadism and detachment. In this story, the unnamed narrator is a young college-going woman who lives with her newly-pregnant sister and her sister's husband. Each diary entry, written by the narrator, details the changes in habit and obsessions that occur in her pregnant sister. The sister becomes increasingly disgusted by food as her pregnancy progresses, and eventually stops eating almost entirely. The narrator and her brother-in-law buy only unscented products, cook and eat outside in the yard, and scrub the house clean of any smells or tastes that may offend the woman's morning sickness.

The sister, bordering on neurosis in the narrator's estimation, repeatedly visits the doctor for checkups. The hospital, a scene with strong nostalgic characteristics, is idealized by the narrator as a site of childish intrigue and play. "The narrator believed that the sister and herself shared the same identity as shōjo until her sister married and became pregnant. The sister's world is the closed space where no one else is welcomed. To the narrator, her brother-in-law is a disturbing invader to the sisters' world which is supposed to be exclusive to these girls" (Yuko Ogawa 88). Warped as the hospital is now to perform the functions of adult womanhood, the narrator becomes disoriented and disgusted by her sister and by the clinic. The friendship of shared girlhood is interrupted, according to the narrator, by the brother-in-law's intrusion into the female bond, and the eventual alien body of the fetus. "The narrator in her diary expresses her resistant reactions to her

transforming sister, who is about to completely grow out of being a girl." Her sister's pregnant body starts "to look like "a giant tumor"…Furthermore, the narrator starts to regard her sister as an "uncanny" being" with all of its connotations of abjection and fear (Yuko Ogawa 88). The narrator associates motherhood with disease and death—the death of girlhood and the death of self—and therefore seems to want to reverse time to before her sister's marriage, back to a time of girlhood.

Suddenly, the sister's morning sickness ends. Instead of being repulsed by food, she becomes obsessed with it, always having something in her hand and gaining weight at a rapid pace. The first food item the pregnant sister eats is a bag of two-year-old, potentially moldy, raisins that the narrator gives her (just as, in the first novella, Aya fed Rie a moldy cream puff). Later, through a serendipitous series of events, the narrator makes grapefruit jam—and pregnant sister becomes entirely preoccupied by this one food, demanding it at all times. The narrator, remembering a pamphlet that warned people against carcinogenic chemicals that are sprayed on grapefruits, specifically buys those fruits from overseas that the pamphlet warned against in a twisted attempt to deny her sister's transition into motherhood. The narrator's perspective warps, calling the jam "chemical" and the fetus just "the shape of… damaged chromosomes" (Ogawa 101, 102). In the final scene of the story, the narrator goes to visit her sister at the hospital where she has just given birth. She goes to the room, following the sound of a baby's cries, in order to "meet [her] sister's ruined child" (Ogawa 105). The language of toxicity worms its way into the narrator's perception of motherhood writ large, as she sees the adult female world as poisonous and virulent. Thus, her only response is to destroy the possibility of that future.

Over the course of the narration, it becomes clear that any chance of female friendship or solidarity between sisters becomes perverted and destroyed altogether by the end of girlhood and the patriarchal norms involved in marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth. The narrator does not congratulate her sister on the pregnancy, routinely expresses dislike for the husband, and writes that couples are "shapeless, colorless," and "unintelligible," things (Ogawa 64). Her sister, she says, is "trapped in a laboratory beaker." The fetus is "disturbing" to her, and she wonders if "the chromosomes in there were normal, whether the cocoons were wriggling somewhere deep inside her" (Ogawa 93). The baby, she says, "haunted the shadows that fell" between her and her sister (Ogawa 71). The fact of pregnancy makes ordinary discourse impossible. Put simply, the narrator has become alienated from ordinary human relations.

Her disgust for childhood, her perverse desire to 'ruin' the baby, and her abuse of food for these aims are all themes paralleled in the previous story. The narrators undercut traditional notions of female nurturing, caring, and maternalism, replacing them with torment and destruction. The displacement of the sister relation is precipitated by the appearance of the alien fetus, a clear mark of the end of girlhood. As a result, the narrator's deep sense of spite towards this incarnation of patriarchal ideology becomes externalized in the violence of carcinogens transmitted via grapefruit jam. Ogawa's fictions thereby emphasize "violence and rage as constant undercurrents in the lives of women trapped by ideals of domesticity," and her violent women "undermine conceptions of female passivity and male aggression" (Ting 552, 559). Her critique of conventional femininity inevitably means writing characters who take pleasure in the transgression of those norms, as violence forces the reader to reckon with patriarchal discourse that associates women with the private and maternal.

Ogawa's work revolves around the subversion of femininity and caregiving in favor of sadism and detachment. *The Diving Pool* deals with structures of belonging that are organized around food, and the interpersonal alienation intrinsic to patriarchal capital is made clear by the distortion of caregiving through spoiled and unsafe foods. Commensality is ruptured because of foreign intrusions that bring with them the specter of marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood that

disturb Ogawa's protagonists from their satisfaction in girlhood. And this is the endpoint—that this woman's writing is done in such a way as to be directly and intentionally political, in that it attempts to subvert patriarchal ideals through fiction. Ogawa writes sadistic women who destroy others, showing commensality and food relations generally as both sites of violence and as sites of alliance-building. Women in *The Diving Pool* use food in order to externalize their disgust and horror at domestic life and the commodification of women's desires and bodies. As such, Ogawa's work evinces a deep commitment to the unveiling of patriarchal relations and misogynistic ideology in favor of friendship and bonds of belonging.

J Lundquist is a first-year PhD student in English at Rice University, having just finished an MA in English at York University with a Master's Research Project focusing on the memoirs and poems of unconverted long-term prisoners from north Korea. Research areas include Gothic fiction, contemporary poetry, and classics (particularly Euripides), as well as north Korean literature and criticism.

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