The World and Japan in Murakami Ryū's *Kibō no kuni no ekusodasu*

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Today I'm going to talk about Murakami Ryū's novel, *Kibō no kuni no ekusodasu* (hereafter, *Exodus*).[1] This work was originally published serially in *Bungei Shunjū* between 1998 and 2000, and then compiled and published as a book in 2000. The story begins in 2001 and follows approximately eight-hundred thousand Japanese middle school students who stop going to school, form their own online communities, and start a variety of businesses under the ASUNARO umbrella. They use the money they've earned to purchase a vast stretch of land in Hokkaido where they start their own semi-independent city, Nohoro, complete with its own electronic currency, the ex.

Before I dive into my analysis here, I'd like to talk briefly about methodology. This project draws on strands of cultural theory such as Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities,"[2] Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma's "cultures of circulation,"[3] and Arjun Appadurai's five "-scapes."[4] These theories all conceptualize the circulation and consumption of images as processes that shape society. To quote Appadurai, all media, including literary texts provide

> a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live as they help to constitute narratives of the Other and proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies.[5]

Literature thus offers us tools to organize and think about the lived world around us. Today I'll be looking at the ways this work of literature presents the vast flows of images, people, and money that shape the world we live in to consider the following question: what material does it offer us to construct narratives and fantasies of the world around us?

There have been several attempts to theorize this work's titular exodus to Hokkaido, and I'd like to begin today by introducing three of them. The first two, both by Kuroko Kazuo, are a 2008 essay, "Anti-National

[1] Murakami Ryū, *Kibō no kuni no ekusodasu* (Tokyo: *Bungei Shunjū*, 2000).
[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. (London, New York: Verso, 2006).
[3] Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, "Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity," *Public Culture* 14, 1 (2002).
[4] Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2, 2 (1990).
[5] Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference," 331.

Identity in the works of Murakami Ryū, Inoue Hisashi, and Ōe Kenzaburo"[6] and a chapter, "The Cornered Children (Middle School Students)" from his book on Murakami's works, *Imagination Against "Danger,"* published in 2009.[7] Today I'm going to treat these two different essays as one work. While there are certainly differences between the two (and I bring them both up here, because various parts of each are useful to my argument in different ways), they make the same basic argument. While the 2008 essay emphasizes the anti-national impulse and a certain desire to construct a utopia across a range of texts, the chapter focuses more on *Exodus*. I believe reading them as one text can productively elucidate the two parts of Kuroko's argument.

Kuroko locates *Exodus* within a series of novels that includes Inoue Hisashi's *Kirikirijin* and Ōe Kenzaburo's *Dōjidai Gēmu*. These works take as their theme the construction of utopias that take the shape of "another country." Kuroko claims that "what these works have in common is a fundamental 'revolt' against and 'rejection' of this 'country,' this 'Japanese society' in which we live."[8] Kuroko also says these utopias are doomed to fail. Discussing another work of Murakami's *Hantō wo deyō* (translated as *From the Fatherland, With Love*), he writes that

> The sixty-four years of "peace and democracy" since the end of the war have sat side by side with the "dangers" symbolic of war. Without an awareness of that fact, no matter how many 'other countries' (utopias) we imagine within this country, they will all be for not.[9]

Lee Kenji offers a related critique in his essay "The Independence Novel."[10] Lee proposes the independence novel as a genre wherein part of Japan declares independence from the rest of the country. The genre initially emerged as a way to reflect Japan's "indirect rule by America,"[11] reached its pinnacle with Inoue Hisashi's *Kirikirijin*, vanished during the bubble era, and then reemerged in the 1990s in response to economic collapse and ensuing unease. Lee claims that through thinking about "independence" we can think about what it means to be "inside" and "outside" Japan, and what's at stake in being ruled by Japan.

Both of these critiques raise interesting questions about the status of the nation. Lee employs the "independence novel" as a way to question the often unconscious presuppositions we have about the nation, in

[6] Kuroko Kazuo, "*Gurōbaruka to nashonaru aidentiti—mirai no tame ni*," *Kanagawa Daigaku Hyōron* 59, 8 (2008).
[7] Kuroko Kazuo, "*Oitumerareta kodomo (chūgakusei) tachi*" in *Kiki ni kō suru sōzōryoku*. (Tokyo: Bensei shuppan, 2009).
[8] Kuroko, "*Oitumerareta kodomo (chūgakusei) tachi*" 256.
[9] Kuroko, "*Gurōbaruka to nashonaru aidentiti—mirai no tame ni*," 129.
[10] Lee Kenji. "*Dokuritsu shōsetu—sengo no 'naichi',*" *Hikaku Bungaku Kenkyū* 91 (2008).
[11] Lee, "*Dokuritsu shōsetu*," 70.

particular the frequently naturalized unities of ethnicity and language, and the geographical hierarchies that construct rings of privilege around the metropoles. Kuroko's analysis forces us to question the material conditions that enable the construction of the utopia, and the ways in which positive figures, such as hope and independence, emerge from the critique of the nation. However, I bring these essays up now to offer two points of criticism. First, both critics fail to historicize the the nation state itself. Instead of seeing the various works they analyze as responding to different historical moments, wherein the nation performs different functions and legitimizes itself through different means, they take the nation of Japan (at least as it existed since Japan's occupation by the U.S.) as a historical constant. Second, and this point is related to the first, by placing *Exodus* within a series of texts that perform the same function, both critics effectively dehistoricize this text as well. In other words, both construct a certain continuity at the cost of recognizing possible moments of rupture.

The first point probably doesn't need too much explication. It is no secret that since the 1990s, the figure of globalization loomed large in the world. Discussions of the flattening of the world, global villages, and the end of history were all in vogue. In academia as well, global formations of capital and power emerged as objects of study. All of the cultural critics I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation demonstrated in various ways that in the age of global, networked capitalism, the nation becomes just one node in the many systems of power that span the globe.

What's more, this transformation is very much reflected in the text of *Exodus*. Towards the beginning of the novel, the narrator, a freelance journalist named Sekiguchi, tells us that Japan's economy is failing.

> 2001 will probably go down in the books as the year foreign financial institutions started buying up Japanese businesses and land like mad . . . At some point the yen broke one hundred fifty yen to a dollar, and slowly, but unquestionably, began to fall. Then a good number of large city banks vanished, and the unemployment rate broke seven percent. There wasn't a day when depression didn't come up, but the sense that things'd work out somehow remained unchanged. Several of Japan's stronger businesses moved their main branches overseas.[12]

Within this work, the health of the nation is tied to international trade and finance. The borders of the nation are porous, allowing foreign money to flow in and Japanese businesses to move out. The yen's value is measured not in buying power, but by its value in international markets. This leads to a general sense of unease,

[12] Murakami, *Exodus*, 12.

as well as directionless hope. After all, what can the individual do in the face of this sort of global transformation?

Sekiguchi continues by claiming that, "Japan's last hope was establishing the Yen Economic Zone," a group of nations that would peg their currency to the supposedly safer yen, in hopes of stabilizing their national economies and increasing the values of their own currencies.[13] Recovery, too, hinges not on an internal process of increasing manufacturing output, improving education, or government spending on infrastructure, but rather on an external process coordinated across international lines.

A bit later, Sekiguchi adds that

> The Japanese of the 21st century have the same kind of complex the Japanese had over Americans after losing the war, but now they have it over the international "market" centered on Europe and America. Nowadays, no matter who you ask, the market is more admired than the Japanese government.[14]

According to Sekiguchi, the postwar inferiority complex has been deterritorialzed from the concepts of national identity or culture and been transformed into a problem of international economics. What's more, this is not the astute observation of a well-informed reporter. He also tells us at a different point in the novel that "Even in the newspapers and on TV, people pointed out the end of the Cold War and appearance of the world market made the concept of the nation fade."[15]

It's thus a bit curious that both Kuroko and Lee neglect to comment on this transformation, and implicitly construct an image of the nation as an essentially static entity by focusing on the continuities and similarities of the works they analyze. This leads me to my second criticism: the fact that they fail to historicize *Exodus* specifically. While this book is epic in scope, and there are certainly other productive ways to read this text, today I will focus on the representation of information technology—specifically the way it is imagined in relation to the nation and the world economy—as a way to place this text more soundly within historical context.

To that end, I'll turn to Japan's *Annual Economic Report for the Year 2000*. Its title is hopeful: "A New

[13] Ibid., 12.
[14] Ibid., 32.
[15] Ibid., 254.

World Begins."[16] This "new world" refers specifically to two closely related "transformations" taking place in Japan. The following year would bring the 2001 Central Government Reform, which would whittle down twenty-two ministries to twelve. While this was sold as an attempt to streamline the government and make it more transparent, it also had the not-so-secret goal of cutting public sector jobs by twenty-five percent over a decade.[17] But this governmental reorganization is presented as a secondary change. It is "changes in the world" which "demand organizational reform" of the government, and this government reform is but an attempt to "respond to qualitative changes of the economy."[18] Again, we see Japan not as a central power shaping the world, but as an agent that acts in response to the global economy. The global economy in turn is seen to have its own agency, to which Japan can only respond.

According to this report it is information technology that is driving economic change. Furthermore, this transformation is different from any economic transformation of the past: "the current development and spread of information technology is different in course and character from the technological revolutions repeatedly brought on by modern industrial society." While industrialization brought standardization and mass-production, informatization brings a new human element: "the technology to mediate between people."[19]

This difference is important for it is considered the cause of Japan's economic stagnation. Too used to the modern, industrial system, Japan "fell behind during the process of informatization [because] we couldn't fully change the systems, customs, and social images produced by standardization and mass-production."[20] The changing economy demands not just a reorganization of the government, but the construction of new subjects, systems, customs and images of its own. Information technology thus offered both the carrot and the whip. If Japan could capitalize on it, there would be renewed growth; however, failure promised further economic stagnation.

In this report, technology will not only determine Japan's role on the global *economic* stage, but is also charged with cultural meaning.

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[16] Economic Planning Agency (EPA), 2000, "Annual Economic Report: A New World Begins," Tokyo: Economic Planning Agency.
[17] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014, "Gist of the Central Government Reform," accessed September 10, 2017. http://www.mofa.go.jp/about/hq/central_gov/gist.html
[18] EPA, "A New World Begins."
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

> If we can develop [uniquely Japanese information technology], we can build a new society in this information age, different from those of Europe and America. We can construct a Japanese-style knowledge-based society. It is even possible that this society will be accepted not only in Japan, but also the world over, as a new world culture.[21]

Technology offers not just the possibility for economic growth, but a cultural renewal. And through this process of building a "new culture," Japan could potentially find a new space for itself within global culture.

Kuroko and Lee do not spend much time on representations of technology in *Exodus.* Lee hardly raises the subject at all. He touches on the internet briefly in his summary of *Exodus*, writing that the story's "middle school students gather in cyberspace and begin their own autonomous lives."[22] The internet's role in the story goes without any theorization or interrogation. Kuroko similarly touches on technology in his summary of the story, but actually dismisses the internet as nothing more than a convenient plot device. When comparing *Exodus* to Inoue Hisashi's novel, *Kirikirijin,* he claims that the only reason one uses the internet and the other does not is "whether or not empirically it served the structure of the story."[23]

In what follows I will examine the way technology, nation, and economy are tied together within this text. We shall see that it is in fact the skillful use of information technology that allows the ex-middle school students of *Exodus* to organize and profit. However, their relation to the nation of Japan is very much ambivalent. While they do succeed at reinvigorating Japan's economy, they do so by challenging and changing national systems.

This ambivalence towards Japan as a nation is obvious from their earliest ventures. The networks the youths produce connect indiscriminately across local, national, and international levels. When they first combine their various message boards to create a single, nationwide network, they repurpose a set of codes created by the Ministry of Education to monitor their computer networks, and use it as a tool to verify users are actually middle school students. At the same time, they buy their server space from a company in California. They exploit an immanently national system, and connect it to a foreign one. We can see this sort of bricolage at work in most of the work they do. Their first few work corporate ventures involve dispatching film crews around Japan. The first company they work with produces programs about amateur performances across Japan

[21] Ibid.
[22] Lee, "*Dokuritsu shōsetu,*" 81.
[23] Kuroko, "*Gurōbaruka to nashonaru aidentiti—mirai no tame ni*," 259.

and sells them to Japanese satellite TV companies. The second, the Belgian news company Vltava that employs a worldwide network of migrants to capture footage from around the globe. While these children do make use of objects that could be considered national or Japanese when it's useful to them, they also connect directly to international flows of capital. They succeed, as the economic report urged, in connecting the uncertainty brought by technology with greater possibilities, hope, and challenges. However, Japan does not serve as a privileged site to articulate this transformation. It is merely part of the reality they react to.

There are also moments in this text where the actions of ASUNARO are directly antagonistic towards the nation of Japan. I'd like to look at two such moments. These scenes are interesting because they play with a set of disjunctures in the way we think about and define the nation state. Several entities often considered definitive of the modern nation state—the economy is the paradigm case here, but the media and politics should also be included—are often perceived as independent agents that act separately from the nation itself. That is to say these entities are often imagined as out of control of the citizenry of the nation, while at the same time defining the nation itself. In these scenes where technology forces the national into conflict with the international, we see something interesting happen. These entities so often imagined as possessing their own agency are reinscribed within the control of ASUNARO.

First, I'd like to look at what's potentially the largest swindle in the novel. Towards the beginning of this presentation I mentioned that there were hopes to start a Yen Economic Zone. Japan succeeds in convincing several other countries—China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Malaysia, and Indonesia—to participate. They establish an Asian Monetary Fund and a Yen Economic Zone Committee, and the countries outside of Japan peg their currencies to the yen. Soon after, a report is published by a San Francisco based digital magazine called the Sky Tribune claiming that China's population has been massively underestimated.

> According to a trustworthy source, China's population passed two billion in 1998. It was said that China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has data to confirm this as well. American navy reconnaissance satellites have confirmed the presence of large villages in the arid northern region and grasslands south of the Yangtze river. Cargill, the world's largest producer of grain estimates based on it's own satellite images that China's grain output may fall below 70% of last years. It is predicted that China's population problem will have a large impact on the world grain market.[24]

[24] Murakami, *Exodus*, 270.

As you can see from this long quote, China's population is positioned here as a global problem, and this is soon reflected in the global economy. The value of Chinese stocks plummets, and people begin selling Chinese yuan. The Chinese markets close, but not before dragging down markets in Hong Kong and Singapore. People begin selling Hong Kong and Taiwanese dollars, and Korean wan, as well. The Bank of Japan does nothing because the yen doesn't seem to be getting targeted by short-sellers. But then it does. The value of the yen also comes crashing down and the Nikkei Index follows suit. For the members of the Yen Economic Zone this chain of events materializes as a catastrophe. Sekiguchi describes the TV coverage as "having the same force as a broadcast about a typhoon, or earthquake, or volcanic eruption."[25] It's a disaster, and one that can't be easily squared by the action of the nation. This sort of financial disaster is only possible because of an uneven but global dispersion of information technology. It required satellite imaging, as well as a digital magazine to produce the story. The shock then spread through financial institutions conducting trades and sharing information through their own communication networks. The very limits of what is national and what is international, what is private and what is public seem to fade in the face of an event like this.

A few days later there comes another report.

> Early June 8th major American news outlets including CNN and the Washington Post published a report by an internet news agency concerning the population of China. The report estimates China's population is between 1.4 and 1.47 billion, contradicting a previous report by the globally known San Francisco based magazine Sky Tribune which claimed the population was over 2 billion. The new report has been deemed reliable.[26]

This report was assembled by Vltava with the help of ASUNARO, the news company started by the middle school drop outs. In other words, ASUNARO appears here as a global player capable of influencing the economy of not just Japan, but the world over.

Now, when I began telling this story, I described it as a potential swindle. While this is never confirmed, the Financial Times later runs an article suggesting that ASUNARO could have staged the entire financial crisis by planting the article in the Sky Tribune. Given their financial and news distribution network, it wouldn't have been impossible. And if they leveraged yen to buy yuan and Hong Kong dollars when they were cheap, they could have made between 5 and 10 trillion yen. If this story is true ASUNARO can not only "influence" the

[25] Ibid., 278.
[26] Ibid., 296.

global economy, but, at least under the right conditions, actively control it. The economy at least temporarily goes from being an independent agent, to a space through which ASUNARO displays its own power and influence.

Now, I'd like to discuss one of the most famous scenes from this novel. The same day that ASUNARO and Vltava's joint report on the population of China is released, Pon-chan, one of the leading members of ASUNARO speaks at the Diet Budget Committee on behalf of the middle school students who have stopped attending school. Because he's worried about being arrested, he does not go in person. Instead, several members of ASUNARO set up a screen at the Diet, and he teleconferences in.

This scene is discussed regularly because Pon-chan gives a few highly quotable lines. One in particular, "Japan has everything, except hope" is brought up in almost every commentary on this novel. But what I'd like to discuss is seldom mentioned. These Budget Committee meetings are usually only broadcast by NHK, and thus can't be seen by the rest of the world. ASUNARO, under the guise of visiting NHK's facilities to discuss a possible future collaboration, set up a system to remotely access their control center. They hijack the broadcast, and send it to news media throughout the world. This transforms what should have been a Japanese media event into a global one, and in so doing reveals Japan's position within this global system.

Upon learning of the broadcast hijacking, the entire budget committee freezes. "None of the members tried to ask questions, and everyone, including the chairperson was struck dumb from surprise. No one knew what to do."[27] Unsure of how they'd be judged abroad, Japanese politicians could do nothing. By forcing them onto a global stage, Pon-chan effectively neutralizes the power of the Japanese government.

Sekiguchi goes on to say that this hijacking was probably calculated because Pon-chan and his group knew it would have this freezing effect not only on the Budget Committee, but the Japanese media generally.

> They probably took over NHK's operation center and sent the feed to the foreign media because they knew their influence. The Japanese media couldn't criticize Japanese people or organizations recognized by foreign media. Those people and companies are automatically removed from Japanese media's standards of judgment. They either have to put their name in *katakana* to show that the person's outside the Japanese frame, or ignore them. Either way, they have no standard to judge or criticize them. They've never needed that standard.[28]

[27] Ibid. 390.
[28] Ibid. 333-4.

The Japanese media is revealed, like Japanese politicians, to be ineffectual in the face of global pressure. All they can do is reject or ignore what they fail to understand. What's most interesting about this is the reason behind the perceived ineptitude. It stems from an inability to judge the international. By being internationally and technologically savvy, Pon-chan and ASUNARO can manipulate the media and politicians alike.

But there's another trick to this. The foreign media likes Pon-chan. "To the foreign media always complaining about how incomprehensible Japanese politicians, bureaucrats and economists are, Pon-chan's group seemed fresh. They probably thought that the modern, western communication style they preached was finally picked up by Japan's middle schoolers."[29] Thus, this is not only a critique of the Japanese powers that be, but also an appeal to international powers. It's a sort of advertising. And it has real economic consequences.

> BBC and CNN played Pon-chan's talk on their evening news. There were also [. . .] segments suggesting what kind of companies ASUNARO would work with in the future . . . The stock prices of the companies discussed on BBC and CNN went flying.[30]

Their broadcast hijack serves not only as a way to demonstrate the ineptitude of Japanese politicians, but also as platform to capture funding for ASUNARO's own business ventures. While, on the one hand, they critique Japan, on the other hand, they also manage to direct flows of international profit and attention to their own businesses, which effectively "saved" the Japanese economy. Here we see two conflicting images of Japan. The one that can only speak into the country, and a new one, produced specifically for an international stage. There's a powerful ambivalence here. By exposing the weakness of the powers that be—powers that are considered immanently Japanese—they save Japan.

At first glance, this whole process maps quite neatly onto the work of cultural theorists I mentioned earlier who have discussed the rise of international capitalism and the decline of the nation state. To give just one example, Lee and LiPuma write in their essay, "Cultures of Circulation" that contemporary finance capitalism "constitutes a new stage in the history of capitalism, in which national capitalisms that were created from the seventeenth century through the concluding decades of the twentieth are being simultaneously dismantled and reconstructed on a global scale." Here we can recall both the building up of the Yen Economic Zone in an

[29] Ibid., 317.
[30] Ibid., 317-8.

attempt to solidify regional currencies, and also the crisis which almost sunk it. We can also project into the background those who profited off of this crisis. They go on to say that "The effect [of this dismantling and reconstruction] is to subordinate and eventually efface historically discrete cultures and capitalisms and to create a unified cosmopolitan culture of unimpeded circulation."[31]

But this unified cosmopolitan culture never materializes in *Exodus*. Instead, by moving to Hokkaido ASUNARO attempts to take control of their own relation to both the global economy and the Japanese economy. When Pon-chan first discusses the possibility of moving to Hokkaido and starting their own independent community, he explains to Sekiguchi that "We've come to understand a bit about the market. It's a place to communicate desires, and just like air, or a virus, it penetrates everything and destroys the communities that were there before. It makes the morals and rules of those communities meaningless." In response to this, ASUNARO's members begin to imagine their own community. One without the winners or losers that "a liberal economy always produces."[32]

In order to accomplish this feat, Nohoro must establish economic and energy independence from Japan. Nohoro issues its own bonds, backed by a bank owned by ASUNARO. Now, normally we're told, cities in Japan can't do this because no one would buy them. However, Nohoro's bonds are immediately given a triple A credit rating, allowing the city to refuse national subsidies. They also immediately construct two-hundred windmills—enough to produce approximately twenty times the base energy they need for their city. They created a fund for NGOs and NPOs recognized by Nohoro, and any business or individual who contributes to it has the amount they contribute deducted from their taxes. They even offer to pay income tax for small businesses who contribute just two percent of their income to the fund. Nohoro becomes a sort of ethical tax haven and a symbol for what we might call now "green" or "ethical" consumerism.

What I'd like to emphasize by way of conclusion is that this network is always in process of becoming, and constantly reorienting itself within the global market. Towards the end of *Exodus* Sekiguchi and his partner Yumiko visit Nohoro. During dinner, Yumiko asks their guide, Sekiya, about the future of their currency, the ex. She answers openly that "there are some scary bits." Controlling the amount of ex in circulation is

[31] Lee and LiPuma, "Cultures of Circulation," 21.
[32] Murakami, *Exodus*, 359.

incredibly difficult. Furthermore, Asunaro is planning facilities in Kunigami and Nagano. There's so much demand for ex at the moment, people are even willing to pay unfair rates to buy it. Of course, there's talk of potentially issuing bonds based on the ex to maintain its value, and allow it to grow without becoming a target for speculation. The conversation ends with Sekiya saying, "I don't know what will happen when we come to that."[33]

While some critics may see Nohoro as a utopia, we must at least qualify that it is a utopia always coming into being. There are no formulas to respond to the global flux we are all in. To close with a quote from another critic, Aoki Keishi,

> If there remains something like an answer after reading this book, it is the fact that every individual must accurately grasp their own current 'reality,' think up a 'real' way to manage it, and carry that into action. It has been a long time since we've lost models like the 'parent' or 'god' on which to base our actions.[34]

While this may seem a frightening conclusion on the one hand, we should also see in it the hopeful message that the world is ours for the making.

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[33] Ibid., 413.
[34] Aoki Keishi, "*Matorikkusu no tatakaikata*," *Nihon Daigaku geijutsu gakubu kiyō* 40, 7 (2004): 88.

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