

Absent Mothers, Constructed Families and Rabbit Babies

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1. In biographies of Japanese writer Kanehara Hitomi (b. 1983) included in the English language translations of her work, commentators unerringly proclaim that Kanehara's brilliance was evident from the moment she famously left home at an early age to pursue a career in literature. Kanehara was eleven when she stopped attending school. The repeated claims in these biographies of her rebellious brilliance, in addition to constant emphasis on her youth (Kanehara was 20 when she first gained recognition as an author), and *Gyaru* (lit. 'Gal' or 'Girl') fashion style, contributed to the 'girl from the streets' discourse that accompanied the advertising campaigns for both the Japanese and English editions of *Hebi ni piasu* (Snakes and Earrings),^[1] and the English language translation of *Oto fikushon* (Autofiction, 2006, trans. David James Kawashima, 2006). However, while these biographies occasionally suggest that part of Kanehara's early success is due to her 'literary translator father'^[2] (after leaving home, Kanehara would send him manuscripts for editing) no mention is made of Kanehara's mother.
2. For the most part, and in parallel to the real-life commentaries related to her fiction, Kanehara's early work is characterised by the conspicuous absence of conventional mothers or maternal figures who nurture children in the manner expected of the normative mother. In this article I seek to foreground the ideal of the 'absent mother' in Kanehara's works. This absence takes two main forms: absence as a result of omission or rejection, as in works such as *Hebi ni piasu*, *Oto fikushon*, *Asshu beibi* (Ash Baby, 2004) and *AMEBIC* (2005);^[3] and absence that is the direct result of a renunciation of the social role of motherhood on the part of the protagonist/s, which is visible in Kanehara's 2011 novel *Mazazu* (Mothers).^[4] In the rare instances that mothers and/or maternal figures are present in Kanehara's narratives—often even in instances in which these women are biological mothers—they are more akin to the evil stepmothers or weak-willed women from the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm than stereotypical, nurturing figures. Indeed, in all of Kanehara's works written before 2011,^[5] the 'nuclear' family unit of two parents and child/ren is largely non-existent or fractured to the point of being unrecognisable. We will see that in the absence of a maternal or mothering figure that complies with the hegemonic demands of good wife and, particularly, wise mother, Kanehara's protagonists surround themselves with families of their own making, often constructed from an assortment of girlfriends and lovers.
3. Although she has rarely featured as a model to emulate in the writing of Japanese women authors, the good wife/wise mother, denoted by the maxim *ryosai kenbo*,^[6] has been the most persuasive social paradigm for women in modern Japan. From the Meiji Period (1868–1912) to 15 August 1945—the end of the Pacific War, Japanese women were required to nurture and care for the sons of the empire. These sons were the imperial subjects of the future who would, according to the role stipulated in the Meiji Constitution (which rendered women invisible), pay taxes and serve in the military. Furthermore, the good wife/wise mother was confined to serving her father-in-law, husband and son. She therefore had little leisure and certainly no time for smoking or drinking in the back streets of Tokyo. In resonance with the 'virgin/whore' duality found around the world, good wives and wise mothers were to be objects of purity who repressed their desire and who engaged in sex only for reproducing imperial sons and dutiful daughters. While *ryosai kenbo* was a pre-war paradigm, scholars writing in both English and Japanese

note that its influence lingered into the late-twentieth century,[7] if not until the present day. We will see that Kanehara's protagonists, as well as their absent mothers, reject this ideal in its entirety.

4. Such is the pervasive nature of the marketing strategy surrounding Kanehara's debut and later works that a review of the English language translation of *Oto fikushon* states that it is 'a mild disappointment to discover that writers like Kanehara, and [author] Yoshimoto Banana (b. 1964) before her, are the privileged offspring of literary and academic parents' and not 'gifted, world-weary delinquents hailing from the tough public housing estates of east Tokyo.' [8] In an interview published in the journal *Bungei shunju* shortly after she received the Akutagawa Prize in 2004, Kanehara confided that while she often stayed home from elementary school, Grade 4 was the year that she stopped attending classes altogether. Following this, she spent her days at home or waiting for friends to finish school so that they could go shopping or sing karaoke together. It was not until Kanehara spent a year living in San Francisco with her father that she started reading contemporary Japanese literature by authors such as Yamada Eimi (b. 1959) and Murakami Ryu (b. 1952). Upon returning to Japan, Kanehara refused to attend middle school and would occasionally attend her father's university tutorials where he would look over her literary attempts. [9] However, while Kanehara sometimes spent all night away from home partying with friends, in no way was she living 'rough' on the streets of Shinjuku or Shibuya as suggested by the various marketing campaigns that have promoted her novels.
5. It is important never to read too much into similarities between the lives of authors and the fiction they write (a relationship that, as will be discussed further, Kanehara herself parodies in *Oto fikushon*). It is nevertheless impossible not to infer that the experiences of Kanehara's Tokyoite protagonists are derived to some extent from her own life. Indeed, in an interview with the Japan Foundation in 2014, Kanehara notes that she 'can't create characters who are totally alien' to her; something which the author sees as both a weakness and a strength. [10] The protagonists of both *Hebi ni piasu* and *Oto fikushon*, Lui [11] and Rin respectively, leave home before they reach the age of majority (20 in Japan) to drift instead between a string of clubs, karaoke boxes [12] and boyfriends' houses. Aya, the protagonist of *Asshu beibi*, lives in a share house (a 'room share apartment') with a friend from university, while the protagonist of *AMEBIC* lives on her own in an apartment in an undisclosed Tokyo location. In some ways, Tokyo is as much a part of these early narratives as the protagonists' disposable boyfriends and Gal fashions.
6. In the same *Bungei shunju* article in which she recounts dividing her days between wandering the Tokyo streets and periodically returning to her parents' home, Kanehara mentions her mother a scant three times. Each mention reads as little more than a begrudging platitude along the lines of '[and then I did such and such] and of course this worried mother.' [13] Kanehara's refusal to attend school, which resulted in a bond with her father, seems to have resulted in an 'enduring conflict' with her mother. [14] We are given the sense that, at least from Kanehara's point of view, her mother is a vaguely ineffectual person, more worried about the outward appearance of Kanehara's school refusal and not the young woman's wellbeing in and of itself. We might draw some comparisons to Rin's mother in *Oto fikushon*, a figure whom we only glimpse briefly during the last chapter of the novel set when Rin is 15 years old.
7. *Oto fikushon*, Kanehara's third novel, is separated into four chapters set in chronologically reverse order —'22nd Winter,' '18th Summer,' '16th Summer,' and '15th Winter.' At first reading it is easy to pass Rin off as yet another young Japanese woman protagonist with a tenuous grasp on her sanity. In the first section we are introduced to 22-year-old Rin, a successful author sitting next to her husband, Shin, as they fly home from their honeymoon in Tahiti. In the space of a few paragraphs, Rin spirals from radiant newlywed, to an anxious woman who suspects that her new husband is having sex with one of the flight attendants, to a depressed failure convinced that wiping away her own existence (through death by plane crash) is the only solution to her current despair. The chapters that follow depict an origin story told in reverse order that takes us back to when Rin was 15. As one reviewer of the English language translation puts it:

We are introduced to Rin, the successful and married author; then we see the bimbo who barhops through Tokyo, dependent on the measly handouts of men in exchange for sex; then the secondary school girl who's determined to drop out; and finally the troubled 15-year-old dependent on painkillers and [anti-]depressants. [15]

While there is more to the story than suggested by this cursory, if not flippant, review, these comments are largely representative of the general reception of *Oto fikushon* in both Japanese and English commentary.

8. We meet Rin's mother and father in the last chapter of the novel entitled '15th Winter.' Rin is at her (parent's) house attempting to retrieve medication so that she can return to her current boyfriend, Kitty. [16] Through the fog of the anxiety attack that occurs as Rin confronts her parents, we are introduced to two adults obviously at their wits end as to what to do with their daughter. [17] Rin's father is portrayed as the central pillar of the household—despite (or possibly even because of) his numerous extramarital affairs. This image of patriarchal authority is further enforced when Rin's mother asks her husband for permission to unlock the front door in order to let their daughter in. Rin's own father has locked the girl out of the house. Her mother is depicted as the same sort of vaguely ineffectual and constantly worried woman as the image created by Kanehara of her own mother in the *Bungei shunju* interview above. According to Rin, who's reliability as a narrator decreases as she slips deeper into her panic attack, the only reason her mother would open the door is to stop the neighbours from becoming curious or annoyed. [18] It is an act driven purely by a desire to save face rather than to help her daughter. In the ensuing confrontation between father and daughter, Rin's mother is strangely absent—reduced to nothing more than a crying, hand wringing, shadow in the background.
9. With the similarities between the characterisation of Rin's mother and that of Kanehara's own mother as presented in by the author in *Bungei shunju*, not to mention the novel's promotion of the 'girl from the streets' discourse, it might be tempting to read *Oto fikushon* as an autobiography that feeds on the confessional nature of the *watskushishosetu* or I-novel first person narrator genre. Indeed, some print-runs of the novel released in Japan sport a stylised photo of Kanehara's lower face and neck on the cover, [19] creating the impression that the novel is indeed to some extent about the author herself. However there are clues throughout *Oto fikushon* that Kanehara is in fact playing a clever game with her audience, perhaps mocking or even punishing those reviewers and readers who draw too many similarities between her early life and the narratives of her first two novels: *Hebi ni piasu* and *Asshu beibi*. These parallels, which continue to dog Kanehara in articles and interviews published under titles such as 'Barbie Doll Who Shocks,' [20] were first drawn when Kanehara attended the Akutagawa Literary Prize award ceremony with bleached blonde hair wearing a short dress and multiple earrings. The 2014 Japan Foundation interview, too, describes the author as wearing 'countless piercings in her left ear' before stating that 'earrings, alcohol, and cigarettes are standard features in almost all of her novels.' [21] While a rundown of the author's wardrobe for a particular interview, such as her 'silver Gucci sandals,' [22] makes sense when included in a fashion or gossip magazine, English language articles and book reviews continue to present Kanehara's novels in terms of her appearance. Thus she is described in one interview as the 'school girlish,' 'pretty,' 'childish' 'embodiment of all those enduring male fantasies of [the] ideal Japanese woman,' replete with 'native submissiveness, ornate femininity and girlish sexuality.' [23]
10. The game that that Kanehara is playing becomes evident when the title, *Oto fikushon*, is explained in the first chapter of the novel entitled '22nd Winter.' Here, Rin is approached by an editor who asks her to write a work of autofiction. The editor explains:

In short, it's an autobiography-style fiction. A work of fiction that gets the reader suspecting that it's actually an autobiography. After reading your short story set in the plane, I thought you might be interested.

[Rin replies:]

Are you asking me to write about my childhood in the sanatorium? [24]

From this brief passage readers who are familiar with the mechanics of autofiction are told all that they need to know in order to unlock the rest of the novel. The term autofiction refers to a form of contemporary French genre fiction and was coined in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky to describe his novel *Fils*.^[25] Since in autofiction 'there is a deliberate element of fictionality,'^[26] the reader in the know immediately realises that in real life Rin has never been a patient in a sanatorium. Her willingness to engage in this kind of storytelling as soon as her editor brings up the notion of autofiction hints at Rin's unreliability as a narrator of 'real life.' Rather than falling under the banner of the autobiographical *shish osetu*, autofiction (*Oto fikushoni*) represents a 'calculated attempt to go beyond and fatally unsettle the autobiography.'^[27]

11. Rin's editor's mention of the 'short story set on a plane'^[28] in the context of autofiction suggests that the opening scene—in which a husband and wife return from a honeymoon in Tahiti—may well be a work of Rin's imagination. Indeed it may be, in fact, that both the plane trip and the character of Rin's husband, not to mention the rest of the novel, are little more than Rin's autofiction. It could be that the narrative about Rin (or Rin-as-narrator) actually ends with the close of the first section, before the novel moves into the work of autofiction that Rin-as-author completes for her editor. I would suggest that the only 'reliable' information that Rin-as-narrator relates is the scene in which she is at her computer typing, her 'fingers and nails striking the keyboard' making the only sound in the room.^[29] Rin is alone in this scene, working quietly with only a 'silent dog' on the couch for company.
12. In her discussion of Kanehara's earlier novel, *AMEBIC*, Rio Otomo notes that the author's writing protagonists have a habit of secluding themselves in a 'room of her/their own' similar to that of Virginia Woolf.^[30] Rin's husband, if in fact he ever existed outside of the short story set on the plane, has left after Rin (reportedly) requested a divorce. In the absence of a blood family, Rin constructs one by surrounding herself with (the memories of) a number of boyfriends and lovers—firstly her husband Shin, and, as the text moves backwards in time, Shah, Kazu, Gato, 'the guy from work,' Kitty and Hiro—in addition to a group of girl-friends. While Rin's lovers are quickly replaced by equally neglectful and/or abusive partners, Rin's friends Kana and Ran make consistent appearances through the last three chapters of *Oto fikushon*: '18th Summer,' '16th Summer' and '15th Winter.' This loosely formed coterie of girls who skip school, drink, dance and party together is reminiscent of the writings of Yamada Eimi (b. 1959) and the various sororities that feature in her novels. Of particular interest are the similarities between Yamada's 1989 collection *Hokago no kinoto* (After School Keynotes, trans. Sonya L Johnson, 1992) and the later sections of *Oto fikushon*.
13. This similarity is not surprising given that Kanehara has openly acknowledged the literary debt she owes to Yamada Eimi, and in particular, *Hokago no kinoto*. In the postscript to the 2004 soft cover edition of Yamada's *Himegimi* (Princess), for example, Kanehara explains that *Hokago no kinoto* was the first book by Yamada that she had ever read.^[31] It is a text, Kanehara explains, that she has returned to and re-read multiple times. While acknowledging that the 'freshness' of the stories may have disappeared, Kanehara notes that each time she reads *Hokago no kinoto* she nevertheless experiences narrative in a different way—skipping over some parts, pausing over others and finding elements that she did not notice or had not understood during previous readings.^[32] Like Kanehara's protagonists, Yamada's also reject their blood families, preferring instead to surround themselves with their own constructed families. *Hokago no kinoto*, like many of Yamada's other collections of short stories, feature narratives that are coming-of-age stories in which young women dance their way through 'spiralling' patterns of desire, satiation and loss as 'lovers meet, gaze, touch, kiss, make love, eat, drink, smoke and part.'^[33] Similarly, Kanehara's protagonists drift into sexual liaisons without conscious deliberation of either cause or consequence. Protagonists such as *Oto fikushon*'s Rin, *Hebi ni piasu*'s Lui, and *Asshu beibi*'s Aya spend their days (and nights) in the Tokyo precincts of Shibuya and Shinjuku, drawn moth-like from provincial cities such as Saitama to the bright city lights.

14. Much has already been written on the representation of Japanese youth in Kanehara's narratives.^[34] Her early stories are set in a dystopic Tokyo that is the reality for many young Japanese. In the face of this bleak reality, the primary concern for Kanehara's protagonists is to 'locate new modes of sensation that will lift [them] out of a generalized post-bubble anomie.'^[35] Indeed Lui's exclamation in *Hebi ni piasu* that: 'I can't believe in anything; I can't feel anything. I can only feel alive while I'm experiencing pain'^[36] could almost be seen as a banner cry for each of the protagonists in the writer's early works.
15. *Asshu beibi*, Kanehara's second novel, depicts what is arguably one of the darkest corners of Kanehara's Tokyo. As with Rin and Lui, the protagonist has surrounded herself with a family of her own construction and choosing, which is radically removed from her natural/natal parents. Aya lives with a friend from university: a young man named Hokuto. While the pair maintains a tenuous friendship, there is no romantic relationship. Aya is in a relationship with Murano, a man who works at the same company as Hokuto. Despite Murano's cold demeanour, Aya is eventually able to entice him into marriage. Like many of Kanehara's early protagonists, Aya inhabits a liminal position on the fringes of society as a nightclub hostess. Numbed by this existence, Aya's only coping mechanism is self-mutilation, namely cutting and stabbing the flesh of her own thighs.^[37] This is a practice she shares with other Kanehara protagonists including Lui and the protagonist of one of Kanehara's earliest short stories, 'Banpaia rabu' ('Vampire Love,' 1999).^[38]
16. When Aya finds Hokuto masturbating in front of a newborn baby girl, her immediate reaction is to leave the scene and turn to self-mutilation.^[39] Rather than demonstrating an instinctive maternal response and swooping in to save the baby, Aya retreats to her own room. No mention is made of where the infant came from—Aya supposes that Hokuto kidnapped her—nor of what happens to the child, although it is implied that she is further abused. Later, when Hokuto tries to force himself on Aya, she holds him off with a knife before presenting him with a pet rabbit that he later bestialises.^[40] This is one of the earliest—and one of the darkest—mentions of a child or children in Kanehara's work. The other occurs in *Hebi ni piasu* when Lui delights in terrifying a child she sees as she walks through the streets of Tokyo.^[41]
17. Neither Aya in *Asshu beibi* nor Lui in *Hebi ni piasu* have any interest in being mothers or taking on a maternal role. Their reactions to the children around them—to avoid or to terrify—may well be the result of animosity between the young women protagonists and their own mothers. While neither text gives any specifics, this is something which can be inferred from the conspicuous presence of 'absent mothers' in both novels.
18. *Oto fikushon* builds on many of the tropes that Kanehara established in her debut novel, *Hebi ni piasu*. *Hebi ni piasu* tells the story of 19-year-old Lui, a young woman living in Tokyo, and her relationships with two 'obsessively unstable' young men: a young punk with a split tongue called Ama, and a tattoo artist known as Shiba.^[42] Kanehara refers to this work as 'the novel she had to write.'^[43] Lui has no permanent job and no relationship with her parents. In place of a nuclear family, she swings between the two men and, despite being in a live-in relationship with Ama, she frequently sleeps with Shiba at his tattoo shop. The three are further linked by the dragon tattoos that each sports—two of which are Shiba's work as a tattooist. The trio continues in this manner until Ama mysteriously disappears. After Ama's mutilated corpse is discovered, Lui finds herself living with Shiba. There are eerie similarities between Lui's relationship with Ama and her relationship with Shiba (and indeed, to some extent between later Kanehara protagonists and their lovers). In each case, when Lui enters into a live-in arrangement with one of the men, it is with no apparent forethought or active decision on her part. Similarly, when both men are suspected of committing murder, Lui takes steps to protect them from discovery and possible arrest. However, while her relationship with Ama ends when he dies (possibly at the hands of Shiba), Lui's relationship with Shiba undergoes a significant change when she eventually refuses to submit to his sadistic advances.
19. The murders that Ama and Shiba commit can be directly linked to both men's need to possess Lui under

the guise of protecting her. Ama murders a gangster who molested Lui as the couple walk through the night streets of Tokyo. His anger can be read as a reaction to the thought of the thug hurting or touching Lui. Shiba's violent torture and murder of Ama occurs on the very same day that he, Shiba, proposes to Lui with a ring that he has created. Lui is still dating Ama when Shiba makes his offer prior to the discovery of Ama's body. [44] The first time that Shiba and Lui sleep together Shiba states that if Ama breaks up with her, she will automatically become 'his girl.' [45] By murdering Ama, Shiba removes his main competition for Lui's affection. Furthermore, Shiba's rape of Ama can be read as his attempt to possess and replace any traces of Lui that remained on Ama. The rape takes place largely 'off screen,' [46] although it is foreshadowed when Lui daydreams about Ama and Shiba sleeping (consensually) together and referred to after the fact. [47] Lui asks Shiba to pierce and tattoo her as a paying customer. Shiba later burns, pierces, sodomises and sounds Ama, [48] repeating while escalating, to a fatal degree, the processes carried out on Lui's body.

20. Lui inadvertently sums up both Ama and Shiba's need to possess her when she observes that 'possession can be such a hassle, and yet we are still driven by the desire to possess people and things.' [49] While Ama and Shiba engage in a range of acts to possess Lui, with both ultimately committing acts of murder, Lui is equally invested in protecting the two men. As noted above, Lui takes steps to ensure that neither man will be convicted for their crimes, becoming in the process an accessory to murder. Lui dyes Ama's distinctive red hair an ash blond and makes him wear long sleeved shirts to hide his dragon tattoo. [50] She later commands Shiba to grow out his hair to hide the dragon tattoo on the back of his skull and urges him to choose a different incense for his studio after the distinctive brand that he uses is linked to Ama's death. [51] While Lui has rejected her own family, she is fiercely protective of the family she has made for herself. Her repeated attempts to insulate Ama and Shiba from the consequences of their actions by virtually bullying them into changing their hair and clothing style are almost, but not quite, maternal.
21. It should be noted that the individual mothers of each protagonist are not the only maternal figures absent from Kanehara's work. For example, while Lui meets Ama's father when she attends the younger man's funeral, no mention is made of his mother. And in what might be read as another twist to the absent mother theme, in the final pages of *Oto fikushon* it is revealed that 15-year-old Rin is pregnant. She is taken to a clinic where she has an abortion. Excluded from the decision of whether or not to keep the child, the narrative ends (begins) with Rin sinking deeper into drug dependency, and despair. The possibility of Rin's being a mother was over before it even began.
22. In the 2011 novel *Mazazu*, Kanehara introduces three young mothers whose children all attend the same kindergarten. These women are not the dignified 'wise mothers' of the *ryosai kenbo* doctrine; becoming a mother has not miraculously 'repaired' Kanehara's fragile, self-harming protagonists, and each young woman in this novel has more in common with Lui or Aya than with the passive, submissive women valorised in narratives of ideal maternity. The novel switches point of view between the three women—author Yuka, housewife Ryoko, and model Satsuki. Unlike *Oto fikushon*, in *Mazazu* the possibility of young motherhood is realised. Rather than focusing on the 'joyous' and fulfilling nature of 'motherhood' advertised in glossy women's magazines, however, *Mazazu* foregrounds both the 'happiness and terrible loneliness' associated with being a mother. [52]
23. While the imperial pressures to produce sons capable of defending the nation may no longer apply, today's young mothers in Japan are at the mercy of equal and perhaps more immediate social pressures, sometimes even from other mothers. This is especially the case with young woman who, like Kanehara's mothers, follow the *gyaru*, or Gal, culture. These 'Gal mothers' have spent the majority of their lives being judged for the behaviour that Kanehara's protagonists revel in. Nevertheless, as *Yan mama* (lit. young mamas or *yanki* mama), they also face the judgment of their peers and are pressured to conform by maintaining a certain weight, making a good impression at their first 'park debut,' [53] and by not 'selling out' to the more respectable image of Japanese motherhood. The young women in

Mazazu do not necessarily reject 'motherhood' per se. Instead they attempt to partake in the rituals of *yan mama*-hood while struggling also to maintain their Gal identity.

24. Kanehara never adopts a didactic tone, or one that makes overt social critique, preferring instead to leave readers to make their own inferences. The *Mazazu* text, nonetheless, very much suggests that the mythical social norms of motherhood/mamahood far transcend what is achievable by the average young Japanese woman who, once she becomes a mother/*mama*/*maza*, is denied the right to personal leisure time or any pursuits of pleasure. It may be tempting to dismiss Kanehara's young women protagonists, as Mark Driscoll implies in his discussion of *Hebi ni piasu*, as narcissistic products of an aggressively neo-liberal regime.^[54] We can, however, also read their actions as resistance by soon-to-be adult woman who remain snared in the web of residual good wife, wise mother discourses that refuse their right to a personal identity. And we must remember that there has always been the demand on young women assuming motherhood in Japan to put away 'childish' things, including the youth and freedom of the Gal or shojo. This is in spite of the fact that similar demands are rarely, if ever, made on young males. It should not be surprising therefore that, instead of feeling fulfilment and satisfaction, Kanehara's young mothers are plagued by a terrible sense of loneliness and isolation.
25. Each of the three mothers depicted in Kanehara's 2011 novel have their own personal struggle which, in spite of their best efforts, they are often unable successfully to overcome: Yuka is addicted to prescription medication which she uses in an attempt to maintain a semblance of balance in her life; Ryoko escapes from her young child into a private room; Satsuki struggles to maintain a long-distance marriage with her husband while conceiving and giving birth to her lover's child. Each of these women's narrative arcs showcases and further develops tropes found in Kanehara's earlier work. Yuka's addiction and work as an author is reminiscent of the addiction and writing habits of *Oto fikushon*'s Rin and *AMEBIC*'s nameless protagonist. Ryoko's locked room recalls Otomo's invocation in her discussion of Kanehara's narratives of Woolf's 'room of one's own.' In these narratives, the locked room originates with Shiba's locked tattoo parlour first seen in *Hebi ni piasu* as he pierces the meat of Lui's tongue. It is echoed in *Ash beibi* in the form of Aya's private room where she hides both from the abhorrent acts of Hokuto and from the world at large. Regarding Satsuki's multiple partners, we are already familiar with the bed-hopping ways of the Kanehara protagonist as displayed previously by Lui, Aya and Rin.
26. It could be argued that *Mazazu*, by its very title, disproves the premise of this article, which is that mothers are only represented in Kanehara's work by their repeated absence and that these 'absent mothers' are later replaced by 'constructed families' of the protagonists' own choosing. Yet, while they may be biological mothers, these young women refuse to comply with the motherhood norms that Japanese society continues to insist on for women who give birth. It should be noted that despite the novel's title, the protagonists' own mothers are once again conspicuously absent and/or overlooked. Furthermore, none of these young *Mazazu* are part of a 'traditional' family unit.
27. Kanehara is in actuality the mother of two young girls.^[55] In the wake of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami and the resulting Fukushima nuclear disaster, the writer fled Tokyo with her then four-year-old daughter. At that time she was in the final months of her pregnancy with her second daughter. In order to 'protect' her daughters, Kanehara opted to stay with her grandmother in Okayama, a regional city far removed from the bustle of the greater Tokyo metropolis.^[56] The author currently resides in France with her children. She notes that in her new environment removed from the 'stresses' of Tokyo, she is doubtful that she will be able to create characters such as Lui and Rin.^[57]
28. *Mazazu* heralds a new era in Kanehara's work. Her protagonists have matured from waifish schoolgirls and university dropouts to young mothers. While her early protagonists reject their families choosing to replace them with constructed coteries of friends and (ex)lovers, the protagonists of *Mazazu* have literally produced their own family—albeit one that is fractured and fragmented in the sense of the traditional Japanese 'ie'-style extended, patriarchal family or the more 'modern' nuclear archetype.

Furthermore, it appears that Kanehara's conflict with her own mother remains unresolved and she has not sought to 're-write' this relationship in her novels. It remains to be seen what shape the 'constructed family' will take in Kanehara's future works. Indeed, it may be that these constructed families, seen as fragments or abstractions of traditional family structures, will become the norm; as resplendent in their imperfection and transience as the images that appear in a kaleidoscope.

Notes

- [1] Kanehara Hitomi, *Hebi ni piasu* (Snakes and Earrings), Tokyo: Shueisha, 2004; trans. David James Karashima, 2005.
- [2] Kanehara Hitomi, *Autofiction*, trans. David James Karashima, London: Vintage 2007, fly page, (Tokyo, 2006).
- [3] Kanehara Hitomi, *Oto fikushon* (Autofiction), Tokyo: Shueisha, 2006; trans. David James Karashima, 2008; Kanehara Hitomi, *Asshu beib&\$299; (Ash Baby)*, Tokyo: Shueisha, 2004. The title of *AMEBIC* is given as an acronym for 'Acrobatic Meism Eats away the Brain, it causes Imagination Catastrophe.' See Kanehara Hitomi, *AMEBIC*, Tokyo: Shueisha, 2008, front cover.
- [4] Kanehara Hitomi, *Mazazu* (Mothers), Tokyo: Shinchosa, 2011.
- [5] In 2011 Kanehara left Tokyo and eventually moved to France. The period of her debut in 2004, until 2011, can therefore be seen as the first phase of Kanehara's career.
- [6] See Koyama Shizuko, *Ryosai kenbo to iu kihan* (The Moral Code of *Ryosai Kenbo*), Tokyo: Keisei Shobo, 1991.
- [7] For English language commentary see Muriel Jolivet (for example Muriel Jolivet, *Japan: The Childless Society?*, London: Routledge, 1997. Koyama Shizuko *Ryosai kenbo to iu kihan* gives a definitive discussion in Japanese.
- [8] Stephen Mansfield, 'Sordid scenes from a dark cracked city,' *Japan Times*, 8 June 2008.
- [9] Kanehara states that one of the reasons she refused to attend school was that the uniform was so ugly, she would 'rather die' than wear it. 'Jusho intabyu: Futoko to pachi-suro no hibi ni chichi ha—Kanehara Hitomi' (Prize Winner Interview: What does Father think of Your Days of Truancy and Pachinko Machines—Kanehara Hitomi). *Bungei Shunju* 38(4) (March, 2004): 320–24.
- [10] Kawakatsu Miki. 'In their own words: Interview in Paris with Kanehara Hitomi,' *Japanese Book News* 81 (Fall 2014): 16.
- [11] I have decided to translate ?? as 'Lui' as opposed to 'Rui.' This is due to the character's self-identification with the brand label 'Louis Vuitton' (*Lui/Rui buitton* in romaji).
- [12] While karaoke in the west is often performed on a stage in front of an audience at a pub, bar or club in Japan karaoke is generally performed in a small room or 'box' hired by the hour.
- [13] See 'Jusho intabyu,' pp. 321–24.
- [14] [Angela Neustatter](#), 'With a rebel yell.' *Guardian*, 30 May 2005. Online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/may/30/japan.fiction> (accessed December 2012); See also 'Jusho intabyu,' pp. 321–24.
- [15] [Ted Mahsun](#), 'Tokyo's darker side,' *The Star*, 30 March 2008. Online: <http://www.tedmahsun.com/2008/03/review-autofiction-by-hitomi-kanehara.html> (accessed 8 January 2017).
- [16] Karashima's translation. Kitty's name in the original is given as ????? 'Nyanko,' a childish word for 'cat' or 'kitten.'
- [17] See Kanehara, *Autofiction*, pp. 191–96.
- [18] Kanehara, *Autofiction*, p. 191.
- [19] For example, see the 2009 Shueisha soft and hard cover editions.

- [20] 'Barbie Doll Who Shocks,' *Straits Times*, 6 November 2008, p. 49.
- [21] Kawakatsu, 'In their own words,' p. 16.
- [22] 'Sakka Kanehara Hitomi ga 'dekiru made' (Author Kanehara Hitomi Does Her Best), *Web and Publishing* 81 (December 2007): 8–17.
- [23] Nuestatte, 'With a rebel yell.'
- [24] Kanehara, *Autofiction*, p. 49.
- [25] Serge Doubrovsky, *Autobiographiques: de Corneille à Sartre* (Autobiographies: From Corneille to Sartre), Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988, p. 69 cited in Claire Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France*, Oxford: Legenda, 2007, p. 18.
- [26] Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies*, p. 17.
- [27] Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies*, p. 18.
- [28] Kanehara, *Autofiction*, p. 49.
- [29] Kanehara, *Autofiction*, p. 63.
- [30] See Rio Otomo, 'A girl with her writing machine,' in *Girl Reading Girl in Japan*, ed. Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, pp. 130–42.
- [31] Kanehara Hitomi, 'Kaisetsu' (Commentary), In *Himegimi* (Princess), Tokyo: Bunshun, 2004, pp. 254–61, p. 254.
- [32] Kanehara, 'Kaisetsu,' p. 254.
- [33] Nina Cornyetz, 'Power and gender in the narratives of Yamada Eimi,' in *The Woman's Hand; Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing*, ed. Paul Gordon Shalow and Janet A. Walker, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp.425–60, p. 429.
- [34] See Rachel Di Nitto, 'Between literature and subculture: Kanehara Hitomi, media commodification and the desire for agency in post-bubble Japan,' *Japan Forum* 23(4) (2001): 453–70; and Mark Driscoll, 'Debt and denunciation in post-bubble Japan: On the two *freeters*,' *Cultural Critique* 65(Fall 2007): 164–87.
- [35] Driscoll, 'Debt and denunciation,' p. 182.
- [36] Kanehara Hitomi, *Hebi ni Piasu* (Snakes and Earrings), Tokyo: Shueisha, 2004, p. 45.
- [37] Other modes of body modification that reoccur throughout Kanehara's *oeuvre* include body piercing, tattooing, (self) starvation or food refusal, wrist cutting and skin branding.
- [38] 'Jusho intabyu,' p. 322
- [39] See Kanehara Hitomi, *Asshu beibi* (Ash Baby), Tokyo: Shueisha, 2004, pp.61–63.
- [40] This is somewhat reminiscent of Murakami Ryu's *Piasshingu*, Tokyo: Gentosho 1994 (this is particularly evident in the cover of the 2007 Penguin translation by Ralph McCarthy) and Kanai Mieko's *Usagi* (Rabbits) Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1976; 'Rabbits,' trans. Phyllis Birnbaum, in *Rabbits, Crabs, Etc: Stories by Japanese Women*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1982, pp. 2–17.
- [41] The child that Lui frightens bursts into tears as a result of Lui's dour face as she decides that she wants to 'live recklessly' leaving nothing but 'ashes' in a world that she describes as 'dark' and 'dull,' where 'the sun doesn't shine and there are no love songs.' *Hebi ni piasu*, pp. 45, 46, 77; *Snakes and Earrings*, pp. 43, 44, 80.
- [42] '130th Akutagawa Prize, Autumn 2003: *Hebi ni piasu* (Snakes and Earrings) by Kanehara Hitomi.' Online: http://www.jlit.net/reviews/akutagawa_prize/akutagawa_reviews_125-143.html (no longer available).

[43] Nuestatte, 'With a rebel yell.'

[44] Kanehara, *Hebi ni Piasu*, p. 86; Kanehara, *Snakes and Earrings*, p. 89.

[45] Kanehara, *Hebi ni Piasu*, p. 42; Kanehara, *Snakes and Earrings*, p. 40. This interaction occurs when Lui goes to Shiba's tattoo studio to finalise the design of her tattoo. Somewhat chillingly Shiba elaborates: 'But if we did get together it would be with marriage in mind.' Could it be that Shiba starts plotting the murder of his 'friend' (and thus the possession of Lui) from this very moment?

[46] This is also the case in the 2005 film adaptation of the novel. Watanabe Peko's 2004 manga adaptation shows the rape in a single page spread, but uses it as an allegory mixed with the *momento mori* motifs found in Shiba's tattoo and piercing shop throughout the manga. See Kanehara Hitomi and Watanabe Peko, *Hebi ni Piasu: Pricking Pain Surrounds Us* (Snakes and Earrings: Pricking Pain Surrounds us), Tokyo: Queen's Comics, 2004, p. 188.

[47] Kanehara, *Hebi ni Piasu*, p. 39; Kanehara, *Snakes and Earrings*, p. 36. While Lui thinks that Ama and Shiba together might be 'quite beautiful' she is later horrified at the idea of a stranger, some other 'guy' raping him Kanehara. See *Hebi ni Piasu*, p. 107; Kanehara, *Snakes and Earrings*, p. 11.

[48] Sounding or urethral sounding is the act of inserting items into the urethra, usually glass or metal rods but in this case incense sticks. Kanehara, *Hebi ni Piasu*, p. 107. Sounding also occurs in the work of other Japanese authors, most notably Yamada Eimi whose novel *Hizamatsuite ashi wo o name* includes a scene in which a client at a BDSM club begs the novel's protagonists to sound him using an old calligraphy brush, all the while calling out for his (step)mother and the club's Mama san. See Yamada Eimi, *Hizama zuite ashi wo o-name*, Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1988; Amy Yamada, 'Kneel down and lick my feet,' in *Monkey Brain Sushi: New Tastes in Japanese Fiction*, ed. Alfred Birnbaum, partial translation by Terry Gallagher, Tokyo, New York and London: Kodansha International, 1991, pp. 187–204, p. 202.

[49] Kanehara, *Hebi ni Piasu*, p. 79.

[50] Kanehara, *Hebi ni Piasu*, pp. 47–52.

[51] Kanehara, *Hebi ni Piasu*, pp. 107–10.

[52] '[Dai 22 kai Bunkamura Deux Magots bungakusho jusho sakuhin](http://www.bunkamura.co.jp/bungaku/winners/22.html)' (22nd Bunkamura Deux Magots Literary Prizewinning Work), Online: <http://www.bunkamura.co.jp/bungaku/winners/22.html> (accessed April 2013).

[53] This refers to mother and baby's first outing to the local park to meet other young families from the area. A failed park debut could result in ostracism well into the child's schooling. See Yan mama comic,' in Frederick L Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*, Berkeley: Stone Bridge, 1996, pp. 127–31.

[54] See Driscoll, 'Debt and denunciation.'

[55] '[Kanehara Hitomi san: Hoshasen shinpai, kodomo no tame ni Tokyo kara Okayama he](http://ameblo.jp/seikatu0777/entry-11049596146.html)' (Kanehara Hitomi: Worried about radiation, from Tokyo to Okayama for the sake of [her] children), *Mainichi Shinbun*, 16 October 2011. Online: <http://ameblo.jp/seikatu0777/entry-11049596146.html> (accessed 5 January 2017).

[56] 'Kanehara Hitomi san.'

[57] See Kawakatsu, 'In their own words,' p. 16.

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