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**Virtual Genfūkei:
The Internet as Origrinary Landscape in
Three Born-Digital Literatures**

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Rachel Glassford

Digital folklorists and ethnographers have engaged with the advent of the internet age in various ways, but few scholars have approached the internet from the perspective of literary analysis to address its function as a fictional setting. This dissertation addresses that gap by applying literary critic Takeo Okuno's genfūkei (originary landscape) theory to three works of born-digital fiction, all written and set during the early-Post-Internet (the period between the Dot Com Boom and the 2018 repeal of network neutrality regulations in the United States). Genfūkei proposes a fictive-remembered system of nostalgia whereby the personal and collective memories of a work's creators and readership fuse, forming a literary trend that unites portrayals of a particular landscape and presents this setting in a specific way, underpinned by specific ideas (often misconceptions) about a particular time and place in the past. This conceptual framework emphasizes the high degree of interactivity between literary or cinematic text and the public imagination; it is similar to theories of artistic nostalgia put forth by media critics Frederic Jameson, Mark Fisher, and Simon Reynolds, whose writings are here used in recontextualizing Okuno's work in regard to the internet-as-place. A comparative close reading of three born digital literatures reveals common themes, rhetoric, and framing devices possibly indicative of widespread perceptions of the early-Post-Internet period shared by millennial creators. Moreover, the practical application of Okuno's genfūkei concept demonstrates that the originary landscape can appear in a given text as both feature and mode in addition to its uses as an analytical tool; thus, critics are advised to exercise caution when using this terminology in future applications of Okuno's theory. Finally, the results of this study suggest that the early-Post-Internet period has been mythologized as a frontier, using the language and archetypes associated with the frontier myth.

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INTRODUCTION

Genfūkei, most often translated as *originary landscape*, is a framework of analysis created by literary critic Takeo Okuno in the early 1970s for the purpose of discussing issues of nostalgia as tied to setting in fiction. Since its inception, the term has been used both in subsequent literary criticism and in writing about space/place theory — human geography and urban planning in particular. Most notably, the genfūkei framework has been applied to various pieces of adult contemporary fiction that deal heavily in themes of childhood nostalgia and memory. That being said, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the internet as a primary setting in literature, even though the lens of genfūkei could be used to analyse literature dealing with digital and/or virtual places in addition to physical ones.¹ The first generation of youths who truly “grew up on the internet” are now adults who are publishing their own stories about childhoods spent online. Genfūkei, as it is deeply concerned with psychogeography in fiction, is an ideal framework with which to analyse and explore these stories.

In his treatise on the subject, Okuno (1972, 45) makes three qualifying claims about the originary landscape as it appears in literature: that originary landscapes are depicted as classless (in reference to a lack of obvious classed signifiers and limitations), spontaneous (in reference to a lack of predictability within the narrative), and interrelational (in reference to the connections between protagonists and their surroundings, and between settings and their constituents). If these are Okuno’s key criteria for identifying the originary landscape in texts with *offline* settings, it follows that these criteria could also help scholars and literary critics to identify the originary

¹ In some cases, especially in older texts, the word “internet” is routinely capitalized. I have chosen not to capitalize it on the grounds that it is a common noun rather than a proper noun, in the same way the word “chair” refers to a specific category of household object but not any one particular chair. In cases where I refer to the internet as part of a proper noun phrase, such as a title or specific name, the word is capitalized.

landscape in texts with *online* settings — and moreover, could help them further understand the role fiction and cultural notions of space/place play in continually informing and constructing one another, with particular regard to how the internet appears in both public memory and literature. The value of Okuno’s theory lies in the claims he makes regarding how nostalgia, location, and style (whether prose or verse) come together to create the originary landscape in literature, and what sort of misconceptions can be construed by the artifact of nostalgia produced.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research questions concern how digital and/or virtual settings are reflected in fiction published about and during the period between the dot-com boom of the late 1990s and the end of net neutrality regulation in the United States in the late 2010s. First of all, does the internet qualify as an originary landscape in these literatures? If the internet does indeed constitute an originary landscape for millennial authors, how are digital locations being represented now, through the rose-tinted lens of nostalgia and the transformative properties of fiction? This dissertation project aims to answer these questions by way of literary analysis, using a case study made up of three “born-digital” (originating online) works of fiction which feature the internet as their primary setting.

The central conceits of this dissertation are that *genfūkei* as a literary *theory* can be applied to non-Japanese fiction, that *genfūkei* as a literary *feature* appears in such fiction, and that *genfūkei* as a literary *mode* characterizes digital or virtual settings as well as geographical ones in fiction.

BACKGROUND

The term and accompanying theoretical framework were created by Takeo Okuno (1926–1997), who, during his lifetime, was one of Japan’s foremost literary critics. Today, he remains a little-known figure beyond the country’s borders, due in large part to the disinterest of translators. Nevertheless, Okuno’s work left a long-lasting impact on the Japanese literary scene. Born in Tokyo, Okuno studied at the Tokyo Institute of Technology before pursuing literature seriously. In 1984, he was among four authors to be awarded the esteemed and short-lived Hirabayashi Taiko Literature Prize for his work *Between Constructions* or 間の構造 (“Ma no Kōzō”) in the category of criticism. In 1995,

two years before his death, Okuno received a Medal of Honour from the Japanese Government, its ribbon awarded in purple to signify a momentous contribution to academic and/or artistic development in his field. The precise character of the literary developments to which Okuno purportedly contributed are the subject of some discussion: his first major and undoubtedly most well-known work, *Originary Landscapes in Literature*, makes up the central topic of this dissertation project; but otherwise, Okuno is remembered for having opened doors for women writers in the post-war period and beyond (Bardsley 2006, 66).

Neglected by translators and biographers alike, the emerging image of Okuno materializes from short essays, single chapters, and fragments of criticism translated into English by academics remarking or extrapolating upon his work. This image is one of Okuno as politically conscious, as wholly devoted to understanding the complex entanglement of legislative and civic events with developments in art and culture. The Okuno that emerges is a staunch advocate for women writers but not a feminist, a sociopolitical spectator but not an activist, and above all, a critic of literature but not a producer of it (Copeland 2006, 279). This image of Okuno, as it exists in the West, will remain incomplete until mainstream publishers are prepared to fund and produce a more thorough translation of his work. In the meantime, however, the fragments of translated theory available to us in the form of essays and one-off chapters (scattered across decades of scholarly writing in fields as close to home as literary criticism and as far-flung as urban planning) still hold significant value.

Originary Landscapes in Literature: Imaginings of Fields and Caves (“Bungaku ni Okeru Genfūkei: Harappa, Dōkutsu no Gensō”) is one of Okuno’s earliest works and arguably his most influential to date. Published in 1972, the book outlines a new theory of literary nostalgia, one which is codependent on setting and portrayal of landscape in fiction, and which attempts to pinpoint a number of precise connections that the nostalgic setting establishes (intentionally or otherwise) within a given text.

Defining genfūkei itself presents something of a challenge, as the term describes both a phenomenon occurring in literature and the framework by which scholars might unpack literary nostalgia, the fictive-remembered versions of place that construct and are

constructed by texts in turn. The term Okuno uses throughout the book is 原風景, made up of the characters gen (原) meaning *original*, fuu (風) meaning *wind* and sometimes also referring to an *original quality*, and kei (景) referring to *scenery* in modern Japanese. Based on this breakdown, a direct translation of the term might be *original-quality landscape*: quite literally, scenery which is imbued with an original quality. Angela Harris, a linguist at the University of North Texas, translates the term as “fundamental” or “basic” scenery. The word itself is assumed singular by default, but in translation could be made either singular or plural based upon the specific context of the sentence in which it is used.² Scholars have furnished their own translations of the term, a selection of which is provided here for the purpose of better understanding the word itself and the general sphere of meaning to which it is attached. Takao Hagiwara (2000, 129-149) translates genfūkei as “archetypal landscape/s.” Shimazu, Fukuda, and Oshiro et al (2012, 11) translate genfūkei as “primal landscape/s.” Jennifer Robertson (1988, 516) translates the term as “*original landscape/s*” while the phonetically similar “*originary landscape/s*,” the English equivalent which I have chosen to use throughout this project, comes from translations of Okuno by Margaret Hillenbrand (2013, 177) and Jordan Sand (2013, 47) in their respective, isolated work on subjects of visual culture and urban life.

Coined by Okuno for the express purpose of talking about his framework for examining setting as connected to nostalgia in fiction, genfūkei encompasses a broad range of associations. *Originary landscape*, however, seems the most apt translation available in English as it appears to get closest to the heart of the phenomenon Okuno describes. Genfūkei refers to a place from which one is understood to have arisen, a location that is not literally generative in a biological or even historical sense, but which is widely understood as a heartland or scene-of-origin for an individual, a set of values, a culture. An originary landscape is the sort of place that, while it may not be your actual childhood home, certainly *feels* as though it was. It is a remembered fantasy of a

² According to Harris, Japanese rarely distinguishes between singular and plural in the case of abstract concepts, so in Japanese the word is always spelled with the same characters and Okuno relies upon the reader to determine whether it is being used as a singular or plural noun based upon immediate context.

childhood home — nonspecific, collective, at once immaterial and tied to certain physical spaces.

MATERIALS & METHODOLOGY

Needless to say, the quintessential originary landscape exists only in literature and film. It is a fiction. Though the term *genfūkei* has been appropriated by researchers in adjacent fields, Okuno initially created it in order to expand the language with which one might discuss fiction; it describes a literary phenomenon. As such, the best way to explain the originary landscape is by using fictional examples. Okuno's book is organized into five short chapters, wherein he discusses examples of *genfūkei* in the modern Japanese novel, tying contemporary appearances of nostalgic scenery to the Japanese literary tradition at large, often tracing the roots of particular tropes back to early writings including classical (ca. 550-1185) period texts.³

Like Okuno, I will pursue answers to my research questions and illustrate my arguments using a case study containing examples from literature. My own case study is made up of a zine (a small-circulation, self-published work), a short zine anthology, and a multimedia webcomic. Translations of Okuno's work on the subject of *genfūkei* form the main theoretical platform from which I will analyse the literature in my case study. Additionally, in order to appropriately contextualize my research within nostalgia studies and internet studies, I will be drawing from a variety of critical concepts from eminent cultural theorists — most notably Frederic Jameson's idea of the *nostalgia mode* and journalist David Keenan's idea of artistic *hypnagogia*, which was later adapted by culture critics Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds into a homonymous theory of artistic remembrance. Finally, I draw from historian Richard Slotkin's work on the frontier myth in order to discuss fictional representations of the web as a simultaneous paradise and wasteland.

³ These five chapters are 1) "Floating Living Spaces," 2) "The Font of Creativity," 3) "The Fantasy of Fields, Corners, and Caves," 4) "The Depths of Jomon-Era Space," and 5) "Territorial Bounds, Utamakura, and Urban Space," as translated by Angela Harris.

JUSTIFICATION

Make no mistake, Okuno's genfūkei is a theory of Japanese literature specifically — he created it with the Japanese novel in mind and explains it using Japanese texts. However, genfūkei encapsulates the potential for some degree of universality; many places besides Japan can be said to have a semi-conscious, collective notion of an originary landscape, reflected again and again in their art and literature. The term genfūkei may be uniquely Japanese, but the phenomenon it describes is prevalent elsewhere. To recognize this, one needs only take a glance at the rural east-coast communities in the work of Scottish authors Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Nan Shepherd, for instance, or the primordial midwestern American suburbs to which the novelist Ray Bradbury continually returns. Art and stories play a fundamental role in turning a landscape into *the idea of a landscape*, in attaching to a location particular associations and images.

My reason for pursuing genfūkei as the subject of this dissertation is that, while other mediums of digital or virtual entertainment such as computer and video games have amassed sizable communities of scholars dedicated to studying them, born-digital literatures have largely been overlooked in academic writing. Moreover, recent developments in online cultures suggest the digital age that directly preceded the end of net neutrality in the USA is currently in the process of being mythologized. Like any other mythos, the mythos of the internet demands serious study, and historians and anthropologists have already made significant strides in this regard in the fields of digital folklore and meta-history. However, to my knowledge, the mythologization of this era has not yet been approached from the angle of literary criticism. Little scholarly attention has been paid to fiction that attempts to recreate the early days of from-home, recreational internet usage, especially in the case of literatures that are born-digital rather than traditionally published.

How various eras in web history (and the subcultures and events associated with them) are remembered and interred in the public imagination matters deeply, and art and literature are vital pillars in shaping collective remembrance. I choose to focus on genfūkei because I believe the originary landscape concept is a useful tool in exploring and understanding early-Post-Internet cybernostalgia in literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

GENFŪKEI AT HOME:

Contextualizing the Originary Landscape within Criticism of the Japanese Novel

Before moving on, it is necessary to discuss *genfūkei* as it features in criticism of the Japanese novel since the term's introduction into the language nearly forty years ago. How far has the idea of *genfūkei* come in those four decades? How is the term applied and understood? Moreover, if those applications and understandings have changed in the decades since the term was coined, how have they changed?

Notice that this section is not titled "contextualizing the originary landscape within *Japanese* literary criticism," but rather, "within *criticism of the Japanese novel*." There is an important difference between the two phrasings. Just as access to Okuno's original work in translation is severely limited, so is access to translated Japanese literary criticism, broadly. Due to this limitation, many of the following sources are from either diaspora Japanese writing in English or Western academics fluent in Japanese, who offer commentary and criticism of the Japanese novel from a scholarly tradition that is situated outside the culture. As such, the writings of Jordan Sand, Jennifer Robertson, Stephen Dodd, and others about the originary landscape in fiction bears a substantial degree of cultural removal from the texts which these scholars discuss. In short, the theoretical milieu I attempt to locate *genfūkei* within is, just like my own working definition of *genfūkei* itself, constructed piecemeal from such sources.⁴

In her article "Furusato Japan: The Culture of Politics and Nostalgia," Jennifer Robertson discusses *genfūkei* as having deep contextual ties to *furusato*, a word translated variously as "old village," "home," and "native place." Evocative of forested

⁴ For more information about the specific limitations of this dissertation project and how they were (or were not) overcome, please refer to SECTION IV: LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH.

mountains, rice paddies, and thatch-roofed farmhouses, furusato immediately signifies rustic simplicity and, as such, holds compelling appeal for Japanese advertisers, designers, politicians, and artists. “Furusato derives from the manifold contexts in which it may be appropriated, from the gustatorial to the political economic,” Robertson writes, arguing that the pervasiveness of furusato as an expression of a broad range of cultural products instils in those products a unifying national value by way of provoking nostalgia (1988, 494). But nostalgia for what, exactly? Robertson uses *genfūkei* to furnish an explanation:

Okuno Takeo offers a nativist explanation as to why “old village” is such a ready model of and for cultural renewal. The Japanese, he claims, “traditionally a farming people,” and despite a century of industrialization and urban growth, “are subconsciously, collectively imprinted with the image of farm villages and their environs.” Since furusato is, according to Okuno, an *ur-landscape* permanently etched on the [hearts] of ethnic Japanese, it can be evoked through the agency of nostalgia (Robertson 1988, 504).

Robertson asserts that Okuno’s theory of *genfūkei* effectively illustrates the mythopoeia that forms the very basis of the agricultural nationalism that these nostalgic images inform, construct, and maintain. Okuno was one of the first critics to identify widespread furusato imagery in literature, to recognize its connection with the idea of the (re)imagined childhood, and to name the phenomenon being exhibited. Subsequently, *genfūkei* has become an unavoidable term as far as discourses about collective nostalgia and visual literacy in Japan are concerned.

Others, like Sari Kawana and Stephen Dodd, understand Okuno’s work as inherently tied to issues of politics and economics, observing that, under Okuno’s own application, each originary landscape was inextricable from the circumstances in which it was written. The narrator of Itō Sei’s 1937 novel *Street of Ghosts* (“*Yūki no Machi*”) returns to his native hometown in rural Hokkaido, where he experiences surreal, hallucinatory encounters with individuals from his past, and is forced to “confront shameful aspects of his [youth] that he had tried to repress” (Dodd 2013, 449). According to Dodd’s survey of Japanese writing on the subject of the wartime novel, Okuno used the concept of *genfūkei* to “spell out” the links between the events of the novel and the social and political changes occurring in the country at the time (Dodd 2013, 453). *Street of Ghosts* is the quintessential example of *genfūkei* as a feature of the novel: it contains the return of the prodigal protagonist to a remembered but estranged homeland, a place he

suddenly finds unfamiliar and terrifying, a site of strange and unexplained occurrences. Okuno argues that this psychological regurgitation of the *unheimlich*, the familiar-turned-frightening, speaks to the civic unrest that plagued the book's author and his contemporaries.

[Okuno] identifies Itō with a generation of writers...who participated in an artistic revival (*bungei fukko*) during the mid-1930s. This group was very conscious of the fact that many of their number had [since] come to renounce, often under duress, their most fundamental beliefs...Against this background, the nightmarish demons in *Yūki no Machi* may be understood as embodying an irrepressible sense of guilt, self-loathing and hypocrisy that many writers felt after having betrayed their own core identities (Dodd 2013, 453).

Sari Kawana, in her own study of Japanese wartime literature, articulates a position similar to Okuno's, who treats the wartime years as a confused era for Japanese authors who wavered between the pro-nationalism literature favoured by the imperialist government (referred to as *binjō bungaku* or "usurper's literature" on account of its forced adoption) and the kinds of stories they felt compelled to tell. According to Kawana (2010, 456), Okuno suggests that, especially towards the end of World War II, "many authors were forced into silence, and on the surface Japanese literature died out and entered a blank era." Therefore, in *Street of Ghosts* and similar stories of the same period, the rural *furusato* setting represents the pure (sometimes self-indulgent) idealism of left-wing anti-imperial ideology, a concept of the nation that is nativist but rejects nationalism; conversely, the unnerving return to the originary landscape, now a warped and twisted facsimile of the remembered home, represents the shadow of right-wing imperial censors which pressured writers to conform and, as Okuno puts it, betray their core principles.

Maeda Ai's seminal collection *Text and the City: Essays on Japanese Modernity* discusses literary reflections of playspaces and youth street culture, focusing on portrayals of childhood in Japanese adult fiction. Ai identifies *genfūkei* as an active element at work in adult fiction on childhood, characterizing the impulse behind depictions of *genfūkei* as being twofold: simultaneously escapist and socially critical. "We adults," he writes, "formerly heaping expectations on children as 'future adults' and casting an oppressive and vigilant eye on them, are now re-examining our own warped world and attempting to rectify it through a recovery of the children's gaze" (Ai 2004,

110). According to Ai, adult fiction on childhood usually serves two purposes: first of all, to provide a nostalgic and oft-romanticized vision of picturesque childhood that many adolescents who came of age during the Meiji and early Shōwa periods were deprived of experiencing themselves; and secondly, to draw attention to the imperialist education policies of the late 1800s and early 1900s, which both indoctrinated Japanese children into nationalism and prevented them from enjoying aspects of daily activity that did not explicitly serve the purposes of the imperial state (ibid, 115-119). Ai identifies absurdist stories like *Alice in Wonderland* and genfūkei tales such as Higuchi Ichiyo's 1895 *Growing Up* ("Takekurabe") as a reaction against what he calls "the onslaught of pious lectures" about the virtues of diligence and self-refinement (ibid, 111). Ai argues that an obvious parallel can be discerned between the *Alice* books and Japanese fiction of the late 1890s: these works, instantly recognizable for their reliance on the aesthetics of genfūkei, are similar "in their attempt to retrieve the original world of children at a time when [mainstream publishers] were thrusting the role of 'future adults' on the children of England and Japan" (ibid, 111). Ultimately, Ai's conclusion is that representations of genfūkei are often critical of popular children's literature — particularly of stories aimed at children during the Meiji era, when almost all forms of art and media were being utilized overtly by the imperial state as vehicles of nationalist indoctrination.⁵ Ai's central thesis is essentially that genfūkei stories tend towards escapist fantasy, but also carry enormous potential to be wielded as tools of progressively-minded criticism (Glassford

⁵ Interestingly, Ai notes that the utilitarian worldview exalted by Meiji leadership as an enlightened philosophy had roots in late Victorian and Edwardian literature. The English tradition of stoicism found an eager audience in Japanese imperial government officials, who at the time were keen to prove to Western powers that Japan was their equal in terms of both military prowess and lifestyle as a cultural force. Japan was therefore uniquely susceptible to the brand of stiff-upper-lip-ism touted by Victorian moral crusaders. Books such as Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help*, first published in 1859 and introduced to Japan in 1870, adapted a message of pragmatic utilitarianism into a biographical format that children would find comprehensible. Moreover, the Japanese concept of *rishhin shusse* (personal advancement) mirrored the qualities championed in *Self-Help*, Nakamura Masanao's translation of which became the Meiji period's best-selling book. Ai asserts that this newfound compatibility between Meiji and Victorian ideals further pressured Japanese youth to put aside play and the adjacent trappings of childhood in favour of mimicking adult behaviour and, inevitably, adult conformity.

2019, 3-5). Here, *genfūkei* is a tool applied not only as theory but as a rationalizing or mitigating condition that interrogates nostalgia as well as creates it.

Tamaki Mihic discusses the role of *genfūkei* as a framework used to analyse the historical construction of various regions in the Japanese popular imagination. Though *genfūkei* can refer to scenes from childhood memory, she writes, it also carries the meaning of “scenery that evokes collective nostalgia, regardless of whether you actually spent your childhood there” (Mihic 2020, 79). Just like Okuno, Mihic asserts that the scenery in question which tends to evoke this nostalgia for Japanese audiences is the rice paddy: the agricultural originary landscape which produces food and thus ties the people to the land. “As a producer of rice, [the countryside region] was reconstructed as the core of Japan’s homogenous rice-eating culture, where Japan’s *genfūkei* or old Japan could be found” (ibid, 79). Mihic goes on to discuss a number of films and books, notably including works by writer and folklorist Kunio Yanagita and director Makoto Shinkai, which feature rural farming and fishing towns as originary landscapes. Mihic uses the idea of *genfūkei* to examine how these works express *Nihonjinron*⁶ sentiments which actively distance each individual region of the country from its indigenous Ainu or Ryukyuan influences, effectively supporting the historical construction of Japan as being split between homogenous *furusato* countryside landscapes and equally homogenous urban cityscapes, thereby erasing local tradition and variation.

The concept of *genfūkei* is likewise touched upon with relative brevity in the first chapter of Jordan Sand’s *Tokyo Vernacular*. Entitled “Hiroba,” this chapter focuses on boundaries and how they factor into public experiences of communal space.⁷ Although Sand’s coverage of *genfūkei* is quite succinct, it is also remarkably insightful. According to

⁶ *Nihonjinron* is a word denoting Japanese people of ethnic majority, typically excluding indigenous people, mixed-race people, *Zainichi*, and other minorities.

⁷ Sand has done much of the Anglophone legwork on *genfūkei*, identifying the first notable use of the term in Okuno’s 1971 book *Originary Landscapes in Literature*, which began as a number of essays serialized in 1970 in the journal *Subaru*. The *Asahi Shimbun* later ran a series titled *Originary Landscapes of the Novel* (“*Shosetsu no Genfūkei*”) starting in August of that year, and the term presumably entered mainstream urban writing soon thereafter.

Sand, spaces such as *harappa* (empty lots) and alleyways acquire inner lives of their own when considered through the lens of this idea. The theory became what Sand (2013, 47) describes as a “central concept” in urban writing, “a means of anchoring spatial analyses in memory and the phenomenology of individual experience.” Sand interprets Okuno’s work — drawn from the writer’s own anecdotes in addition to examples from fiction — as having “fused collective and personal memory” to perpetuate the notion of children’s playspaces as a “spontaneous [and] classless” commons that held a certain weight and gravity for the Japanese public (ibid, 178). Ultimately, Sand does not draw definite conclusions about *genfūkei* so much as he grounds it in a long and diverse tradition of writing about how spaces become places (Glassford 2019, 2).

As previously stated in the introduction, *genfūkei* seems to emerge as a literary *theory*, a literary *feature* and a literary *mode*. Some elaboration is needed on the distinctions between these manifestations of *genfūkei*. When applied, as in Okuno’s writing, to a work of fiction, *genfūkei* surfaces as a framework by which the reader or critic might make and interrogate observations about how the work’s setting is portrayed and connected to childhood nostalgia in the story — and moreover, what socio-economic, political, or cultural ideologies that particular flavour of nostalgia might serve, incidentally or otherwise. In this manner, *genfūkei* is a supposition, a system of ideas meant to explain a literary phenomenon based upon Okuno’s three criteria, which are identifiable independent of the phenomenon of *genfūkei* itself. Under such circumstances and within such applications, *genfūkei* functions quite literally as a *theory*. As a *feature* of literature, *genfūkei* describes the primary (or a significant) setting in a given work of fiction; in order to fit the description, the setting must be an originary landscape that meets Okuno’s three criteria, is indispensable to the execution of the story’s themes, and must be connected to the protagonist’s, narrator’s, or deuteragonist’s youth in some tangible way. The childhood scenery, reimagined with varying degrees of inaccuracy by the major characters, features in the story as the setting, as the literal landscape from which these characters originate. As a literary *mode*, *genfūkei* describes a broad but recognizable category of works which share a common thematic, stylistic, and atmospheric treatment of the originary landscape, as well as the mood which pervades these works and the

methods by which this mood is created, which are not linked exclusively to a particular form or genre.

So, for instance, the setting of *Street of Ghosts* — the primordial furusato scene to which the narrator eventually returns — functions as the originary landscape of the story and exemplifies genfūkei as a feature of literature. Okuno's observations about the connections between that setting and cultural anxieties surrounding real-world political events at the time, described in Dodd's paper, exemplify genfūkei as an applied theory. Finally, the broad category of works discussed by Dodd, Kawana, Ai, Mihic, and others (which fit Okuno's criteria and demonstrate similar writing styles, thematic treatments, and reflections of mis-remembered or re-imagined childhood spaces) embodies the concept of genfūkei as literary mode.

Altogether, applications of genfūkei evidently occur in one of these three fundamental avenues: feature, mode, or theory. Furthermore, some applications of genfūkei appear to manifest multimodally, insomuch as (for instance, in Mihic's paper) genfūkei-as-theory can be applied to a work in order to scrutinize that work's use of genfūkei-as-feature. This multimodal application of genfūkei is the key to understanding its prevalence and significance, as well as its later implementation in the analysis and case study sections of this dissertation.

GENFŪKEI ABROAD:

Contextualizing the Originary Landscape within International Approaches to Nostalgia

There is an Icelandic hybrid word, *nostaklígja*, a combination of the French *nostalgie* and the Icelandic *klígja*, denoting the taste of bile that appears in the mouth before vomiting. The term indicates a situation “where an overly romantic view of a bygone era transcends good taste and/or common sense” (Muller 2006, 739). Nostalgia is a monumental cultural force; as such, it has been thoroughly studied from the perspective of nearly every academic discipline. As the very existence of a word like *nostaklígja* implies, nostalgia can be in poor taste and even dangerous, and it is important that people are able to recognize and treat it with a necessary scepticism.

This necessary scepticism is embodied in Okuno’s application of *genfūkei*-theory, which uses an awareness of the nostalgia-generated imaginary location to inquire into its rhetorical and artistic legacy. This is hardly surprising, given that Okuno’s own motivations for studying originary landscapes were grounded in the apprehension he felt towards the semiotics of scenery, the image of the countryside as a powerful symbol. Okuno was a Tokyoite whose familiarity with the rural was patchy at best, and Margaret Hillenbrand (2013, 187) reports that he wrote often of the “irritation and discomfort” he felt from childhood onwards whenever he heard words like “*furusato*” being thrown around, casually or otherwise. Having grown up in an urban environment, it is probable that Okuno, though presumably affected by the collective imprint of the country’s agrarian origins to the same extent he claims all Japanese are affected, was distanced enough from the countryside terrain to recognize its myriad uses as a desirable aesthetic, as a marketing scheme, and as a political macguffin.

Because *genfūkei* is so deeply concerned with nostalgia, and because the goal of this dissertation is to apply *genfūkei* to literature that comes from the international community rather than from Japan, I am obligated to contextualize *genfūkei* within global approaches to nostalgia insofar as literature and popular culture are concerned. As Adam Muller notes in *New Literary History*, nostalgia involves glancing backwards through history but not necessarily to a real place or time.

It fuels parochial and cosmopolitan, as well as radical and conservative, moral and political imaginations and their projects. It belongs neither to the present, the past, nor to the future, and yet it remains in some way attached to all three of these temporal zones. It would be easy to remain vague about nostalgia, [...] its central terms of reference, its power, and its deep implication in the fabric of our modern psychic lives (Muller 2006, 739-740).

Even so, there are distinctions to be made between types of nostalgia. Svetlana Boym (2001, 57) differentiates between restorative nostalgia, which evokes romanticized national past and desired future, and reflective nostalgia, which is more concerned with individual and cultural memory. This project is concerned with the latter, the reflective kind of nostalgia, as its ability to “temporal[ize] space” resembles Okuno’s *genfūkei* (ibid, 57).

Understanding possible relationships between time and space is vital to understanding the originary landscape and how it operates in fiction. Okuno defines originary landscapes as “time-spaces (*jikūkan*) and the images symbolizing them, inseparable from the weight of blood relations and neighbourhood relations, that lodge in the unconscious as spaces of self-formation shaped in childhood or youth, and unconsciously define a writer’s literature” (Okuno 1972, 45). This word, *jikūkan*, is made up of the characters 軸 (*jiku*) meaning *axis*, and 間 (*kan*) meaning *interval* or *period*, with secondary definitions including *among* or *between*.⁸ According to Sand’s translation, the two axes in question are time and space. If Henri Bergson uses the image of the cone to envision reflective nostalgia, “represent[ing] the totality of virtual pasts that spring from a moment in the present,” then the tip of the cone is grounded in fantasies of a particular place — even if that place was never truly real (Boym 2001, 360).

On the topic of temporal irreality, Frederic Jameson writes of nostalgia as a series of misrepresentations. The nostalgia mode, when deployed artistically, obfuscates the ambiguities and contradictions of the past in favour of relying on clichés and inaccurate

⁸ A notable related term is *jikukankyori* (軸間距離), sometimes *jikukan no kyori* (軸間の距離), the *distance between axes*, from *jikukan* (軸間), *no* (の), and *kyori* (距離) which is *distance* or *range*. It has also been suggested that *jikukan* could be a play on the word *jikan* (時間), meaning *time* or *hours*.

reflections of history (Jameson 1984, 54). Jameson defines the concept of historical consciousness in late capitalism as an (in)attention paid on the part of the audience to issues of market changes, labour practices, and other conditions that contextualize the images featured in art and film. In Jameson's view, postmodernism sets the stage for such decontextualization, enabling the divestment of the cinematic or literary vision of history from its complicated origins. Film critic Jason Sperb observes the following about Jameson's attitude toward nostalgia in popular culture:

Such cinematic visions of history — both old films still circulating, as well as contemporary depictions of the past — are undoubtedly affectively rich (meaning, they possess the potential to provoke any number of possible responses from the viewer). But these same images are inherently meaningless as representations of the past — simulacra, pastiche — without the various contexts that might create historical consciousness (Sperb).

Whereas Jameson speaks of large-scale representations of the past (reflections of an entire culture or decade, for instance, featuring a heavily homogenized public), Okuno concerns himself with smaller-scale representations: personal space, domestic space, children's playspaces, etc. The consequences of misrepresenting a cultural moment (romanticized stylization of the 1950s is an example Jameson frequently returns to) might include disseminating misinformation and contributing to widespread lack of understanding of a particular historical event, raising what Sperb calls "deeply disturbing questions about general audiences' ability to engage with the messy and complex contradictions in history." By comparison, the consequences of the originary landscape in literature, if they develop, may be more difficult to notice and to dissect; if misrepresenting small moments in the landscape of childhood indeed does have cultural repercussions, it is possible that we may not be aware of them for years to come.

Cultural theorist Mark Fisher's interpretation of Jameson's writing on the subject differentiates psychological nostalgia from the nostalgia mode, though the former may very well preclude the latter, "since it arises only when a coherent sense of historical time breaks down" (Fisher 2014, 11). Nostalgia, Fisher eventually concludes, is not always a subject but a treatment method: even film and literatures with contemporary (or futuristic) settings that do not attempt to represent or recreate the past are capable of exhibiting nostalgia, which "is better understood in terms of a formal attachment to the techniques and formulas of the past" (ibid, 11). In other words, ostensibly original material dealing with unique and contemporary subject matter might, if produced using

forms native to the past, express nostalgia. For Jameson and Fisher alike, nostalgia is the *means of production* as well as (or instead of) the *product*. At first glance, this notion of nostalgia seems irreconcilable with *genfūkei*; after all, *genfūkei* does not simply describe the contemporary audience's relationship with the past and how that relationship has been constructed through art, it describes the reimagined landscape of childhood *particularly*. However, the two perspectives are surprisingly compatible: Just as Jameson's nostalgia-as-mode entails criteria (nostalgia must be the style or production method underscoring the product), Okuno's *genfūkei* also entails the criteria of a classless, spontaneous, and interrelational depiction. Aspects of landscape depiction are not elements of *genfūkei-as-mode*, but of *genfūkei-as-feature*; a novel's setting is not the same thing as a novel's style. *Genfūkei-as-mode* is better understood as employing a style known in Japan as the child's gaze, or *kodomo no ronri* (children's worldview), a fictive approach typically implemented by writers attempting to evoke the perspective of a child narrator (Napier 1995, 145). Just as Jameson's nostalgic mode necessitates nostalgia-as-style, the originary landscape in literature cannot exist without the stylistic aberration of the child's gaze — an elocutionary treatment that contributes as much to a given text as its characters do.

Though Okuno may not have initially couched *genfūkei* in a foundation of global perspectives on nostalgia, the notion of the originary landscape is consistent with much of what international scholars have to say on the subject. "Homecoming does not signify a recovery of identity," Boym writes, "it does not end the journey in the vital space of imagination" (2001, 58). The originary landscape is a place from which we assume or feel we came, but to which we cannot return — not simply because it may no longer exist or may not have truly existed in the first place, but because it is a landscape deeply tied to childhood, to play, and to a certain set of experiences or sentiments which are founded in time as much as they are in place. Like J.M. Barry's neverland, only children may return there.

Because whatever actual location inspired one's *genfūkei* cannot be literally revisited, the writer imaginatively revisits it in their creative work. By attempting to recreate that "child's gaze" through which the location is viewed, the location itself is recreated and becomes an artistic distortion of the actual location. Thus, the originary

landscape is born. Because the originary landscape reflects both individual and collective memory, its transformative power is immense. As Boym notes, the nostalgic rendezvous with oneself is not always a private affair, as “voluntary and involuntary recollections of an individual intertwine with collective memories” (2001, 58). When such an intertwining occurs, a kind of nostalgic continuum is created — something Boym refers to as the *memorable literary fugue*. If the interweaving of individual and collective memory, together with the interlacing of time and space, do indeed serve as driving factors in the creation of originary landscapes, it is important to examine precisely how those landscapes are portrayed in a small selection of fiction. If indeed a memorable literary fugue has arisen as a result of artistic and literary creation, what can that fugue tell us about how these creators recall and reflect the settings of their stories?

*GENFŪKEI ONLINE:**Contextualizing the Originary Landscape within Web Historiography*

In the simplest terms, this dissertation aims to use *genfūkei*, a series of ideas about the representation of childhood spaces in fiction, to analyse three born-digital literatures in the hope of making observations about how *digital originary landscapes* manifest in fiction. In order to conduct this study as thoroughly as possible, it is necessary to dip into internet historiography; after all, discussing *specific* reflections of digital spaces is near-pointless without first presenting a brief overview of *broad* reflective tendencies: i.e. how are digital spaces typically represented in academia, non-fiction, and forms of art excluding literature?

Many early attempts to understand and taxonomize internet usage are patchy at best. In a paper from 2004, historian Roy Rosenzweig attempts to interrogate possible metahistories of the web, asking questions about how the internet's history will be remembered and recorded. Though generally regarded as a seminal text in digital humanities, Rosenzweig's paper fails to account for massive chunks of internet usage. Niels Brügger (2012, 105) notes that "...within the tradition of digital history of which Rosenzweig's texts are seen as representative, the web is mainly used for finding, searching, and annotating digitized source material." In other words, this view of the web neglects its myriad uses as a tool for creating and presenting art, arguably two of the most common and fundamental services offered. When it comes to art and other content displayed and disseminated online, there are two chief categories: digitized material, sometimes called *remediated* or *reborn-digital*, which has been converted and uploaded to the web in a digital format for purposes of online consumption; and *born-digital*, material that originates digitally and whose digital form is its first form, even if that material is later adopted into analogue forms. To that effect, when scholars focus only on digitized material, they leave behind the enormous gap of missing born-digital content.

Notably, the taxonomy of the (re)born-digital is one of the key factors distinguishing the fields of digital history and internet studies from one another. In the former, digitized material still counts as a primary source, whereas in the latter, all

primary sources are necessarily born-digital. While internet studies is grounded in virtual ethnography and network analysis, practices in digital history remain firmly rooted to methodologies not designed for the web. Insofar as internet studies is concerned, historiography “has been dominated by a number of common themes — communities, games, news, politics, language, and privacy,” and a great deal of academic focus is devoted to collecting and evaluating amateur digital histories compiled by laypeople and users who, though lacking expertise in historical writing and methods, were some of the first to recognize the importance of digital history and to archive born-digital material (Brügger 2012, 106). In recent years, digital scholarship has amalgamated into a combination of the textual/quantitative approaches composing the digital humanities and the field-based methods characteristic of digital ethnography, inclusive of and in dialogue with “many dimensions of folkloristic work” (Tolbert and Johnson 2019, 327). This interdisciplinary shift attempts to account for and embrace the internet as field site, seeking to understand digital cultures holistically, “not as a collection of discrete texts but as a network of interrelationships between texts, contexts, groups, identities, and social processes” (ibid, 329). This shift emphasizes the digital as part of the process of doing scholarly work (for instance, rendering information from an analogue literary source into quantifiable data), and simultaneously emphasizes the digital as the subject of that work.

Methodologies developed in urban anthropology crop up frequently in both digital ethnography and web historiography, and it’s easy to see why. Texts about online cultures appear to understand the web of the early-Post-Internet period as a para-urban space: somewhere which is not urban but is adjacent to a city or the idea of a city, crowded, interconnected, and highly incorporative of fads — forms of collective behaviour that develop within a culture, similar to habits or customs but less durable. As children’s and young teens’ time online during the early days of the internet was largely unsupervised, internet culture shares considerable overlap with the traditional youth street culture of physical places. The online world superimposes itself upon the (sub)urban with predictable ease: it is easy to envision the internet as a town or city, where each website or app is roughly analogous to an individual neighbourhood with its own culture, vernacular, and user stereotypes, where even that classic staple of the

suburban gothic, the haunted house, persists in the form of the haunted website, a concept which serves as the origin of more than one digital “urban” legend today.

There are ongoing efforts to catalogue urban legends and internet mythology, in most cases led not by trained historians but by everyday internet users who saw value in the digital worlds around them long before academia caught on. These chroniclers differ greatly in tone, method, and delivery; YouTube channel *Internet Historian* recounts landmark events in web history quickly and irreverently, presupposing the audience’s familiarity with the events being mocked. *Atrocity Guide*, on the other hand, takes a more fastidious approach, providing its audience with detailed descriptions, testimonials, and screenshots. In “Tall, Dark, and Loathsome: The Emergence of a Legend Cycle in the Digital Age,” folklorist Andrew Peck observes that, enabled by the affordances of digital social networks, digital legend cycles exemplify a new form of folklore “that combines the generic conventions of oral storytelling with the collaborative potential of networked communication” (2015, 333). If you were to ask a millennial (currently between 25 and 40 years of age) what they remember about the internet they grew up on, it is likely they would recall at least one of these many legend cycles, popularized on collaborative fiction project sites like Creepypasta and the SCP (Secure, Contain, Protect) Foundation. Through collective interaction, users participate in an ongoing process of performance, interpretation, and negotiation in order to construct motifs and, as Peck puts it, “shared expectations” about the legends they have created together (2015, 334).

Collaborative mythmaking is only one example that seems to evidence a distinctive youth experience of the web that is collectively shared. In fact, when I began outlining this dissertation, I felt a growing interest in what I have come to call the *fictive-remembered internet*, a collectively imagined version of the late-1990s/early-2000s web which millennial users recall with nostalgic fondness, even though this recollection of the web may not have existed in reality, as memory is wont to embellish or erase elements of an experience for subjective reasons. In my efforts to gain a clearer picture of the fictive-remembered internet, I spent time reading through online forums, message boards, and comment threads discussing internet nostalgia, in order to get a sense of what everyday users are saying about the topic. To pick one outstanding example, on the 25th of November 2020, YouTube channel *Trash Taste Highlights* released a filmed segment of

their podcast entitled “When was the Golden Age of the Internet?” In this episode, one of three hosts poses the question, “Do you feel like the golden age of the internet has passed?” and the other two hosts attempt to establish parameters that might help define an elusive “golden age.” One host suggests that the online golden age is happening currently, on the grounds that machine systems are more user-friendly now than ever before. Another host concurs, adding the caveat that “the Wild Wild West is gone” (Bizinger, Colquhoun, and Maneetapho 2020).

Throughout the segment, the hosts grapple with issues of subjectivity vs. objectivity, usability optimization vs. exploratory opportunity, and safety vs. privacy among a slew of other issues that arise when one makes a conscious effort to evaluate one’s own nostalgia. What I found more interesting than the actual podcast, however, were the comments left below the video by viewers struggling to articulate their own online golden age. Of the hundreds of comments, many mentioned specific websites, including free or low-cost multiplayer online games like Club Penguin, MapleStory, and Crazymonkey, as well as hosting services like Yahoo GeoCities and Cool Math Games, blogging platforms like Livejournal, customizable social networks like MySpace, generalized entertainment sites like Newgrounds, and file-sharing extensions like Limewire and BitTorrent. Many commenters reminisced about the experience of watching television shows on YouTube in the site’s early days, when a combined paucity of anti-copyright-infringement infrastructure and a since-removed 15-minute duration limit allowed entire episodes to be uploaded to the platform, albeit split into three separate videos. Much of the content commenters reminisced especially about indie games, which were often enabled by Flash Player, an audio-video viewing software for which Adobe officially discontinued support in December 2020, rendering enormous swaths of born-digital content inaccessible and sending professional and amateur archivists alike scrambling to finish content preservation projects (Ellis, 2015). The end of Flash Player, playfully dubbed “the Flashpocalypse” by a handful of programming and computing publications, perfectly illustrated the fragility of digital systems, the precarious ephemerality of web content, the “terrifying” decision-making power of “huge tech conglomerates,” and the tendency of ordinary users to take these programs for granted (Wagner 2019, 129).

On average, most commenters posited the “golden age” of the internet as having lasted from roughly 2004 to 2012, with the earliest date mentioned being 1998 and the latest being 2015. Overall, these dates indicate an acknowledgement, conscious or otherwise, of the period I refer to as the early-Post-Internet, the period that preceded the 2018 repeal of regulations supporting net neutrality — a policy event that, while only strictly applicable within the USA, had far-reaching effects worldwide. Ultimately, these remarks offer no concrete, reliable information. If this was a survey rather than a casual and unscientific perusal of a YouTube video’s comments section, the sample size would be far too small, the answers gathered from far too particular a viewership to represent any useful data. This exercise did, however, help clarify my concept of the *fictive-remembered internet*, providing a clearer picture of how the web-as-originary-landscape is characterized and the dilemmas facing those who attempt to interrogate their own nostalgia in this manner. A remarkable number of these comments made mention of net neutrality, of increased commercialization and centralization, of a time before social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter eroded the respectability of online anonymity. As one commenter put it, “everything is censored now. offline is the new online” (Braun 2021).

In *404 Page Not Found: The internet feeds on its own dying dreams*, Kate Wagner expresses a near-identical sentiment, annotating the following quote from Jameson in order to tailor the author’s theory about cultural recycling to the current cybernostalgia craze and the artistic movements it fuels:

For with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style—what is as unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints, as incomparable as your own body [e.g. MySpace, Geocities pages] . . . the producers of culture [big Internet companies] have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles [glitter graphics, Geocities], speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture [the whole internet] (Wagner 2019, 130).

Wagner, negotiating with new media scholar Geert Lovink’s 2008 internet culture taxonomy, recalls the Wild Wild Web as anarchic and sprawling, differentiating between the pre-iPhone DIY cultures of the early 2000s and today’s app-driven social media net (ibid, 124).

Similarly, born-digital artworks created during the 2010s, in the years immediately following the alleged golden age of the internet, appear to corroborate this sentiment; nowhere is this more evident than in vaporwave, a subculture based around a microgenre of electronic music, corresponding visual art style, and memes. Musically, vaporwave is characterized by extensive use of audio loops sampled from kitsch sources like easy-listening and shopping mall muzak, bearing heavy influences from the Houston “chopped and screwed” tradition of R&B.⁹ Oxford music critic Adam Trainer identifies vaporwave and its predecessor chillwave (with which it is frequently conflated) as branches of what journalist David Keenan calls *hypnagogic pop*, a dreamlike genre of psychedelic music that evokes cultural nostalgia:

The sound created by these artists is influenced as much by the memory of music, and arguably a personalized misremembering of it, as by specific musical traditions or a unified approach to sound creation or musical form...These artists seemingly activate nostalgia for an era in their lives that can't be summoned clearly or concretely, an era that was refracted through a specific popular culture lens but, given their average age, was also filtered through the unstable perspective of childhood remembrance and nostalgia (Trainer 2016, 410).

Obsessed with early '90s retrofuturism, vaporwave gets its name from *vaporware*, a term for commercial software that is announced and advertised but never actually released.¹⁰ Guillaume Loignon and Philippe Messier (2020, 5) argue that by sampling iconic hit songs from past decades and applying a combination of audio degradation techniques, vaporwave artists “produce intimate connections with listeners’ materially imagined pasts.” The microgenre’s corresponding visual art typically manifests in the form of the collage graphic, evoking 1980s techno-orientalism by featuring untranslated katakana

⁹ It is noteworthy but unsurprising that vaporwave, which features predominantly white and East Asian aesthetics in its visual imagery, was so irreversibly influenced by “screw music,” pioneered by DJ Screw in the American South during the 1990s. It serves as yet another reminder that vaporwave, like every other major genre of Western popular music, borrowed heavily from Black American innovations without ever meaningfully crediting or celebrating those influences. The impact of slowed-down hip-hop is immediately evident to the listener when one hears a vaporwave track, yet Black people are very infrequently featured in vaporwave visual artworks and other expressions of visual media associated with the subculture.

¹⁰ According to Wagner, a 2016 *Esquire* article claims the “vapor” in vaporwave references the Karl Marx quote “All that is solid melts into air,” but this claim is unsubstantiated.

text and ukiyo-e imagery,¹¹ while simultaneously lampooning commodity fetishism through its frequent inclusion of *nouveau riche* items like faux Classical Greek statuary and logos from brands popular in the 1990s, notably Lisa Frank (ibid, 2).

By employing technical tropes that suggest expanding and shrinking space, vaporwave graphic art attempts to emblemize the online experience itself, an encounter with an internet that feels both incomprehensibly vast and claustrophobically insular. The feelings of nostalgia evoked by vaporwave aim to create a connection with appropriated material, effectively making the genre an object of its own criticism (ibid, 11). In short, vaporwave, with its recognizable endemic anxieties and revisionist leanings,¹² offers one of the most semiotically cohesive cultural symbols through which the fictive-remembered internet can be identified and understood. Vaporwave presents a unified, internally consistent, highly stylized “online aesthetic” shaped and nurtured by the forces of technological determinism, consumerism, and adolescent *ennui* — each of which are presented as having been granted safe harbour in the lost digital world of the past.

Generally speaking, this image of the web as a veritable fantasyland of unsupervised, unstructured time and exposure to new products and experiences is consistent with common characterizations of the fictive-remembered internet as a mysterious and lawless hinterland. It is recalled as a once-vast playscape, increasingly sanitized and increasingly encroached upon by capitalism, a place where yesterday’s

¹¹ Ukiyo-e is a genre of Japanese art that flourished between the 17th and 19th centuries. Its paintings and woodblock prints typically featured kabuki actors, historical and folkloric scenes, landscapes, and erotica, all rendered in a highly distinctive art style.

¹² A common visual motif in vaporwave graphic art is the image of the New York City skyline with the Twin Towers intact. As Loignon and Messier note, vaporwave imagery juxtaposes various cultural symbols and elements in order to conjure up imagined worlds, including a variety of alternate realities wherein the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre did not occur. This event fundamentally changed Western culture, ushering in the age of counterterrorism and with it, decades of ill-justified American invasions in the Near East and unprecedented pan-societal surveillance. Vaporwave, however, attempts to recreate a pre-9/11 optimism that it does not quite achieve, lending the subculture’s art a dark Modernist sentiment that is closer to the uncanny than to Modernism in the traditional sense.

dynamism has become today's disposability. The contradictions inherent in this nostalgic reimagining of the early-Post-Internet period are immediately evident: for example, the web is remembered as being a place where one was anonymous but not necessarily safe, but the distinction between safety and privacy has long been a point of contention among users and developers. Similarly, the fictive-remembered internet is meant to predate the commercialization of the web, yet it is also strongly associated with specific websites, creators, properties, and Flash-supported advertisements. Although this rose-tinted image of Ye Olde Internet is rife with contradictions, such inconsistencies are par for the course, as far as nostalgia is concerned. No proposed "golden age" (whether real in some way or mostly imagined) can exist in the public imagination without the thing that purportedly overtakes and destroys it. Just as users have constructed Ye Olde Internet in their individual and collective memories, so too have they constructed Today's Internet. The fictive-remembered internet is constructed in contradiction to the internet of today, in which, allegedly, 1) uniformity has replaced personalization; 2) content has hyper-saturated its platforms and thus is regarded as disposable by both creators and consumers; 3) the chaos of the Golden Age Internet has been replaced by corporate regulation; and 4) anonymity is now discouraged while transparency is encouraged.

To say these visions of web history are constructed does not mean they are entirely false or that they bear no resemblance to real events. There is some truth to the notion that internet cultures and discourses are now built around the infrastructures of only a handful of major corporate platforms, just as users are wise to be apprehensive of the internet as a pan-societal tool of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2015). I don't mean to belittle these concerns, but to identify the fictive-remembered internet and its current-day counterpart as products of what historiographers call *narrativization*: in short, art/literature/any social apparatus informs and is informed by collective memory, which in turn informs history — the transformation of historical material into the shape of a story or plot, creating a coherence that is typically absent from raw historical data.

A key motif that begins to emerge is that of perception and its role in constructing the internet as both a place and a network of overlapping cultures. Much of nostalgia is made up of ideation that, while not unfounded, often differs considerably from the reality it claims or aims to reflect or recreate. *Enregisterment* is a process by which linguistic

features (like spellings, pronunciations, abbreviations, etc) become widely understood as distinctive, imbued with social meaning and associated with specific personae, and links to anything else perceived as distinct registers, or varieties of language. There is perhaps no better example of this than the collective remembrance of Netspeak, of which sociolinguist Lauren Squires notes:

The enregisterment of internet language is explored through several sites of metadiscourse: academic scholarship about computer-mediated communication, uses of the metalinguistic terms netspeak and chatspeak in print media, and online comment threads about language and the internet. This metadiscourse provides evidence of a shared concept of internet language as comprising distinctive written features, primarily acronyms, abbreviations, and respellings. Internet language's enregisterment emerges from standard language ideology and deterministic views of technology, where the construal of these features as both nonstandard and internet-specific articulates the perceived distinctiveness (Squires 2010, 457).

In other words, enregisterment is a pattern of recognition, wherein a set of linguistic tendencies becomes affiliated with a particular demographic, place, or idea.

Enregisterment is a key term in this study because, as described by Squires, it is one of many processes through which a nostalgic idea of an imagined past is collectively constructed and popularized by way of media portrayal.

Much of Squires' article focuses on the status of netspeak/chatspeak (linguistic forms associated with digital places despite infrequent use) in the public consciousness and as a subject of interactive metadiscourse. Because early cell phones had small keyboards with limited space, multiple characters were triggered by hitting the same key. Many texters found having to hit the same key six times in a row to produce a single desired character tiresome and inefficient. Netspeak, a system of abbreviations, developed as a method of unconventionally spelling words in order to shorten them, thus making the act of physically typing a message less time-consuming. However, because cell phone technology progressed rapidly, this typing pattern was relatively short-lived as people swiftly moved on to phones with keyboards on the screen of the device, which did not entail the space issues that had made netspeak a necessity when using earlier models of cell phone. Despite the brevity of its heyday and its scarcity in recent years, netspeak remains closely associated with online spaces and internet cultures. Curiously, Squires

notes, netspeak has become representative of a remembered version of the early-Post-Internet period which is not necessarily accurate, but merely perceived.

Enregisterment offers insight into how individual memory eventually becomes collective memory. Just as *linguistic* enregisterment allows features of language to become widely understood as distinctive, so too might *cultural* enregisterment cause a set of shared experiences to be identified with a specific demographic, time period, and place. The fictive-remembered internet seems a textbook case of *genfūkei*, an originary landscape imbued with social meaning and associated with specific personae, registers, and experiences of childhood. The millennials creating vaporwave art essentially form the first generation of kids for whom a childhood spent online was truly possible, given that widespread internet access rapidly expanded in the late 1990s.¹³ This explains the internet-as-playspace phenomenon, wherein users' happiest memories of their time online typically involve their childhood experiences, exploratory and carefree in nature. Their first years of internet usage are remembered as their best, not because the internet was necessarily more navigable, user-friendly, or "better" but because children have different concerns and priorities from the adults they grow up to be. There is a case to be made that the internet didn't get "worse," its users simply got older and more critical of services and products. Due to the phenomenon of cultural enregisterment that Squires describes, common themes shared among the experiences of individual users are eventually recognized as a pattern, propelling them into the realm of collective memory, of public imagination. In scenarios like this one, the internet as a childhood originary landscape is collectively remembered as a *better internet*.

To that effect, the fictive-remembered internet appears to be a classic example of *genfūkei*, but it is important to remember that "originary landscape" is a literary-critical term and thus must be observed in literature in order to be properly verified. As such, the

¹³ The Internet Explorer OS was released in 1995 and had 75% of the browser market within four years, and 90% by 1999. According to the United States Census' 2016 Computer & Internet Use Report, roughly half of all American households had a computer by the year 2000, marking the advent of from-home computing.

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claim that the fictive-remembered internet exemplifies genfūkei demands further exploration and analysis.

CASE STUDY

The central question of this dissertation remains: how are online settings represented in born-digital literatures that aim to depict the early-Post-Internet period? Do these settings meet Okuno's criteria for the originary landscape, and how can his concept of *genfūkei* be used to deconstruct and understand them? The upcoming case study is composed of a zine, an anthology of zines, and a webcomic. Each item in this case study was organized and created online by contributors and writers sourced from the internet, and originally disseminated online before going to print. Each attempts to reflect upon a youth spent online, and thus belongs more or less in the Young Adult category of fiction.

The term "zine" is a shortened version of *fanzine*, a portmanteau of *fan magazine* that refers to small, self-published (and in most cases, self-manufactured) magazines circulated by science fiction connoisseurs as early as the 1930s. In wake of the 1980s punk rock phenomenon, zines exploded in popularity as punks in local communities adopted the medium as a form of DIY resistance against corporate consumer culture, a form of *samizdat*¹⁴ without a totalitarian censor to lash out against (Radway 2011, 140). Until fairly recently, zines were almost always handmade, making each issue small-run with a narrow circle of distribution by necessity. Since then, the digital world has provided greater access to graphic design and formatting tools, as well as various means of inexpensive manufacture. In response to these affordances, zines have seen a recent surge in popularity and unprecedented increase in quality. Many zines are now distributed in PDF form exclusively, only going to print if the organizing board and parties interested in purchase are able to sell enough copies on pre-order to fund a print run. The halfway mark of this process typically involves a very limited print run wherein only contributors and organizers receive physical copies of the zine, but other fans or community members are able to purchase the PDF or are allowed to download it for free.

¹⁴ Samizdat was a grassroots form of dissident publishing in the socialist Eastern Bloc, wherein individuals created and manually reproduced underground makeshift publications in order to evade Soviet censorship.

The hand-stapled, photocopied zines of the past have largely been replaced by the glossy, perfect-bound, high-definition illustrated zines of the present.

It has been suggested that the renewed interest in zine history, resurgence in zine creation, and upturn in zine quality is owed to a late-2010s/early-2020s backlash against a perceived privatization of the web and corresponding uptick in paywall-enabled web content. Zines are often nonprofit, but even for-profit zines benefit the contributors and organizers, often compensating them more fairly for their work than industry-level jobs in their respective fields would. Though zine production has become more polished, the foundational rhetoric of zines as showcasing content created for a community by that same community remains crucial to zine culture — a culture now located predominantly online.

The upcoming case study consists of three artifacts, two of which are sourced from zine communities; the third artifact is a multimedia webcomic. There also exists a large body of traditionally published YA literature exploring what it means for teenagers to come of age online, but unfortunately the scope of this study is not broad enough to include these novels. It is my hope that further research into fictional portrayals of internet youth culture will explore the YA novel as thoroughly as I aim to explore the items in my own case study. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have restricted artifacts in the case study to born-digital materials exemplifying distinctive youth experiences.

5 ZINES ABOUT THE INTERNET

Published in hardcopy for the first time by Awkward Ladies Club (ALC), an independent press based in Oakland, California, *5 Zines About The Internet* is exactly what it sounds like: an anthology of short zines that discuss, celebrate, and parody interactions experienced online by either the zines' creators themselves or their narrators.

The first zine, "Never Date Dudes From The Internet" (2012), is a collection of alleged responses to a Craigslist W4M (woman seeking male partner) advertisement. This

work characterizes the internet as a site which obscures identity and calls into question truth. It also characterizes the internet as a place which often relies upon shorthand as a form of communication but does not necessarily have to.

The second zine, “Dad Tweets,” claims to be a series of tweets collected between 2009 and 2013, though it is unclear whether all included remarks were uttered by the same dad. This lack of clarity is likely invoked on purpose by occasional changes in font style and size. Like the work prior, this zine does not make any statements about the internet as a whole, so much as it characterizes specific sites and user demographics. This is significant, as individual sites and apps cultivate their own cultures which are not interchangeable with those of other platforms.

The third included zine, “Messages From Your Friends Upon the Announcement of Your Breakup” (2013), follows a similar format: a purported catalogue of the aforementioned messages. This work is unique in that it doesn’t specify or even indicate which platform or group of platforms the messages are coming from. Based on the varied remarks archived herein, it seems likely that these messages could be sourced from a variety of platforms. However, based on the presence of old school emoticons (type-emojis created by combining a series of characters, used to indicate tone and sentiment before image-emojis existed or became widely accessible) the text appears to imply that the friends responding to this announcement are online friends instead of “IRL” friends. This work characterizes digital genfūkei as sites of interconnection.

The fourth zine, “Lists of Lists of Lists of Wikipedia,” contains lists from Wikipedia sampled between March and September of 2015, alongside the addendum of “the information contained herein is of variable use and of questionable veracity.” Among other things, this zine characterizes online culture as Anglophone-centric, cumulative, as a nexus of data and a virtual library, and as antithetical to use or the concept of “usefulness.”

The final work, collected in 2017, compiles questions from a series of new mothers seeking parenting and newborn care advice. This zine highlights the process of seeking advice online as convenient but also overwhelming — pervaded by the anxiety of having to trust potentially-unreliable strangers. One interaction featured at the very end, where

a poster confuses FTM (female-to-male transgender) with FTM (first-time-mom), highlighting that the internet is a site of continual transit and overlapping platform cultures which often interact, giving rise to comedic misunderstandings.

All in all, these are “archive-style” or epistolary pieces which cannot automatically be assumed to be real; in fact, the lack of screenshots (only one in the entire booklet) suggests that all other material may be fabricated. For the purposes of this project, I treat this anthology as a kind of auto-fiction: a series of fictionalized accounts of real events experienced by the creators. Due to the fact that most of the aforementioned interactions that make up the zines’ substance have been manually transcribed instead of screenshotted, it seems likely that each piece is a recreation of online interactions that were remembered but not preserved. Any further speculation about the authenticity of this anthology would be pointless and tangential to the main thrust of the memoir-style tradition, wherein accuracy is typically a lower priority for the creator than artistry or theme, for instance.

SAD AND ON THE INTERNET

This item is the most traditional compendium of zine content in this case study. Self-aware and scathing, *sad and on the internet* (stylized in lowercase, a typing style much in fashion during the early 2010s) compiles the poetry, flash prose, and illustration artwork of twelve presumed young people.

The first piece, by Patrick Forsythe, is an illustration series depicting scenes from the artist’s life in high school and in online chatrooms. He discusses coping with the onset of an unnamed chronic illness, dealing with drama between friends, and navigating the substantial online following he has built around his artwork. The second and third pieces, by contributor minipete (username) and Elaine Murphy respectively, are short four-panel comics discussing how online networking has both helped and hindered their own growth and identity-formation. The fourth piece, by Hadeer Ali, is a mixed-media collage illustration in the surrealist tradition, which highlights the dual isolation and interconnectivity that having an online presence can afford. The fifth and sixth pieces, by

Nami Oshiro and contributor Sad Pink Galaxy respectively, are full-spread comics that explore online romance and friendship. The seventh work, by C.E. Stanway, is a prose piece discussing the cognitive dissonance that sometimes occurs upon meeting an online acquaintance in person for the first time, as well as bridging occasional language barriers that come up when interacting with others online. The final piece, by Joshua Shepherd, reflects upon internet usage as an out-of-body experience wherein the narrator begins to doubt their own physical reality. The zine is interspersed by single uncaptioned illustrations by contributors olee and woggu (usernames); the last credits go to the zine's two organizers.

HOMESTUCK

Originally released between 2009 and 2016, *Homestuck* is a multimedia webcomic written and animated by Andrew Hussie. The story revolves around a coterie of teenagers who accidentally bring about the end of the world by installing a beta copy of a computer game called SBURB that triggers the apocalypse. The teenagers then come into contact with a civilization made up entirely of internet “trolls” (individuals who post inflammatory content in order to receive attention or provoke a response from other users), who are revealed to be previous players of the same computer game and who assist the protagonists in recreating the universe.

Unlike the previous two artifacts, *Homestuck* comments primarily upon early-2000s gaming of the multiplayer RPG variety and early chatlog applications, exploring these games' mechanics and virtual worlds as well as the player cultures that crop up around them in online communities. Made up of over 7,000 panels, 800,000 words, and a series of playable Flash games, the webcomic (sometimes referred to as a web *novel* alternatively) is notoriously difficult to classify. Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda (2014, 33) consider the webcomic a work of “new media,” wherein literatures adopt previously under-utilized multimodal mechanics in order to extend the storytelling capacity of born-digital fiction, often incorporating not only text and images but also audio, animations, and “user agency enabled by the affordances of a touch screen.” Just like the games it

parodies, the comic “repeatedly frustrates the user’s desire for explicit interactivity, inviting and then curbing the type of agency promised by many new media projects” (ibid, 33).

Though *Homestuck* does not strictly take place online, it presents an obvious reflection of interlocking online subcultures. The sandbox-style computer game SBURB does not (predominantly) require unfettered access to a literal computer in order to be played, but rather superimposes itself atop the real world, raising interesting questions within the story about the exclusive or inclusive nature of physical vs. virtual spaces. Outside of and throughout their respective game sessions, the characters communicate using an instant messaging chatlog application called PesterChum, contribute to walk-through instructions on (real) gaming tutorial site GameFAQs, and source information from various internet forums. The aforementioned activities fulfil the precedents according to which real-world (nonfictional) cyberspaces are generally deemed inhabited by sociologists and human geographers, and the intermateriality of the game allows the characters to inhabit spaces and places which are at once physical and virtual (Martinez 2012, 4).



Aside from being born-digital literatures concerned in some way with childhood or adolescence, each of the items in this case study was selected as exemplifying distinctive online youth experience based on thematic cohesion, subcultural specificity, collaboration, and varying degrees of mainstream cultural impact. *5 Zines* is more about the young adult experience than the childhood experience; it demonstrates a cohesiveness of theme in its organization and portrays specific subcultures but is not a product of collaboration and has a narrow readership with no real cultural impact. *sad and on the internet* is quintessentially about the child-adolescent online experience, portrays a site-specific subculture, and was created collaboratively; it too has a narrow readership and made little impact upon the culture that consumed it. *Homestuck*, with its multimillion-dollar crowdfunded spinoff game and numerous other tie-in properties, has made a massive impact on pop culture by comparison and is a highly collaborative work,

with the composition of original music and animation frequently outsourced to guest artists. While *Homestuck* articulates a distinctive youth experience and construction of the internet-as-playspace for specific subcultures, it extrapolates on this setting in unexpected ways.

By embracing current technological affordances, new media continue to transform the storytelling tradition. It would have been easy to locate more examples of new media and use only these in this case study, but to do so would be to essentially ignore the vast swathes of collaborative born-digital fiction that developed alongside new media and which tell new stories using old forms, embracing some digital affordances while neglecting others. While it is tempting to focus solely on multimodal new media literatures, it is impossible to understand the extent to which the events and circumstances surrounding born-digital literatures may be technologically determined without examining literatures that, while born-digital, do not require multimodal engagement from their readers. For this reason, the inclusion of the zines is as vital to this study as the inclusion of *Homestuck*.

ANALYSIS

Okuno defines the originary landscape as being remembered and therefore depicted as classless, spontaneous, and interrelated to its surroundings or components. In 1972, Okuno was writing of the physical only; at the time, there were few information communication technology (ITC) products widely available to the public, and the only virtual worlds to speak of were those of the fictive-remembered, the fantastical, the speculative, which creators and audiences were free to explore in art and literature.

Michel de Certeau (1988, 117) theorizes that the distinction between place and space lies in process: while *place* is a stable configuration of elements (referring to physical or digital infrastructure), *space* is home to fluctuating variables (referring to the people who inhabit/visit those infrastructures and the actions they perform there). This view of space/place theory differs substantially from its equivalent in the field of human geography (wherein a space becomes a place when it is assigned value), and operates according to the notion that space is both a social product and social producer in relation to the practices that go on inside (and therefore construct) it (Martinez 2012, 3). Okuno's own conception of space put forth in *Originary Landscapes in Literature* is essentially in agreement with de Certeau — the things done and said, the actions performed and executed at a particular location give that location meaning, effectively constructing the location anew. But while de Certeau argues that this process occurs in everyday life and produces physical spaces, Okuno claims the process is mirrored in literature and that it does not merely produce fictive-remembered space but also produces that space strictly in relation to a particular time. So, for instance, a piece of fiction might feature genfūkei in recreating a childhood spent in the Japanese city of Kyoto during the 1950s; in this (purely hypothetical) case, Okuno would argue that the story constructs *1950s Kyoto specifically*, not simply the city by itself.

Originary landscapes are “time-spaces and the images symbolizing them, inseparable from the weight of blood relations and neighborhood relations, that lodge in the unconscious as spaces of self-formation shaped in childhood or youth, and unconsciously define a writer's literature” (Okuno 1972, 45). Acting as the backdrop for childhood play, these landscapes are not only “spontaneous and classless” but have

“fused personal and collective memory” (Sand 2013, 47). *Classlessness* is here defined as that which is not subject to distinctions of wealth or income and other financially determined class markers such as education, culture, or ownership of land and property. *Spontaneity* is here defined as action or event lacking in inhibition or premeditation; something which occurs or arises as a result of sudden inclination, without interference of external stimuli. *Interrelatedness* is here defined as that which is subject to mutual reciprocation; that which is connected to its constituent parts and external surroundings. Aside from the merging of individual and public memory, these are the key characteristics ascribed to *genfūkei* by Okuno. As such, these are the central criteria by which I will evaluate the artifacts in this study.

CLASSLESSNESS

When describing the idea of classlessness in relation to *genfūkei*, a repeated motif Okuno discusses is *harappa* (the empty lots that dotted the Japanese landscape leading up to the economic boom of the 1980s), which formed an important network of playspaces for children. In reality, these playspaces were not unmarked by class. A child’s proximity to a particular playspace is determined by the neighborhood in which they live, which is typically determined by their parents’ income. Thus, that child’s opportunities to meet and play with other children is equally limited by class. While it is possible to meet children from neighbouring districts in a common playspace, it is unlikely that children from far-away parts of a town or city will be able to frequent the same playspaces as each other, especially in cases when children are unable to take public transportation or catch a ride from someone with an automobile. We may remember playspaces as having been classless, Okuno reminds us, but many of them were not.

In the same vein, the internet is generally and inaccurately regarded as classless. There is a digital divide: in order to access the internet, one needs to own either a computer or smartphone, or else live near a public library with a computer lab. Though internet access has arguably become a basic necessity of daily life, it is classed in the same way that access to transportation, shelter, and essential amenities are classed. These are commodities and privileges that not everyone can afford, yet the assumption that “the internet is available to everyone” remains relatively widespread (Roser, Ritchie,

and Ortiz-Ospina 2015). It is perhaps to be expected, then, that textual mentions of class and class signifiers are elusive in the selected literatures.

In *sad and on the internet*, the only real mention of any kind of possible financial issue is in a four-panel comic drawn by contributor Elaine Murphy (no connection to the Irish playwright), where the artist jokes about having no food. The caption “if we have no food, the fridge becomes an air-conditioned chair” accompanies a drawing of the artist sitting inside of a cleared-out refrigerator. It is unclear, however, whether the self-insert character representing the artist is unable to afford food or whether she is unable to get off the computer for long enough to go to a grocery store. When her partner says, “You need to get your act together. Go get food. We’re going to die,” the narrator replies that she is busy blogging. Issues of internet addiction and poverty are here both connected and conflated. More interesting is the narrator’s admission that despite the amount of time she spends online, she has come to “hate everyone,” highlighting the often reactionary communities that can spring up online, where anonymity enables aggression (Sunkyung and Voellinger 2013). The last of Murphy’s four-panel comics depicts a mouse and keyboard plugged into a wooden voodoo doll, rendered in the artist’s signature tongue-in-cheek style, instead of a computer monitor, likening her narrator’s online persona to a constructed object effigy that, while only a representation of the user, transfers unignorable pain and injury to the real person behind the facsimile.

5 Zines does nothing to actively acknowledge socioeconomic or financial issues, but class markers are present throughout the anthology nonetheless. The first zine, “Never Date Dudes from the Internet,” takes place within a highly localized online setting: the Southern California Craigslist dating annal, where an unnamed female narrator ponders the bizarre messages she receives from men in response to her ad. In an effort to win the attention of the self-professed “nerdy girl” narrator, men drop mentions of expensive brands, bougie activities, and designer drugs, hoping these things will appeal to the ad-poster. One suitor mentions he likes to play chess, albeit with cocaine. Another invites the narrator to go “thrift store hopping,” a type of consumer hobby wherein upper-middle-class and rich people go to secondhand/charity shops in typically poorer neighbourhoods to look for vintage items, either to wear or to resell at an inflated price. Nearly all of the men mention their higher education credentials, clearly playing into the

narrator's initial admission of being in graduate school. The bourgeois Berkeley-centred bubble in which the narrator lives stands in stark contrast to the narrator's working class home life, depicted in "Dad Tweets," where most conversations involve beer or basketball and all trappings of her academic life are gone (ALC 2017). The juxtaposition of the narrator's father's tweets vs. the increasingly outrageous Craigslist messages the narrator receives from affluent men serves to illustrate that class divides that exist in real life can easily follow users into their online lives, especially when navigating geo-tagged or localized websites. Rather than start life anew online, the narrator finds herself funnelled from one community into its online counterpart. The anthology depicts the internet not as distinct from the material world, but as inextricable from it.

As in the case of the other two literatures, *Homestuck* makes no direct mention of class, but traces of it are prevalent in the comic nonetheless. The comic revolves around four adolescent friends who chat every day online but have never met in person. Thirteen-year-old protagonist John lives in a McMansion situated in a tract housing development typical of upper-middle-class suburban America, where he spends most of his time avoiding his hardworking salaryman father. His friend Rose, on the other hand, lives in a sophisticated East Coast manor house with her alcoholic mother, while his friend Dave lives in an inner-city apartment block in what is implied to be the Houston metroplex under the guardianship of his dubiously responsible older brother. The fourth member of the main cast, Jade, lives in an isolated, technologically advanced laboratory on a Pacific island. Each of the kids represents the new rich, old money, working class, and the fantastically techno-affluent. Though the main characters come from very different backgrounds and live very different lifestyles, class is never a point of contention between them; indeed, it is unclear how much these characters even know about their friends' home lives. Instead, the kids busy themselves with the average, expected activities of adolescent life: chatting on instant messaging service PesterChum every day, playing PC games together, complaining about the meddling of their respective parental figures, and occasionally sending each other physical mail (Hussie 2020, 1-1153). Though the narrative of *Homestuck* does not aim to comment upon class, each kid's socioeconomic background informs not only their characteristic responses to external stimuli, but also their relationships to each other.

The game typically proceeds with a necessary minimum of two players: the server player and the client player. After loading the hard copy of the game, the client player does not need a computer unless downloading grist (a virtual in-world building material) or communicating with other players and is free to roam about their environment. The server player can manipulate the client's environment in real time, performing actions like building new rooms, remodelling existing rooms, destroying rooms, and arranging and employing objects (Hussie 2020, 1-1153). Subsequently, the type of items each player can create is necessarily impacted by the affordances and limitations of their class-derived surroundings. The materials the players have at their disposal in-game are determined by the assets they possessed or had access to prior to the beginning of the game session; both access and purchasing power are directly proportional to financial stability.

All in all, commodity fetishism is the motif by which time-space is most consistently constructed in these works, in relation to class or lack thereof. Marx's initial definition of commodity fetishism refers to the commodity's dual state: one that is physical and simultaneously meaningful beyond its immediate, tangible use or function. Situated at the heart of social-material relations, the commodity contributes to the process that determines the relationships between people in society. The commodity creates and renews social relations by necessitating the manufacture process that created it, a manufacture which generates the economic apparatus wherein people whose names you will never know laboured to produce the commodity in question (Marx 1967). A more recent, more colloquial secondary definition of commodity fetishism implies the social process by which particular commodities (usually luxury goods, but can be commonplace items or even basic necessities) are assigned cultural significance beyond their intended functions. This vernacular use of the phrase denotes a commodity that has picked up specific associations unrelated to its purpose, as well as the human behaviours surrounding (and treatment of) the commodity which continually create those associations.

In *5 Zines*, the men who solicit the narrator's attention on Craigslist bombard her with an endless stream of brand names and titles of media properties — watch company Rolex, Anglophone television shows *Futurama* and *Family Guy*, and the video game

Katamari Damacy, to name a few. The brands and media properties featured in these interactions are all mentioned because of their specific associations either with luxury (Rolex) or with the concept of nerdiness (*Katamari*, etc) in response to the narrator's original advert, where she calls herself a "nerdy girl" (ALC 2017). *Futurama*, being heavily associated with early 2000s nerd culture, is treated as a safe topic of conversation, a fetishized commodity that could have a chance of igniting the narrator's interest.

Similarly, in *sad and on the internet*, media properties are alluded to but never discussed or engaged with: Japanese animated cartoons are referred to broadly, both in prose (by contributor Patrick Forsythe) and in art style (by contributors minipete, oleo, and Sad Pink Galaxy), but no specific anime title is ever brought up. What is being commodified here is not any one particular anime TV show, but the idea of anime as it pervades the West — anime as perverse, as representative of Japan despite comprising only one part of the nation's complex soft power economy, and most importantly, as inextricable from the "online aesthetic" that vaporwave aims to dually capture and construct. Fetishism of East Asian commodities is part of an observable pattern, the end result of which is the fetishization and commodification of the idea of East Asia itself. This frankly distasteful trend in material semiotics is a trait inherited by both vaporwave and its early-2020s counterpart hyperpop from their common predecessor, cyberpunk. Dystopian subgenre-turned-fashion, cyberpunk arose out of the 1980s, when Japan happened to be undergoing an economic boom and was subsequently viewed as a competitor by manufacturers in the West. Western anxieties about being outpaced by East Asia manifest in the cinematic and literary trope of techno-orientalism, which portrays East Asia as a futuristic, alien fantasyland of advanced technological prowess. As such, techno-orientalist imagery has become a staple in art that deals with issues of the digital, virtual, and/or cybernetic (Tran 2015, 139). Stylistic references to anime and anime-derived art are a running gag throughout *sad and on the internet*, where "terminally online" narrators (to borrow a derisive slang term for users disconnected from reality) see themselves as cybernetic beings dependent upon the internet (u/Evelyn701 2021). Ultimately, *sad and on the internet* is a neo-cyberpunk work. It is to be expected, then, that it includes the usual trappings of the genre, techno-orientalism

and all. Commodity fetishism is here inseparable from fetishism of the racialized and cybernetic Other.

Homestuck, too, is a hotbed of commodity fetishism; the list of products, goods, and media properties that crop up in the comic is endless. Faygo soda, foodstuffs brand Betty Crocker, films featuring actors Nicholas Cage and Bill Cosby, Gushers fruit gummy snacks, American hip-hop duo Insane Clown Posse, Doritos flavoured crisps, and celebrity chef Guy Fieri make up only a small fraction of the objects and cultural assets that surface repeatedly over the course of the webcomic's seven-year run (Hussie 2020, 4817-6242). It goes without saying that if *Homestuck* was a film franchise, the movies would be accused of egregious product placement; Hussie's appropriation and repurposing of any symbol, image, form, or story that suits his needs is reminiscent of the "guerrilla semiotics" described by Umberto Eco (1986). The placement of brands throughout the narrative is almost conspiratorial; it invites the reader to fantasize about the role that people such as celebrity chef (and unwitting internet meme) Guy Fieri might play in one's own life. The cultural icon becomes the spectator in one's domestic space. *Homestuck* invites the reader to imagine the Insane Clown Posse not as eclectic musicians, but as minor antagonists in a child's PC game against an invading alien army.¹⁵ There is something distinctly hypnagogic about the fluidity and ease with which these commodities are assimilated first into the environments that make up the backdrop of *Homestuck*, and then into the comic's central plot. In the same way Dorothy's real-life acquaintances are transformed into the scarecrow, the tin man, the lion, and the witch in the fantasy plot of *The Wizard of Oz*, so too are household food products and well-known public figures assigned new roles and value systems in *Homestuck*, inevitably transformed by the narrative into what effectively amounts to original characters.

Moreover, the literal infrastructure that makes up the *Homestuck* webcomic is itself a commodity fetish linked to cybernostalgia. Although the fictional computer game

¹⁵ It is a miracle the comic's creator was never sued for appropriating brand imagery, official logos, and real people (many of them celebrities) into his magnum opus. To my knowledge, no legal action was ever initiated against Hussie or the webcomic.

SBURB is modelled after open-world games like *Minecraft* (2011), *EarthBound* (1994), and *The Sims* (2000), the format in which content is presented to the reader is reminiscent of text-parser games like *Zork* (1980). The text-parser is an older style of adventure game wherein players type commands into a textbox and the game's engine translates the command into a simpler instruction that, if available, can be performed. Each page of the comic will, for instance, contain a header with a grammatical imperative, indicating both the action to be shown in the corresponding comic panel and the character taking said action: "John: Nail poster to wall" (Hussie 2020, 19). This is what critic Simon Reynolds would no doubt call a product of "dyschronia," evidence of a temporal disjuncture resulting from pervasive retromania (Fisher 2014, 14). Text-parser games are an old-school relic of the past, and while innovations in gaming have completely transformed the player experience and long since left text-parsers behind, the format of the text-parser has become a nostalgic object. *Homestuck's* framing device constitutes what Fisher calls "a consequence of a retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience" (ibid, 11-12). The text-parser framing device allows the comic's author to tap into and profit from a deep well of collective cultural nostalgia. Hussie is "playing with a set of bygone cultural forms" (Reynolds 2011, 337).

Overall, the zine, the anthology, and the webcomic all acknowledge class and seemingly fit into a longstanding pattern of portrayals of online space as classless — an equalizer that strips away the accessories and signs of class, leaving internet users free to interact without the limiting force of class bias or barriers to accessibility. More specifically, commodity fetishism plays a role not in constructing *space*, but in constructing *time*. The cultural assets mentioned frequently are all either objects of early-Post-Internet nostalgia, products that achieved immense popularity and are therefore representative of this period, or public figures who (for reasons often inexplicable) became memes during this timeframe. Every item is associated with the period between roughly 1995 and 2010, the period to which Ye Olde Internet (the idealized, fictive-remembered version of the web that is continually constructed and reconstructed in the hearts and minds of users and reinforced through art and media) is attributed.

SPONTANEITY

Narratively, spontaneity is synonymous with randomness: the apparent lack of predictability in plot events, or the lack of overall pattern in terms of story arc. Narrative spontaneity, as Okuno conceives of it, is a flagrant disregard for storytelling convention, a disavowal of trope and archetype and recognizably structured plot, as well as spontaneity as a character trait or recurring motif within the actual story. *Street of Ghosts*, for example, mutates from a fairly standard work of fiction into a surreal, hallucinatory nightmare for its narrator and reader alike, as the familiar structure of the setting and prose break down. There is a kind of narrative determinism at work in the storytelling tradition; trope, cliché, and archetype set narrative precedents which the story's characters are expected (and expect) to follow. Narrative spontaneity dissolves the foundation of those precedents.

Discussions in literary criticism around the philosophy of action are still dominated by themes of free will and determinism, entailing a paradigm wherein mankind is distinct from nature and all spontaneity or “self-caused movements” is thought to be dictated by the nonhuman (Bruya 2010, 207). This traditional reading of spontaneity as a sign of divine influence begets an understanding of the text that positions the writer and reader as god-like in their power to decide or anticipate what happens to the characters and what those events truly mean. As Robert Fagles (2000) writes in his study of Theban stageplays, “The audience, with its knowledge of the past and future, is on the level of the gods; they see the ambition, passion and actions of the characters against the larger pattern of their lives and deaths.” However, fiction featuring *genfūkei* does not assume this philosophy of action, and narrators are sometimes allowed to occupy roles traditionally intended for the readers (or, as Fagles puts it, the audience) — narrative spontaneity, with its subversion of organization and symbol, subverts the readers' expectations for what is possible within the confines of the story, figuratively anointing the characters as gods instead of the readers. In cases of *genfūkei*, spontaneity is not just a feature of the narrative but a description of its structure or lack thereof.

5 Zines does a remarkable job of emphasizing the spontaneity of life online, featuring five series of encounters, many of them randomized, taking place between users who have never interacted before and will never interact again. One of the

anthology's strongest comedic moments occurs in its final section, when a community of LGBT activists comes into haphazard contact with a pregnancy and parenting advice community, leading to humorous exchanges between users who, the reader is meant to assume, are unaccustomed to interacting with one another. All of this culminates in an impressive failure of communication when one user makes a post featuring the acronym FTM, and it is unclear both to the reader and other users whether the intended meaning is female-to-male (indicating transgender identity) or "first-time mom" (ALC 2017). This exchange highlights the web as a nexus of overlapping cultures, a place where the phenomenon of culture clash occurs often and can become the source of both consternation and amusement. Sites dedicated to niche interests and activities, especially forums, do the dual work of hosting and supporting communities while simultaneously isolating community members from outside perspectives, worldviews, and demographics. Here, the structural elements that make up the website and other digital manifestations of its community stand in as the divine element, the technology that determines user activity. But complete isolation is impossible. Spontaneity cuts in, introducing random events and unexpected interactions into small, otherwise-segregated environments.

Throughout *sad and on the internet*, philosophies of action are both deterministic and strangely free of any sense of fate. The narrator of "Unsent Love Letters" by contributor Nami Oshiro writes that even though she met her high school girlfriend IRL, the two of them spoke more often online than in person. "I guess we didn't have much to say to each other if it didn't involve the kind of stuff you talk about on the internet," writes the narrator, the text juxtaposed first against the logo for the blogging website LiveJournal and then beside the dashboard layout of Tumblr, a microblogging platform popular in the mid-2010s. "In the end, I burned our bridge over something trivial. Sometimes I think it was for the best, but even if it was, I wish I'd done it differently," says the narrator, "Not in the petty way the internet makes too easy" (Sunkyung and Voellinger 2013). The corresponding illustrations imply that these characters ended their relationship over the internet, through messages sent on blogging websites. The artwork places the intense emotions felt by the narrator and her former girlfriend in close proximity to their (mainly digital) methods of communication, at once acknowledging the

validity of those emotions and raising questions about the legitimacy and stability of a relationship under the influence of technological determinism.

At first glance, *Homestuck* appears to use spontaneity solely for shock value. While the comic was actively being released, the sheer unpredictability of the plot was the subject of jokes among fans and fascinated spectators alike. The story borrows narrative elements from real-world mythology, Arthurian legend, PC gaming convention, and pop culture iconographies; characters are killed and revived, go to war, feud with one another, ascend to godhood, and step in and out of the story at the drop of a hat. *Homestuck's* reputation as a nigh-incomprehensible monolith of fiction is well deserved. Many of the comic's so-called random elements, however, are not as spontaneous as they initially appear: items and characters who vanish from the narrative often reappear many chapters later, bringing self-fulfilling prophecies full-circle and providing much-needed context for events that happened earlier in the story. Perhaps the best example of this storytelling mechanism in action is that of a birthday package Jade sends to her friend John. John unknowingly loads the beta copy of his world-ending computer game and accidentally initiates the apocalypse before opening the parcel from Jade, which is lost when it tumbles into a seemingly bottomless chasm (Hussie 2020, 291). The parcel is unexpectedly recovered thousands of pages later and NPCs (non-player characters) infighting over the box eventually leads to a monumental war that serves both to further develop existing character dynamics and the world in which the story takes place, and to progress the overarching plot (Hussie 2020, 1459). The seemingly lost element re-enters the narrative in order to clarify and expand upon prior conflicts and themes. Playing with the conventions of RPG computer gaming, *Homestuck* depicts online subcultures and in-game relations not as being truly spontaneous, but as entertaining the illusion of spontaneity.

Overall, these works definitely play into depictions of the internet as spontaneous — as a place where absolutely anything can happen, and where one is unable to predict the interactions and events that might occur next within any given space. However, much of that spontaneity is portrayed as resulting not necessarily from the technological infrastructure that makes up digital spaces and virtual worlds, but from the users who operate within them. The digital affordances of the websites used by the narrators of 5

Zines and *sad and on the internet* allow the characters to pursue social innovation, to explore new methods of communication that revolve around new value systems and materialities. Ultimately, this is neither a purely good or purely bad thing; enabled by technology, the narrators make bad decisions that they did not have to make. The universe of *Homestuck* is a technologically determined one, but its conditions and events are equally determined by the actions of its characters, player and non-player alike. The protagonists play a game that has rules, yes, but some rules remain fixed while others can be bent or circumvented. Just as de Certeau theorizes, the online landscapes depicted in these works are what the characters make of them, in the same way that a space is constructed by the social processes that occur inside it.

INTERRELATEDNESS

Interrelatedness, as Okuno conceives of it, constitutes the interpersonal connection between individuals, the meaning and obligation that ties people living in a society together. Interrelatedness is a *weight*, he writes. Other people are heavy; so are you. We weigh each other down and lift each other up. To be interconnected means to have and maintain relationships (Sand 2013, 178). The two types of interpersonal connections Okuno names specifically are with one's family and one's neighbours; the latter, what Okuno calls "neighbourhood relations," are composed of all those who live around the narrator and whose domestic lives have a chance of coming into contact with theirs. Again, I will point out that neighborhood is a marker of class; where someone lives is largely determined by their income and access to credit. But the originary landscape, being a fictive-remembered space rather than an accurate reflection of a real one, is not required to address or explain this paradox. The originary landscape is portrayed, impossibly, as classless *while also being* locally interconnected — neighborhood-based, one could say.

In *5 Zines*, the narrator both connects with digital extensions of their local IRL communities (the Berkeley-area Craigslist server, for instance) and explores further opportunities for connection in non-localized sites, forums, and webpages that are frequented by users from around the globe. On the other hand, *sad and on the internet* revolves quite strictly around Tumblr and other blogging platforms whose userbases share significant overlap with Tumblr's. Writer and illustrator Patrick Forsythe remarks in

a caption beside one of his artworks that when interacting with classmates offline, he will “often feign an ignorance of the personal happenings they describe,” though he is already aware of intimate details of his acquaintances’ lives via access to their social media profiles (Sunkyung and Voellinger 2013). The internet encourages interconnectedness, but in Forsythe’s case this has only served to further distance him from his peers. In both zine and anthology, the interconnectedness afforded by the internet is unavoidable and the consequences of that connection can be overwhelmingly positive, merely awkward, or devastating depending on the circumstances.

At first glance, *Homestuck* feels more referential than strictly interrelational. Known for its imitation of simulation and choose-your-own-adventure games, as well as its parodying of current internet culture, the comic is possessed of a postmodern irony that initially seems incapable of generating original content in relation to existing storytelling modes and frameworks. Gérard Genette (1997, 3-5) defined the paratext as a text that prepares us for other texts, forming a “threshold” between the inside and outside of the text. In the case of *Homestuck*, nothing is safe from becoming paratext: not Gushers fruit snacks, not the 1997 film *Con Air*, not even a real celebrity chef. Anything and everything with some degree of public visibility is fair game; there is nothing the central text of *Homestuck* cannot envelop. That being said, *Homestuck* is even more self-referential than it is extra-referential. In a 2015 article for The Atlantic, journalist Lilian Min (2015) called the comic “one elaborate, self-referencing inside joke collapsed inside its own funhouse mirror reflection,” remarking that the story treats time and space as unstable vectors that shift with alarming frequency.

In *Homestuck*, time travel, or rather “time shenanigans,” is not just another plot device; it is the way to make anything happen. How did the four main protagonists come into being? By creating themselves and their alternate-universe parents using prehistoric technology and sending them back through time via meteor portals born of an apocalypse triggered by a clown hat. What caused the main alien protagonists’ universe to collapse? A murderous mutant winged dog, running from his own future creation, transports himself across dimensions via a magical lotus portal. How did the world’s Big Bad villain come into being? He was already there. The individual elements of the story barely make any sense (what part of that paragraph *did* make sense?), but amid the dense and almost unbelievable minutiae of the plot and setting, the reader can loosely puzzle together the narrative by tracing character and item timelines. When was the last time you saw this weapon, or

at least an iteration of it? When did this character lose her life? When did this character come back to life, or at least re-enter the story? (Min 2015).

The comic's greatest strength is its propensity for story-building through connection-building — its continual interweaving of plot and character threads that, while they may vanish temporarily, are never actually dropped outright. When the reader least expects it, long-lost story beats are picked back up again and interlaced with the current events of the comic, creating narrative loops within loops within loops. It is a fictional Möbius strip.

SYNTHESIS

Of the many visual motifs encountered throughout this study, one of the most enduring is the wooden voodoo doll featured in *sad and on the internet*. The doll is one of many references to the digital doppelganger, the online persona constructed (unconsciously or otherwise) by the internet user in order to better interface with others online. Generally speaking, the internet is characterized in the works surveyed as a site of duality and hyperreality: each narrator or protagonist is forced, in some way, to mediate between the identity they have constructed offline and the one they have constructed online. These literatures effectively call into question the reader's preconceptions about the relationship between identity and reality, observable in the repeated motif of each narrator questioning which version of their personality more accurately represents the "real" them — the online persona, or the offline one?

Most interpretations of the 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix* seek to understand the events of the movie as a metaphor. When taken literally, however, the film presents a fascinating and oft-overlooked ethical dilemma concerning whether reality is more inherently valuable than illusion. The youths featured in *sad and on the internet* appear to be grappling with the same question. Many of their narrators are happier online than IRL, and that happiness is real, though intangible. Alternately, the narrators of these stories also sometimes feel that rather than expressing their true selves online, they are acting out a fantasy version of the person they would like to be in ideal circumstances. This raises interesting existential questions about performance. Can it be assumed that performing personality online is automatically less true or possessed of less integrity than

performing personality offline? This is one of many complex questions that people with online presences grapple with continually.

If *sad and on the internet* and *5 Zines* raise increasingly relevant queries about the value of digital life and identity, *Homestuck* presupposes that value. About non-gaming social networking sites, sociologist Simon Gottschalk (2010, 504) writes, “In contrast to virtual worlds designed around games, there is no ‘mission’ to accomplish, no tower to storm, no dragon to slay, no enemy to kill, no winning or losing. Just creativity and interaction.” While this may be the case, these words ring oddly naive in light of the devastating emotionality on display in the born-digital literatures surveyed here as well as in the embittered culture wars that have played out online throughout the 2010s. From 4chan to Tumblr, online cultures have been sites of extreme and brutal reactionary discourses for over a decade now; one needs only recall Gamergate, a 2014 online harassment campaign against women perceived as threats to mainstream gaming culture, to recognize the dangers of online visibility and the power of mass movements generated in online spaces. Users whose behaviour draws the ire of online communities on either side of the political spectrum routinely run the risk of being sent death and rape threats, being doxxed, having nude photos leaked, or worse (Nagle 2017, 10-27). Even if there is no killing and no death online, there is very often winning and losing.

In *sad and on the internet*, the winning and losing in question is related to concepts of rumour and reputation. Forsythe’s piece discusses the impact gossip had on his life and work:

In November, it came to light that my former girlfriend had been spreading a painful and unjustified set of rumors and misrepresentations about me online. This had likely been building up and going on for some time. Almost surprisingly, this marked my first instance of being the subject of any such thing — at least, so far as I know. The resulting feelings of frustration, helplessness, and betrayal left me in a near-catatonic state of unchecked sorrow for days (Sunkyung and Voellinger 2013).

Rendered in the overwrought, pseudo-formal style popular online during the mid-2000s, this monologue and the ones following it expose Forsythe’s reliance on his online persona as an escapist identity. When rumours from his offline personal life threaten the sanctity and stability of this persona, the version of Forsythe that he has carefully constructed begins to collapse. The monologue is accompanied by an ironic illustration of a cemetery

headstone that reads, “Here lies Patrick. Someone on the internet was once kind of shitty to him” (Sunkyung and Voellinger 2013).

In *Homestuck*, winning and losing are at once more literal, often resulting in death, which is often nearly meaningless since characters can be resuscitated with relative ease. Players can achieve immortality once they reach a certain tier of playerhood, but that immortality is conditional: the player “will live forever, unless killed” and can be resurrected only if their death is deemed by the game programming to be neither “just” nor “heroic,” i.e. pointless (Hussie 2020, 3630). In other words, *characters who are killed only stay dead if their death is narratively satisfying*. Inscrutable, flexible, and dubiously conscious, the game exists as the ultimate antagonist: the symbol of fate in the classic fate-versus-agency narrative, wherein characters struggle for some semblance of control only to play (no pun intended) directly into the universe’s grand cosmic plan anyway, despite *and* because of their efforts.

What does virtual and/or digital mortality have to do with *genfūkei*? If, as Melisa Martinez writes in “Cyberspace: An Approach from Spatial Praxis,” online spaces are considered inhabited when they host human activity, then the ways in which human activity are portrayed within fictional reflections of digital spaces are crucial in figuring how the internet as originary landscape is constructed. Digital life — and death — are key aspects of human (and, in the case of *Homestuck*, inhuman) activity. In the literatures here studied, characters communicate, make art and spread rumours, live and die. Their every interaction with and within their environments contributes to the digital cultures their stories attempt to represent, construct, or deconstruct.

The image of the originary internet that emerges, overall, from these works is dual in nature: at once a paradisaical Arcadia and a godforsaken no man’s land, a landscape of winning and losing where users are as likely to become spiritually lost as they are to connect meaningfully with others. Various digital cultures (Tumblr as featured in *sad and on the internet*, for instance, or the chatrooms where the interpersonal dramas of *Homestuck* play out) appear as solitary strongholds in the unexplored wilds of an incomprehensibly vast digital space — the endless archives of Wikipedia featured in *5 Zines*, for example. This depiction fits into what frontier historian Richard Slotkin calls the “terra nullius,” the concept of unclaimed land that is constructed as both paradise and

unknowable hinterland (Slotkin 1973, 3-24). This tension between presence and absence, an essential part of colonial mythologies, has seemingly also come to characterize representations of the web as an originary landscape.

This presence/absence tug-o'-war is more specifically a tension between habitation and emptiness. If human relationships and activities (or, as Okuno puts it, interrelation) are indeed what qualify cyberspaces as inhabited, then the digital and virtual communities featured in these literatures are bastions of interaction which define themselves in opposition to an uncharted outback which is a source of both fear and freedom.

CONCLUSIONS: The Wild Wild Web and the Closing of the Frontier

If I had to pick a single word to summarize the methods by which the fictive-remembered internet is constructed as an originary landscape within the texts here examined, I would choose *utamakura* (歌枕), literally “poem pillow.” A literary-critical term for a Japanese rhetorical device, *utamakura* denotes a complex and self-sustaining system of associations allowing for greater intertextual allusion. Discussed heavily in the fifth chapter of *Originary Landscapes in Literature*, *utamakura* refers more specifically to the strategic use of words (often place names) in poetry and prose, invoking the affiliations of that word within a given text and therefore enriching the text itself. The construction of the fictive-remembered internet as an originary landscape is an exercise in mediation: a nostalgic idea of the past is conjured by way of combined commodity fetishism and hypnagogic experiential remembrance. Within these literatures, the images of the past are summoned from personal memory and culturally enregistered by way of *utamakura*, the strategic placement of words assumed to be evocative of childhood online experiences native to early-Post-Internet digital cultures.

The literatures here studied each negotiate with — and ultimately align with — conceptions of the internet as being a site of spaces that, while not strictly speaking classless, enable innumerable opportunities for users to connect with people typically outside of their classed demographics. These literatures explore the internet as a mediator that arbitrates, interferes with, facilitates, and ultimately transforms both the realities of human connection and the state of interconnectedness dually produced and inhibited by postmodern late-capitalist society. Finally, these literatures characterize digital spaces and places as spontaneous and unpredictable, contributing to shared depictions of the internet as both exuding an atmosphere of chaos and supporting a mass culture of creativity and impulsivity.

Japanese poetry scholar Edward Kamens (1997, 1-2) understands *utamakura* as a manipulation of the associations that “cluster” around particular words. This technique, while not consciously utilized in the creation of the born-digital literatures I have studied, more or less exactly describes the process by which native digital art forms have attempted to recreate and transfigure the internet they recall from childhood. Certain

words, often digital place-names like textual mentions of specific websites and apps, serve as supportive and enriching implements in the construction of the originary landscape that is the fictive-remembered internet. Just like the vaporwave artists that preceded and sometimes worked contemporaneously alongside them, the creators of the literatures here studied utilize a bricolage of past-associated words, images, and symbols to trigger nostalgia in the millennial reader, for whom a childhood spent online can within reason be assumed.

But nostalgia for the past is not simply evoked in the creation of these works, it is transformed into something dreamlike and inscrutable: hyperreal renderings of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century personal experience of the digital, reimagining cultural landscapes as originary landscapes, that is, through a personalized lens using a combination of historically embedded words and symbols (*utamakura*) and narrative forms (*genfūkei-as-mode*.)

When Andrew Hussie frames the prose narration of his webcomic as commands in an archaic text-parser game, or the creators of *sad and on the internet* stylize all text using only lowercase in order to evoke early-2010s online vernacular, for instance, these authors are using elocutionary treatments which both articulate an atmosphere of nostalgia and constitute the methods by which that atmosphere is achieved. In short, the digital spaces and cultures portrayed in these literatures function as *genfūkei-as-feature*, the figurative/artistic/rhetorical means by which those literatures construct digital originary landscapes function as *genfūkei-as-mode*, and the analytical means by which this construction can be understood is an application of *genfūkei-as-theory*.

That being said, each community, nation, culture, or demographic is capable of articulating its own originary landscape, one which is unique to its circumstances; *furusato* is, as Okuno and Robertson argue, the *genfūkei* of Japan. To that effect, it is inadequate to simply establish that the fictive-remembered internet, as it appears in the literatures here studied, is an originary landscape. To be specific, these works depict the *genfūkei* of the fictive-remembered internet as a frontier/wasteland continuum. The mythos of the internet's early days is a frontier mythos. According to Slotkin (1973, 5), the quintessential frontier myth depicts the North American continent as "a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way

to the top.” The fictive-remembered internet is depicted as operating according to different principles, but it is a frontier nonetheless. Instead of aiming to thrust one’s way to the top of a metaphorical food chain, internet users explore their frontier with the goal of recreation, of discovering new communities, forms of art, methods of communication, business opportunities, comedic registers, vernacular, and types of play. Such recreation is remembered as having been more commonplace than and more highly-valued over entrepreneurship in the days of Ye Olde Internet. Subsequently, an increased emphasis on e-commerce beginning in the 2010s, the corresponding emergence of social media influencers to sell products, and the end of net neutrality in the United States are perceived by many millennial users as events signifying a closing of the frontier and the end of the Wild Wild Web. Though the web-as-frontier bears none of the cowboy trappings of the traditional frontier, the fictive-remembered internet is inarguably depicted as having resembled the wide-open, largely unexplored land of opportunity that Slotkin writes of.

The dual nature of the frontier is likewise clearly on display in cultural narratives surrounding both the early-Post-Internet period and the art that emerged from it. As millennial users began to foretell the closing of the online frontier, they began to generate artworks and stories that grappled with the duality of online life as a distinct youth experience which was at once a source of enjoyment and horror, and which these users were unapologetically nostalgic for and desperate to recreate. For instance, Wagner describes vaporwave as,

...an ironic, embittered genre that asks: What if the utopian innocence of those early Geocities websites had survived, and what if we all lived in chill, pastel, communal harmony? What makes vaporwave so distinct, other than its dubiously Marxist undertones, is that it is utopian and therefore against the grain of the modern mania for dystopian thought. Vaporwave was a new version of a recent past, a simulacrum; it was like a hitting “Save” instead of “Save As . . .” version of the 1990s—an overwritten file, a copy, but one for which no original exists (Wagner 2019, 130).

It is difficult not to think of *Homestuck* when reading this description. Like vaporwave, the comic’s utopian undertones fly in the face of the dystopomania that gripped first Young Adult fiction (in the wake of *The Hunger Games*’ 2008 release) and then the adult market as well in the years that followed. The comic’s tone is bizarrely casual; the end of the world is treated not as a tragic calamity but a challenge to be overcome or outwitted. The

dangers presented by the apocalypse are not a source of fear but an inconvenience, and the opportunity to recreate the world anew excites and motivates the protagonists. Conversely, the originary landscape that makes up the setting of *sad and on the internet* is a barren moor populated by listless ghosts and maladjusted users aspiring to ghostliness; it is the badlands. The narrators of these stories navigate both isolation and interconnection, faceless anonymity and the acerbic, bracing intimacy that only anonymity can produce. The narrators of *5 Zines*, on the other hand, navigate the internet as a reflection of late capitalism, as an extension of their real lives that is grim and dystopian in its inseparability from reality. Their web can never be the escapist fantasy presented in *Homestuck* or even the dissociated liminal space presented in *sad and on the internet*; rather, it is a place that has only visitors, not denizens, and for those users the web is but another dimension or plane wherein they must confront a postmodern loss of meaning and proliferation of chaos.

These born-digital literatures portray the fictive-remembered internet as an originary frontier that exhibits at once a utopian enthusiasm for creation and a post-apocalyptic dystopian cynicism. The frontier/wasteland paradigm is not a dichotomy but an ouroboros. Frontier myths are creation myths, while the mythos of the wasteland is all about *recreation* — or, in Slotkin’s words, regeneration. The frontier is expanded into and eventually occupied; whatever occupies the frontier eventually falls into ruin, giving rise to the wasteland. The wasteland is the mirror image of the frontier: a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity, but one that is pockmarked by the symbols of fallen grandeur. In the same way that vaporwave is an attempted new genre appropriating dead forms and symbols, the wasteland bears influences from the past while being developed in the present as a site of new circumstances and new contingencies.

Slotkin describes the process by which the frontier myth was constructed and interred in the American psyche as a mythopoeic mode of consciousness by which experience and perception are transformed into narrative: “The myth is articulated by individual artists and has its effect on the mind of each individual participant, but its function is to reconcile and unite these individualities to a collective identity” (Slotkin 1973, 8). This concept is more or less identical to Reynolds’ (and Fisher’s, and Trainer’s) description of artistic hypnagogia, the dreamlike evocation of the past achieved by art

that manipulates the memoradelic imprint of childhood experiences in order to elicit nostalgia in the audience. The resulting hypermnesia is an affective convergence of personal and collective memory. The nostalgia elicited by hypnagogic art aims to convert *exclusive experiences* of a solitary past into *inclusive perceptions* of a shared past, quite literally reconciling and uniting individualities. This is myth-making through art, and it is the process by which these literatures both come to reflect similar views of the early-Post-Internet period and have a chance of influencing future perceptions of that era.

In conclusion, the born-digital literatures here studied are heavily encoded works that emerge in an era of information surplus and as subjects of an information-rich cultural moment that seeks to reunite the reader with long-lost personal memory and, in the absence of that memory, creates ties to symbols and vernaculars collectively enregistered through reflections of memory-sites (in this case, the fictive-remembered internet) in art and literature. These works construct both the internet at large and the individual cultures of specific websites and apps as originary landscapes. Moreover, the internet-as-genfūkei, here called the fictive-remembered internet, is characterized dually as both utopian frontier and dystopian wasteland.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

A number of extenuating factors limited the scope of this dissertation. Of these, the most severe limitation was the language barrier. As explained in both the Introduction and Literature Review, Okuno's seminal work on genfūkei has yet to be translated in its entirety. Subsequently, I have relied primarily on the partial translation appearing in Jordan Sand's *Tokyo Vernacular*, as well as applications of Okuno's work in criticism of the Japanese novel by Western academics. This is an imperfect methodology, and it has given rise to several inconsistencies.

The term "genfūkei" itself is used very sparingly by Western academics and Japanese scholars, such as Maeda Ai, whose work has been translated into English. Even in cases where the concept of the originary landscape is identified and discussed and Okuno's work referenced explicitly, the actual term does not crop up very often. This calls into question either the breadth of understanding of the term's applications in Western

scholarship on the subject, or the continued relevance of the term in Japanese scholarship.

Oh Seon-Ah notes the evolution of the term in *Originary Scenery Viewed from the Narrative: Joint Narrative, Joint Originary Landscape* (“Katari kara miru hara fūkei: Kyōdō no katari, kyōdō no genfūkei”), recognizing its coinage by Okuno in the early 1970s and tracking its dissemination across the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, geography, and architecture in the decades since (Hillenbrand 2013, 187-188). Frustratingly, just as Okuno has been neglected by translators, so too have critics assessing and expanding upon his writing, including Oh. Oh’s study of genfūkei is clearly thorough, but no complete English translation has been officially produced or published, and what little of Oh’s study is accessible has only been made available through the tangential writings of Anglophone academics in the distant fields Oh acknowledges: psychology, anthropology, geography, architecture, etc. According to Margaret Hillenbrand, a scholar of modern East Asian literature at Oxford, Oh argues that genfūkei has become a cultural keyword in Japan. This is a small but important detail; published in 2001, Oh’s study is fairly recent and can thus be taken as a relatively reliable account of the vernacular usage of the term in contemporary Japan. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to determine the continued significance of the term today.

Another potential explanation for the relative scarcity of the term in both English-language translations of Japanese literary criticism and English-language criticism of the Japanese novel by Western academics is that there are a number of closely adjacent terms with which genfūkei might be exchanged: 文学の風景 (literary landscape), 女性文学の風景 (the landscape of women’s literature), 内的風景 (inner landscape), and 心臓風景 (the heart’s landscape), to name just a few (Liman 1995, 53). While these terms are not interchangeable, they do occupy contiguous avenues of theme, especially where psychogeography and literature are concerned. It is very much feasible that when writing about or (translating writings about) specific literary texts, scholars have made the decision to use one of these alternate (and in some cases, more specific) terms to describe the landscape being depicted.

Another inconsistency arising from the language barrier is that the timeline of the concept's development remains somewhat unclear. Most sources attribute its first use to 1972, the year that *Originary Landscapes in Literature* was published. However, Sand claims that the book was developed from Okuno's essays on the subject, serialized in the journal *Subaru* in October 1970, prior to the 1971 *Asahi shinbun* essay series on nostalgic landscapes in the novel that is often inaccurately credited to Okuno. According to Sand (2013, 178), the term *genfūkei* does not appear in the Japanese household dictionary *Kōjien* until 1991, over twenty years after it first appeared in Okuno's essays. This may seem like a small and ineffectual detail to agonize over, but confusion about the timeline of *genfūkei*'s development in turn obscures the influence Okuno's idea exerted upon Japanese literary criticism at the time, the origins of possible inspirations that Okuno may have drawn from, and the rate at which the term *genfūkei* spread from the field of literary criticism into adjacent fields and then into the mainstream vernacular. Indeed, much could be gleaned from a complete and professional translation of *Originary Landscapes in Literature* along with the expansive body of untranslated Japanese scholarship on the subject.

The other major limitation hindering this dissertation was the mere scope of the project, which left me no room to study remediated literatures that engage with the fictive-remembered internet as an originary landscape. *Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin, *Gena/Finn* by Hannah Moskowitz and Kat Helgeson, and *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell make up only a tiny portion of the enormous body of traditionally published Young Adult literature that explores digital and/or virtual online settings, relationships, and personae. It is my hope that further research into fictional portrayals of internet youth culture will treat the YA novel as a conduit for conveying the fictive-remembered internet as an originary landscape and distinctive youth experience.

Finally, further research is needed in regard to the mythologizing of internet history. Slotkin (1973, 6) writes, "The narrative action of the myth-tale recapitulates [the] people's experience in their land, rehearses their visions of that experience in its relation to their gods and the cosmos, and reduces both experience and vision to a paradigm." In the case of online myth-making, users are "the people," the internet is their "land," the "gods" and "cosmos" are the corporate powers and independent creators and

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programmers who design the infrastructures of digital and virtual space, and the “paradigm” is the story this generation will tell about the early-Post-Internet period. What kind of story will that be, in the end? How will this history be represented and, inevitably, misrepresented? Art and literature play a vital role in shaping collective remembrance. For this reason, the importance of studying fiction about the internet cannot be overstated.

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