INTRODUCTION

THE DEMIMONDE AS GENRE, METAPHOR, AND SPACE

What is socially peripheral may be symbolically central.¹

Early one evening, I took in a curious double feature: Mizoguchi Kenji’s 1936 Gion no shimai (Sisters of the Gion) and Rob Marshall’s 2005 Memoirs of a Geisha. Two films that treat the space of the early twentieth-century Kyoto karyûkai (literally, “the flower and willow world” of the pleasure districts), they invite a parallel reading, even as it may seem to be disallowed by their disparity in time and provenance—the first film was directed and written by Japanese, whereas the second is an American director’s treatment of an American imagining of the geisha of pre- and post–World War II Gion. Perhaps the most striking contrast between the two lies in their visual representation of the space of the Gion pleasure quarters: Mizoguchi concentrated on still interiors and defines the narrow roji, or alleyways, of Gion with deliberate, moving-camera long shots, whereas Marshall privileged exteriors and motion, depicting the karyûkai
of *Memoirs of a Geisha* as grand and bustling, akin to a roomy, hectic, larger-than-life, and over-the-top theme park. The director of the latter film tried to instill a sense of the closed, highly specialized, and discrete space of Gion, not so much through visual style, but through the script’s heavy use of adjectives and nouns such as “forbidden,” “secret,” “mysteries,” and “artist” (the last a word meant to denote a separation from everyday life—and, in this context, a distinction between geisha and prostitutes, which is belied by the film’s emphasis on sex/romance over art).

This difference in spatial rendering reflects a divergence in narrative viewpoint: the shots of the rooftops of Gion in *Memoirs of a Geisha* broadcast the fact that it is an outsider’s (unabashedly orientalist) view of the demimonde that guides the viewer, whereas the alleys and intimately framed scenes of *Gion no shimai* visually embody an insider’s entrenchment within that world. On another level, the grandeur of the one film versus the claustrophilia of the other mirrors their different approaches to narrative structure. For, as Judy Bloch wrote, “Mizoguchi capitalizes on the narrow alleyways and shuttered windows of the Gion to create a milieu closed off to the traditional machinations of well-meaning narrative.” His *roji* symbolize a sense of entrapment that complements the story of two geisha who are condemned to a life of disappointments and suffering, in which money, not love, is the most important commodity to a woman. In contrast, Marshall’s roofs and vistas buoy the improbable romanticism of what is basically a retelling of the age-old Western story of the hooker with a heart of gold. Many of the issues raised by these two films—including the way in which the three-dimensional space of the demimonde is represented in two-dimensional film and disembodied narrative, the tension between demimonde “insiders” and “outsiders,” the clash between reality and fantasy, the persistence of suffering and trauma, the emphasis (or lack thereof) on monetary transactions, and the dangers of orientalizing and/or exoticizing this sexualized space—are prevailing themes in this book.

To Pascal, imagination was, in a derogatory sense, “the mistress of the world.” Seizing this metaphor, one could read the ubiquity of literature of, in, and about the demimonde as a collision of the impetus and
texture of artistic thought with the literal world of pleasure, of which the mistress is synecdochic—a world that is peripheral, decadent, sexual, seductive, defiant of state institutions (particularly marriage), and perhaps even defiling and/or transformative.

The prevalence of demimonde representations in literary texts of both the Japanese and Western canon is an example, to quote Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, of how "what is socially peripheral may be symbolically central." For, although the demimonde may truly exist only in a dialectical relationship with mainstream society, as its dark and forbidden underside, its aesthetic, sociological, psychological, and of course, sexual ramifications have always adumbrated, complemented, and generally impacted the "respectable" world.

In a nation such as Japan, which historically had designated specific sections of its major cities as pleasure quarters, the translation of these spaces into the literary and artistic imagination demonstrates the degree to which a realm that was supposed to be contained, controlled, and "outside" the mainstream could nevertheless hold great significance in the dominant culture as a place of aesthetic experimentation as well as of performed and internalized ideals, trauma, mourning, testimony, racism, violence, redemption, and transcendence. This book considers how the physical space of the demimonde was interpreted in literary space in various twentieth-century Japanese texts, films, and artworks, especially as the space of the actual pleasure quarters was undergoing striking changes.

From rapid modernization during the interwar period (1918–1939) to postwar devastation and economic recovery (1945–present), Japan experienced a radical transformation in social and cultural values during the twentieth century. This sociocultural shift led writers and other artists to return repeatedly to the demimonde to represent, in sometimes highly inventive ways, its many potent facets: its intimacies, fantasies, addictive and contagious power, complex temporality, memories, lost illusions, pleasure, and pain. In the process, writers inevitably detailed the cities that those demimondes inhabited, harassed, and inspired, underlining the connection between demimonde texts and those about the city.
The flâneur, who, as Baudelaire once claimed, was a person who walks throughout the city in order to experience it.7

I examine primarily the case of Japan from the very beginning of the twentieth century to the early 1990s through the analysis of fiction, critical essays, films, photographs, and performances by Nagai Kafû, Kôda Aya, Tanizaki Junichirô, Kuki Shûzô, Mishima Yukio, Hosoe Eikoh, Tamura Taijiro, Murakami Ryû, Ohno Kazuo, and Matsumoto Toshio. However, I also make use of comparative examples from Western demimonde literature for several reasons.

For one, I do this in order to bring the unique aspects of the Japanese texts to the fore. After all, although the twentieth century marked great changes in society, culture, and literary representation for the entire world, Japanese writers and artists were shaped by their own particular historical and cultural context, as well as by the conventions and legacies of their long tradition of demimonde literature, so the differences between their texts and Western ones should not be in any way elided. Comparisons to Western writers may also provide some grounding for those who are well read in the Western canon but unfamiliar with Japanese literature.

Finally, the twentieth century was the first full century since the sixteenth to be marked by an open dialogue between Japan and any foreign country, which resulted in constant cross-cultural influences and fantasies of the exotic other on both sides in the early part of the century. (To name just two opposing examples, there was the Japonisme movement in the West, which attracted such artists and musicians as Claude Monet, Édouard Manet, Gustav Klimt, Vincent van Gogh, French demimonde chronicler Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Giacomo Puccini, and W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan in The Mikado. In contrast, one could note the way in which Kafû’s texts were inspired by his extensive readings in French literature, notably Gustave Flaubert’s Sentimental Education). From the beginning, however, this exchange was darkened by Japan’s concern over foreign—particularly Western—adulteration of its native culture. The seemingly amiable ties were also clouded by American attitudes
toward Japan, which tended to view it as a naïve country, available for
cultural plunder and easily taken advantage of, particularly since Amer-
ica had forced Japan to open its borders in the 1850s. This concern sub-
sequently blackened into the full horror of violent global power struggles
by the 1930s, including Japan’s attempts at colonial dominance in Asia,
the Pearl Harbor attack, Japan’s eventual wartime defeat, and its postwar
occupation by United States forces.

Despite the exceptional events of the twentieth century, my temporal
focus is not meant to suggest that demimonde literature is central only to
that century. On the contrary, the demimondaine is indisputably one of
the most popular figures in literature of all periods. This is especially so
if, along with the self-evident courtesans, prostitutes, and kept women
(such as Nana, Moll Flanders, Flaubert and Honoré de Balzac’s work-
ing women, Theodore Dreiser’s fallen girls, the variegated courtesans of
Han Bangqing’s *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*, and any number of
characters from the canonical Japanese fiction of Ihara Saikaku, Chika-
matsu Monzaemon, Kafû, and Kawabata Yasunari), her group is allowed
to include the pimps, dandies, derelicts, artists, and students who hover
in the shadowy alleys of and disport in her disreputable neighborhoods.
Within narrative, she haunts a variety of social and historical settings:
luxurious palaces and down-and-out brothels, boom economies and war-
torn landscapes, myth and dream. Owing in good part to this flexibility,
perhaps, the demimondaine plays a major role in (re)constituting the
narrative center of some of twentieth-century Japan’s most significant
fiction, even as the existent pleasure quarters were themselves suffering
from the consequences of historical reality.

Although the demimonde in history cannot, of course, be mapped
directly onto the space as it was represented and disseminated in lit-
erature, and vice versa, there are nevertheless similarities between the
two spheres. Like its historical counterpart, the imagined demimonde
was a discursive construction, influenced by the nativist convictions of
Japanese writers, texts from both the literary canon and the fringe, con-
flicting political stances, the stresses of colonialist expansion, and the
fears—both rational and not—of legislating authorities. In this sense, the
demimonde is both a place and a semiotic construction, mediated by the performance of erotic relations between the customers and prostitutes. But, because the demimonde was an actual place, its loss functions as a powerful catalyst for its invention on the page. As Judith Butler wrote,

Places are lost—destroyed, vacated, barred—but then there is some new place, and it is not the first, never can be the first. And so there is an impossibility housed at the site of this new place. What is new, newness itself, is founded upon the loss of original place, and so it is a newness that has within it a sense of belatedness, of coming after, and of being thus fundamentally determined by a past that continues to inform it. And so this past is not actually past in the sense of “over,” since it continues as an animating absence in the presence, one that makes itself known precisely in and through the survival of anachronism itself.8

This “belatedness,” or sense of anachronism, Butler addressed may be considered a phantasmal agent of nostalgia, or a feeling in which the past “continues as an animating absence in the presence.” Formed from the Greek roots nostos, meaning “to return home,” and algos, meaning “pain,” the word “nostalgia” refers to a longing, infused with a mixture of pleasure and suffering, to bring the past—often an idealized, prelapsarian past—home, into the present, or to a savoring of its flow into the present moment (as Mikhail Bakhtin would have said, thus privileging a presumed authenticity in the past over the future9).

Nostalgia can be understood as a memory (what Marilyn Ivy called “embodied memory”10) that is excessively invested in a particular place, person, idea, or time. It is, as will be shown, an essential motivator and theme of many demimonde texts written in twentieth-century Japan. Nostalgia relates to both space and time. As Svetlana Boym wrote,

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.11
As the pleasure quarters were disappearing during the twentieth century, writers contended with this loss by opening up a space for the demimonde within their narratives. However, in the process, they had to cope with a series of complex temporalities: that of the demimonde itself, of textuality, and of the nostalgic memories which in part enabled its recreation in stories and which rejected the relentlessness of historical time.

This is one reason why the texts I treat in this book have as much to do with time as they do with space. Moored in deep traditions, staged and repetitive encounters, and cyclical events and rituals, the Japanese karyûkai, or pleasure quarters, always possessed a malleable temporality—one that is better described as circular rather than linear, but whose complexity in fact defies any simplistic binary. What changed in the twentieth century was that the karyûkai segued from a world that was marked out in actual space to a world that was gradually enclosed (perhaps as a way to register its vanishing) by imaginative space. Yet, its historical disappearance only lent it power as an enduring and polyvalent figure of the imagination.

The Historical Demimonde in Japan: Textuality and Containment

From its very inception, the state-organized karyûkai became embroiled in an important and intricate textual history. Even if the demimonde’s shift from a physical reality to an imaginative reality (and perhaps also, even more recently, to a digitized, virtual reality, within the space of the Internet) was new to the modern period in Japan, the idea of this space exceeding its boundaries through textuality—as thereby transcending its physical territory, wherein carnal desires were satisfied but other desires were potentially ignited—was not. Throughout the Edo period (1600–1867), social policies regarding the demimonde reflected the authorities’ fears of pathology and untamed sexuality, as well as their wish to maintain control over their subjects’ activities.12

By setting aside strictly regulated districts such as Tokyo’s Yoshiwara as outlets for the so-called necessary evil of prostitution and other
sexualized entertainment, the Japanese government was doing much the same as authorities in the Western world. As Michel Foucault stated in *The History of Sexuality*, those in charge of policing the Western metropolises such as Paris were realistic: as it would be impossible to completely eradicate all deviant sexual behavior, the best they could hope to do was contain it within a specific social space—and, in the process, exploit it for capital. Foucault wrote,

> If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance.\(^\text{13}\)

In Japan, where not just brothels but entire neighborhoods were allotted to these “illegitimate sexualities” beginning in the early modern period, the project of containment was nevertheless doomed to eventual failure, as it was in Europe.\(^\text{14}\) Curiously enough, during the Edo period and later, an ironic inversion of the paradigm of contamination occurred: pornography concerning the demimonde was usually produced by and for those outside the quarters. As Cecilia Seigle wrote, “Through the 18th century, it was outsiders, not the Yoshiwara, who generated pornography.”\(^\text{15}\)

The benefit of reading these pornographic texts, aside from the vicarious pleasure they afforded, was practical: even as early as the Edo period, they were marked by a bourgeois conception of value for money. The texts supplied the reader/potential client

> with the information necessary to partake of [the demimonde’s] pleasures in a knowledgeable and rewarding manner, thereby enhancing the value of the money he disbursed upon their procurement … In this sense, the publication and prostitution industries enjoyed a kind of symbiotic relationship.\(^\text{16}\)

By convincing the would-be demimonde consumer that he could get the utmost value and satisfaction for his money, these books acted, in a
sense, as textual pimps, luring bargain-lusting outsiders into the pleasure quarters.

In this way and others, the demimonde reconfigured the borders of national, metropolitan, cultural, and social institutions and constitutions, even as its own borders were changed over the centuries. Indeed, throughout this book, one repeatedly encounters examples of the demimonde’s power as what I call—following sociologist Georg Simmel’s terminology for certain social structures and monetary transactions—“a supra-spatial institution.” In the temporal realm, such supraspatial institutions have parallels with the eternal, the timeless; in the spatial realm, they have “a real and fundamental solidarity with space everywhere.”

In other words, such institutions extend beyond their physical borders and are not fastened to specific chronological moments, because they dwell persistently in the mind, in the imagination, and at the threshold of impulse. The historical demimonde—a city within a city—had properties similar to those Simmel ascribed to a city as a whole, in that its sphere of influence does not end at its geographical frontiers.

Even when physical borders existed, as with the walls around Tokyo’s Yoshiwara pleasure quarter, the city dweller’s volatile perception of space could transcend those demarcations. (This is one reason why the idea of the karyûkai as an inviolable space was a fantasy, albeit a powerful one, as shown in chapter 1.) As Simmel wrote,

> People seldom appreciate how marvelously the extensity of space accommodates the intensity of sociological relationships [in the city], how the continuity of space, precisely because it nowhere contains an absolute objective border, therefore permits us to lay down anywhere such a boundary subjectively.

Thus, city dwellers are constantly, if unconsciously, in the process of recreating and resituating the demimonde, despite the best efforts of authorities to keep its influence contained.

The demimonde’s supraspatial quality gave Japanese writers and artists even greater license for their fictional expressions of this world, and
it enabled and encouraged a subjective evaluation and experience of the demimonde’s pleasures and pains. The demimonde’s figurative space could serve whatever purpose these writers wished—aesthetic, psychological, political—and therein rests one of the greatest ironies of this type of literature. Instinct indicates that demimonde fiction would likely chronicle a private desire, as a ledger of attraction, longing, seduction, frustration, loss, anguish, and (sometimes) fulfillment. Yet, I argue that the textual landscapes of such demimonde texts were, because of their very interiority, potentially subversive to state authority and forced ideologies of national unity, particularly in the violent (intellectually as well as physically) interwar and postwar periods. The demimonde figures as a realm in which outsiders with specialized knowledge can become highly influential figures in a society/national culture and in which, ultimately, the wounds left by a dramatic—and traumatic—century in Japanese history may possibly be healed.

By locating the possibility for healing and agency in the pleasure quarters, Japanese writers, I argue, discovered a paradoxical truth: namely, that the demimonde, often seen as a place of pathology, may become a textual place in which to work through trauma. Even though the topos of the karyûkai was still, at times, written as an elegy—it was portrayed as a place of tragedy and loss in works, for example, such as the stories of Higuchi Ichiyô, Ôka Shohei’s Kaei, Tamura Taijiro’s Story of a Prostitute (about the Korean comfort women), and the films of Mizoguchi Kenji which deal with demimondaines and the karyûkai, including Sisters of the Gion and The Life of Oharu—it also figures as a redemptive space in twentieth-century demimonde literature. The freedom to unmoor oneself from linear time was one way in which the demimonde spurred on such a regenerative process. In turn, such processes were represented in modern demimonde literature by performative techniques, such as the dancelike montage sequences found in several key demimonde texts, such as Kawabata’s Yukiguni. I argue that modes of performance became integral to processing in these narratives the negative experience of modernity as well as the loss induced by the collapse of the historical karyûkai. Demimonde literature further points to the
ways in which trauma may be worked out through the pleasures of not just narrative but the acts of reading and writing themselves.

WORLDS AND WORDS

Because a variety of terms exist—in both Japanese and English, but particularly in the former language—to denote women who sell sex and the concentrated districts wherein they do so, it is necessary to include some explanation of the terms I use in this book. The demimonde and literature have been entwined since the latter’s inception as a popular art form; indeed, the second definition of the word “demimonde” in Webster’s is “writers of the lowest kind—ghostwriters, hacks, and publicists.” From Giovanni Boccaccio and Ihara Saikaku to James Joyce and Kafû, both Western and Eastern writers have documented the spaces and women that were devoted to sexuality. However, the very fact that the demimonde was so widely imagined and represented in fiction problematizes the task of trying to circumscribe the term.

The word “demimonde” has always suffered from a kind of schizophrenia, referring as it does to both a place and persons. It specifies a peripheral space of concentrated, commodified, staged eroticism, but it can also designate people who embody such a fringe erotic lifestyle, whether they are physically located within a sex district or not. In other words, whereas some demimondes are officially situated, as in the case of licensed prostitution quarters that are cordoned off from the rest of the city, others are more mobile—composed, for instance, of kept women who circulate through various social classes and neighborhoods. Therefore, I intend to define the demimonde as a larger cultural phenomenon that plays on a dialectic of otherness and containment. It is a commodified arena of sexuality that, as a commodity, transgresses the typical boundaries of inside/outside and often attracts and embodies various qualities such as deviance, decadence, rebellion, disreputability, amorality, a stress on appearances, and a frankness regarding carnality, artistry, and performativity. Another way of putting it is that the demimonde is an “inside” world to which outsiders go.
In this vein, the term “demimonde,” as I propose to use it, can be divided into three semantic categories: the demimonde as a place (for example, one of Japan’s licensed quarters or Nighttown in Joyce’s “Circe” chapter from Ulysses), along with the denizens who work in or frequent it; the demimonde as a genre of literature that is centered around such spaces and habitués; and finally, the demimonde as a metaphor for how spaces that are set aside for sexuality and heightened eroticism can become disseminated throughout society, resulting in, among other consequences, a perceived threat to the dominant class or cultural principals. The demimonde in this way signifies a subculture of resistance.

It should be noted that the elasticity of the term “demimonde” can lead to some confusion. Although I use it interchangeably to refer to both physical locations (brothels, cafés, dance halls, and so on) and to spaces of textuality (often conflated with a realm of pure art, pure freedom, or “pure” imagination), the demimonde/pleasure quarters can never be seen as purely physical spaces. But, neither are they purely imaginative. Rather, the relationship between physical space and literary space is mutually generative, and the two realms are linked by a performance of social and erotic relations (which are carried out, in the texts this book explores, in physical spaces as varied as the traditional karyûkai, the high-rise hotels of the film Topâzu, and the urban “jungle” inhabited by the postwar pan-pan, prostitutes who catered to the occupying forces following World War II.)

I have chosen the term “demimonde” as the most all-inclusive for my purposes. Not surprisingly, because Japan had officially sanctioned pleasure quarters, whereas America, England, and other English-speaking nations did not, the Japanese language has more words for such spaces than English does. These terms include yûkaku, or “night quarter”; hanamachi, or “flower town”/“flower district” (the flower euphemizing the prostitutes who inhabit the districts); and yûjomachi and keiseimachi, both roughly translating as “courtesan district” and dating back to the early seventeenth century and Yoshiwara’s first incarnation. However, the Japanese term I privilege is karyûkai, literally meaning “the flower-and-willow world,” and a more contemporary coinage for
the pleasure quarters that Kafû, Aya, theorist Isoda Kôichi, and others favored in their writings about this wasting world. Therefore, I use the term *karyûkai* (or its most common, if loose, English translation of “pleasure quarter[s]”) in speaking of the Japanese districts—either the most traditional examples, such as Yoshiwara, or those districts such as Yanagibashi in *Nagareru* or Tamanoi in *Bokutô kidan*, which, though not as flashy or organized as Edo-period Yoshiwara and Gion, nevertheless retained some of their systems of etiquette and aesthetics.

However, the word *karyûkai*, unlike the word “demimonde,” generally refers to a physical space. In contrast to the term “demimonde,” which might be seen as a Foucaultian construction in which institutions and the exercise of power equally traverse the real and the semiotic, the *karyûkai* is grounded in a physical world—a world of flowers and willows, teahouses and walled streets. Though the term *karyûkai* of course symbolizes a whole realm of erotic possibility and as such transcends the mere delineation of a physical locale, it is particular to a nation and its traditional cultures and thus has less flexibility than the term “demimonde.” The word “demimonde,” in contrast, can refer in this book to either a Japanese or another national instantiation of the place, genre, or metaphor, as discussed earlier.

Complicating the definition of the term “demimonde” is the fact that the venerable *karyûkai* was not the only demimonde chronicled in twentieth-century Japanese fiction. Two distinct kinds of demimondes had emerged in Japan by the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s. One was the newer culture of cafés, staffed by *jokyû*, or bar girls, and trading in glamorized, mass-produced caricatures of Western pop culture and beauty standards. The other was the traditional *karyûkai*, a realm that was far more codified and cyclical, with centuries of aesthetic and cultural history, as well as an exhausting script of erotic proprieties, behind it. By the 1920s, the café-culture demimonde had largely become the setting for fashionable, trend-setting movements—which the *karyûkai* had been throughout the Edo period—and the *karyûkai* had settled into functioning as a bastion of tradition which could be cited, albeit reductively, by nationalists as emblematic of a pure, uncorrupted “Janesenesess,”
particularly in the form of *iki*, which might be loosely translated as “chic,” and which was an aesthetic born in the Edo pleasure quarters. In this way, the demimonde—typically a peripheral space of otherness and outsiders—was repositioned as the paragon of a supposedly national consciousness. Within the context of a modernizing culture, however, even this casting of the demimonde as a space of tradition and a throwback to a gloried past could in fact be read as counterculture and radical. In this way, the very traditionalism of the *karyûkai* may be another key to its continued power as an image of resistance.

Shut down for about a year during WWII, the historical *karyûkai* never really recovered its place of significance in Japanese culture after the war, and this was reflected in Japanese demimonde literature and art during the second half of the twentieth century. Backed by a literary tradition, established during the Edo period, of ribald *karyûkai* stories which in breadth and accomplishment could easily rival that of France’s demimonde literature, modern Japan begot often heartbreaking and sometimes highly experimental demimonde fiction by canonical writers such as Aya, Kawabata, and Kafû. After the war, demimonde literature and arts in Japan began to mirror not so much the *karyûkai*, but instead a more diffuse, less defined space of the underworld, such as the post-war prostitutes, or *pan-pan*, in Tamura Taijirô’s “Nikutai no mon” or the specialized call girls in Murakami Ryû’s film *Topâzu*. As shown in chapter 3, postwar demimonde literature also could not seem to avoid making frequent references to the transnational economy of sex work that pervaded Japan’s colonial period, particularly in the infamous form of the “comfort women,” women who were forced into prostitution during World War II by the Japanese military.

Of course, even the traditional *karyûkai* comprised various strata of prostitutes, from the most common (and most easily seduced) to the resplendent *tayû* and *oiran*, who demanded a more delicate, time-consuming, and costly approach. Even within these various categories, slippage and camouflage occurred (that is, there were women who pretended to be less amenable to advances than they in fact were, as with the initially demure geisha Komako in Kawabata’s *Yukiguni*), so that
defining a particular woman’s class within the caste of sex work can be difficult. Because of this, I use words such as “prostitute,” “sex worker,” “whore,” and “demimondaine” interchangeably and without any intended pejorative implication. However, the label “geisha” will be reserved for Japanese women who were trained in the geisha’s arts and/or called so by the text itself. The term “courtesan” will apply only to prostitutes of a higher economic status and, in general, a greater refinement.

QUESTIONS OF DISPARATE TRADITIONS, GENDER, AND CHRONOLOGY

Although I concentrate primarily on Japanese fiction, traditions of and evolutions in demimonde literature extend far beyond Japan, and they impacted many Japanese writers of the modern period. Thus, in my exegesis of the Japanese works, I strongly and, I believe, insightfully rely on comparative readings of Western demimonde texts (which, in some cases, may be a novel with just a few scenes set in the demimonde), including those by James Joyce, contemporary American writer William Vollmann, William Faulkner, George Washington Cable, Jean Genet, Balzac, Emile Zola, Flaubert, Lawrence Durrell, Gerard de Nerval, Ishiguro Kazuo, and W. Somerset Maugham. Just as important, in my view, are my inclusions of the often lesser-known but searing voices of such non-Western/postcolonial demimonde works by Algerian female author Assia Djebar, Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz, Salman Rushdie, Indian writer Prakash Kona, and Chinese novelist Han Bangqing.

Because the demimonde, as stated earlier, has always existed vis-à-vis other institutions and influences, it is all the more appropriate to approach demimonde literature from a comparative perspective. Whether Western or Eastern, however, it is immediately noticeable that most of the Japanese writers/directors to be examined are male (with the notable exception of Aya, who wrote *Nagareru* after she herself worked as a maid in a geisha house), so that what will be explored are male fantasies about a space that was largely inhabited, in historical reality, by working women. This gender disparity becomes even more interesting in the context of a
common rhetoric, created by (almost exclusively male) theorists, which casts traditional Japanese culture as female. As Alan Tansman explained, “The discourse of modernity in Japanese intellectual life employs the language of gender: that which resists the modern—the anti-rational, non-Western, native core of Japanese culture—has figured in the culture as feminine.”

Writers such as Kuki, in the 1930 essay “‘Iki’ no kōzō,” wed these two genderings—the de facto femininity of the karyûkai and the projected femininity of the traditional in Japanese culture—in order to laud the authenticity of the pleasure quarters.

However, the flip side to this argument was also prevalent by the interwar period: namely, that women—and in particular, women of the demimonde—were harbingers of the modern, in part because women were suddenly more visible in the social and working structures of society after the First World War. As Miriam Silverberg observed, “Japanese commentators on Japanese modernity were very much aware of the presence of women in the modern picture. The images of the café waitress, along with the vibrating presence of the modern girl, were placed front and center.” Naomi, the main character of Tanizaki Junichirô’s 1924 novel, Chijin no ai, wickedly synthesizes these two fantasies of the café waitress and the modern girl, but in many of the works I discuss—notably Nagareru, “‘Iki’ no kōzō,” and the texts of Nagai Kafû—femininity is mobilized to either promote modernity or to preserve tradition.

But whether demonized or apotheosized, bemoaned as modernized vamps or heralded as guardians of tradition, the female demimonde characters of twentieth-century texts and films frequently become the repository of a wide variety of male longings, ideals, convictions, and fears. In the postwar nikutai bungaku, or “literature of the flesh,” movement, for example, women generally and prostitutes specifically were appointed as agents of freedom, supposedly transcending ideology. However, this characterization by a male writer such as Tamura only raises further questions about subjectivity, projection, and fantasy in male texts about women.

As much as any ideal, literary demimondaines often embody loss. In part because this trope of loss and mourning frequently accompanies
demimonde fiction, I have chosen to break somewhat with a strict chronological format, for the work of mourning, like the demimonde itself, finds an alternate temporality to the linear. Thus, presenting these texts in a nonchronological format creates a metaphor for the subject matter. That is why in the first chapter I analyze the work of contemporary American writer William Vollmann alongside that of 1930s Japanese authors Kuki Shûzô and Nagai Kafû.

However, though this book, unlike many studies of movements in twentieth-century Japanese fiction and ideology, does not present World War II as precipitating the most decisive divide in twentieth-century literature, its argument does follow a trajectory that begins with interwar texts and ends with postwar texts. Although both the interwar and the postwar periods were represented in writing and art as moments in which boundaries were disrupted—historically and textually—the particular issues these two disparate periods concerned themselves with were unique. What is more, there was, I would argue, a definite shift in demimonde literature as the demimonde itself gradually transformed from the bustling subculture it was in 1930s Japan to the ghost town it became after 1956 and the outlawing of prostitution. During this period, the karyûkai transitioned not only in reality but on the page as well, becoming more concerned with mental/psychic boundaries after World War II. Before, when the pleasure quarters existed in reality, demimonde literature had largely been concerned with physical boundaries in three-dimensional space.

Themes of internalization, spectralization, the collapse of boundaries, trauma, and healing recur throughout this book, but its five chapters are grouped around concentrations of specific motifs and spatial paradigms. However, they also progress temporally, with the first two chapters discussing prewar works and the last three presenting postwar ones. Chapter 1 discusses, through close readings of Kuki’s “‘Iki’ no kôzô” and Kafû’s Bokutô kidan, how authors in the 1930s used themes of distance and connoisseurship to model the demimonde as an inviolable space on the page, and how such fiction challenged state authority, structuring a place of resistance in which society’s outsiders could become insiders.
It also considers the particular temporality of the *karyûkai*, as well as what impact the publication of a specialized knowledge might have on a nation that was trying to regain its sense of identity—and perhaps a modicum of pleasure—through ideals of aesthetic and cultural unity. Chapter 2 explores, through readings of Kafû’s *Okamezasa* and Tanizaki’s *Chijin no ai*, how the sexualized space of the demimonde, once a cordoned-off territory, became intertwined with the domestic sphere and more diffuse public space during the interwar period, resulting in a chaos of confused boundaries, identities, fantasies, contagions, and addictions.

As for the postwar works, chapter 3 focuses on how the demimonde and its taboos are employed as a locus of and a reaction to trauma in Tamura’s “Nikutai no mon,” Matsumoto’s *Bara no sôretsu*, and Murakami’s *Kagirinaku tômei ni chikai burû* and *Topâzu*. Through an extended reading of Kôda Aya’s 1956 novel, *Nagareru*, chapter 4 questions how demimonde fiction becomes internalized in the body of the one who imagines it and in the text, through the tropes of narrowness and enclosure as well as through an emphasis on claustrophilia (the love, as opposed to the fear, of small spaces). The chapter also looks at examples from a wide variety of world literary texts to argue that narrowness and enclosure are ubiquitous motifs in demimonde literature both in and outside of Japan. Finally, chapter 5 argues, through analyses of Hosoe Eikoh’s *Barakei* photographs of Mishima Yukio and the butoh dance of Ohno Kazuo, that demimonde narratives may create a language of healing through fragmentation, montage, performance, and interiority—and through language itself.

One of the greatest dangers for a project such as this is that it may fall victim to that which it at times seeks to highlight: namely, the exoticizing, romanticizing, or orientalizing of the Japanese demimonde. In the process of trying to demonstrate why and how the *karyûkai* attracted so many significant chroniclers, champions, and detractors, I have found this trap both pernicious and instructive: instructive in that this very danger testifies to how seductive the tendency to romanticize the space of sexuality—a tendency to which scholars otherwise as sophisticated and nuanced as Kuki Shûzô fell victim—truly is. Rather than avoiding or
eliding this hazard of rhetoric and ideology, however, I have concluded that it is more appropriate to face it head-on, for the demimonde, at least as it materialized on the written page in the twentieth century, was itself a world of traps, illusions, fantasies, and intimacies, and any analytical project which Pretends otherwise would be disingenuous. For why do scholars write of things, if not because they themselves have succumbed to allures that transcend the purely intellectual? I believe that ultimately this almost sensual investment in one’s subjects, rather than impairing or limiting one’s critical view, can lead one to greater insights.