

In Search of Lost Language: Kōra Rumiko and the Aphasiac Experience

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This essay shows how the aphasiac experience found in the work of Kōra Rumiko (a contemporary poet born in 1932) is linked to her attempt to “overcome Japanese modernity.” According to her own account, when she was a child, she existed in a state of aphasia in a broad sense. She felt that she was outside the language that surrounded her, like a foreigner. This feeling was related to her strong “resistance to their language”—the language of the powerful, or the language of intellectuals. When she was twenty years old, language came back to her in the form of poetic language. Kōra’s entire work (her poetry, novels, and criticism) is characterized by its questioning of Japanese modernity—the inability of Japanese modernity to face “the other” (especially, Asia and women). And this critique of Japanese modernity is inseparable from her reflection on the problem of language. Her work that originates from the aphasiac experience seeks to “overcome modernity” by “recovering the lost language.” In her poetry, she tries to recover language as “the place” where the subject produced by Japanese modernity is overcome. The significance of Kōra’s work lies in its attempt to revive the language of “the other,” i.e. what is oppressed in the historical process of the formation of the modern nation-state of Japan which is inseparable from the formation of the national language. It tries to resuscitate the language in the emotional and primitive horizon of being, the language that is connected to action, or the language that is linked to the woman’s body.

Keywords: LANGUAGE, APHASIA, THINGS, JAPANESE MODERNITY, THE OTHER, WOMEN

INTRODUCTION

This essay shows how the aphasiac experience found in the work of Kōra Rumiko 高良留美子 is linked to her attempt to “overcome Japanese modernity.” By her own account, she felt, as she was growing up, that she existed outside the language that sur-

rounded her, like a foreigner. This feeling was related to a strong resistance to what she calls “their language.” For Kōra, “their language” means the language of the powerful or the language of intellectuals whose living conditions put them at a distance from the daily-life concerns of ordinary people. Her work shows the need to recover or rediscover what lies behind “their language.”

Kōra Rumiko is a poet who was born in Tokyo in 1932. When she was in the third grade, the Pacific War broke out. In 1944 the fifth and sixth grade students of her elementary school (about sixty students) were evacuated from Tokyo and moved to Tochigi Prefecture. When she was in high school, she read nineteenth-century European novels, Russian novels, and Japanese novels. She was also interested in reading poetry and was particularly moved by Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*. She read Japanese modernist poets such as Hagiwara Sakutarō 萩原朔太郎, Murano Shirō 村野四郎, and Kitagawa Fuyuhiko 北川冬彦. She also enjoyed reading the poetry and tanka of Ishikawa Takuboku 石川啄木 and the poetry of Kitamura Tōkoku 北村透谷. Around the same period she read Japanese postwar novels, for instance, the works of Dazai Osamu 太宰治, Shiina Rinzō 椎名麟三, and Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫. She studied art at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music and law at Keio University. In 1956 she and her mother went to Paris by ship, sailing by way of Marseille. From Paris she traveled alone; she visited Switzerland, Italy, and other countries, and returned to Japan in the following year. In the fall of the same year she started working at The National Museum of Modern Art.¹

Kōra has written several books of poems. Her first, *Seito to tori* 生徒と鳥 was published in 1958. Her second, *Basho* 場所, was published in 1962 and won the Mr. H prize in 1963. In 1988, her *Kamen no koe* 仮面の声 won the Contemporary Poet's Prize. She also writes novels and literary criticism. A six-volume collection of her literary criticism, *Kōra Rumiko no shisōsekai* 高良留美子の思想世界 is a significant work in the field of literary criticism in Japan where few women critics have yet obtained a recognized voice. Kōra's entire work can be characterized by its questioning of Japanese modernity.² This questioning comes not from above but from “the ‘bottom’ of the reality” (to be discussed below). In this essay, I will focus on two of the several aspects of Japanese modernity that Kōra discusses: the inability to face “the other,” and the separation between art and politics. In her thought, the “other” can be interpreted as “the other” of Japanese modernity or the existence that has been excluded or oppressed by the self-defining movement of Japanese modernity, the existence that is deprived of its own language and being. It especially indicates Asia and women—and she suggests that Asia is “the proper other” of Japanese modernity.³

In her essay, “Rokujūnendai no shi to modanizumu” 六十年代の詩とモダニズム, Kōra observes that the “modern consciousness” produced by Japanese modern society is the consciousness of the person who “looks at” the other or “names” the other; it is not the consciousness of the person who “is looked at” or “named by” the other.⁴ She thinks that this consciousness is actually found in Japan's relation with Asia and argues that

Japanese modernity essentially involves its inability to “face” Asia. Japan has always looked toward Europe and America in its process of self-definition since Meiji period. According to her, this is the basic structure of Japanese modernity. Japanese modernity does not “face” “the look of the other.” This inability is based on the insatiable desire to catch up with “the West.” Sakai Naoki 酒井直樹, for instance, analyzes the process of constituting the subject of the nation-state of Japan, and writes that the subject who was loyal to the national community was constituted by “the consciousness of lack.” The consciousness that Japan lacks what the West has and the desire to fill that gap were the conditions for constituting the national subject. Sakai holds that “the consciousness of lack” had to be maintained for the formation of the subject of the modern nation-state of Japan.⁵ We could say that the formation of the national language was also made possible by this “consciousness of lack” and the desire to catch up with “the West.” It should be noted here that Kōra translated Asian and African poetry into Japanese while the majority of intellectuals and writers in Japan were looking only toward Europe and America.⁶

Another aspect of Japanese modernity that Kōra questions is the separation between art and politics. In “Rokujūendai no shi to modanizumu” she holds that one big characteristic of the “modern consciousness” in Japan is the desire for the innocence of the self.⁷ She links this desire to irresponsibility and thinks that Japanese modernity has not produced individuals who are conscious of their responsibilities for the society as a whole. And she finds this same irresponsibility in poets and artists in the postwar period. In her essay on Ayukawa Nobuo 鮎川信夫, she criticizes the modernistic, abstract “individuality” which seeks to isolate itself from the community, and yet ends up becoming a complement to it.⁸ This “individuality” is not free from the negative residues of “the passive community” in Japan, such as discrimination, the exclusion of others, and the “personality cult.” She sees here the lack of a critical thinking that places a high value on concrete aspects of individual lives and questions these residues of “the passive community.”

Kōra criticizes the structure of Japanese modernity, to be more specific, the self-forming structure that has constituted itself through the exclusion of its “other.” Here we can see a link between her critique of Japanese modernity and Sakai Naoki’s argument about the formation of the modern nation-state of Japan, which he sees as inseparable from the formation of the national language. He observes that in the historical process of forming the self-identity of the modern nation-state, a homogeneous space of culture and language was imagined and the social system that oppresses “the alterity of the other” was created.⁹ A transition from the premodern multilingual society to the monolingual social system took place, and it was in this transition that the Japanese language and the Japanese people were “born.”¹⁰

In *Shizansareru Nihongo, Nihonjin 死産される日本語・日本人* Sakai claims that the Japanese language was born in the eighteenth century as a lost language; it was posited as the homogenized “interior” that had once existed in the past moment, as the language that had to be learned and restored.¹¹ In *Voices of the Past: The Status of Language in*

Eighteenth-Century Japanese Discourse as well, Sakai asserts that the Japanese language and its “culture” were born in the eighteenth century.¹² Sakai then insists on some difference between the eighteenth-century conception of the Japanese language and the modern conception of it in the late nineteenth century (after the Meiji Restoration). He holds that from the beginning of the Meiji period, the unity of the Japanese language was equated to that of the existing language and community, and that this equation consequently standardized cultural institutions, and homogenized the language. He writes:

In this process, the concept “culture,” which was substantialized and made to imply the unity of homogeneous systematicity, was fully utilized. By first establishing a consensus that the “interior” was already there, the ruler was fully authorized to illegitimate any institution that might enhance the heterogeneous. The Japanese language and its ethnos were brought into being and made to exist in the present. . . . Thus the Japanese were resurrected from the dormant past and, as a nation, began to play the role of the subject (*shinmin*) to and for the modern state.¹³

Thus Sakai describes how, in the eighteenth century, the unity of the Japanese language was posited as a lost idea, and in the late nineteenth century was appropriated into what constitutes the “interior” of the modern nation-state of Japan.

To look at Kōra’s work from the viewpoint of Sakai’s observations, we could say that she tried to revive “the alterity of the other” that the modern nation-state of Japan had eliminated and to put the encounter with “the other” into words. For Kōra, this attempt is inseparable from an attempt “to overcome modernity (*kindai no norikoe* 近代ののりこえ).”

Kōra’s critique of Japanese modernity is also inseparable from her reflection on the problem of language (the relation between language and human existence). Her work, which is based on her own aphasiac experience, seeks to overcome modernity by “recovering the lost language.” We should note here that Kōra’s concerns about language and being are similar to those of modern writers and artists in other regions of the world. For instance, in the modern art movement in Europe, writers and artists such as Joyce, Beckett, Artaud, and the Surrealist poets resisted the symbolic system which is based on logic and syntax and tried to recover the aspects of language which are irreducible to the system of signification, more primitive and closer to the bodily movement (e.g., rhythm, intonation, tone, pause). Kōra and these modern writers and artists share an intense awareness of language and the need to recover the non-linguistic aspects of language behind the power of the symbolic order. However, her concerns about language and being are specific to her particular historical-cultural context. As a poet who experienced World War II, the ruins of Japanese society, and the complete change of the society after the war, she lived through the postwar period of Japanese poetry. She continued to stress the importance of thinking of the responsibility toward Asian people for the war crimes committed by Japan during the war. At the same time, she continued to think of the richness of women’s culture and its history in Japan and in Asia. In this sense, her concerns about language and being could be understood as her reflection on a question—

how it is possible for “the other” of Japanese modernity (people in other Asian countries and women) to recover their own language and being?

1. THE APHASIAC EXPERIENCE

“I recall the cheerful faces of the people who are recovering language,” writes Kōra in her essay entitled “Ushinawareta kotoba o motomete” 失われたことばを求めて.¹⁴ In this essay, which is a reportage about aphasiac patients at the hospitals that she visited, she draws a parallel between the experiences of aphasiac patients who make efforts to recover their languages and her own experience of language. Kōra begins the essay with her childhood memories, especially how she experienced language as a child. According to this essay, she stopped speaking at some point in her early childhood. When she was with people, especially with her parents, she would not talk. She felt at ease speaking only when she was alone or when she was with her dolls. This did not mean that she had nothing to express or nothing to convey to other people. On the contrary, she had too much to express. It was just that she could not put it into words when she was in front of others. Instead of using her mouth, she very often started a fight by using her hands.

What prevented her from speaking was her “resistance to language.” She also describes it as a “grudge against language” or a “latent fear of language.” This resistance was linked to her family environment. Her father was a psychiatrist, and her mother was a psychologist. Since she did not like the way they “named” her (e.g., they said that she had “nervous breakdown” or “neurasthenia”), she had a strong resistance to “their” language. In an interview, she says:

From the time I was a small child, I was intensely aware of language. I felt even as a child that language was not mine, that I existed outside the language that surrounded me, like a foreigner. The warmth and familiarity of a language that was my own, wrapped gently around me, remained a dream, unknown. In the absence of a language that I could wear comfortably, I took the sounds and words around me and played with them. Language was one of my favorite toys as a child. Yes, it's true that I have always been aware of language as something outside myself and have written about it, and within it, in a very self-conscious way.¹⁵

This feeling of alienation from language is related to her strong resistance to what she terms “their language.” In another essay, “Kotoba to mono” 言葉ともの, she describes her resistance to “their language”¹⁶ by which she means “the language of the powerful, or the language of intellectuals, language separated from daily life,” or “language that pretended to be the everyday language of everybody.” But at the same time she had a great love of language, a love that was connected to the memory of “play” or “pleasure.” She remembers that she enjoyed “naming” various things with her elder sister in her childhood. Thus we see her ambivalent relation to language—both resistance and love.

According to her, it was her resistance to language that connected her to the aphasiac

patients in the hospitals that she visited. For both, recovering language meant overcoming their resistance to language.

“Ushinawareta kotoba o motomete” depicts Kōra’s visit to a hospital near Koriyama that offered speech therapy to aphasiac patients with brain damage caused by cerebrovascular accidents. At the hospital, Kōra observed the therapies given to seven patients. She learned that there are two different tendencies in aphasia. One is that although language enters the patient’s brain as sounds, he or she cannot comprehend the language. The other tendency is that although the patient understands the meaning of what he or she hears and reads or knows what he or she wants to say, the patient has difficulty with speech production. Most patients have both tendencies though one is usually stronger than the other.

Kōra noticed various aspects of the aphasiac patients. For example, in a practice in which a patient is supposed to utter the name of a thing whose picture he sees on a card, he cannot come up with a name if no one tells him the sound of the first syllable. But if he hears the ‘*tsu*’ sound from the therapist while looking at a picture of a desk (*tsukue* 机 in Japanese), he is able to utter the word “*tsukue*.” Also the patient repeats the sound of the first syllable when he looks at the next thing. That is, after uttering the word, “*tsukue*,” the patient repeats the *tsu* sound when he sees the next thing.¹⁷ She also found that, for the patients, what they had learned in their childhood was easier to utter than what they had learned in their adulthood. Moreover, concrete words were easier to say than abstract words. “Obscene words” or the words connected to the primitive senses seemed to remain in their memories. Kōra became very interested in the fact that even in serious aphasiac cases, many patients could sing a song. In fact, they could sing it with an accurate rhythm and melody, even though they made some mistakes with the words of the song. She surmises that the language that had rhythm echoes with the primitive part of the human brain, and that it is linked to the bodily movement and pleasure induced by it.

Kōra’s encounter with aphasiac patients made her think of the relation between herself and poetry in terms of rhythm. In her own case, when she recovered language at the age of twenty, her language inclined toward the language that had rhythm or toward poetic language.

As she reconstrues it, since she was a child, she had been in a state of aphasia in a broad sense. Kōra shared the experience of the loss of language with the actual aphasiac patients. Yet, in her case, the aphasiac state did not mean that she could not utter names of things or that she made grammatical mistakes. Rather it meant that because of the repression of her primitive and emotional horizon, she had had no language to express herself. She overcame this aphasiac state by discovering a language with rhythm. Rhythm opened her language—the language that could express the primitive and emotional horizon of her being.

For Kōra rhythm and an “act (*kōi* 行為)” are inseparable from each other.¹⁸ She finds rhythm not only in poetry but also in conversation, speeches, and ordinary writings. The

rhythm of language is not something that we can extract as it is. When one “speaks,” the rhythm comes into being in that “act” of speaking. Speaking or writing is an “act” that takes place between the self and the other. It has a “subjective and personal” side and an “objective and social side.” Both sides exist in language.

She looks at modern society as one in which the individual “act” of speaking is gradually becoming impoverished, homogenized, and deprived of its content.¹⁹ This society is filled with words which are “given” in a one-way communication. A great quantity of monotonous and faceless language is emitted through the mass media. She says, “Rather than saying that people in modern society have lost language, we could say that they haven’t created their own language—language that is connected to an ‘act.’”

Kōra’s experience shows that the problem of aphasia is based on the “resistance to language,” that is, a refusal to accept the dominant structure embedded in language. In the case of Kōra, the resistance to language meant the resistance to the language of the powerful or the intellectual language, that is, the language separated from daily life, or the language that represses the primitive and emotional horizon of our being. This resistance is linked to the structure of Japanese modernity, to be more specific, the self-forming structure that has constituted itself through the oppression of its heterogeneous “other.” For example, Kōra writes, “Japan achieved modernization and industrialization at a great cost to poor women and farmers, the people in *hisabetsu buraku* 被差別部落, the Ainu and the people in Okinawa, and the people in Korea that Japan colonized. This was done with great oppression and tension.”²⁰ Without doubt these people have faced great difficulty in finding their own languages that express their realities and beings. Hence the aphasiac experience expressed in Kōra’s work should not be considered as something that is limited to her own personal experience. We can say that this experience also belongs to various groups of people who have been oppressed by the formation process of the modern nation-state of Japan.

2. RECOVERING THE LOST LANGUAGE: LANGUAGE AS “THE PLACE”

At one level we could say that Kōra’s aphasiac period ended when she started writing poetry. She had been deprived of language for a long time (from childhood to her early adulthood), but suddenly she recovered her ability to use language. Yet on another level one could say that her aphasiac state continued even after she had started writing poetry; it became the condition for her creation of poetry. This leads us to think that “recovering the lost language” is a continual process that does not have a definite end, a process that repeats itself. For, in Kōra, the aphasiac state means “the lack of language” or “the lack of being” found in language. It is what makes her continue writing. In other words, it is the very “lack of language” that brings forth a new language.

It could be said that Kōra’s work is based on an attempt to “recover the lost lan-

guage.” What does this mean? It means recapturing the sense of language as the place of “turning”—the place where the subject produced by Japanese modernity is overcome. Her famous poem, “The Place” (*Basho* 場所) gives us concrete images of language as the place of “turning.” The poem defines “the place” as the place where something will happen or begin. It also pictures “the place” as an “indefinite space (*futeikei no kūkan* 不定形の空間),” a formless plane which resists fixed forms. Some salient lines of the poem follow:

“The Place”

The earth lies like an aged skin.
It draws things to the ground in its own ways.
Roots of the trees, wooden benches,
leaves hanging down from the branches.
The leaves turn their soft tips toward the earth
And touching the air, in one breath, they renew themselves.
The mesophyll manifests its density, its moistness;
the soil proves its absorbing force, obstinate but little felt.

If something happens, it will happen in this place,
between hanging leaves and grains of soil sticking to each other.
If something begins, it will begin in this indefinite space.
Men and women chasing, embracing, pulling each other.
Everything is ardent and simple
until the dominant past coats these days
and hands them over to us.

If something happens . . .
But acts already past, they congealed.
The person who tried to live was taken to pieces, he had no voice.
. . .

The soil wants only to cling.
People turn it up, prepare it, trees invade it,
It obeys any force.
The grains cling to each other, drawing things that are touching them.
The soil—an old cloth, a dead skin—
is indifferent to any change.
It does not keep one teardrop or memory of any human desire.
It does not remember about each pebble or about the water that fell on it.
. . .

A wriggling skin with no joints or rents
 now covers all the ground.
 A great number of ears and tips of heads contrast against the space.
 They move, they feel and sometimes
 they mix their shadows violently on the ground.
 This is our existence.
 This is the lack of our existence.
 Look at this space, carefully investigate it.²¹

“The place” is revealed here as the plane for the “turning”—the transformation from the past into the future, from death into birth, from the dissolution of an act into the arrival of a new act, from the “lack of our existence” into “our existence.” And this plane made of the earth or the soil is described as “an old cloth” or “a dead skin.” The repetition of the phrase, “If something happens . . .” in the poem directs the reader toward the future, or makes the poem as a whole point toward the future. “The Place” appears as the renewing process itself. We recall here that in her essay “Josei no kotoba ni tsuite” 女性の言葉について, Kōra compares language to “leaf mold” (*fuyōdo* 腐葉土); the language as “leaf mold” contains time, memory and death. And she finds this kind of language in women’s language. She writes, “The element of time contained in this language is not inorganic time, but cyclic time. It is the time that makes the dead plants ‘corrode,’ ‘ferments’ them, gives them gradual change in quality, and eventually restores them to life.” She also holds that the language as “leaf mold” consists of heaps of materials that are mixed, squalid, and rich in organic substance. We can consider this language as the renewing process itself.²²

Thus, “The Place” indicates the meaning of recovering the lost language. It is recovering, in poetic language, “the place” of “turning” where the death in the past will renew itself into the future life. Here “the place” appears as the renewing process itself or the plane where the transformation of the world will take place.

We might say that this attempt to recover language as “the place” is at the center of her work. There are other poems where we sense the force of the plane on which a new form is forming itself. For example, in “The Tree (*Ki* 木)” the images of life in nature and the human world are presented as the redoubling process or as the renewing process.

“The Tree”

Within a tree there is a tree which does not yet exist.
 Now its twigs tremble in the wind.

Within a blue sky there is a blue sky which does not yet exist.
 Now a bird cuts across its horizon.

Within a body there is a body which does not yet exist.
Now its sanctuary accumulates fresh blood.

Within a city there is a city which does not yet exist.
Now its plazas sway before me.²³

In this poem, the image of a “thing” that exists at present (a tree, a blue sky, a body, or a city) reveals itself as the movement of redoubling. It contains within it the latent state of its future. And we sense the outlines of the future world emerging.

3. HER OWN “DEATH” IN THINGS

In the poem, “The Place,” we have seen how “the place” is presented as “the indefinite space” where something will happen or something will begin, where the turning from the past into the future or from death into life will occur. In Kōra’s work, the meaning of “the place” is also presented in terms of the relation between human words and things. The idea of “things” (*mono* もの) is essential to her thinking. Kōra perceives “things” as “the other” of human beings. In the relation between human beings and things, humans exist as those who look at things and name them. That is to say, things are in the passive position of being looked at and named by humans. They exist only at the service of the exchange value system. And Kōra sees in things “the death”—the state of being deprived of their capacity to undertake a project. She also recognizes the same state of “death” in individuals and language in the modern society.

Reflecting on her collection published in 1962, *Basho* 場所, Kōra describes how her effort in the poems in this book was a dangerous attempt to grasp the moment in which she and things exchange their positions.²⁴ It was dangerous because she had to take a risk of “becoming things,” which suggests that she had to risk her life in encountering her “death” in things. This poetic act of “becoming things” is very important in her poetry. In “Kotoba to mono” she writes:

Words were dead, and things were dead, too. In words I recognized my death, and in things, too, I recognized my death. But my future and the possibility of my life seemed to be hidden in them. It was only in words and things that my future, the possibility of life, existed, if it did.²⁵

What Kōra sees in things is the “death” of things, the state of being deprived of their capacity to undertake a project. And she finds her own “death” in things. In other words she sees, in the inertia of things, her state of being deprived of her capacity to undertake a project. She argues in the same essay that in modern society human beings and things are locked up in the state of being deprived of their “being,” that is, of their capacity to create or “act.” At the same time, she holds that it is in the very inertia of things that the

turning from death into life will take place.

Kōra's thought on poetry in this period, especially her reflection on the relation between words and things, shows the influence of Francis Ponge's theory of poetry. According to her interpretation (in her essay on Poe and Ponge, "Rira no koeda no uchū" リラの小枝の宇宙), Ponge attempts to overcome the inertia of things by placing himself on the side of things.²⁶ What Ponge recognizes in things is the fragility of human beings who are deprived of their capacity for a project and exist at the mercy of the hands of others. So his attempt involves delivering human beings from a spell of inertia, while delivering "things in themselves" from the domination of human beings and language. He tries to strip things of their usefulness and instrumentality, and to describe in his poetry the being of things which are prior to the state of being a tool. Kōra sees in Ponge the desire to transform not only things and language but also human beings. Ponge wants to connect human beings and things in their "being," and recover an organic relation between human beings and things.²⁷ In brief, Kōra recognizes in Ponge an experiment in which the possibility of remaking the world is at stake.

To return to the idea of recovering language as "the place" of "turning" where the death in the past will renew itself into the future life, we can say that recovering the lost language is only possible by experiencing the state of "death" in things – experiencing the "death" of the other. In other words, only through the experience of what Kōra terms "the otherness hidden in things" the "turning" from death into life becomes possible; things, human beings, and the world are freed from the spell of inertia and recover their capacity to transform the world. This is directly related to her remark in the preface of her six-volume critical work, *Kōra Rumiko no shisōsekai*, where she says that the second volume "Ushinawareta kotoba o motomete" involves "the problem of overcoming the modernity through the otherness hidden in things."²⁸ Here "the otherness hidden in things" can be understood as referring not only to things but also to those people who are placed in a passive state akin to the state of things. For Kōra, the attempt to "overcome modernity" is based on the experience of the otherness of things or, one could say, the experience of the alterity of the other (those people who are placed in a passive state like the state of things, in the state of "death").

4. TOUCHING "THE 'BOTTOM' OF REALITY"

In her essay on Amazawa Taijirō, "Muzai to iu tsumi to batsu" 無罪という罪と罰, Kōra argues that the significance of a literary work depends on whether it can put the experience of "the moment of suspension" into language. According to her, in order for a literary work to attack the reality from the other side of reality and transform it, its movement of image and language needs to touch "the 'bottom' of the reality" (*genjitsu no 'soko'* 現実の<底>), and let "the other" appear from "the bottom," while having an imaginative relation with the totality of the reality. And the literary work needs to put

this encounter with “the other” into language.²⁹ She calls this moment the “moment of suspension” and thinks that this moment—in which the poet (or writer) encounters “the other” that comes from “the ‘bottom’ of the reality” and suspends himself/herself with “the other” in becoming one with “the other”—should be at the center of the literary work. Kōra believes that if the literary work does not have this “moment of suspension,” it cannot realize “the transformation of the reality.”

She criticizes many Japanese poets of the sixties by arguing that they did not truly encounter “the other” that comes from “the ‘bottom’ of the reality” or from “the other side” of the reality. She finds that although the poets of the sixties seemed to have a more radical negativity and critical attitude against the reality than the poets of the fifties, their works did not face and touch “the ‘bottom’ of the reality.”³⁰ Kōra relates this failure to face “the ‘bottom’ of the reality” to the loss of the viewpoint from which one looks at Japanese modernity from “the other side.”³¹

The motif of touching “the ‘bottom’ of the reality” is essentially linked to the experience of “the otherness hidden in things”; what Kōra calls “the ‘bottom’ of the reality” is the dimension of things. This is the dimension where the poet encounters “the look of the other.” Facing “the other” necessarily means being looked at by “the other” that is in the state of being deprived of its “being.” This motif of being looked at by “the other” is repeated many times in her work. For she thinks that “the look of the other” is essential to poetry. The reason why she criticizes many postwar poets in Japan is that their poems are not based on the experience of being looked at by “the other.” They stand on the side of those who look at “the other” and name “the other.” For example, she writes that Amazawa’s poetry lacks the experience of “being looked at” by the consciousness, gaze, and being of “the other.”³² In other words, Kōra thinks that the postwar poets didn’t truly experience “the otherness hidden in things”; they didn’t place themselves on the side of the things that are looked at and named by human beings.

Her critique of the postwar poetry is inseparable from her critique of Japanese modernity. She thinks that modern Japanese society fails to touch “the ‘bottom’ of the reality” and encounter “the look of the other.” The closed nature of people’s consciousness in the lives of the modern Japanese appears as the lack of imagination toward other races.³³

All these points suggest that the poetic act of recovering language (i.e., recovering language as “the place” for overcoming Japanese modernity) is made possible only by touching “the ‘bottom’ of reality,” letting “the alterity of the other” appear, and encountering “the look of the other.” Kōra’s work suggests that the acquisition of the viewpoint of “the other” brings new values and meaningful changes to the modern society. She especially thinks that it is very important for poetry to indicate “the reality” (*genjitsu*) of human beings and things and to find the significance and new beauty in people’s ways of living, dying, loving and working and to liberate them.³⁴ Indeed we find her work (including her poetry, novels, and criticism) trying to face and touch “the ‘bottom’ reality” in Japanese modernity by describing the significance and new beauty in concrete “realities”

of people's lives—living, dying, loving and working.

5. THE QUESTION OF WOMEN

We have seen the importance of encountering “the other” or touching “the ‘bottom’ of reality” in Kōra’s attempt to “overcome modernity.” In her later works, she starts focusing on the question of women. And we can regard it as an attempt to touch the reality of women which constitutes “the ‘bottom’ of reality” in Japanese modernity. In this section, I would like to briefly discuss Kōra’s thought about women.

As in her discussion on “things,” Kōra seeks to achieve the “turning” of the sense of “woman” (*onna* 女)—the turning from “the being in service (for the patriarchal system)” to “the being with new value.” She asserts the necessity of the transformation of the sense of “woman”; from “woman” as the object of gaze and possession to “woman” as the being that is grounded on work and action; here work and action include household work, childbirth, and childcare.³⁵

Among various aspects of women’s work and action, she becomes particularly interested in discussing the idea of “motherhood” (*bosei* 母性). In her essays about women and motherhood, she argues for the “turning” of the sense of motherhood. She criticizes “motherhood as a system” or “motherhood as an ideology” that Japanese modernity imposes on women and their bodies through the myth of patriarchy.³⁶ And she points out the need to redefine motherhood as “an act that is natural as well as human and social.”³⁷ She observes that in the patriarchal system, by giving birth to a child, a woman ceases to exist as an independent person and becomes powerless. Childbirth is either despised or mystified by the society.³⁸ Also she criticizes the fact that in the postwar Japanese society motherhood has become a private matter and has lost its social and communal aspect. She repeatedly stresses the need to recover the social nature of motherhood. She does not consider motherhood or fatherhood as what is limited to the attitude toward her or his own children. For her it can be demonstrated in social activities for the next generation.³⁹

Another important aspect of Kōra’s thought about women is found in her understanding of the female body. For her, “the ‘bottom’ of reality” is inseparable from the horizon of the body. She writes that “in reality there is a woman’s nature = body which, although being ruled by the dominant power, is not completely subjected by it.” She adds that the realm of “woman’s nature = body” is the realm which is justified by the “public,” yet because of that very reason, alienated and oppressed.⁴⁰ Here too, she calls for the transformation of the sense of “woman’s body”—from “the body as the object looked at by the other” to “the body that is a part of living nature.” Kōra tries to locate the corporeal sense (especially that of women) in the relation between human beings and nature, especially in the relation between human beings as a part of nature and nature as the environment for human life.⁴¹

The language and culture that are connected to the horizon of the woman's body, of "the body that is a part of living nature" are restored in her poetry. Concerning the question of women, she says, "We need to rediscover a subterranean water vein of women's culture which lies hidden in the basal layer of culture. We need to realize its significance again."⁴² Her poem, "The Woman" (*Onna*) could be read in light of this attempt to rediscover "a subterranean water vein of women's culture":

"The Woman"

It is something rather like a well
When one throws down a bucket in it
One knows that there is a deep, anxious well.

The water is somberly soft
She has no more boundary
And she grafts herself to it.

But being herself is more difficult for her
Than being water is for water
Just as it is difficult for water
To be something more than water

She and I
Are loving friends who used to betray each other
The two mirrors that reflected each other.

Escaping her I never fail to be
Made her, facing her
I become him, rather than myself.

What I have done after all constitutes what I am.
For those were all I did when
I didn't see what I did.⁴³

Concerning the question of woman, Kōra states, "The question of 'Woman' is the major obsession of my life . . . and like the 'Asia' question it won't be solved in the modern age, and yet it is only by facing it directly that we might catch sight of the horizon of the future of human civilization."⁴⁴ These words suggest that the question of women is important not simply for women but for the whole of human civilization. Kōra's thought does not regard women or the oppressed simply as the object of liberation. For her, their existence indicates a future horizon for human beings in the sense that only through the

encounter with its realities can human society gain the force of renewal. Kōra's work shows that the encounter with "the alterity of the other" brings new values to human society and enriches culture.

CONCLUSION

The aphasiac experience expressed in Kōra's work should not be considered as something that is limited to her personal experience. We can say that this experience belongs to various groups of people who have been oppressed by the formation process of the modern nation-state of Japan and deprived of language and being. In brief, the problem of aphasia points to that of "the other" of Japanese modernity (especially the problems of Asia and women).

The experience of being deprived of language and being does not simply mean that of losing the faculty of speech. It is the experience of being deprived of a life in which one's discourse makes sense in the sociopolitical realm. We could liken this experience to that of "slaves and barbarians" in the ancient Greek society that Hannah Arendt depicts. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt speaks of the distinction between Greek men who live inside the polis and barbarians and slaves who are excluded from it. She writes:

Aristotle's definition of man as *zōon politikon* . . . can be fully understood only if one adds his second famous definition of man as a *zōon logon ekhon* ("a living being capable of speech") In his two most famous definitions, Aristotle only formulated the current opinion of the *polis* about man and the political way of life, and according to this opinion, everybody outside the *polis*—slaves and barbarians—was *aneu logou*, deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other.⁴⁵

Like the experience of barbarians and slaves, the experience of being deprived of language can be understood as that of being excluded from "the polis."

Kōra tries to "recover the lost language" in her poetry. "Recovering the lost language" means recovering language as the place of "turning"—the "place" where the language of "the other" of Japanese modernity is recovered or the "place" where the state of "death" or "things" (the state of being deprived of language and being) turns into the future life.

For Kōra, recovering the lost language becomes possible by experiencing the state of "death" in things—experiencing the "death" of the other. Only through the experience of what she terms "the otherness hidden in things" does the "turning" from death into life become possible; things, human beings, and the world are freed from the spell of inertia and recover their capacity to transform the world. In other words, the poetic act of recovering language is made possible only by touching "the 'bottom' of reality," letting "the alterity of the other" appear, and encountering "the look of the other."

Kōra's work shows that language is a fundamental site of struggle. As a postwar poet,

she has actually lived that struggle of language, and from that contentious endeavor her poetry and thought have originated. Her uniqueness among feminist thinkers in Japan lies in her reflection on the nature of language in relation to our “being.” At the center of Kōra’s work is the question, “What is language for human beings?” Her uniqueness also lies in the fact that her thinking and language are grounded on concrete realities. Compared with the works of feminist thinkers who often filter the concrete scenes of our lives through Western feminist theories in their observation of reality, Kōra’s work always has at its center the lives of the people who live at the bottom of the society. We find in her work a respect toward the people who are forced to live in a more difficult situation than she herself, or than her readers. Speaking of women who are learning to read and write in their old age, Kōra writes, “When we fight for the liberation of ourselves, we will find many friends who are helping us in more difficult places.”⁴⁶

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NOTES

- ¹ For a more detailed account of Kōra's life, see "Haikyo no naka kara" 廃墟のなかから. Kōra 1971, pp. 131-138.
- ² By "questioning Japanese modernity," Kōra means questioning the Japanese society that has accepted "the modern civilization." See Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, p. 293. By the same phrase, she also means questioning "the modernistic consciousness" that Japanese society has produced, the consciousness based on a longing for the modern individuality. See Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, p. 18.
- ³ Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, p. 336.
- ⁴ Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, p. 14.
- ⁵ Sakai 1996b, pp. 68-69.
- ⁶ See Kōra 1998.
- ⁷ Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, pp. 18-19.
- ⁸ Kōra 1992b, vol. 1, p. 233.
- ⁹ Sakai 1996a, pp. 9-53. Also see Lee 1996, Kawamura 1994, and Ueno 1998.
- ¹⁰ Sakai 1997, pp. 228-245.
- ¹¹ Sakai 1996b, pp. 166-210.
- ¹² Sakai 1991, pp. 320-336. Sakai holds that during this period, although the scholars of the National Studies believed that "a unity of the Japanese language" had existed in the past, "they had not completely lost the insight that the Japanese language was possible only as an 'idea,' particularly a lost 'idea'." According to him, they refused to superimpose the unity of the Japanese language, "the unity of an internally homogenized and coherent whole, or the status of the 'interior,'" on their existing contemporary community or the Tokugawa polity. They posited the image of the unity of the Japanese language as the lost language in order to "highlight the estranged and fragmented state of affairs" in their contemporary polity. Sakai 1991, p. 335.
- ¹³ Sakai 1991, p. 336.
- ¹⁴ Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, pp. 4-23.
- ¹⁵ Buckley 1997, p. 104. Nicola Liscutin, in "Reclaiming a Language Taken" briefly discusses the significance of Kōra's work in terms of the relationship of women to language. In this article, she reviews two books, *Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism* and *The Woman's Hand: Gender Theory in Japanese Women's Writing*. Liscutin 1998, pp. 338-339.
- ¹⁶ Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, pp. 38-47.
- ¹⁷ Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, pp. 10-20.
- ¹⁸ Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, pp. 19-20.
- ¹⁹ Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, pp. 22-23.
- ²⁰ Kōra 1993, vol. 6, p. 171.
- ²¹ Kōra 1971, p. 69. The English translation cited here was done by Kōra Rumiko. The journal, *International Poetry*, has a section devoted to selected poems by Kōra as well as an English translation. See Kōra 1996. An English translation of her poems is also found in *Lines Review*. Kusano Shinpei 草野心平, Shiraishi Kazuko 白石かずこ, and Yoshimasu Gōzō 吉増剛造 contribute to the same issue. See Kōra 1990.

- ²² Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, pp. 24-37.
- ²³ Kōra 1971, p. 69. The English translation cited here was done by Kōra Rumiko.
- ²⁴ Kōra 1971, p. 129. For example, see the following poems in *Basho* 場所, “Beruto” ベルト, “Heya” 部屋, “Hei” 塀, “Sakana” 魚, “Hoseki” 舗石, “Tetsubuta” 鉄蓋, and “Umi no söchi” 海の装置. Kōra places herself on the side of things that are looked at and named by human beings. Kōra 1971, pp. 36-52. In “Imēji no shōchōsei to mono” イメージの象徴性とももの (1990) Kōra reflects on her previous poetic works and writes that after publishing *Basho* 場所, she became interested in “the things that contain society and nature.” Speaking of her poem, “Tori no uchū” 鳥の宇宙 in *Kamen no koe* 仮面の声, she writes that the poem describes the birds that live in the relation with other birds and with night, that is, in an “environment”—an “environment” that makes human beings live as well. Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, pp. 58-66. Some of her poems in *Shirakashi no mori* しからしの森 also illustrate how she places herself on the side of “things” that are inseparable from society and nature. Kōra 1992a, pp. 28-66.
- ²⁵ Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, p. 38.
- ²⁶ Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, pp. 68-80. See, for instance, Ponge 1998.
- ²⁷ In “Kotoba to mono” 言葉とももの she writes, “What I really want to open is not their reality [the reality of the things] but the relation with them which does not exist, but might come into being.” Kōra 1992b, vol. 2, p. 40.
- ²⁸ Kōra 1992b, vol.1, p. ii.
- ²⁹ Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, pp. 34-35.
- ³⁰ Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, pp. 33-35.
- ³¹ Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, p.45.
- ³² Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, p.43.
- ³³ Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, p.45.
- ³⁴ Kōra 1992a, p. 108, p. 110.
- ³⁵ Kōra 1993, vol. 6, p. 8.
- ³⁶ Kōra 1993, vol. 6, p. 22.
- ³⁷ Kōra 1993, vol. 6, p. 209.
- ³⁸ Kōra 1993, vol. 6, pp. 59-61.
- ³⁹ Kōra 1993, vol. 6, pp. 89-116.
- ⁴⁰ Kōra 1992b, vol. 3, pp. 64-66.
- ⁴¹ Kōra 1993, vol. 6, p. 21, pp. 206-210.
- ⁴² Kōra 1993, vol. 6, pp. 343-344. Concerning women’s culture, she says: “In Japan there is a long and deep heritage of women’s culture. Within that culture women are not bound only to such qualities as softness, gentleness, emotiveness, but are also often angry, laughing, fighting. . . . When I think of feminine qualities, I don’t think of softness and emotiveness; I think of vitality, synthesisism, continuity, and egalitarianism. These are not qualities that are negatively marked. They are the very basis for the future development of society.” Buckley 1997, p. 110. About women’s language, she gives the following remark: “It may be that the language women came to speak has been historically defined in certain ways. It may be even be true that its boundaries were externally determined, but the language itself developed among women and in that sense is the property of women. It is now up to women to

defy the boundaries and make this language work for them. To speak language rather than be spoken. I still believe that women's language is a place of departure and not something to be escaped." Buckley 1997, p. 115.

⁴³ Kōra 1971, pp. 64-65. The English translation cited here was done by Kōra Rumiko. This poem was cited in the section called "Infinite layers: I am not I can be you and me" in *Woman, Native, Other*. Trinh 1989, p. 95.

⁴⁴ Buckley 1997, p. 103.

⁴⁵ Arendt 1958, p. 27. Kōra's following words are relevant here: "I don't know if appropriation is the right word for the devaluation of women's speech, but this is the other strong memory I have from my youth. The language that I spoke was women's speech, but it was as if that language could only be heard in certain contexts. Outside those private contexts a woman's voice couldn't be heard. It was like speaking into a void." Buckley 1997, p. 115. For a discussion of the relation between women and language, see for example, Hendricks and Oliver 1999 and Mizuta 1993.

⁴⁶ Kōra 1993, vol. 6, p. 87.

要旨

失われた言葉を求めて：高良留美子と失語症経験

対馬 美千子

本稿は高良留美子（1932年生まれの現代詩人）の作品に見いだされる失語症の経験が、いかに彼女の「日本の近代をのりこえる」試みに結びついているかを考察するものである。高良によると、幼少の頃から、彼女は広い意味での失語症の状態にあり、まるで外国人のように、自分をとりまく言語の外部に自分が存在していると感じていた。この感覚は、彼女のうちにあった「彼らの言葉」（権力者の言葉、インテリという言葉）への強い「抵抗感」によるものであった。20歳の頃、言葉を取りもどすという経験をするが、その時、彼女に戻ってきたのは詩的な言葉であった。高良の全ての作品（詩、小説、批評）に通じる特徴は、自身の「他者」（特にアジア、女性）に向きあってこなかった日本の近代を疑問に付すところにある。この近代批判は、彼女の言語の問題についての思索に密接につながっている。失語症的な経験を出発点とする彼女の作品は、「失われた言葉を取りもどす」ことによって「近代をのりこえる」という試みである。詩を書くことにより、彼女は、日本近代が創出した主体をのりこえる

「場所」を言葉のうちに取りもどそうとする。高良の作品の意義は「他者」の言葉、つまり、日本の近代国民国家が形成される歴史的プロセスにおいて抑圧されてきた言葉の生を取りもどそうと試みたことにある。それは、存在の感情的、原始的な地平にある言葉、行為に結びついた言葉、女性の身体に結びついた言葉を甦らせることでもある。