KOUNO FUMIYO'S HIROSHIMA MANGA: A Style-Centered Attempt at Re-Reading

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Abstract

Kouno Fumiyo's graphic narratives about Hiroshima, beginning with *Yūnagi no machi, sakura no kuni* (*Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms*, 2004), have drawn attention as a new kind of A-bomb manga, but they have also met with harsh criticism by historians who privilege story and representational content when approaching manga. Against their charge of a lack of criticality, this review article highlights the critical potential of Kouno's graphic narratives by focusing on how comics-specific style, especially paneling and linework, affects both narrative content and the act of reading. Kouno's works exhibit a number of peculiarities, ranging from what is drawn inside individual panels to the materiality of the line work marked, among other things, by the motif of the hand. The article demonstrates how these stylistic contrivances prompt not only re-reading, or revisiting both specific manga images and the represented past, but that they also allow for 'touching' the past. With respect to the latter, the article maintains, that Kouno's manga promote a bodily kind of historical memory that implies an alternative to the exclusive concentration on thematic representation and ideological content. With respect to manga, the article emphasizes that critical potential arises to a significant extent from specific acts of reading facilitated by specific stylistic means.

Keywords

Atomic bomb, historical memory, manga studies, manga stylistics, representation

About the Author

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Since the year 2000, academic interest towards manga has grown significantly in Japan, and not only with regards to manga studies as a distinct field of scholarship. Manga have also attracted the attention of scholars from established disciplines, in particular with respect to the representation of WWII and the atomic bombs. However, discussions of manga by historians and literary scholars show an inclination to separate story from style and represented meaning from reading practice. Precisely this inclination has affected the intellectual reception of Kouno Fumiyo's Hiroshima manga and led to their characterization as politically acritical. In contradistinction, this review article highlights the critical potential of her graphic narratives by focusing on how comics-specific style, especially paneling and linework, affects both narrative content and the act of reading.

In Japan, Kouno Fumiyo¹ gained renown with the publication of *Yūnagi no machi, sakura no kuni* (*Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms*) in 2004.² The volume's first part, *Town of Evening Calm*, had first appeared as a one-shot in *Weekly Manga Action*, a magazine for non-infant male readers (*seinen*).³ While it relates the last months of the life of Minami, a female survivor of the atomic bomb, the two-part sequel *Country of Cherry Blossoms* features Minami's niece in 1987 and 2004 respectively. Prestigious awards, for example from Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs, acknowledged *Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms* to be the most important A-bomb manga since Nakazawa Keiji's *Barefoot Gen*, which, published over thirty years earlier, was the very first manga to cross borders around 1980 (see Sabin). But Kouno's book also did astonishingly well with regular manga readers: it ranked No. 1 on amazon.co.jp in January 2005 (Yoshimura 173), and by 2014, four hundred thousand copies had already been sold (Itō).

Despite or precisely because of this wide-ranging recognition, harsh critique arose. The manga and its author were specifically accused of facilitating the denial of Japan's war responsibility as well as the rampant disinterest in political issues (cf. Kimura 2007; Kawaguchi 2008). This critique against Kouno's allegedly acritical approach towards the war-time past shall be my starting point below. I will then focus on her otherwise neglected style to reveal the critical potential of these graphic narratives, which lurks beyond explicit ideological claims or easily quotable dialogue (and monologue), and which reaches much farther than their categorization as A-bomb manga may suggest.

FIG 1. Kouno, Fumiyo. *Yūnagi no machi, Sakura no kuni*. Tokyo: Futabasha, 2004. –23.

ALLEGEDLY ACRITICAL

Town of Evening Calm is a 29-page short story set in 1955 Hiroshima. Having lost her father and sister to the bomb, the protagonist Minami dwells with her mother in the so-called A-bomb (*genbaku*) slum, an area of barracks for survivors and returnees. Yet, the meaning of this location is not explicated by the manga narrative; only readers with prior knowledge may deduce it from the riverside position of the house and its appearance. Likewise unmentioned is the fact that the 'A-bomb slum' was eventually torn down, giving way to the Peace Memorial Park built shortly after the protagonist's death which concludes the manga. Thus, the narrative appears to confine the reader's cognition to that of Minami's. Visual style privileges her perspective as well: when she kisses the nice young man from her workplace for the first time, she suddenly recalls what the surroundings looked like when the bomb had been dropped, and how many people she abandoned to survive (see fig. 1). She starts to feel guilty and stops seeing the man, apparently reconciling herself to her destiny until she dies of radiation sickness.

After *Town of Evening Calm*, *Country of Cherry Blossoms* Kouno published another manga about Hiroshima, a rather lengthy one eventually composed of three book volumes (two in 2008 and one in 2009). Titled *Kono sekai no katasumi ni* (*In a Corner of this World*), the narrative stretches from December 1943 to January 1946. Stringing together almost self-contained episodes, it relates the daily life of a young dutiful woman named Suzu and the family of her husband. Initially

from Hiroshima, Suzu moved to nearby Kure upon her marriage to a man whom she had met only once when still very young. Not only bullied by her sister-in-law, she is also troubled by her husband's extramarital love affair with a prostitute, but she endures everything without complaining. Towards the end of the narrative, Suzu and other Kure residents catch sight of a huge cloud which seen from afar is not at all shaped like a mushroom (Kouno, *Kono sekai no katasumi ni* (3) 78). The narrative, however, refrains from addressing issues such as the atomic bomb, Kure's outstanding naval port, or the allegedly unsinkable battleship Yamato which was constructed there. Although set against that specific historical background, the protagonist's interests and concerns stay confined to the private realm and its daily routines.

Such focus on the everyday life of an ordinary woman in one corner of this world distinguishes Kouno's two A-bomb manga from the famous *Barefoot Gen*. While the latter communicates a clear anti-war message, Kouno's graphic narratives exercise ideological restraint, and it is precisely this restraint that has divided the minds of advocates and adversaries. As for the latter, Kawaguchi Takayuki, an expert in A-bomb literature, points out that the Hiroshima of Kouno's manga—is distinct from *Barefoot Gen*—is devoid of the Korean population:

On paper and by means of manga, *Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms* revives the 'A-bomb slum' which has vanished from the actual urban space of Hiroshima City, but while appearing as if resisting oblivion, it secretly severs the de facto codified image of the 'A-bomb slum' as inhabited by Koreans. ("Media toshite no manga" 126)

The apparently humble female protagonist, who does not want to be a burden to anyone and who seems to resign to her fate, attracts his criticism as well:

The first-person expression⁴ of a woman who is dying of radiation sickness in the 'A-bomb slum' comes across almost like a mechanism which efficiently evokes the image of a weak being, a victim, and as such something most convenient for representing Japan as 'feminized,' not subject but object of violence. ("Media toshite no manga" 128)

In a similar way, historian Kimura Tomoya observes:

A 'quiet,' 'pure' and persistently 'privately narrated' memory of the atomic bomb. Such a narrative won't stir the public sphere; it deprives itself of any influence on the contemporary political situation. Already 25 years ago doubts started to be raised against the discourse of postwar Japan's general 'pacifism,' which was based on the country's self-perception as innocent victim, utilizing images of femininity or notably maternity. But today, in tandem with political reforms that pursue a clear route of militarization, the

by now naïve discourse that equates 'woman' with 'peace' and 'victim' is getting jammed even into the private sphere.

Whereas Kawaguchi and Kimura are concerned about thematic omissions which they trace back to the foregrounding of everyday life as privatization and the privileging of the female protagonist's view, Ichitani Tomoko, also a researcher of A-bomb literature, approaches the 'feminized memory' in a positive way. Without denying the invisibility of the Koreans, she succeeds in reading *Town of the Evening Calm* differently, precisely because she does not treat the manga as a self-contained representation (385). Rather, she factors in knowledge about Hiroshima's geography (characters' names being derived from toponyms) and the aforementioned history of the 'A-bomb slum,' knowledge that is not readily available to non-residents nor provided by the manga narrative, although Kouno attached a hand-drawn map of the inner city that indicates differences between 1955 and 2003 in the book edition (*Yūnagi no machi, Sakura no kuni* 101). Consequently, Ichitani highlights that this manga employs a *spatial* tactic, manifesting itself, among other things, in the juxtaposition of the same place at different points in time (in the first short story and its sequels). And she appreciates the concern with space, or location, as a critical addition to historical as exclusively temporal accounts:

... Kouno's manga attempts to represent traumatic memories of Hiroshima that were marginalized by the reformulated city-space and landscape in the circulation of the discourse of the Peace Memorial City. (369)

With this in mind, she draws attention to the poster, which Minami passes on her way home from the office: it announces the First World Conference against A and H-Bombs held in Hiroshima in August 1955 (Kouno, *Yūnagi no machi, Sakura no kuni* 8). On the last page of the initial manga narrative, this very poster, now torn off, is blown by the wind (34).

Apart from background details like these, questions arise as to why *Town of the Evening Calm* appears feminine, although it was not positioned as such by its publication site, that is, by a generically female manga magazine (*shōjo*, or *josei manga*), and why this femininity is perceived as conservative and suspect. Against the backdrop of manga's gendered genres, a female artist who presents a nice female protagonist drawn in soft lines almost inevitably invites categorization as feminine. But character design alone does not yet make a graphic narrative, and upon closer inspection, Kouno's protagonists undermine the first impression of a submissive woman in the course of the narrative. For example, once at home, Minami stretches out on the floor and puts her legs on the low table which triggers a rebuke by her mother (Kouno, *Yūnagi no machi, Sakura no kuni* 10). Furthermore, her very last words are highly provocative. Already blind, she soliloquizes: "It's

been ten years. I wonder if the people who dropped the bomb are pleased with themselves. 'Yes! Got another one!'" (Kouno, *Town of Evening Calm* 33; see fig. 2). Compared to Nakazawa's character Gen, Minami does not lead a future-oriented life, and she eschews any ideology, but she clearly entertains doubts about the people around her who keep quiet about the bomb despite their scars, visible, for example, in the public bath (Kouno, *Yūnagi no machi, Sakura no kuni* 16). And she breaks this silence in her monologues. This is reflected in the manga's title word 'evening calm' (*yūnagi*), which echoes Minami's experience that "nobody talks about it" (16). In a lengthy interview, Kouno herself referred to the issue of silence, i.e. withholding information and suppressing communication, as one of her major concerns (Fukuma et al. 374, 389–390). As a side note, the term *yūnagi* denotes the

FIG 2. Kouno, Fumiyo. *Yūnagi no machi, Sakura no kuni*. Tokyo: Futabasha, 2004. 32–33.

windless condition characteristic of Hiroshima that became a metaphor for both the survivors as lost humans and the destroyed city, last but not the least due to the 1953 novel by Ōta Yōko (Ichitani 373).

Kouno's deliberate distancing from grand ideologies, which some critics have equated with political indifference, may also be taken as an invitation to reconsider collective memory. Manga researcher Yoshimura Kazuma has pointed out that Kouno subverts iconic media images, such as the infamous mushroom cloud, by omitting them—in *Town of the Evening Calm*—or by presenting the actual phenomenon from an unfamiliar optical angle—in *In a Corner of this World*.

According to Yoshimura, this approach is historically accurate: Minami and the other Hiroshima residents who experienced the dropping on the ground could not see the mushroom shape, and by 1955, the iconic photo taken by the American air force had not yet circulated widely in Japan (Yoshimura 182). From this media-historical perspective, Kouno's confinement to everyday life, which supposedly obscures macro-political issues, reveals its critical potential as it suggests changing the perspective, literally, on the level of vision, and figuratively, on the level of historical memory. In order to explore this further, I shall now turn to an aspect

FIG 3. Kouno, Fumiyo. *Yūnagi no machi, Sakura no kuni*. Tokyo: Futabasha, 2004. 24–25.

overlooked by historians and readers alike, i.e., the stylistic contrivances that distinguish Kouno's works from mainstream manga.

THE MEANING OF STYLE

What stands out at first glance is Kouno's peculiar paneling. The panels as such are regularly shaped, and drawings exceed panel frames only in rare cases (which is another difference from 'female' genres, especially *shōjo* manga). The content of the panels, however, is occasionally arranged in an unfamiliar way. The last few pages of *Town of the Evening Calm*, that relate Minami's dying, provide a representative case: the less vision Minami has, the blander the panel space becomes, until only

monologue lines, accompanied by a few speech balloons, remain (see fig. 2). At the same time, the usually rectangular panel shape changes into a slightly angled one on the lower tier, preparing the reader for Minami's last words as well as the final page. Another good example is the scene in which Minami experiences her first kiss with the young man from her workplace, only to concurrently recall the day of radioactive contamination. The panel layout as such is not atypical for a Japanese manga, but the last panel in the page's bottom left corner is, squeezing an actually horizontal action into an elongated vertical frame (see fig. 1). Its lower part contains images of A-bomb victims, whom the protagonist apparently tries to escape by rushing from bottom to top. But the Japanese monologue, rendered in vertical

FIG 4. Kouno, Fumiyo. *Kono sekai no katasumi ni* (3), Tokyo: Futabasha, 2009. 106–107.

lines, runs reversely, from top to bottom, leading the reader's gaze to the images of the victims in the ground. Upon turning the page, more vertical panels appear, guiding the reader's gaze from top to bottom and vice versa: the protagonist is heading upwards, while text lines and pictorial elements, by orientation, anticipate her plunge (see fig. 3). Such compositions distract the reader for a moment from the narrative, drawing her attention to style itself.

In addition to extraordinary paneling, Kouno's manga exhibit also an exceptional use of linework, as *In a Corner of this World* evinces exceedingly. Most striking in this regard is the role of the hand. Manga, especially in male genres, tend to give preference to ruler-straight lines when depicting buildings and streets, but Kouno's

works employ hand-drawn outlines, soft and often dashed, even for architectural structures (see fig. 4). And with respect to shadows or patterns, they favor hand-drawn lines over screentones. Screentones were initially adhesive sheets onto which patterns of dots and lines were printed, but in recent years, manual application has been replaced by digitalization. While screentones readily evoke an ‘industrial’ look, Kouno’s manga present themselves as utterly handmade. The alternate use of brush and charcoal, pencil and crayon⁵ in *In a Corner of this World* brings the materiality

FIG 5. Kouno, Fumiyo. *Kono sekai no katasumi ni* (2), Tokyo: Futabasha, 2008. 92–93.

of this linework further to the fore, for example in the case of that double-spread which presents traditional playing cards with poems that are to be paired with the compatible image (aided by the first syllable of the respective poem in the top right corner of each image; see fig. 5). Drawn by the protagonist herself, these cards appear almost as if spread out on a table in front of her (and the reader), but they are rendered in a picture-book style and as such in lines different from the rest of the manga, as if indicating a different dimension of the protagonist’s reality.

Across cultures comics critics maintain: “Very little attention has been spent addressing the one feature of comics that marks them as profoundly different—and perhaps even irreducibly so—from both novel and film: the trace of the hand, the graphic enunciation that is the drawn line” (Gardner 54). Focusing on the importance of linework in comics, Nakamura Tadashi highlights the ‘dialogic’ relation effectuated by the co-existence of different drawing styles within the same

work. Leaning on Bakhtin's theory of the novel, he regards Kouno's alternation of linework as a way of intersecting different perspectives: first and third perspectives related to one and the same character as well as the perspectives of character and reader. The setting of *In a Corner of this World*, for example, has it that the protagonist likes to draw, and the intradiegetic appearance of her drawings, marked by a different kind of linework, helps to foreground her subjective views (Nakamura 84). This is further amplified by the motif of the hand. Suzu's hand holding a brush is repeatedly shown up close, in a way which aligns her view with the view of the reader. But in June 1945 (that is, at the beginning of the third volume), Suzu loses her right hand due to the detonation of an unexploded shell hiding by the roadside. Sixteen pages later the manga's linework becomes crooked. In accordance with the intradiegetic loss of the protagonist's right hand, the artist too changed her hand for the remaining part of the manga, as she revealed in an interview: "Halfway I decided to draw the backgrounds consequently with my left hand; normal artists wouldn't have such low-level pages get published though." (Fukuma et al. 380). Standing in a destroyed street, Suzu says to herself, "It's me who is crooked. As if the world was drawn left-handedly." (see fig. 6). This utterance links the right-

Fig 6. Kouno, Fumiyo. *Kono sekai no katasumi ni* (2), Tokyo: Futabasha, 2008. 60–61

handedly drawn parts and the left-handedly drawn parts to different mental states of the protagonist. And although prior to the loss of her right hand, Suzu's hand as well as her drawings have been shown frequently, it is only after the accident and the subsequent change of linework that the whole manga begins to appear as

if created by Suzu. At this point, protagonist and author tend to collapse, and the inscription, with which the first volume of *In a Corner of this World* began—"To myself here and there in this world"—finally makes sense: obviously, Kouno tried to imagine how she herself would have lived during the war.

A drawing protagonist is also characteristic of Kouno's 6-page colored short story *Furui onna* (*An Outmoded Woman*).⁶ In the form of an autobiographical first-person narration, this manga features a woman who has disappointed her parents for not being the son and heir whom they desired. Although she regrets being born a woman, she eventually marries an "outmoded man." The story ends with her uttering, "and when it comes to war, I will gladly send my husband out to the battle field" (Kouno, "*Furui onna*" 14). If focusing solely on story content, the protagonist appears as an extremely submissive woman, but the style in which this story is

FIG 7. Kouno, Fumiyo. "*Furui onna*." *Washizumu* 19. Ed. Kobayashi Yoshinori. Shogakukan, 2006. 10–11.

rendered gives a different impression. Indicative of that is the early confession that she "used to draw for fun onto the blank back of leaflets" (*Furui onna* 14, third panel). Astonishingly enough, the manga itself seems to be drawn onto such a back of a leaflet, the colors of which were reproduced in print (see fig. 7). This raises doubts about the protagonist's verbal statements: do they mirror her actual way of thinking or not? One is inclined to assume that a submissive woman would not draw manga in the first place and if so, not on the back of leaflets. Thus, Kouno's style succeeds in interrelating multiple levels and opening up the possibility to read the outwardly conservative story ironically.

REPETITIVE ACTS

In addition to a specific kind of reading, stylistic contrivances like Kouno's also prompt re-reading as a repetitive practice, not only because of a certain unease of incomprehension we are left with upon first reading, but also because images that reappear with slight differences across chapters invite comparison with their earlier version. Obviously, Kouno's manga are to be read with pauses and retrospects. In fact, *Town of Evening Calm* ends with the monologue line, "This story is not over yet" (Kouno, *Yūnagi no machi, Sakura no kuni* 34). In terms of content, this could mean that the aftermath of the atomic bomb is not over with the death of the protagonist. At the same time, the hand in the very last panel suggests, that this graphic narrative calls for more than one reading, for being taken into our hands several times. As a result we are not necessarily granted a 'more correct' understanding of the past. Rather, we have partaken in the ordinary routines of the protagonist through repetitive, not necessarily rational but highly sensory acts of reading. Kouno's manga engage our senses of vision and touch in a way that by watching the images, reading the dialogues, and turning the pages, we may experience the sensation of 'touching' the past by hand. Her graphic narratives promote a bodily kind of memory that implies an alternative to the exclusive concentration on thematic representation and ideological contents. They suggest that the critical potential of comics in general and manga in particular may arise less from verbalizable messages, but rather from specific acts of reading facilitated by specific stylistic means.

Notes

1. The precise romanization—Kōno—was not used for her only book available in English. The artist was born in Hiroshima in 1968 and resided there until her twenties. She made her commercial debut in 1995.
2. The book edition assembles *Town of Evening Calm* (*Yūnagi no machi*) and its sequels *Country of Cherry Blossoms* (*Sakura no kuni*) 1 and 2. It was published in English in 2006 by Last Gasp.
3. Launched in 1967 as a weekly and relaunched in 2004 as a biweekly, *Manga Action* is known for the serialization of Monkey Punch's *Lupin III*, Koike Kazuo & Kojima Gōseki's *Kozure ōkami* (Lone Wolf and Cub), Usui Yoshito's *Crayon Shin-chan*. Although *seinen* magazines do not necessarily address a male-gendered readership anymore, the cover of the *Weekly Manga Action* issue, in which the one-shot *Town of the Evening Calm* first appeared (30 September 2003), suggests 'masculinity' featuring a scantily dressed young woman who gazes directly at the viewer.
4. This refers to the predominant monologue mode on the verbal side.
5. More recently, Kouno created an adaptation of Japan's oldest historical record, the *Kojiki*, consequently employing a ball pen (*Ten no maki*; *Chi no maki*; and *Umi no maki*), which has been received as highly experimental.
6. Published in the alternative magazine *Washizumu* (*washi*=I + *ism*), edited by manga artist Kobayashi Yoshinori. Beginning with his *Neo Gōmanism Manifesto Special: On War* (1998), he advocated historical revisions which led to ferocious debates inside and outside of Japan.

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