

**SACRED PARIAHS:
HAGIOGRAPHIES OF ALTERITY, SEXUALITY, AND
SALVATION IN ATOMIC BOMB LITERATURE**

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Woman was the embodiment of respectability;
even as defender and protector of her people she
was assimilated to her traditional role as woman
and mother, the custodian of tradition, who kept
nostalgia alive in the active world of men.

George L. Mosse
*Nationalism and Sexuality*¹

Introduction:

The eponymous protagonist of the television drama *Yumechiyo Nikki*, or the Diary of Yumechiyo, is 34 years old, and has been diagnosed with leukemia. Her illness is attributed to her exposure, while still a fetus in her mother's womb, to the atomic bombing of 1945 in Hiroshima. With only three years to live, Yumechiyo must travel twice a year to a hospital in the city, several hours by train from her small village. Keeping her sickness a secret, she continues her life as a geisha and as a caretaker for other geisha. Despite its grave themes – the plight of the geisha, leukemia, and the atomic bombing – or perhaps because of its dramatic seriousness, the *Yumechiyo* story, by renowned screenwriter Hayasaka Akira, enjoyed wide popularity upon first airing in Japan in 1981. The show began with five episodes from NHK, a Japanese public television station, and was followed by two sequels, a movie, and numerous theatrical productions. No other atomic bomb narrative had garnered so much attention in popular media until then.

Feminist thinker, Maya Morioka Todeschini, has rightly pointed out that the story of Yumechiyo, like other such stories, aestheticizes the female victims' sufferings, while also portraying their sufferings as

¹George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 97.

necessary for their moral and spiritual growth – a combination that lends romantic appeal to the characters through the evocation of nationalistic nostalgia.² In fact, the movie analyzed by Todeschini spent more time on a romantic relationship between Yumechiyo and an artist who appeared in the second season of the TV series.³ Thus, I examine primarily the first TV series of *Yumechiyo*, whose screenplay is now in print and readily available, reflecting its popularity. While acknowledging Todeschini's critique of *Yumechiyo*, I want to avoid viewing the popularity of this fictive narrative as merely the result of a simple-minded audience being manipulated into seeing Yumechiyo as a representation of A-bomb "maidens," as Todeschini's interpretation may suggest. Instead, I will explore the possibility of different readings of *Yumechiyo*, so that its popularity among the Japanese audience is not merely reduced to sexism alone.

The significance of Todeschini's argument lies in pointing to the aestheticization of female victims as well as the romanticization of their diseases, preventing us from a deeper understanding of the individual victim's plight. Following Todeschini's argument, I drew upon hagiographical tropes in medieval popular accounts as a prototype to read *Yumechiyo*. I find that through this the survivor's ethical sensibilities are better understood, thereby better relating us to them. With this hagiographic lens, I argue that the story of *Yumechiyo*, in fact, reflects some of the survivors' ethical sensibilities – an ethic that does not seek to impute responsibility to victimizers, but rather pursues critical self-reflection as a means of reconciliation. The hagiographical trope will reveal to us a new understanding of the survivors' ethical sensibilities, covered by melodramatic plots. The audience is not merely contributing a chauvinistic

²Pastoral scenes in *Black Rain* written by renowned writer, Ibuse Masuji, are thoroughly examined by John Whittier Treat: "So successful is the dissolution of one of the greatest atrocities of the century into stories of baby carp and other nostalgic signs of a long-gone pastoral, that the novel's translator can say that its theme is precisely opposite what the public assumes," in *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 296. This observation is applicable to *Yumechiyo*.

³Both in TV series and film, Yumechiyo was played by a famous actress, Yoshinaga Sayuri. Some may argue that she herself embodies the nostalgia that will be discussed later in the paper.

understanding of women portrayed in the media, but is also seeking a way to come to terms with the Other who experienced the unprecedented event of the bombing.

To this end, by employing philosopher Edith Wychogrod's argument, I will explain why I take it to be hagiography, and also comment on the ethical import of hagiography in a postmodern era that explains Todeschini's argument in light of the problem of representation. I will briefly illustrate the story of *Yumechiyo* and then analyze it by utilizing the archetype of "popular" narratives in medieval times. In doing so, I hope to delineate its problems and the survivors' ethics.

Hagiography and Postmodern Moral Theories

Hagiography, or sacred biography, differentiates itself from historiography in its amalgamation of "the 'mythic' and 'historical' elements."⁴ Although what constitutes "mythical" versus "historical" is certainly a contested issue, for the purpose of this essay, I focus on what I take to be the "mythic" element and its relation to hagiography. As the editors of *The Biographical Process* state, what is worth examining in hagiographical literature lies in the analysis of the "mythical ideal," rendering one's life experience extraordinary, while giving rise to a new idea of "holy" for a sacred biography: "Given that the mythical ideal remains somewhat fluid at the time the sacred biography is written or compiled, the selection of biographical material is an extremely vexing problem. A single reported episode may have a constitutive effect on the resulting mythical ideal."⁵ In its intractable blending of biography and fictive narratives, the mythical ideal generates a structural foundation for hagiography.

How then, might hagiographies founded on the mythical ideal enhance ethical discourse particularly in our time? Edith Wyshogrod argues that postmodern ethics, emerging in response to the genocides and other atrocities that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed, must take seriously the question of how we define the concept of alterity and deal

⁴ Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps, eds., "Introduction" in *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*, (Mouton: The Hague, 1976), p. 1.

⁵Ibid., p. 3.

with the Other.⁶ What allowed humans to commit genocide and other atrocities, claims Wyschogrod, was the failure to reflect deeply on one's relationship with alterity. Wyschogrod therefore suggests that postmodern ethics should lie in "the sphere of transactions between 'self' and 'Other' and is to be constructed non-nomologically."⁷ This non-nomological thought stands in contrast to ethical systems that engage in "the investigation of the norms of conduct."⁸ Such ethical systems, as opposed to non-nomological ones, thus tend to treat the Other as another self, consequently and inevitably converting the concerns for the Other into the pursuit of self-interest.

Wyschogrod's further reflection upon the relationship between self and the Other is expressed as follows; "If, on the other hand, saintliness is a total emptying without replenishment, there is no subject to engage the Other. In either case the alterity of the Other disappears, and is reduced to the homogeneity of the same. This paradox opened up by saintly selflessness will seem to dissolve once the relationship between power and powerlessness in saintly existence is clarified. Powerlessness will be viewed as renunciation and suffering, the expressions of self-negation in saintly life, whereas, by contrast, the field of moral action will be interpreted as requiring empowerment."⁹ This dialectic relationship to the Other – one's awareness of power over the Other, renunciation of it, and being powerless as a way to relate to the Other to sustain the hagiographical structure.

Towards the end of evolving a postmodern ethics that seeks to develop new conceptions of self and the Other, and the given understanding of saints' relations to the Other, it is a natural outcome for Wyschogrod to recommend turning our attention to hagiography, where saintly lives

⁶"The Other, both individually and collectively as the precondition for moral existence, is the Other in her or his corporeal being. The saintly response to the Other entails putting his/her own body and material goods at the disposal of the Other." Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. xxii.

⁷Ibid., p. xv.

⁸Ibid., p. xv.

⁹Ibid., p. 33-34.

exemplify “compassion for the Other, irrespective of cost to the saint.”¹⁰ Narratives of saintly embodiments of radical altruism and practices of self-negation dramatically display the refusal to make the Other a mere extension of the self, and instead put the saint’s “own body and material goods at the disposal of the Other.”¹¹ Exhibiting altruism and practices of self-denial, the saints’ lives “unfold in tension with institutional frameworks,” which generally advocate nomological moral behaviors. Wyschogrod claims that saints’ manifestations of negation – negation of self by renouncing their power, as a means to alleviate or relate to the negation of the existence of the Other – undermines the order of institutional frameworks and perhaps any social structures, which presupposes the pursuit of individual self-preservation over the preservation of the Other.¹² Such behaviors that go beyond or even nullify such social norms appear to be inexplicable, however they appeal to us as the mythical ideal, as a manifestation of saints’ extraordinary concerns and care for others, at the expense of their – social or even physical – self-preservation. Calling into question institutional orders – be they ecclesiastical or social – hagiography challenges those social values which are often taken for granted.

In these features of hagiography, Wyschogrod finds resources for new approaches to ethical thinking. She argues that the mode of behavior manifested by saints must not be taken as “a nostalgic return to premodern hagiography, but as a postmodern expression of excessive desire, a desire on behalf of the Other that seeks the cessation of another’s suffering and the birth of another’s joy.”¹³ Even when religious institutions endorse hagiography for the purpose of controlling the common people, the life stories of saints manage to offer unfathomable care for others that go beyond the institutional constriction. The sacred biography is not simply used by authorities, but persistently reveals its own resistance to the limits enforced upon it. Hagiography, in sum, contributes to contemporary moral theory by displaying ways in which altruism is put into practice. At the same time, hagiographies exhibit antinomian behavior through their

¹⁰Ibid., p. xxiii.

¹¹Ibid., p. xxii.

¹²*Saints and Postmodernism*, p. xxiii.

¹³Ibid., p. xxiv.

relentless negations of self.¹⁴ With this in mind, I want to turn to Todeschini's critique on *Yumechiyo* and a hagiographical interpretation of it.

***Yumechiyo* as a Representation**

The story of *Yumechiyo* begins in full melodramatic form. The protagonist is returning from the hospital on a train crossing a high iron bridge into her village, evoking a sense of remoteness from the convenience of city life.¹⁵ Another passenger on the train is a detective who is pursuing a murder case. The main suspect of the case is Ichikoma, one of the geisha under Yumechiyo's care. Yumechiyo's village has been infested by the *yakuza*, or Japanese mafia, who want to turn it into a resort area. Yumechiyo's former fiancé comes from the city to persuade the villagers, including Yumechiyo and his own mother, not to persist in the old way of business. In the meantime, Yumechiyo protects Ichikoma and abets in her escape, while the only medical doctor of the village flees with one of Yumechiyo's geisha after it is discovered that the doctor has been practicing medicine without a license. As with any soap opera, there is no grand finale to this melodramatic plot; rather, the story is indefinitely protracted through characters' arrivals to and departures from the village, interweaving their pasts and the present.

Describing the story of Yumechiyo as an "A-bomb soap opera" and an "A-bomb tear jerker," Todeschini maintains that *Yumechiyo* "contains all the ingredients for commercial success: a long-suffering beautiful heroine who dies fashionably...; romantic love and sex; traditional dance, song, and popular theater; intrigue, female suicide, and murder."¹⁶ In her analyses of such A-bomb "maiden" movies (including the well-known

¹⁴Wyschogrod states: "although hagiographic texts endorsed by religious traditions are often idealized biography or autobiography, saints' antinomian acts provide an intratextual counter-discourse to the constructed artifacts of already well-developed theological and institutional frameworks," in *Saints and Postmodernism*, p. 37.

¹⁵The beginning of this drama, with the use of the tunnel and Yumechiyo's occupation, reminds the viewers of *Yukiguni*, a famous work by Kawabata Yasunari.

¹⁶Maya Morioka Todeschini, "'Death and the Maiden': Female *Hibakusha* as Cultural Heroines, and the Politics of A-bomb Memory," in *Hibakusha Cinema*, ed. Mick Broderick (London: Kegan Paul, 1996), p. 225.

Black Rain), Todeschini attributes their popular success to their exploitation of female *hibakusha* (or survivors): the A-bomb stories fashion their experiences into “culturally and politically sanctioned narratives”¹⁷ by imposing cultural stereotypes upon women in general as silently suffering innocents, and upon female *hibakusha*, whose individuality is dismissed in favor of romanticized victimization through glamorized suffering.

The central point of Todeschini’s critique is that the story of the A-bomb maiden aestheticizes radiation-related sicknesses by suggesting that women’s external beauty corresponds to inner virtues developed through silent suffering.¹⁸ The *actual* suffering experienced by the historical “Hiroshima Maidens,” who were invited to the United States in 1955 for free plastic surgery to treat their bomb-induced disfigurements,¹⁹ would prove this point: A-bomb maidens portrayed in fiction have to be physically intact, as if their outward appearance confirmed their inner beauty.²⁰ Todeschini further argues that the theme of such short-lived innocent beauty evokes in readers’ minds the “*mono no aware*, or the ‘suchness’ and ‘sad beauty’ of existence.”²¹ This notion is associated with the eighteenth-century philosopher Motoori Norinaga, whose school of National Learning provided the theoretical underpinnings of the Japanese nationalism that led to wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this way, these A-bomb maiden stories evoke nationalistic memory, exhibiting “symbolic alignment with ‘tradition,’ and the supposed ‘essence’ of premodern Japan.”²²

¹⁷Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁸Once, tuberculosis or pneumonia was the favored disease in romantic novels as a maidens’ ailment, until they became curable sicknesses in English literature.

¹⁹For more information, see Rodney Barker, *The Hiroshima Maidens: A Story of Courage, Compassion, and Survival* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985).

²⁰For example, Yumechiyo never appears as a suffering patient from chemotherapy. She merely becomes more fragile. As is observed in *Black Rain*, the protagonist Yasuko loses her hair, but no subsequent scenes show further loss of her hair or any physical manifestation of radiation sickness, except her becoming thinner and paler.

²¹“Death and the Maiden,” p. 232.

²²Ibid., p. 241.

While I agree with Todeschini's critique of the distortion and dangerous misuse of the *hibakusha* women's experiences, the question of A-bomb maiden's representation requires several points to be clarified for further discussion. One such question is whether *hibakusha*'s experiences themselves, regardless of their gender, have ever been appropriately represented in media. While the population of Hiroshima city in 1944 shows only a slightly higher percentage of women to men (52% to 48%),²³ visual representation of *hibakusha* focuses predominantly upon women and children. Under such circumstances, where victimization is often represented by de-masculine figures, we must consider, on the one hand, what can be an appropriate representation of *hibakusha* men's experiences. On the other hand, *hibakusha* women's experiences are certainly different from those of men.

A journalist and a *hibakusha* herself, Seki Chieko gives some examples of different experiences between men and women in post-A-bomb life: first, a *hibakusha* wife's miscarriage is often solely attributed to her history of experiencing the atomic bomb, while a non-*hibakusha* wife's miscarriage is hardly associated with her *hibakusha* husband.²⁴ Second, acknowledging men's suffering from burns and keloids, Seki concludes that generally speaking, social expectation for and emphasis on women's external beauty places higher pressure on women with scars.²⁵ Third, the 1970s census demonstrates that the number of women who are engaged as day laborers in Hiroshima (5.8%) is higher than that of the national average (2.7%). From the data, Seki speculates that more *hibakusha* women tend to stay single than their male counterpart.²⁶ Each example above is not necessarily unique to the *hibakusha* women. Still to this day, a number of women feel responsible for their miscarriage; scarred women can be avoided in courtship while the scars on men can be read positively as a sign of courage. Nonetheless, these examples exhibit the uniqueness of *hibakusha* women's experiences, as a result of the atomic bombing induced

²³Seki Chieko, "Genbaku saigai to josei" ["The A-bomb Destruction and Women"] in *Onna ga Hiroshima o kataru* (Women speak about Hiroshima) eds. by Esashi Akiko, Knou Mikiyo, Seki Chieko, and Horiba Kiyoko (Tokyo: Inpakuto shuppankai, 1996), p. 205.

²⁴Ibid., p. 214.

²⁵Ibid., p. 215.

²⁶Ibid.

discrimination against them. Experiences of ineffable sufferings from an unprecedented event may hardly be appropriately represented in the media, and neither *Yumechiyo* nor hagiographical reading of it will rectify the misuse of *hibakusha* women's experiences. Thus, I only hope that interpreting *Yumechiyo* by means of hagiographical plots discloses a new approach to ethical thinking about the experiences of the atomic bombing.

The fact that *Yumechiyo* was exposed to radiation while still in her mother's womb creates an extreme case of innocent suffering. Consequently, as Todeschini claims, "the portrayal of heroic, 'innocent' survivors allows for a 'symbolic reconciliation' of the various political, social and moral tensions and ambiguities in Japanese public memory surrounding the A-bomb experience, with regard to the dropping of the bomb, conditions that led up to it, and the social position of survivors in Japanese society."²⁷ However, the *Yumechiyo* story does not simplistically and unambiguously portray the suffering of an innocent, but in fact elucidates the moral complexity of human beings, which cannot be crudely categorized as either innocent or wicked.

For example, in the first TV series, *Yumechiyo* abets her fellow geisha, murder suspect Ichikoma, not from her conviction of Ichikoma's innocence, but perhaps from her responsibility of being a guardian for all the geisha under her wings. This creates a moral dilemma between compliance with public authority and complicity in Ichikoma's plight. Helping Ichikoma's absconding, *Yumechiyo* exhibits her ambiguity, rather than her innocence, as a heroine. Meanwhile, Numata, a member of the *yakuza*, turns out to be a *hibakusha* who was helped by *Yumechiyo*'s mother when he lost his parents to the atomic bomb. When Numata realizes that the geisha house that his group is trying to purchase is that of *Yumechiyo*, he offers incense at the Buddhist altar to pay respect to *Yumechiyo*'s late mother, and suffers a spell of vertigo upon standing up. Seated on a tatami mat, Numata says, "This is because of the Pika. The effect won't go away after these many years." (The Pika is an onomatopoeia for the flash of the atomic bomb, thus refers to the bomb itself.) *Yumechiyo* asks if he has had himself checked up at a hospital. He responds, "No one wants to see me live long." Numata is a *hibakusha*, and yet, in contrast to the stereotype, he is neither morally virtuous nor heroically courageous, but is as weak and corrupt as anyone else.

²⁷Ibid., p. 244.

In addition, Kihara, the village's kindhearted doctor, flees with one of Yumechiyo's geisha after authorities discover that he has been practicing without a license. Again, the tension between public authority and personal human relationships resurfaces: the most helpful and sympathetic doctor in a rural village is a lawbreaker. In the end, detective Yamane lets Ichikoma get away, burns the evidence of Kihara's illegal practice, and resigns from his job. Thus, the main characters in *Yumechiyo*, including the long suffering protagonist, are far from being simplistically righteous, just, or innocent, but are morally ambiguous, caught between social norms and non-nomological compassion. Focusing upon Yumechiyo's "innocent" suffering alone does not acknowledge the complexity of the *hibakusha*. Thus, Todeschini's analysis of this popular drama does not recognize the moral vicissitudes of its characters, simplifying them in a way that fails to take into account the ethical insights – non-nomological self renunciation – afforded by a hagiographical understanding of Yumechiyo's story.

Yumechiyo – Sacred Pariah

The sort of moral ambiguity present in the *Yumechiyo* story is also evident in the lives of saints. Because of their extreme altruism and practices of self-negation, saints' behaviors often go beyond those institutional norms that demarcate right and wrong, good and evil, innocent and wicked. Fascination with the lives of saints, like that of the Yumechiyo story, derives from their power to nullify social and ethical norms through their extraordinary acts of altruism toward the end of alleviating the suffering of the Other. In addition, examining hagiographies in Japan reveals that saintly figures transgress not only social norms and metaphysical demarcations of good and evil, but also physical boundaries through transfiguration.

In reading *Yumechiyo* from a hagiographical lens, it is important to keep in mind that most hagiography on holy women in medieval times were written by men, and it is almost inescapable to reconstruct a women's saintliness through men's perspectives, as Catherine M. Mooney, European medieval historian, states. Even though Mooney specifically refers to Christian tradition in medieval Europe, the problems and questions she poses may not be greatly dissimilar to those found in Japan. "Given the patriarchal and misogynistic cast of medieval society and, in particular, the medieval Church," asserts Mooney, "many scholars have increasingly expressed skepticism regarding these sources, noting that male-authored depictions of holy women, however sincerely intentioned, are likely to

reveal far more about men's idealized notions of female sanctity and its embodiment in women's lives than they reveal about the female saints themselves."²⁸

Similar remarks were made by Japanese historian, Janet R. Goodwin: "For the most part this was a male discourse...Largely missing from the discourse are the women's own voices."²⁹ For example, the *Kenkyū gojunreiki* (建久御巡礼記) describes the origin and history of temples located on the route to a high-ranked woman's pilgrimage. We know the record was compiled by a monk named Jitsuei in 1191, but we can only speculate who this "high-ranked woman" was, even though this record was dedicated to her.

In this record of pilgrimage, however, a mythical story of an empress appears,³⁰ in which Buddha manifests himself as the marginalized leper. In this story, the suffering and the marginalized was not a woman. On the contrary, the highly respected woman witnessed a transformation of the lowly to the holy – the trope we are examining. The protagonist of this prominent Japanese folklore/hagiography,³¹ of which there exist numerous variations, is Empress Kōmei, who opens a public bath in a time when bathing is considered a luxury available only to the affluent. She even offers to wash the first person to visit her bath. The first person who appears is a leper, who demands that the empress wash him with her own hands. The

²⁸Catherine M. Mooney, "Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity" in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 3.

²⁹Janet R. Goodwin, "Shadows of Transgression: Heian and Kamakura Constructions of Prostitution," *Monumenta Nipponica* 55/3 (2000): pp. 327-368, 328.

³⁰The story of the empress is recorded in *Konjaku monogatari*, and other documents compiled in the twelfth through sixteenth centuries. Historian Abe Yasurō examines the similarity of this plot to that of Xuánzàng's story (in *The Journey to the West*) in the *Konjaku monogatari*. Abe Yasurō, *Yuya no kōgō: chūsei no sei to seinaru mono* [Empress of the bathhouse: sex and the sacred in the medieval era] (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 1999 [1998]), pp. 31-38.

³¹In some documents, this episode is one of the tales (*monogatari*), while others go into more detail of the Empress' life as a sacred person. Abe Yasurō, *Yuya no kōgō*, p. 25.

empress reluctantly acquiesces, and washes him, admonishing not to tell anyone for fear of being marginalized for having come into contact with a leper. But at this moment, the leper transforms into a Buddha ascending to Heaven.³² This story not only shows the ambiguity of the Empress's character as simultaneously merciful and concerned with self-preservation; it also portrays the unsettling proximity of the holy and the unholy: The marginalized sufferer is, in fact, a sacred being, and through this encounter the marginalized enables the empress herself, albeit reluctantly, to be remembered as a saintly figure.

Japanese hagiography is indeed rich in representing the marginalized of society – the sick, the poor, and female prostitutes – and in recapturing them differently. Hagiographical interpretations thus, not only offer further insight into the question of the popularity of the “A-bomb maiden” genre, and in particular, the *Yumechiyo Diary*, but also promote more nuanced analyses of Japanese ethical sensibilities in the face of tragic events. Without merely identifying actual *hibakusha* with saints or saintly figures, and thus eschewing their individual sufferings, let us examine how hagiographic tropes and structures facilitate a better understanding of the ethics of the *hibakusha*.

From the Lowly to the Holy

The pattern of empowering the unholy and thereby deconstructing the boundaries of worldly hierarchies permeates Japanese hagiographies. Interestingly, as time passes, the dichotomy of the holy/unholy were left exclusively upon women, whose social status itself becomes increasingly ambiguous. In this connection, an examination of the historical attributes of geisha provides further insight. Following Todeschini's argument, Yumechiyo's occupation as a geisha may be interpreted as another apparatus for aestheticization and evocation of nostalgia. It is undeniable that the word or term “geisha” certainly evokes in the audience's mind a single image: women's subjugation to men. The image of geisha serving men has been romanticized, particularly in Western European and North American contexts, primarily because of the enigmatic and “exotic” nature of the occupation – geisha are skillful entertainers, attention-givers, and not

³²*Yuya no kōgō*, p. 20. Another version is that the leper demands that the empress suck the puss out from his wound.

simply prostitutes. However, I would like to remind that Yumechiyo is one of the two villagers (the other person is also a woman who owns an old-fashioned hotel in the village), who does not give in to the threat that *yakuza* imposed upon most of the villagers. Confronting the *yakuza* and a detective – representations of hierarchical organizations in two different worlds – Yumechiyo is far from submissive.

A historical survey of the origin of geisha, or a female entertainer, helps us to understand the complexity of their occupation. Traditionally, there are a number of ways to refer to female entertainers in Japan, including *asobime*, *asobibe*, *shirabyōshi*, and *yūjo*, to name a few. This variety of nomenclature reflects the varying range of their skills and associations. Similarly, the social status of these female entertainers is uncertain, at least prior to the Middle Ages of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.

As for the status and the origin of the female entertainers, Goodwin summarizes that opinions among scholars divide into two factions, those who argue that those female entertainers were marginalized and voiceless and others who point to their association to the high ranks in society.³³ While Goodwin agrees with neither factions, she argues in her article that “attitudes toward female entertainers were always ambiguous, ranging from delight to dismay at any given time.”³⁴ On the other hand, Bernard Faure claims that those women’s missions had a religious medium: “The term *asobi*, used concurrently with *ukare* (also read *yū*) in the medieval period, implied an artistic talent related to music, song, and dance. But it would also be misleading to read the *yū* or *yūjo* as mere entertainment. The term *asobi* seems to have first meant *a ritual to console the soul of the departed* (and those of his relatives).”³⁵ Faure continues to assert that “because they served ‘sacred beings’ (the *kami* and the emperor himself), they participated to a certain extent in sacredness. These specialists of ‘deep play’ (*asobi*) took on all of the meanings of the word *asobi* itself, with its broad semantic field, ranging from the religious to the sexual and artistic

³³Goodwin, “Shadows of Transgression,” p. 329. In other versions of the plot, bodhisattva *Monju*, or Manjushri replaces Buddha. *Yuya no kōgō*, p. 29.

³⁴Ibid., p. 329.

³⁵Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 252.

domains.”³⁶ Seeking the origin of the female entertainers and overly romanticized and fantasized association of them to the sacred was critically refuted by Koyano Atsushi.³⁷

While historically the status of female entertainers is still uncertain, the closeness of those women to the sacred was commonly expressed in literature. The following Goodwin statement helps us to facilitate our discussion: “from mid-Kamakura on, one image of them [female entertainers], as transgressors against social norms, became dominant.”³⁸ If the mythical ideal is constituted of non-nomological behavior, in “transgressing against social norms,” thereby female entertainers transcend the conventional morality of good versus evil. Such behaviors are a threat to the authority, yet as we have seen, they can also be the expression of self-renunciation to care for others.

We will now turn to one of those narratives where a saint, encountering a marginalized female entertainer, reaches a higher plane of enlightenment. In this plot, the boundaries between the holy and the unholy came to be obscured, and thereby unveil the ambiguity of the categories, as those women reveal themselves as a manifestation of the holy. This functions in a way similar to a popular account in Christianity in which

³⁶Ibid., p. 255.

³⁷Koyano Atsushi, “‘Sei naru sei’ no saikentou” (Re-examine the “Sacred Sex”) in *Nihon Kenkyū* 29/2 (2004): pp. 301-323. Also, by the same author, *Nihon Baishun Shi: Yūgyōnyofu kara sōpu rando made* [History of Japanese Prostitutes: from wandering female entertainers to women in the contemporary sex industry] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2007). Instead of arguing whether or not their occupations were originated in religious rituals, Koyano asserts that combining sex and sacred is the *kyōdō gensō*, or collective fantasy. (The term, *kyōdō gensō* is originally introduced by philosopher Yoshimoto Takaaki’s monograph, *Kyōdō gensō ron*, or Discourse on Collective Fantasy, published in 1968. It refers to a state as a political entity or superstructure in the Marxian sense. Here, Koyano uses it as a constructed idea that has no historical ground, yet is widely shared and supported as a fact). Koyano argues that the idea of “sacred sex (*sei naru sei*)” is imported in the early twentieth century from Euro-American academic discourse, much after those folklore and hagiography in question were compiled. “*Sei naru sei*,” p. 315.

³⁸“Shadows of Transgression,” p. 329.

Mary Magdalene came to be identified with “the woman sinner,” who was eventually saved by encountering the Savior despite (or because of) her sinfulness. Female entertainers in Japanese hagiography are transformed into sacred beings. They are, in fact, the saviors, not the saved.

As Goodwin states, by the end of the Middle Ages, the status of these female entertainers was diminished, as seen in the fifteenth century Noh play *Eguchi*. Here the *yūjo* no longer holds the privileged social status associated with being a spiritual mediator between the sacred and the profane. Rather her initial position of lowliness sets the stage for a transgression of ontological boundaries, as the *yūjo* becomes holy.³⁹ The *Eguchi* story is based on the legend of a tenth-century Buddhist saint, Shōkū shōnin, who had a burning desire to see the bodhisattva Fugen, or Samantabhadra. He had a dream that directed him to visit a *yūjo* instead. Eventually, Shōkū shōnin is able to see the *yūjo* as an avatar of bodhisattva Fugen. The movement from lowly to high in the juxtaposition of the *yūjo* and the bodhisattva appeals to the audience, while this hagiographical trope suggests the ambiguity of moral, spiritual, and religious manifestations in this world, which inevitably leads to the uncertainty of the norms that moral, spiritual, and religious authorities draw upon.

Such hagiographical tropes are re-imagined in Yumechiyo’s multifaceted social stigma. Grave enough in the context of Japanese society to place her on the bottom of the social hierarchy – she is a *hibakusha* who is barren, and suffers from a terminal illness, and a geisha in a rural village – her stigma relegates her to the role of a pariah. At the same time, these very qualities anticipate a transformation into the holy, a fact attested to by the statue of Yumechiyo as a bodhisattva that has been constructed by the people of the village upon which the village in the Yumechiyo story is based.⁴⁰ The popularity that this melodrama has garnered thus lies not solely in its provocation of chauvinistic and nationalistic sentiment alone, but also in its appeal to the audience’s ethical imagination, in its attempt to understand, and perhaps respond to, the Other’s suffering.

³⁹*Yuya no kōgō*, pp. 150-151.

⁴⁰In the postscript to a pocket book edition, the screen writer Hayasaka Akira proudly reports that “(In the village) Yumechiyo statue was erected, Yumechiyo kan’non [a Buddhist bodhisattva] was built, and a big Yumechiyo hall was established.” Hayasaka Akira, *Yumechiyo nikki* (Tokyo: Shinpūsha, 2003), p. 265.

The Yumechiyo story trades in hagiographical tropes in which the lowly become holy through their “excessive desire...on behalf of the Other,” by seeking to end the suffering of the Other, and promoting the “birth of another’s joy.” The characters of this story, neither morally perfect nor totally corrupt, are agents of the nullification of worldly moral norms through the extension of compassion to the suffering of the Other. But more importantly, such transformation is made possible when one dares to transgress boundaries set up by social norms such as at the moment when the Empress touches the leper, a Buddhist monk comes to see *yūjo*, and detective Yamane stops going after “criminals.” The transformation, then, occurs on both ends: Empress Kōmei, Shōkū shōnin, and Yamane, encountering the unholy Other outside of their environment, once preoccupied with self-preservation within a framework of social norms, come into contact with the “holy” through their renunciation of social “power.”

Conclusion

In this essay, I have suggested that reading *Yumechiyo* in light of its use of hagiographical tropes, not only helps to explain the popularity of the television series, but also yields ethical insight. The transformation of pariahs into saints is only made possible, in Japanese hagiographies, when the individual – the Empress at the public bath or Buddhist sage in the Noh play *Eguchi* – overcomes the impulse of self-preservation by coming into contact with the lowly Other. The Other, as in those narratives, invites us to reveal the meaninglessness of boundaries between self and the Other, culminating in the lowly becoming the holy. In fact, the actual A-bomb survivors, despite difficulties enduring the marginalization, in their testimonies deconstruct the boundaries of the victims and victimizers: survivors do not focus upon persecuting the perpetrators of crimes. Rather, they frequently reconcile their experiences of the atomic bombing by reflecting upon their own shortcomings: I too have done wrong, so I am not in the place to condemn others.⁴¹ Instead of imputing responsibility or

⁴¹Ms. Emiko Okada, who was 8 years old at the time of the bombing, critically reflects upon herself that she was unaware of discrimination against Koreans before the bombing, and that she wished to have been a brave soldier if she were a boy. Public testimonies given in Chicago, IL on October 22-25, 2007. Another *hibakusha*, Nagano Etsuko, blames herself

pursuing retaliation, these survivors seek reconciliation through sharing their testimonies to prevent the future suffering of others.

The reach and applications of this self-critical attitude, however, remain in question. For example, how does the hagiographical model speak to situations in which Japanese people have been the primary perpetrators, such as the cases of Unit 731, Nanjing massacre, comfort women, and other atrocities? This question challenges ethicists with the meanings of accountability and moral responsibility within a religious tradition that recognizes institutional and social dichotomies as illusory, as with self and other. Nonetheless, the denial of dichotomization – the holy and unholy, the victimizer and the victim – runs deep in the *hibakusha*'s ethic involving reconciliation. The *hibakusha*'s self-critical reflections in the face of human-made tragedy thus merit consideration as a model for an ethic of reconciliation, requesting us to come into contact with their suffering, and for evolving an alternative account in which a pariah will transform into a saint.

by recounting that the reason that her little brother and sister died from the bomb was because she insisted on returning to the city before the bomb in *White Light/Black Rain* (directed by Steven Okazaki, 2007). Rev. Shigenobu Kōji, who lost his sisters and father from the bombing and after-effect radiation, states that even he would have pressed the button to release the bomb if he were a pilot of the Enola Gay. Public talk given by Rev. Kōji, on December 4, 2007 at Kōryūji (Hiroshima, Japan). Even the inscription on the memorial in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park does not refer to those responsible: “Errors won’t be repeated. Please rest in peace.”