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Becoming Popinobopian: Defining the Self Through Abjection, Metamorphosis, and
(Re)Production in *Earthlings*

In Sayaka Murata's 2018 novel *Earthlings* (*Chikyū seijin*¹), women's wombs and men's testes belong to society—at least, that is what Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya believe. The three of them are self-proclaimed aliens in their thirties who are stuck on Earth and have one goal: survive in a society that does not accept them. Day and night, they are scorned by their friends and family because they do not have nuclear families or stable jobs. In other words, they are not (re)productive [*seisansei*], a term Kazue Harada uses to describe the interconnectedness of sexual reproduction and economic productivity in low-fertility Japan. Harada, a professor of Japanese at Miami University, writes in her book *Sexuality, Maternity, and (Re)Productive Futures* that Japanese women authors such as Murata use the genre of speculative fiction to resist the pressure to bear children and imagine fantastical worlds in which heterosexual (re)production and relationships are not the norm (2). I concur with Harada's evaluation of Japanese speculative fiction authored by women and (re)production and apply it to my analysis of Murata's *Earthlings* to demonstrate how Murata not only challenges heteronormative values and (re)production but also the definition of "human" that is constructed in the novel's fictional world. In reading Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya's abjection from human society, and the way their identities are decoupled from their physical bodies, I also argue that in *Earthlings*, social norms carry more weight than biology in determining the line between human and non-human.

¹ The title is 地球星人; the first two kanji (地球) mean "Earth" and the second two kanji (星人) mean "star person."

To explain Murata's critique, I will conduct a literary analysis of *Earthlings*, primarily of the events that occur in the final chapter, and use Ginny Tapley Takemori's 2020 English translation of the novel. First, I will trace the human and alien binary that is established to demonstrate that being human is defined by social expectations surrounding (re)production in *Earthlings*, emphasizing the mechanical descriptions and language used to make these distinctions. I will then apply that social definition of the human to my discussion of the metamorphosis from human to alien that takes place for Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya. Finally, I will analyze the significance of silkworms, *yamauba* (a type of female Japanese demon), and the concluding cannibalism-induced pregnancy, which collectively imagine a world where both men and women can become pregnant asexually. I will begin by providing a summary of the novel.

*Earthlings*² is an anti-coming of age and survival story that follows eleven-year-old Natsuki Sasamoto, who experiences alienation growing up due to her parents' favoritism for her older sister. She is also sexually abused by her male teacher when she is in sixth grade. Her only friend is her toy hedgehog named Piyyut that talks to her, claiming he is from Planet Popinpobopia and has turned Natsuki into a magical girl. Aside from Piyyut, the one human who understands her is her cousin Yuu Sasamoto, who believes he is an alien from another planet because of his abusive mother. Yuu and Natsuki are secretly boyfriend and girlfriend and have sex for the first time one summer and end up getting caught by their family members. They never see each other again until they are in their thirties when Natsuki returns to her grandparents' house on a trip with her husband Tomoya Miyazawa. Tomoya is asexual and cannot be intimate with women because of trauma caused by his mother. Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya bond over their disillusionment with heteronormative and (re)productive expectations of society, believing that

² Content and trigger warnings: cannibalism, child abuse and neglect, emotional abuse, gore, incest, pedophilia, physical abuse, sexual assault, suicide and attempted suicide, murder, violence

their bodies are not their own because society has turned them into tools for (re)production. In the last chapter of the novel, they flee to the mountains of Nagano, Japan, to become Piyyut's species: Popinpobopians, aliens from Planet Popinpobopia. The Popinpobopians pledge to live as individual beings who have complete control over their bodies.

(RE)PRODUCTION AS AN EARTHLING DUTY

Black writer, researcher, and activist Syl Ko writes in her essay "By 'Human,' Everybody Just Means White" that being human is less about being part of the Homosapien species and more about adhering to "a certain way of being, especially exemplified by how one looks or behaves, [and] what practices are associated with one's community" (23). Drawing on the history of slavery and the continued oppression of African American and Black people, and writing from a North American perspective, Ko argues that humanity is racialized: being human means being palatable to a white audience. *Earthlings* does not revolve around race and ethnicity like Ko's essay does; however, in this section I propose that the definition of human in *Earthlings* is similarly based on society's expectations to be heterosexually (re)productive and not on possessing the human genome. Moving forward, I will use Earthling to refer to human and Popinpobopian to refer to alien and non-human.

Just as Ko writes, the criteria for being an Earthling in *Earthlings* are centered around socially acceptable behaviors and practices, specifically surrounding (re)production. Being an Earthling means being heterosexual and (re)productive to support the economy and bring a new life into this world. In fact, Earthlings have a "duty" to bear children, according to Tomoya's father (Murata 190). His use of the word "duty" amplifies Harada's idea of (re)production, which she writes comes from the Japanese phrase *seisansei* meaning both reproductivity and productivity (1): childbearing is a job that society employs Earthlings to perform, and Earthlings

who do not have children are incompetent workers and should be fired. Being (re)productive, however, is not something that excites Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya.

Natsuki, in particular, views the process of creating a new life as ugly industrialization and capitalism, exemplified by the mechanical language she employs to express her disapproval of both (re)production and humanity. Eleven-year-old Natsuki tells us her hometown of Chiba, Japan is a “Baby Factory” where everyone exists to produce babies (Murata 35). If a couple has not “manufactured a new life” yet, they are expected to “[contribute] to the Factory through their work” (Murata 106). When they have babies, their babies will grow up and “be shipped out” to other factories to work and create more babies (Murata 35). Natsuki’s description of the Baby Factory conjures up images of automation and Ford’s assembly line. The industrial processes and labor that take place in a factory are organized and disciplined yet lack life and personality. Workers are disposable: when someone cannot do their job well, they are immediately replaced with someone else who can perform better. As such, Earthlings are a “factory component” in the Baby Factory (Murata 36)—they have no purpose aside from working and procreating. Natsuki’s opinions on the Baby Factory do not waver even when she is thirty-four years old and married. Her husband Tomoya hates working so much that he struggles to hold jobs and often tells Natsuki that Earthlings are “hypnotized into thinking that [work and sex] are great” (Murata 106). Natsuki agrees, claiming that Earthlings are “brainwashed by the Factory” and (re)produce “for the sake of the Factory” (Murata 105). Love is also not real; it is a “mechanism designed to make Earthlings breed” (Murata 175). Natsuki and Tomoya’s belief that Earthlings do not consciously and voluntarily choose to work and have children suggests again that Earthlings have no identity. To them, the domain of Earthling-hood encompasses not just being heterosexual and (re)productive but also being a slave to society and their reproductive organs, and this lack of

freedom is unsettling and creates an unfulfilling life. Earthlings have no autonomy and are destined to be tools for the Baby Factory to use from the second they are born.

THE POPINPOBOPIAN WAY OF LIFE

Bulgarian-French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva describes the nature of abjection in her monograph *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection)*. Kristeva defines the abject as the thing we find repulsive and threatening (e.g. rotten food, menstrual blood, and criminals), and abjection as the process of expelling the abject from ourselves or society. Her theory on the abjection of the self is especially relevant to *Earthlings*. According to Kristeva, the abjection of the self is rejecting the parts of ourselves we find repulsive and consequently experiencing a breakdown of the self (5-6). In being acutely aware of the “other,” we have a jarring realization that the abject cannot be fully separated from the self because it is what “constitutes [our] very being” (Kristeva 5). I first explain why Natsuki, Tomoya, and Yuu are not Earthlings and then use Kristeva’s abjection of the self to argue that the characters’ abjection of their Earthling status is needed to create their Popinpopobopians identities. Moreover, the retention of their Earthling bodies despite no longer being Earthling exemplifies how being biologically human is not enough to be considered human.

The social definition of Earthling (heterosexual, (re)productive, and slave) is one that does not apply to Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya in a number of ways. First of all, Natsuki and Tomoya do not adhere to heteronormative values and are not (re)productive. The two of them both work temp jobs and split household chores evenly instead of having Natsuki, a woman, handle all of the domestic affairs, which is looked down upon by their friends and family. They are also in a loveless, contractual marriage “to escape family surveillance” (Murata 103). Tomoya cannot bear to even look at Natsuki’s legs, so having sex to make a baby is out of the

question. Yuu is not under as much scrutiny because his parents passed away and he is an only child, but he is still outside of Earthling society because he is currently single and unemployed. The three of them are critical of being slaves to society as well, evident in Natsuki and Tomoya's awareness and criticism of the Baby Factory and the Earthlings' lack of autonomy. Yuu is much more complicit with the Factory's demands (Natsuki mentions he is the best at being an Earthling) but admits he has no sense of self when he does not follow directions. All of them, therefore, are considered to be abject in Earthling eyes and do not fit into the socially-constructed mold of an Earthling. For example, Tomoya's father says Natsuki and Tomoya are "abnormal" because they have never had sex and do not have children (Murata 190). This abjection by those around them contributes to the constant and growing sense of alienation that disturbs, frustrates, and confuses the characters, and soon pushes them to abject their humanity. I will summarize a part of the novel that initiates the characters' abjection of the self.

In the last chapter of *Earthlings*, chapter six, Tomoya tells Natsuki he has decided to accept his fate as an Earthling. He wants to get a divorce so that Natsuki can be free and become a Popinpopobian. Natsuki convinces Tomoya that he is a Popinpopobian just like her because being an Earthling and a Popinpopobian can both be caught like a disease, so Tomoya must also be infected. The two of them agree to leave the Baby Factory (run away from society) and race to save Yuu from being infected by Earthlings. Yuu is on his way to Tokyo to find work and resists at first but then tells Natsuki and Tomoya that he can hear orders from other people—his mother, professors, colleagues, and more—even if they do not verbalize these demands. He has spent his entire life following these silent commands but has not been able to hear them ever since he lost his job. Yuu actually took voluntary redundancy when his company went bankrupt because that was what the company's silent orders were. He says he "no longer know[s] what to

do or how to live” because following these orders was “how [he] always survived” (Murata 206). Tomoya abruptly proposes the three of them hold an unofficial divorce ceremony—Tomoya and Natsuki divorce, and Yuu and Natsuki divorce (they “married” when they were children)—and pledge to live as separate entities from each other. After that, Tomoya and Natsuki plan to live at her late grandparents’ house in Akishina. Yuu decides to join, claiming that the only way he can make sense of his freedom from silent orders and the Baby Factory is by becoming a Popinbopian.

Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya’s self abjection is gradual and makes it impossible for them to ever return to Earthling society again, but I view being a Popinbopian as a liberating experience that the three enjoy more than being an Earthling. The first stage of their metamorphosis from Earthling to Popinbopian is in their shifting mindset. When they reach Akishina and attempt to define what it means to be a Popinbopian, Tomoya declares they must discard their Earthling knowledge and “see everything with the alien eye” (Murata 214). They believe that Earthlings are brainwashed slaves, so they need to engage in mental training to un-learn Earthling beliefs and behaviors. Natsuki says as the days pass, the three of them “progressed rapidly” in their mental training to become Popinbopians and learned to view the world “from a more rational stance” (Murata 214). To the Popinbopians, what is rational is what will aid in their survival, and they use it to justify actions such as stealing food from other Earthlings because they do not have much money and do not want to starve. I believe the Popinbopians’ primary goal to survive is reminiscent of the abjection they experienced due to their inability to survive in a (re)productive Earthling society. As they mentally train to become Popinbopians, Natsuki notes that “it felt as though we were recovering [a sensibility] we’d always had.” (Murata 214). Natsuki’s sentiments and the Popinbopians’ mental

metamorphosis connect to Kristeva's theory on abjection of the self and how the self simultaneously casts off what is abject and relies on the abject to exist. The Earthling ideas and lifestyle that the Popinpopobians reject are what help them form their alien identity—which is the opposite of an Earthling identity—and even establish Popinpopobian-ness as a superior state of being. Whereas Earthlings are expected to be (re)productive slaves who uphold heteronormativity, Popinpopobians are non-(re)productive beings who are liberated from the Baby Factory and can think for themselves and choose what they want to do with their bodies.

It is also intriguing how the Popinpopobians' abjection of the self occurs psychologically and leaves their physical bodies untouched. Mentally, they are Popinpopobians but physically, they are Earthlings. The Popinpopobians often refer to themselves as “empty receptacles” (Murata 212). A receptacle is a container used to hold something, so the Popinpopobians' self-characterization as empty receptacles can be understood as them viewing their Earthling bodies as physical vessels that hold their identities. According to the Oxford English Dictionary's entry on “receptacle,” a receptacle can specifically be a structure—often a reproductive organ—that holds or receives sperm and eggs. As I initially discussed, Earthlings have no identities outside of (re)producing. The Popinpopobians' claim to be empty receptacles suggests the physical Earthling body is also nothing more than a pair of testes or a womb. Popinpopobians do not use their Earthling skins to be (re)productive, so their bodies have no purpose or meaning. Their identities encompass who they mentally are, the actions they perform, and the values they hold and have nothing to do with biology. If being Earthling means possessing the human genome, Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya's humanity would not be questioned. But that is not the case, and this separation of their identities and bodies that occurs during their self abjection reminds us again that being part of the Earthling species is not enough to make the characters Earthlings.

AN INTERLUDE: SILKWORMS

One image that recurs throughout the novel is the image of silkworms. Before moving on to the next stage of the Popinobopians' metamorphosis, I will briefly discuss silkworms being a symbol of transformation in *Earthlings* to demonstrate why the characters' change is analogous to the life cycle of a silkworm. According to *Britannica*, silkworms first start out as eggs that hatch in the spring, and the larvae eat mulberry leaves and continue to grow into bigger silkworms. They then spin their cocoon and enter the pupal stage, soon turning into adult silk moths. Silk moths mate and female moths give birth to eggs, beginning the cycle all over again.

The first time silkworms appear in the novel is in chapter one. Natsuki is at her grandparents' house in Akishina and tells us one of the rooms in the house used to be where silkworms were raised. Baskets of silkworm eggs were put into this room, and once they hatched, the larvae spread across the floor, built their cocoons, and turned into moths. The final time they are mentioned is at the end of the last chapter. It is snowing in Akishina, and the Popinobopians are cocooned in blankets in Natsuki's grandparents' home. Natsuki imagines the white flakes in the air to be the powdery scales adult silk moths shed (Murata 243).

The changing appearance of silkworms—first as eggs and then as silk moths—in the novel reflects their life cycle and Natsuki's own development. Natsuki is eleven when she tells us about her family's silkworm farm for the first time. Like a silkworm larva, she is young and she is growing, taking in the world around her, profoundly shaped by the traumatic and abusive environment she grows up in. The next stage in the life cycle of a silkworm is the pupal stage, which is when metamorphosis occurs in a cocoon. We meet Natsuki again when she is thirty-four years old and find her opinions on the Baby Factory are still unwavering but she has not transformed into a Popinobopian yet, nor has she recovered from the sexual abuse she

experienced twenty-three years ago. When Natsuki flees the Baby Factory with Yuu and Tomoya, she is ready to move forward in her life cycle and complete the metamorphosis to finally emerge as a Popinpopobian. The event that completes everyone's metamorphosis in Akishina—their alien land and cocoon, and where silkworms were once bred—is when the Popinpopobians nourish their minds and later their bodies by eating an Earthling. Afterward, with their stomachs full, they wrap themselves up in white quilts, sleep, and awaken as pregnant *yamauba*.

YAMAUBA, FERTILITY, AND MOTHERHOOD

Yamauba, translated as mountain witch or mountain crone, is a female and cannibalistic supernatural being that appears in Japanese folklore (Reider 3). Noriko Reider, a professor of Japanese at Miami University, writes in her book *Mountain Witches: Yamauba* that a yamauba has a number of distinctive features: “she is an anthropophagous woman living in the mountains, she possesses the duality of good and evil, and she has the transformational power to manifest herself as an ugly crone or a young beauty” (19). There are many depictions of yamauba. Two yamauba archetypes I will discuss in this section are the yamauba as a symbol of fertility and the yamauba as a mother. Reider says yamauba are often associated with fertility, citing a yamauba legend that takes place in Shimoinagun, Nagano Prefecture³: a hunter named Ōyamazu no mikoto gives water to a yamauba who is having a difficult labor, and she rewards him with game (14). The second archetype of the yamauba casts her as a mother of various sorts. She can be a loving mother, a vicious mother, a mother to divine children, and more.

The climax of *Earthlings* is when we see Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya engage in cannibalism, and I also believe this is the moment that triggers their spiritual metamorphosis into

³ The Popinpopobians live in the mountains of Akishina, which Natsuki says is located in Nagano, Japan.

yamauba. The three of them wake up to a surprise attack launched by the parents of Takaki Igasaki, Natsuki's cram school teacher. Natsuki was sexually abused multiple times by Mr. Igasaki when she was in elementary school and murdered him with the guidance of her hedgehog toy Piyyut, though she struggles to fully remember both the sexual abuse and murder due to her trauma. Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya fight back and kill Mr. Igasaki's parents and decide the most rational thing to do is to eat them because they are out of food. They freeze Mr. Igasaki's mother and cook three dishes with his father's meat: Miso Soup with Man, Daikon Leaf and Man Stir-Fry, and Man Simmered in Sweetened Soy Sauce. After their feast, Yuu tells Natsuki and Tomoya to eat him if they run out of food, and after the three argue over who eats who, they all decide to take a bite out of each other to see who tastes best and should be eaten first. All of them end up taking more than one bite, commenting on how delicious the other person is, and have eaten so much that their bodies are disfigured and their bellies are swollen. They believe they are pregnant.

The concluding cannibalism and cannibalism-induced pregnancy scene bear numerous relations to yamauba. Japanese literary scholar Tomoko Aoyama of the University of Queensland, Australia, writes in her book *Reading Food in Modern Japanese Literature* that cannibalism in Japanese literature represents displacement because it is closely tied to an ambiguous "other," and it appears when characters step into a foreign space (95). The Popinobopians' cannibalism of Mr. Igasaki's father takes place in a foreign space: the mountains. The mountains are also where yamauba live. This cannibalism and "pregnancy" occur specifically in the mountains of Nagano, home to the aforementioned yamauba fertility legend of Ōyamazu no mikoto. The characters' anthropophagy takes place after they have first "cross[ed] the frontier into the Other" by living in Akishina and mentally training to become

Popinobopians (Aoyama 95). When they participate in cannibalism, they continue their displacement from Earthling society and expel more of their former Earthling-hood because cannibalism is considered to be abject by Earthlings. As Natsuki says, they "would never be accepted into the Earthling fold again" if they became cannibals (Murata 234). What results from this anthropophagy is their spiritual transformation into yamauba that are anthropophagous, bringers of fertility, and mothers. I define an experience to be spiritual when it allows oneself to deeply connect with an unknown part of themselves.

Natsuki's experience with eating an Earthling affects her more tremendously than her two male companions, indicating she has spiritually transformed into a yamauba. Cannibalizing the father of her abuser allows her to regain her sense of taste—something she lost when she was forced to perform oral sex on Mr. Igasaki. Natsuki says the day the Popinobopians became anthropophagous is the day "my body became completely my own" (Murata 243). Kazue Harada applies Aoyama's evaluation of cannibalism and displacement to her own analysis of *Earthlings*. In her chapter "Cannibalistic Spaces and Reproduction in Japanese Speculative Fiction" from the anthology *Into the Fantastical Spaces of Contemporary Japanese Literature*, Harada writes that "cannibalism functions as a displacement of Earthling power to alien power" and "allows ... Natsuki to regain herself" (83, 85). Natsuki is in control because as she eats Mr. Igasaki's father, she erases the traces of Mr. Igasaki. With each bite, there is less and less of his father, less and less of Mr. Igasaki's blood. Through anthropophagy, Natsuki destroys what remains of her abuser's existence and recovers her sense of self that was taken away from her by a man, which echos the many yamauba legends in Japanese folklore that feature yamauba who manipulate, lure, and erase the existence of men by eating them.

Yuu and Tomoya's metamorphosis is not as obvious as Natsuki's because they are men, but their transformation makes male motherhood possible, creating a world that challenges Earthling norms on heterosexual (re)production, gender, and the nuclear family structure. When an Earthling rescue team has found the Popinpobopians, Natsuki cuddles her hedgehog toy Piyyut while Yuu and Tomoya "[hold] their arms protectively over their swollen bellies," and all three of them huddle together (Murata 245). Natsuki is the only one who does not caress her swollen stomach—the place where life is growing—and instead holds an inanimate object. Yuu and Tomoya continue to exhibit more motherly traits than Natsuki when they take pride in their pregnancy. Tomoya is the one who announces to the rescue party of Earthlings that the three of them are pregnant, and Yuu continues by saying "Tomorrow we will multiply. The day after we will multiply more" (Murata 246). Natsuki is silent during this entire ordeal, and I believe her lack of motherly traits and pride in the Popinpobopians' pregnancy is a resistance to the pressure for women to become mothers.

The male characters' transformation into yamauba is intriguing and difficult to make sense of because Reider makes it clear that the sex and gender of yamauba are always female (19). According to comparative literature scholar Noriko Mizuta, a yamauba can still defy female gender norms, which perpetually excludes her from society (Reider 19). A yamauba is indeed female, but Murata's depiction of Yuu and Tomoya as mothers and the conditions of their pregnancy cause me to view the two of them as yamauba. By casting Yuu and Tomoya as anthropophagous male mothers, Murata rewrites the yamauba to be not only female but also male and also disrupts the binary between male and female sexes and gender. The line between male and female sex is blurred because the male characters have the ability to become mothers and carry a child despite not having wombs. What is also notable about Yuu and Tomoya's

pregnancy is the divinity of their children. In “Mountain Weaving and Yamauba,” a chapter of her book, Reider discusses yamauba legends about yamauba who give birth to divine children and adds that yamauba are “simultaneously considered divine” mountain deities (60). The Popinpobopians themselves and the life inside of each of their bellies is unique in that it comes from cannibalizing a person and not from sex. Yuu and Tomoya’s children may be considered to be even more special than Natsuki’s because they are carried and nourished in male Earthling bodies. The Popinpobopian world thus challenges Earthling beliefs on heterosexual relationships and sexual reproduction being needed to build a family. It is a world where procreation occurs without sex, where male motherhood is possible, and where the burden of pregnancy and childrearing does not fall solely on women.

(ANTI)PREGNANCY

Kazue Harada writes in “Cannibalistic Spaces and Reproduction in Japanese Speculative Fiction” that the Popinpobopians’ almost “magical” pregnancy is paradoxical (88). It is “a shared moment of resistance” to Earthling society in its taboo-ness, but it is also momentary survival and conformity to the reproductive⁴ expectations of Earthling society (Harada 84). I agree with Harada and will conclude my essay by evaluating where *Earthlings* fits into the genre of Japanese pregnancy literature written by women authors, traced by Amanda Seaman, to explore another puzzling aspect of the Popinpobopians’ pregnancy: it destroys their physical bodies and consequently completes their Popinpobopian identities. Seaman is a professor of Asian Languages and Literature at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In her book *Writing Pregnancy in Low-Fertility Japan*, Seaman writes that the way pregnancy and childbirth are written about by Japanese women is influenced by how society views women and their bodies

⁴ I use reproductive here instead of Harada’s (re)productive because the Popinpobopians are exclusively reproductive; they do not economically participate in society.

(15). She traces four common depictions of pregnancy in literature: an alien invasion of the body; an escape from a difficult life; a partnership between mother, father, and child; and a painful bodily process. *Earthlings* does not appear to fit perfectly into any of these categories; instead, I see it as a combination of pregnancy as an invasion and pregnancy as an escape.

The Popinbobopians' anti-pregnancy sentiments are rife throughout the novel and align with the perspective of pregnancy as an alien invasion resulting in a woman's loss of her body and identity. For instance, the Popinbobopians entertain the idea of having a child so they can see the effects of raising a child to live like a Popinbobopian. They decide against it because they believe procreating even as Popinbobopians is still using wombs and testes as tools, so their bodies would not be their own (Murata 217). Seaman adds that when Japanese women authors write about pregnancy as an invasion of the body, it is common to see them include elements of horror and folklore to "highlight its [childbearing's] strange and transformative effects on the female body and psyche" (20). We see the horrifying physical changes the Popinbobopians undergo after they participate in cannibalism, which leads to pregnancy. They take bites out of each other's thighs, elbows, hands, faces, and more after they have eaten Mr. Igasaki's father. In addition to missing chunks of their body, they are also thin except for their bulging stomachs. "Are you ... human?" is the first thing the Earthling rescue team asks, covering their hands over their mouths and gagging. Cannibalism-induced pregnancy is a physical metamorphosis that deforms their entire body, not just their stomachs. It makes the Popinbobopians' Earthling shells disgusting and unrecognizable—completely destroying the last Earthling part of themselves. *Earthlings* evidently portrays childbearing as a disturbing loss of one's body, so what are we supposed to make of Yuu and Tomoya's pride in their pregnancy at the end of the novel?

Pregnancy turns Yuu and Tomoya into male mothers, which fits into Seaman's category of pregnancy as an escape from a difficult life in Japanese women's literature. In this type of pregnancy literature, motherhood provides women an opportunity to play an important role in society and the domestic sphere and overall live a happier life (Seaman 51-52). In the novel, men are literally and figuratively distant from the household because they are the breadwinners and authoritative figures while women stay home to take care of children. Motherhood will keep Yuu and Tomoya close to the domestic sphere, close to their divine children. Additionally, all three characters were traumatized by their biological mothers during their childhood: Natsuki was verbally and physically abused, Yuu was verbally abused, and Tomoya was forced to bathe with his mother until his teenage years. Yuu and Tomoya's affection and tenderness for the life in their bellies suggest they will be better mothers than their own biological mothers even though they are male. Perhaps they will even be better fathers—both mother *and* father. They will not be absent from the household because they do not work, allowing them to play a large role in raising their children. In this sense, I propose a Popinpobopian pregnancy is an escape from and criticism of heteronormative Earthling society and what it means to be an Earthling. Male motherhood dismantles and reimagines normative Earthling masculinity and femininity and gendered divisions of domestic labor, envisioning a better life for the Popinpobopians and their children.

“MY BODY WAS NOT MY OWN.”

I began this essay by defining what it means to be an Earthling—heterosexual, (re)productive, and slave—and explaining why Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya fail to be Earthlings. What ensues are three stages of metamorphosis: mental (self abjection), spiritual (yamauba), and physical (pregnancy). This transformation from Earthling to Popinpobopian forces us to think

about what “Earthling” (human) really means: despite being biologically Earthling, the protagonists do not belong in Earthling society. Moreover, Sayaka Murata’s writing of the Popinpopobians’ transformation births an alien world that defies heteronormative conventions present in the Earthling world. The novel’s conformist Earthling society also happens to mirror the pressure to procreate in Japan. Japan’s declining birth rate and growing elderly population have spurred politicians to promote pro-reproduction campaigns and sentiments for decades. In a 2020 interview, for example, Murata mentions that in 2007, former Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare Hakuo Yanagisawa urged women to have children as a “public service,” and she believes women today are still seen as “machines for having babies” (Liu).

Although my research has focused on the Japanese society *Earthlings* is based upon, this does not suggest that institutionalized control of reproductive bodies is exclusive to Japan. Literary translation is an art form that presumes an audience outside of the original text and diffuses perspectives to help us better understand the world and ourselves. Why does *Earthlings* have an English translation? What can a non-Japanese audience take away from reading *Earthlings*? I believe *Earthlings*, a Japanese novel written in 2018 and translated into English in 2020, is relevant to an audience in the United States because federal and state governments have the power to restrict women’s reproductive rights and women’s agency. “My body was not my own,” Natsuki continually reminds us (Murata 188). To reclaim it, she creates and enters the Popinpopobian world—a world that disturbs what it means to be an Earthling and the order of Earthling society. Perhaps legal institutions can then read *Earthlings* as a warning of the harm that women and society will experience when women’s bodies are not their own.

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