Rebecca Suter


Rebecca Suter’s _Holy Ghosts: The Christian Century in Modern Japanese Fiction_ is a cultural studies examination of Christianity, not specifically as a religion, but as a pop culture trope. Suter researched and drafted the book during a year spent as a visiting scholar at Keio University, where she was hosted by Tatsumi Takayuki, whose theories of “creative masochism” (understood as “an attempt to turn the inferiority complex toward Western culture into a source of artistic inspiration and political agency,” p. 107) inform Suter’s own approach in a general way. Further, _Holy Ghosts_ builds on the conceptual foundations Suter constructed in her first book _The Japanization of Modernity_, which focused on Murakami Haruki and his role as a cultural mediator between Japan and the United States. In that book, she analyzed Murakami’s oeuvre to articulate a theory of Japanese “transnational cultural power” as based in an “indigenized modernity” (Suter 2008: 34). Making a similar analytical move, Suter turns, in _Holy Ghosts_, to the figure of the Japanese Christian as deployed in popular culture (fiction, video games, manga, movies, anime and light novels), and she foregrounds the Japanese Christian as a site of creative misreading and an enduring trope of indigenization.

The book focuses on representations of the “so-called Christian century of Japan, the period between the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in 1549 and the Shimabara Rebellion of 1637–1638, the last Christian revolt before the final ban on the foreign religion under the Tokugawa regime” (p. 1). Suter’s main thesis is that, “by divesting that religion of its transcendent dimension and portraying it as an exotic cultural practice,” later pop culture appropriations of Japan’s Christian history “parallel and invert a common paradigm that sees Asian religions objectified for popular consumption in Europe and North America and present us with precious insight on Japan’s relationship with Western culture” (p. 1). As such, the book certainly contributes to the burgeoning field of Japanese pop culture studies as represented, for instance, by recent translations of Japanese scholarship—including Tatsumi Takayuki’s _Full Metal Apache_ (2006) and Azuma Hiroki’s _Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals_ (2013), the extensive oeuvres of Susan Napier on anime and Anne Allison on sexuality and pop culture, and the multi-year bound journal _Mechademia_.

Of more immediate interest to the readers of this journal, however, _Holy Ghosts_ is part of a growing field that looks at religions as literary cultures. Sheldon Pollock’s many works on Sanskrit cultures in South Asia continue to push the theoretical and conceptual horizons of this field, and work on Buddhism as
a literary culture in Japan, instantiated with William LaFleur’s pioneering publication *The Karma of Words* in 1986, continues apace. We are beginning now to see serious scholarly attention given to Christianity as a literary culture in Japan. Thus far, with the exception of Patrick Schwemmer’s excellent 2015 dissertation and William Farge’s 2003 study of Jesuit translation practices, works in English have tended toward single author studies (of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Uchimura Kanzō, and Endō Shūsaku for example), so Suter’s book is a welcome addition and an innovation in the field, comprising the first broad survey of Christianity as a literary force in Japan.

Suter’s title indicates her parallax approach, which brings the history of Japan’s Christian century into conversation with its modern and contemporary afterlives. As she notes in her introduction, “Tokugawa-period persecutions were successful in eradicating Christianity almost completely from Japanese society, but the Kirishitan lived on in the world of fiction, as ‘holy ghosts’ that challenged modern social and political formations by continuing to exist as a disturbing factor within them” (p. 2). In particular, Suter mines two specific eras, “the rediscovery of ‘Kirishitan’ culture by a number of literary authors and intellectuals in the Taishō period” (1912–1926) and the “rise to fame of the leader of the Shimabara rebellion, known as ‘Amakusa Shirō,’ in the postwar period” (p. 2). Following Higashibaba Ikuo, Suter uses the term Kirishitan “to highlight the separation from the ‘Christianity’ of the Western tradition” and to indicate specifically the hybridized, Japanized forms of the religion (p. 30). Suter’s general idea is that analyzing the Kirishitan as a cultural image affords insight into some key moments of Japanese negotiation with Westernized modernity. Applying queer theory to cross-cultural analysis, Suter utilizes Judith Butler’s notion of “mimetic incorporation” to describe this process of negotiation as a “representational strategy” which can be used to “reflect critically on both Japanese and Western mechanisms of estrangement from, identification with, and projection of a cultural Other” (p. 64).

Chapter 1 provides a brief historical survey of the Christian century, as well embarking on a useful literature review of major secondary scholarship on Japanese encounters with Christianity and the ways in which that history has been redeployed in later centuries. She begins with the Treaty of Tordesillas which, “as early as 1494 … had divided the world into two areas of influence” such that “Africa and Asia were considered the monopoly of the Jesuits, while the Americas were assigned to the mendicant orders of Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians” (p. 9). Notably, this system left Japan as “an object of contention … literally positioned at the intersection of East and West” (p. 9). Suter draws heavily on the works of George Elison for textual analyses of both Japanese and Jesuit textual accounts in order to sketch in the historical prece-