

Introduction

It's as if, to gain clarity, you are pushing open a very heavy wooden door that is creaking on its hinges and resisting your pressure. You apply all your strength, step across the threshold, and, after standing in a twilight gray, expect the light. Instead you are surrounded by a thoroughly impenetrable darkness. Distraught and fearful, you feel your way, touching objects here and there without being able to identify them. Eventually, your eyes very slowly grow accustomed to the dark. Uncertain contours appear; even your probing hands become more assured. Now you know that you're in that space ... call[ed] "the closed world of self-murder."

—JEAN AMÉRY, ON SUICIDE, 1976

Jean Améry composed these words in the aftermath of his first suicide attempt and two years prior to his suicide in October 1978. They are the opening to an essay that he delivered in radio installments for the German public three decades after surviving torture and imprisonment in the concentration camps and emigrating to Belgium where he emerged as a successful writer under this penname. His words offer an entry point into this enclosed world, an apt beginning for this book that seeks to understand works written and read in the face and wake of suicide.

Step by step, Améry's resistant door yields access. The journey is fraught for both listener and speaker. For the outsider, he warns against the temptation "to smile ironically or offer a learned word. This I do not tolerate. ... Only those who have entered into the darkness can have a say in this matter." But even insiders will have difficulty recapturing that experience once outside it, for they will "unearth nothing that appears useful in the light outside. What they have brought from the depths will run like fine sand through their fingers by day." Améry's own authority to speak is equally tenuous. He knows all too well the inadequacy of language, which offers the "only instrument of communication" and yet also "only the torture of insufficiency."¹

Améry invites his audience into this space beside him, nonetheless. With this opening, he attempts to situate both speaker and listener at a moment that is

“before the leap,” to borrow the title of his first radio installment. By bringing his audience into temporal and physical proximity to the suicidal act, he also seeks to collapse the distance between self and other. By entering into the darkness together, he says, we are ready (or as ready we can be) because “we are already on our way, *not away* from persons annihilating themselves, but *toward* them.”²

Given that Améry has safely exited that closed world and writes in retrospect, we might be tempted to escape alongside him, to see him and his text from some transcendent position that escapes that circle into which he invites us from his first lines. Alternatively, given that he will soon reenter, we might regard him as entrapped by these very writings that foretell his own inexorable end. But I ask that we stay with him, and with the other individuals I consider below, in their moment of writing. This is not because we get an unmediated account that collapses all distance—between the living and the dead, a self and another, now and then—but rather because it is a highly mediated one. Whether in the form of a scratchy radio address that at the time reached across the airwaves or as its transcription into a prose essay that we read now, a half century later, it is *in* and *through* this text that we, and they too, glimpse “the closed world of self-murder.” This counterintuitive move—to bring us into the darkness to see—is one that Améry himself undertook through his own act of writing *On Suicide*.

This book is my attempt to enter an orbit of suicidal writers, readers, texts, and acts in modern and contemporary Japan. In my case, this project is motivated by the sense that all too often, discussions of suicide—especially in Japan, a nation saddled with centuries of accumulated stereotypes and loaded assumptions—are too distant from their subject. There are too many outside pronouncements made about those who have died by their own hand and too little careful attention paid to the words of the dead themselves.

These words reach out to us in and from the darkness to initiate a dialogue with the dead. Crucially, these traces that remain are not just meant for an outside reader (much less the critic or diagnostician) in retrospect but also served their writers prospectively. They, too, were dialoguing with the dead, albeit in the form of an imagined future self that was to be no more. And in reading, we, too, are forced to navigate our own distance and proximity to acts of suicide and to acts of writing in the face of self-death.

In this book, I seek out the many textual traces of suicide that remain in modern and contemporary Japan. Some were composed at the moment just “before the leap,” such as the young student Fujimura Misao’s philosophical poem “Thoughts on the Precipice” carved into an oak tree at the head of Kegon waterfall in 1903 or the three-line note left behind by the eminent literary critic Etō Jun on the eve of his suicide in the summer of 1999. Other examples were scripted months or even years beforehand. Most famous among these is Mishima Yukio’s 1961 short story “Yūkoku,” about a lieutenant who commits seppuku, or ritual disembowelment by sword in samurai fashion, after a failed coup d’état, that Mishima adapted into a

film in which he himself played the lieutenant, eerily foretelling his own attempted coup and seppuku a decade later. More recent examples include the young indie manga artist Yamada Hanako, who prefigured her 1992 leap from an eleven-story building in a comics panel two years beforehand.

Most of my examples were scripted by literary professionals whose posthumous fame became inextricably entangled with their suicides and with their many suicidal writings, although some were virgin works by complete amateurs. One case study involves both these types: two hauntingly simple suicide notes left behind in 1968 by the young Olympic marathoner and soldier Tsuburaya Kōkichi, the first to his family and another to his coaches and superiors. His notes, in turn, prompted writings filled with praise by two writers whose own subsequent suicides and choices about writing (or not) in the face of their own suicides make for a study in contrasts—Mishima in 1970 and Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari, whose suicide in 1972 was so traceless as to fuel rumors that it was not, in fact, a self-willed death. Both of Tsuburaya's notes are on display at his hometown memorial museum, the one to his family marked with a drop of his blood and its edges stained with tears that fell from his elder brother's eyes upon reading it.

These are not easy texts to read, and nor, I expect, were they easy ones to write.

Some were penned by those who died, while others were by those left behind. Many are sympathetic attempts to speak to and for those who died by suicide through the mediums of poetry, literature, eulogies, obituaries, and memorial essays, or what in Japanese are fittingly called *tsuitōbun* (追悼文), “writings that pursue in grief.” But not all who wrote were close to those who had chosen to die, and not all were highbrow literary traces. More literal markings exist in the form of newspaper and tabloid accounts, how-to suicide manuals, maps, graves and memorials, and even tourist markers at famed suicide sites. If some imagine the dead resting easily in a memorial site of great natural beauty, others suspend them at the moment and site of their self-destruction. Some are euphemistic or poetic, mournful or forgiving, others grisly and visceral, angry and judging. Some are flat and factual, others fictional and even fanciful. Many, like the self-writings produced in the face of self-death, straddle these poles. In their sheer variety, they counter any stereotypical notion of “the Japanese” as especially predisposed to glorifying suicide in their culture and in their cultural productions.

Most importantly, the range of examples are designed to help us think through the importance of acts of writing and reading before and after suicide, or, as in some cases, the act of *not* writing. The question of whether, what, and how to write about self-willed death is a pressing one that many of these individuals themselves engaged openly, if often ambivalently, in their texts. It is one that subsequent readers face as well, including those like me, who turn to write in response.

At the most basic level is the question of what word we use to refer to the act itself: *suicide*, a term whose own meaning of self-killing is somewhat buried in its

Latin roots, or anything from *voluntary death* (*la mort volontaire*) to *self-murder* (*Selbstmord*). In Japanese, the common term *jisatsu* most closely resembles *suicide* (*sui-*, oneself and *-cidium*, a killing) with its slightly opaque use of the Chinese readings for its two characters that also translate as “self-killing” (自殺), but as we will see below, many other possible terms signal value judgments as well as a tendency to parse suicide into numerous types: *jiketsu* (自決, self-determination), *jigai* (自害, self-harm), *shinjū* (心中, a term that literally means “hearts inside” used to refer to love suicides), or one of its many variants, such as parent-child suicide (*oyako shinjū*), a love suicide following another in grief (*ato-ōi shinjū*), and murder-suicide or forced double suicide (*muri shinjū*).³

How to write and read, rewrite or unwrite, stories of suicide mattered to these individuals and to those they left behind then, and they matter today. It is a question of enduring relevance in Japan, where regulations against representing the act of suicide stretch back from the eighteenth-century double suicide plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon to contemporary prefectural prohibitions against filming in the infamous “suicide forest” of Aokigahara. It is relevant to policymakers and mental health professionals intent on preventing suicide, whether they study the effects of expressive writing on trauma and suicide-attempt survivors (Pennebaker and Chung 2012) or on suicidal poets (Stirman and Pennebaker 2001), design word-association video game software to detect and correct suicidal ideation (Nock et al. 2010), devise self-censorship media guidelines for reporting suicides (WHO 2008), or develop algorithms to detect suicide risk based on user’s web searches and social media posts using information and communication technology (ICT) software.⁴ Alongside the ongoing quest to identify physiological and/or genetic biomarkers, researchers seek linguistic markers of suicidality, as well as linguistic interventions that might reduce suicidal ideation by reshaping the ways that individuals conceptualize their relationship to death.⁵

Unlike these researchers and policymakers, my task here is not to prevent or predict suicide. There will be no attempt to neatly divide and catalogue suicides along the lines of long-standing Durkheimian or Freudian paradigms—whether Durkheim’s typology of egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic suicides or Freudian ones that conceive of suicide as a displaced homicidal urge that can be parsed into the wish to die, the wish to be killed, and the wish to kill. Nor do I attempt to retrospectively assign a motive based on a selective reading of these complex final texts. As a scholar working primarily in the disciplines of literary and film studies, my goal is not to diagnose these individuals, much less society as a whole.

Yet like much work done in this vein, I also seek to understand the act of suicide through the many traces left behind. I believe that these traces can reveal fundamental beliefs about suicide (and death more generally) and, just as crucially, about acts of writing. They reveal what it means and why it matters to write into and from the void. That this fraught act of writing was undertaken by so many, both individuals who sought to die by suicide and the loved ones they

left behind, as well as countless commentators who were compelled to weigh in afterward—moralists and government officials, intellectuals and artists, journalists, policymakers, educators, religious leaders, and mental health professionals—suggests the extraordinary investment in producing and policing the representation of suicide in Japanese society. There is weighty cultural and psychic work involved when writing and reading about suicide or in the immense gap that opens up in the wake of any death.

My approach is rooted in close readings that first tackle the question of how individuals achieved the formidable rhetorical feat of depicting their own death, or what Virginia Woolf once called “the one experience I shall never describe.”⁶ Jean Améry claimed representing suicide to be “doubly unthinkable,” indescribable, a “syntactical impossibility” as a “not-being.”⁷ We should note that both these writers were figuring their own deaths in words here, even when claiming it to be unspeakable. At the same time, it is crucial not to conflate their acts of writing with their subsequent acts of suicide. Capturing the precarious circumstances of these compositions and their composers requires careful attention to the text, the timing of composition, its mode of address, the materiality of the inscription, and crucially, their medium of choice.

It is this fraught act of figuring self-death that I seek to better understand throughout this book. How to mark in words, images, sounds, and objects a person’s self-willed absence? What to do with these traces left behind by those who leave us behind? And after their death, how to produce our own texts in response that avoid the ethical violation of what Proust once called “posthumous infidelity”?⁸ And what Wordsworth noted was nothing more than a “tender fiction,” a “shadowy interposition [that] harmoniously unites the two worlds of the living and the dead.”⁹ Or as Joan Didion, writing after her husband’s death, worried might read as a fictional dialogue that was only “my edit . . . obscene, a violation.”¹⁰

If narrating in the wake of death from natural causes is precarious, then it is all the more so in the case of suicide. It has been described by one suicide survivor, the brother of writer Klaus Mann, as “the act that no words describe, that breaks all bonds.”¹¹ And yet, such claims of wordlessness attest to the compulsion *to* speak, *to* describe, *to* narrate suicide, and, I would argue, to reassert via language the bonds that were willfully severed by the dead. If death invites storytelling, suicide demands it.

In the wake of a suicide, a host of narratives inevitably rush to fill the silence. We are left to seek and sift through any traces that remain in an attempt to construct a narrative that might render the act explicable, manageable, and perhaps even acceptable. At the fore is the pressing and natural question of why that person chose to end their life. But the answer is not always clear. Nor, as we will see in many cases, was it necessarily one that preoccupied those who chose to die.

The American poet Anne Sexton offered this by way of explanation in a poem titled “Wanting to Die” that she sent to a friend in 1964 after multiple attempts on

her own life and a year after the suicide of Sylvia Plath, after whom she was said to have patterned her own a decade later:

I have nothing against life.
I know well the grass blades you mention,
the furniture you have placed under the sun.
But suicides have a special language.

Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*.
They never ask *why build*.¹²

Sexton suggests here that understanding suicidal logic or “wanting to die” demands paying less attention to “why” than how. Its “special language” entails also a literary, imagined relationship with self-death, or what she calls an “almost unnameable lust [that] returns” over and over again to “wait[] for me, year after year, / to so delicately undo an old wound, / to empty my breath from its bad prison.” The poem’s metaphorical language and imagery resist any easy explanations of cause or motive, notwithstanding the utilitarian promise of its title. Its final lines end by gesturing to the tendency to mis- or overinterpret the traces that do remain: “leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss, / leaving the page of the book carelessly open, / something unsaid, the phone off the hook / and the love whatever it was, an infection.” Those left behind are warned against the tendency to read into these traces only in the service of answering the natural but often unanswerable question of “why.”

How, then, might we better read these difficult texts and traces that remain in the wake of suicide, and to what end? I propose that we strive to stay closer to these writers in their moment of writing—whenever possible, and to the extent that *is* possible—to emplace ourselves in the moment “before the leap” when these acts of writing were undertaken. In reading, we are invited to occupy a precarious position poised between life and death, just like the writers themselves. This is true even in the case of a simple one-line suicide note like one that declared only “I die in here” (*Kono naka ni te jisatsu su*) left on a notice board beside a lake in early 1930s Japan.¹³ For this writer, death could be figured only in an imagined future tense. And the fact that “death can only be an *idea*, not something known by us as we know our bodily sensations” is also what “recommends it to the use of poets, whose trade it is to deal exclusively in symbols.”¹⁴

Imagining death is always a speculative act, even, or perhaps especially, when it is anticipated and self-willed. Out of necessity, there is a futurity and even a fictionality embedded in these imaginings. As the poet Terayama Shūji points out, “Whenever we start to talk about the suicide of another person—whether fictional or factual—it ends up being storified [*sutōri-ka shite shimau*]. As they say, ‘one cannot experience one’s own suicide’ [*Onozura, sono jisatsu o taiken dekinai*].”¹⁵

It is for this reason that listening to these stories is all the more crucial. Considering how others figured their own self-death in the moments (or sometimes years) beforehand can help us emplace ourselves, at least temporarily, in that unimaginable space. This is both perhaps unimaginable in one sense of the word and also *only* imaginable. It is by reading and writing in response that we, too, imagine (self-)death.

ORGANIZATION AND CRITERIA FOR CASE SELECTIONS

In what follows, I divide my discussion into three parts to focus on three different sites of writing. Each offers a place where the dead are simultaneously put to rest and kept alive forevermore. Part 1, “Mapping Suicide,” begins with the most literal geographical sites of suicide in modern and contemporary Japan. It focuses on the famed poetic places of suicide (*jisatsu meisho*, 自殺名所) where acts of self-death and acts of (self-)writing converge in a way that indelibly mark these locales. The next two sections turn to consider mediums and genres of suicide writings that straddle the literary and the literal in often uncomfortable ways. Part 2, “Noting Suicide,” centers on self-designated suicide notes (*nōtō* or *isho*, 遺書) by famous writers and amateurs alike that became widely published and publicized after their deaths, while part 3, “Mourning in Multimedia,” turns to consider more overtly fictionalized scriptings in which artists foretell and preemptively mourn their own deaths in a variety of media that include poems, stories, films, and photography. Taken together, my hope is to demonstrate the many ways that suicide is mapped, noted, scripted, pictured, and mourned in Japan.

As we will see, there is considerable overlap among the materials included across these three sections. The poetic places of suicide (*jisatsu meisho*) are, as the term suggests, places where suicide collides with poetry, and also sometimes with tabloid journalism, genre fiction, and even tourism. Suicide notes could also include poems, and poems could serve as suicide notes. Fiction and fact intermix. In fact, the first chapter on the young Fujimura’s poem at Kegon Falls offers an example that straddles all three sites of writing. It was simultaneously Japan’s “first” modern suicide site where a classical poem inscribed onto a tree was left behind as a suicide note, and it in turn spurred many creative responses of both the fictional and factual variety. As such, this in-depth case study provides a convenient frame for all three parts of this study and, as we will see, also served as something of a touchstone for scripting suicide in modern Japan.

After this introductory case study, the book is divided broadly into three parts that are each organized chronologically. This is useful for a few reasons. First, it helps us understand how each constituted a site of writing and dying with its own conventions, forms, and codes. As we will see, these were not static or unchanging since time immemorial but were instead highly malleable based on the

particular individuals, their circumstances and contexts. At the same time, for those choosing to die and to self-write their own death—whether in a location marked as a famed suicide site, in a conventional or literary suicide note, or in a semi-fictionalized work of art—there often *was* a self-conscious awareness of inserting oneself into an existing tradition of self-writing and self-death. Importantly, though, these individuals could choose to tap, tweak, or upend that preexisting script entirely.

Second, even when there was no discernible design on the writer's part, subsequent readers tend to interpret them as constituting a genealogy of sorts, speaking backward and forward in time to one another. By progressing chronologically, moving in each section from the early twentieth-century case studies to the more recent ones ourselves, we can trace how these twinned acts of writing and dying were received, understood, and judged—not always flatteringly—by their contemporaries. This enables us to consider also our own standards for interpreting these acts. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the overall arc of this book attempts to bring this book's readers into proximity to these sites of self-death and self-writing gradually in the hopes of easing our way through these difficult materials.

Part 1, "Mapping Suicide," offers an above-the-trees approach that moves from historically distant public sites like Kegon Falls and Mount Mihara in the early twentieth century to more contemporary ones where people go seeking to die today, ending with the notorious "suicide forest" of Aokigahara. For each site, I consider how competing acts of writing, rewriting, and unwriting were crucial to both their making and their unmaking.

Part 2, "Noting Suicide," tackles the more visceral first-person narratives offered in suicide notes that were often simultaneously both more *and* less private. Even when designated for a circumscribed initial readership, some anticipated their subsequent widespread distribution, while others inadvertently entered the literary canon. My case studies in this section stretch from the most famous example of a suicide note in Japanese literary history by writer Akutagawa Ryūnosuke in 1927 to the terse, three-line note left behind by literary critic Etō Jun in 1999. At the very end of part 2, we move back in time in order to inch toward the trickiest of materials with the example of a young female manga artist named Yamada Hanako, whose private diary and published comic strips anticipating her own suicidal leap were widely publicized and probed after her suicide in 1992.

Part 3, "Mourning Suicide in Multimedia," moves into these most difficult materials of all: self-representations of suicide in fictional and semifictional works of art. While these texts might at first seem at a safe remove given their fictionality, in retrospect they can be read only *vis-à-vis* the act of suicide. As such, they cannot help but implicate the reader of fiction in the act of self-death and also in the writer's act of self-writing that self-death. This is especially true of ones that anticipate with uncanny precision the suicidal method later used by its writer. These texts may be highly mediated, but they preclude any illusion of a safe distance between

two-dimensional textual bodies and three-dimensional real ones. In reading, we are also put in the precarious position of navigating the leap between a literal and literary suicide.

In this study, considering less strictly “literary” examples alongside more well-known highbrow canonical ones is especially crucial to its aims of capturing the diverse ways that suicide has been, and continues to be, scripted in modern and contemporary Japan. Too often, this story has been told based on an all-too-familiar lineup of the most famous, and conspicuously male, suicides with a focus on how highbrow literary works by men anticipated (or responded to) the deaths of these elite male literati. The typical Japanese lineup of twentieth-century male literati suicides is a long one: Kitamura Tōkoku, Kawakami Bizan, Arishima Takeo, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Makino Shin’ichi, Dazai Osamu, Tanaka Hidemitsu, Hara Tamiki, Hino Ashihei, Mishima Yukio, and Kawabata Yasunari, plus a few others who vary depending on the list.¹⁶ English-language studies focused on suicide in Japan offer a streamlined version of this lineup, typically featuring the standard holy trinity of Akutagawa, Dazai, and Mishima, sometimes including Kawabata as well.

Even in literary studies not focused on suicide per se, there may appear to be a disproportionately high number of male suicidal authors represented therein. Half the case studies in Makoto Ueda’s *Modern Japanese Writers and the Nature of Literature* (1976) feature this famous foursome of authors who died by suicide. Three of the six writers in Masao Miyoshi’s *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel* (1974) took their own lives: Kawabata appears in a chapter titled “The Margins of Life,” Dazai in “Till Death Do Us Part,” and finally, in “Mute’s Rage,” there is Mishima, who, as Miyoshi puts it, “marks a very special climax in recent Japanese literature.”¹⁷ Even when it requires some creative chronological skewering, Mishima tends to serve as the grand finale, a definitive punctuation mark at the end of a long line.

In part, this is a reflection of the archive, one that skews toward privileging male-authored highbrow canonized literature. In the wake of a famous writer’s suicide come a flurry of commemorative publications and republications in Japan and beyond. The traces that are sought and preserved are themselves a reflection of their perceived value, and their production, publication, and distribution depend also on a sense of their commercial viability. After Mishima’s shockingly anachronistic seppuku on November 25 in 1970, Harold Strauss at Alfred A. Knopf, the foremost publisher of translated Japanese fiction in the postwar period, pushed his Mishima translator to finish as rapidly as possible, noting with unadulterated joy and just a tinge of chagrin, “One of the less charming aspects of this situation is that both you and we are likely to make a great deal of money out of Mishima’s death.”¹⁸ As this statement suggests, the self-silencing act of suicide often paradoxically results in more posthumous airtime. But it is also true that certain kinds of individuals, texts, and suicides invite disproportionate attention, whereas others go unnoticed.

Writing back in 1979 in the preface to *Six Lives, Six Deaths*, Robert Jay Lifton self-consciously notes, for example, “the absence of women in our study” to be “a major limitation” that nonetheless was justified by “find[ing] none that met two of our basic requirements—writing about her own death, and a life sufficiently well recorded for us to reconstruct it.”¹⁹ Sharalyn Orbaugh’s critique of such a “masculinist and modernist” “uniquely male genealogy” of suicide almost two decades later in her insightful essay “General Nogi’s Wife” (1996) suggests the persistence of this problem.²⁰

Naturally, there are limits to what any study can include, and this is true of my own project here.²¹ It, too, is necessarily beholden to an archive. My examples depend on the written traces left behind, and one of my central goals is to prioritize the words of those who chose to die and to self-write that self-death. Many of the usual male highbrow literati examples are key to examining this phenomenon and appear with dedicated chapters or sections below. But I have found it undesirable to limit myself to those alone. Instead, I seek out other material and textual traces in the land (in maps and monuments, at graves, tourist sites, etc.); in visual and print culture, in the mass media, and in popular culture; and also in official government statistics, suicide prevention policies and strategies, and in accounts offered by mental health professionals. It is my hope that this approach enables access to a broader spectrum of others, including people and places, that have tended to be left out of the story of suicide in modern Japan. Equally importantly, by considering a diverse array of materials that go beyond highbrow canonical literature even for the more famous male authors included here, I hope to help open up our understanding of even these most well-known, well-rehearsed examples.

Three of my central case studies focus on women who prefigured their own suicides in their writings. These include aspiring poets Matsumoto Kiyoko and Nagasawa Nobuko (in chapters 2 and 9) and indie manga artist Yamada Hanako (in chapter 8). Another key example is the woman whose suicide at Aokigahara forest back in the mid-1970s is said to have inaugurated a rash of “copycat suicides” that helped make it into one of the world’s top suicide sites even today (chapter 4). In other sections, I touch more briefly on people whose names are no longer known to us but whose traces survive in fragmentary form, for example found only in brief notations on a “suicide distribution map” created by the meticulous ethnographer Kon Wajirō in the 1920s or in Tsurumi Wataru’s controversial best-selling 1993 how-to guidebook *Kanzen jisatsu manyuaru: The Complete Manual of Suicide* (chapter 3).

My case studies also include lesser-known male writers like the young aspiring poet Kishigami Daisaku, who left behind what he titled “Boku no tame no nōto” (A note for myself) in 1960, as well as complete amateurs like marathoner-soldier Tsuburaya Kōkichi (in chapters 6 and 7, respectively). Such examples help remind us how writing in the face of self-death is never merely some academic or highbrow literary exercise.

At the same time, they reveal how difficult it can be to recover certain kinds of voices than others. In the case of less well-known individuals, locating any surviving trace can present a challenge, one that is both logistical and ethical. For some, we have access to their self-writings, but only because these texts were posthumously published, sometimes against the express or implicit wishes of their writers. For example, both Kishigami's and Tsuburaya's suicide notes attracted widespread critical acclaim notwithstanding being explicitly addressed to "[him]self" in the former case and to his family members and coaches in the latter. Manga artist Yamada Hanako's private diaries were released under the sensationalist title *Jisatsu chokuzen nikki* (A diary just before suicide) by her father, who himself was an aspiring writer. While it is important to remember that we are far from the original designated audience for these texts, without these self-writings, we are sometimes left to rely on posthumous accounts by others who narrate these suicides from a distance in ways that are often distorted, if not outright disparaging.

Conversely, in the cases of the most famous authors, like Akutagawa, Dazai, Mishima, and to a lesser extent Kawabata, finding the traces they left behind has been easy, sometimes all too easy. Famed artists' famed "last words" have been widely published and probed—whether in the form of a death poem (*jisei*), a suicide note, a last essay or interview, or fictional or semi-fictional works of art. These texts, however, often circulate in highly digested forms to the point that the soundbite version dominates the story. For these, my goal is to dislodge what have become overly simplified and simplistic interpretations of these complex texts.

To do this, I use a strategy of juxtaposition, putting these canonical authors and texts in dialogue with a host of others that can open up our understanding of these oft-rehearsed examples. Akutagawa's most famous suicide note and its frequently quoted line that purports to explain his motive for dying as attributable to "a vague sense of anxiety" is examined in the context of a host of other texts he wrote, read, and referenced in this note and in the ten other suicide notes he left behind (chapter 5). Nobel Prize-winning author Kawabata and his decision not to write in the face of his own suicide is considered in dialogue with the suicide of the Olympian marathoner Tsuburaya and with his fellow writer Mishima, who also praised the young man's suicide notes (chapter 7). Dazai Osamu is situated in contemporary Mitaka—which has recently been marketed by city developers as "the town where Dazai lived" (and also where he wrote, died, and is now buried)—and alongside those who chose to die with and after him: his lover Yamazaki Tomie and his protégé Tanaka Hidemitsu. Finally, in the last chapter on Mishima, his well-known story-turned-film *Yūkoku* is considered alongside his other multimedia productions. These include his underground "gay version" of the story, a "seppuku ballet" adaptation, and his many stints as a movie actor and photography model who died over and over again in genre films and in photography shoots during the last decade and weeks of his life, including the belated publication of

Shinoyama Kishin's photography book, *The Death of a Man (Otoko no shi)*—on the fiftieth anniversary of Mishima's death in 2020.

In sum, in the pages that follow, I both revisit well-known writers and texts and introduce some new, less familiar ones, while proposing a more self-conscious approach to navigating literary suicide. It is my hope that in so doing, we can reconsider not just who we treat but how we treat them. Before turning to my case studies, I offer a brief overview of the ways the subject has been handled in existing scholarship.

SUICIDE AND THE LITERARY CANON, SUICIDE AND SOCIOLOGY: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Suicide has long functioned “as a marker of literary value” and “as a marker of Japaneseness ... a metonym for Japanese culture” and a “masculinist” one at that.²² In the early 1970s, psychiatrist and leading suicidologist Ōhara Kenshirō estimated that the suicide rate for Japan's most famous modern authors was three hundred times higher than the national average.²³ His method for calculating the rate of Japanese author suicides at five thousand per hundred thousand (versus the overall male population rate of 16.1) is far from scientific or without its own selection biases, having used as his point of reference a pool of one hundred male authors from “one publisher's complete works of modern Japanese literature.” But the statistic is revealing in another sense. It captures the circular relationship between canonicity and suicide in Japan and suggests the degree to which suicide is something of an unavoidable topic for readers, students, and teachers of modern Japanese literature.²⁴

Writing back in 1974, Masao Miyoshi stressed the special centrality of suicide to the formation of the modern Japanese literary canon, claiming, “If A. Alvarez is right in seeing an essential relationship between modern literature and suicide, the modern Japanese novel and its authors are surely the most representative case.”²⁵ Here, Miyoshi was drawing on the seminal work of British writer and literary critic Al Alvarez. In 1971, spurred by the suicide of his acquaintance the poet Sylvia Plath and by his own suicidal crisis, Alvarez penned *The Savage God*, a study of suicide in Western artistic and philosophical traditions from ancient to contemporary times that has become a canonical work. Lying at the heart of both the self-destructive impulses of modern (and especially modernist) artists and art, he finds “this earth-bound Savage God, who ... has thrived on blood-sacrifice.”²⁶

In a similar vein, in 1984, the French cultural anthropologist Maurice Pinguet offered a sweeping parallel study of *La mort volontaire au Japon* (widely translated into a variety of languages, including *Jishi no Nihon-shi* in 1986 and *Voluntary Death in Japan* in 1993), which sketches an even longer trajectory for the prominent place of suicide in Japanese cultural and literary traditions, from the eighth-century *Kojiki* legends, medieval war tales, and eighteenth-century love suicide

plays to Japanese military leaders after defeat in WWII and modern authors. In writing against what they perceive as reigning societal taboos and prejudices against the act of suicide, both Alvarez and Pinguet stress the ways that suicide offers a long-lived aesthetic resource. If it can regrettably lead to self-destruction, it also serves as the wellspring of creativity that can be traced from antiquity to modernity.

For Miyoshi in his *Accomplices of Silence* (1974), suicidal impulses fuel both literary creation and writers' self-destruction, but here with significantly more pessimistic conclusions about their artistic effects. Although his study is not overtly focused on the topic of literary suicide, it becomes central to his thesis in its second half. As his book (and the above-noted chapter) titles might suggest, suicide is interpreted as yet another form of self-silencing—"a powerful compulsion throughout the whole society"—that makes Japanese authors complicit in their own marginalization vis-à-vis Western writers and modern literature. Writing in the face of death (and even writing at all in Japanese, a language he characterizes as marked by "the typical Japanese dislike of the verbal") is both "an act of defiance" and a signal of "defeat and exhaustion ... tantamount to the writer's sacrifice of himself." This tendency to regard suicidal writings and writers as heroically defiant but inevitably defeatist is one that pervades most accounts. In Miyoshi's case, defeat is inevitable, and the deficiencies of the modern Japanese novel stem in large part from "the Japanese attitude toward personality ... [which] is basically profoundly negative," an assertion that is fueled by the sociological research of Nakane Chie and Ruth Benedict, among others.²⁷ Even if this is primarily a literary critical appraisal, the concerns driving it are quite sociological in nature.

These concerns come to the fore in social scientists George De Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma's 1973 "Alienation and the Author: A Triptych on Social Conformity and Deviancy in Japanese Intellectuals." They diagnose three Japanese authors—Akutagawa, Dazai, and Sōseki (who, it is worth noting, did not die by suicide, although he famously wrote about the topic in *Kokoro* and other fictional works)—as suffering from "anomic conditions and personal alienation."²⁸ To make their case, the authors rely heavily on isolating biographical details about the writers' lives and times while citing relevant key passages from selected works—including letters, memoirs, and fiction that are often, but not always, autobiographical—to substantiate their assertions. Later work employing a similar methodology and Durkheimian framework to analyze Japanese writers' suicides (which again include the famous foursome as well as Arishima Takeo) was undertaken by the sociologist Mamoru Iga in 1986.

For these researchers, the rationale behind including so many literary figures in their studies is based less on any quantitative claim about the statistical relevance of suicidal Japanese authors than on a qualitative assessment of their use value. As Iga explains, these writers are both "highly representative of Japanese culture" and offer a privileged glimpse into the mindset behind Japanese suicide: "Considering that writers are more capable than ordinary people of analyzing their own

thought processes, their suicide notes, other personal documents, and literary works should shed much light upon suicidal motives;” De Vos and Wagatsuma put it even more bluntly: “Their own writings and personal documents concerning them well illustrate in dramatic form experiences more or less common to the less articulate Japanese of their times.”²⁹

To offer just one example of where this analysis tends to lead, the final famous scene of Kawabata’s 1937 novel *Yukiguni* (*Snow Country*), in which the protagonist stares from a distance at the burning body of a young woman, testifies to “Kawabata’s capability for emotionless observation [that] made for a lack of real intimacy in a society where personal cohesiveness is emphasized. . . . His lack of social involvement made for an egoistic suicide in Durkheimian terms.”³⁰ That Kawabata’s own suicide occurred in 1972, thirty-five years after this work of fiction (in which death, but no suicide, appears), goes unnoted here. To explain the context and motivations behind acts of suicide, any act of writing serves in retrospect.

These sociological studies of literary suicides attempt to conduct what might be called an “autopsy of a suicidal mind,” to borrow the title of a book written in 2004 by Edwin S. Shneidman, the leading founder of the field of suicidology. But in their case, a diagnosis of some *ism* (whether egoism, fatalism, nihilism, narcissism, and/or aestheticism) serves to pathologize not just an individual but society as a whole. Indeed, their goal is to explain Japan’s phenomenal postwar economic recovery as based in large part on “the cultural psychology of the Japanese” that also entails a downside: a suicidal predisposition, or as Iga’s book title puts it, the thorn in the chrysanthemum.³¹ Like many other contemporaneous social scientific studies, the quest is to define the cultural peculiarities of “Japanese people’s suicide.”³² If some laud their exceptionalism, others lament it.

In *Suicidal Narrative in Modern Japan: The Case of Dazai Osamu* (1990), all these aforementioned scholars are taken to task, especially De Vos and Alvarez but also Pinguet and Miyoshi, among others. In this work, literary scholar Alan Wolfe offers an ambitious deconstruction of “the way in which suicides play a role in the construction of Japan’s twentieth-century narrative of modern development” by focusing “on the life and writings of Dazai Osamu (1909–1948), . . . whose prominence as an object of study for literary critics and sociologists alike calls attention to the paradigmatic status of the suicidal writer in modern Japanese literary history.”³³ If other scholars have depicted Dazai as emblematic of Durkheim’s anomic suicides as a means to figure Japan as either atavistically premodern or fashionably modern, Wolfe depicts him as a “poststructuralist *avant la lettre*.”³⁴ Wolfe’s focus on dismantling the critical establishment’s writings on Dazai, however, leads to surprisingly little material exploring Dazai’s own writings. Instead, they (and he) figure as some abstract exercise in literary criticism and theory rather than as an issue involving a person’s death.³⁵

One recent work by historian Francesca Di Marco has gone a long way toward deconstructing grand narratives that can tend toward cultural essentialism and

chauvinism. In *Suicide in Twentieth-Century Japan* (2016), Di Marco writes against what she calls “the usual story of suicide” in Japan as an “unchanging, atemporal concept” by offering a detailed evolution of psychiatric and psychological discourses and practices through the mid-1980s. Durkheim, she finds, was not as central a founding father of suicidology in Japan compared to other nations as previous scholarship might suggest.³⁶ Her analysis demonstrates what she calls “a medically heterogeneous response” to suicide by considering how its treatment—in both medical and evaluative senses—shifted over time alongside rapidly shifting historical contingencies and debates surrounding Japanese national identity. Her work also nicely highlights the ways that women (and other less desirable suicidal actors and acts) were often exempted from triumphalist ethnocentric interpretations of suicide as uniquely Japanese.³⁷

Also in this study, however, literature and the arts are depicted in broad strokes that suggest they only served to propagate “the usual story of suicide” in Japan. They are bracketed as part of a monolithic and singular culturalist narrative of suicide, or what Di Marco calls “the romantic cultural discourse on suicide.”³⁸ She describes how the “customary romantic narrative of voluntary death” was consolidated at the turn of the twentieth century after “centuries [of] Japanese legend, literature, and drama had portrayed suicide in a positive and romantic light” by “journalists and literati [who] were revivifying premodern images of romantic and noble suicides” and shored up again in the postwar by “many intellectuals and novelists during the 1950s [who] continued to romanticize and glorify suicide as a peculiar feature of the Japanese.”³⁹

As I hope my work demonstrates, there never was any singular cultural discourse to be had, and legend, literature, and drama are far from such easy containers for any ideologically driven notions of suicide. The texts I examine are rife with ambivalence. Neither the artists themselves nor journalists, intellectuals, and literati, much less friends and family of the dead, consistently glorified or romanticized suicide. The act of representation itself should not be so easily conflated with celebration. Instead, a closer, slower look at the texts in question suggests the ways that each medium—whether a death poem, suicide note, memorial, or multimedia production—offers its own challenges for re-presenting self-death at all.

SCRIPTING SUICIDE

While my examples are designed to demonstrate the great variety and types of writings that remain in the wake of suicide, I seek to identify a shared dilemma at their core: How to script suicide? And to what end? These are far from simple scripts in either sense of the word. They do not offer simple “rehearsals” of the “final act” for their authors prospectively, nor do they retrospectively offer readers a transparent record of the author’s psychology in his or her final moments. If they are not straightforward communiqués, they are also not subconscious slips of

the pen. Instead, they are highly mediated for all involved, not scripts set in stone but graven images and words nonetheless that serve to mourn the dead, whether oneself or another.

These writings demonstrate conflicting desires for absence and presence, for bodily erasure and textual presence. They straddle two impulses: to put the dead to rest and to keep them alive therein forever. The image that graces this book's cover—a self-portrait by artist Yokoo Tadanori (b. 1936)—beautifully and hauntingly captures the tension between these two poles. Created in 2018, this huge-scale oil painting (over seven feet tall and six feet wide) suggests that the specter of suicide hangs over the artist, simultaneously framing his existence and also documenting the threat of his self-erasure with the artist fading into the black oblivion.

The most difficult part of this project has been navigating my own distance and proximity to the subject. At times, I found myself a receptive reader, at times highly resistant. When my own struggle with these materials was also one shared by the writers themselves, the materials were easier to approach. Visiting historically famed suicide sites or the graves of those distant in time and space came easily, often yielding receptive and informative locals who were eager to share their knowledge of these long-dead sites and people.⁴⁰ I still worried that there was something unseemly about probing these sites of writing, especially ones that were clearly designated for their intimates and did not include or anticipate a distant reader from a century and continent away. But in reading, I could feel like I was stumbling alongside them, retracing their own hesitations and scruples, their fears and hopes that this last writing might embody them forever helping guide me and my own writing, too.

Even more difficult, however, were those that seem to collapse the distance between acts of writing and acts of suicide too neatly—ones that anticipated their own publication and widespread distribution, seemingly designed to stand as a symphonic finale, a definitive and resounding punctuation mark that closes the final chapter. Somewhat counterintuitively, the more loquacious the dead, the trickier.

None confounded me more than an artist like Mishima, who so forcefully directed readings of so many of his multimedia texts to coincide with his highly publicized and public seppuku. Mishima is often figured in studies on suicide in Japan as “the last act,” suggesting that there is little more left to say about the subject.⁴¹ Initially, my project was motivated in part by a desire to displace this disproportionate focus on Mishima. In the pages that follow, I hope to have done so by offering a more expansive and updated exploration of the diverse ways that suicide is scripted in Japan that go beyond highbrow literature and beyond an exclusively male genealogy. Yet despite myself, Mishima concludes this book as well—not, I hope, as some grand finale but instead as an open-ended dialogue initiated by the dead, one that is taken up again and again and yet is never complete.

Toward the end of his fourth and last installment of his radio address, Améry points to the necessarily incompleteness of this communication: “Nothing more

remains to be said. Or I would have to begin again with the situation ‘before the leap.’ And everything would repeat, without an end, like a canon, a song that no one completely sings to the end.”⁴² In the pages of this book, I follow these songs in the hopes of taking up the refrain, not to “the end” but rather “into the midst.”⁴³

In Japanese, there is a phrase—*Shinin ni kuchi nashi* (死人に口なし). It suggests that the dead tell no tales, or more literally, “have no mouths.” It conveys the powerlessness of the dead to speak on their own behalf. To the contrary, I believe that these texts reveal the many ways the dead do speak; to hear them, I suggest, we need only listen.

I turn now to the words left behind by the young Fujimura Misao, who carved his “Thoughts at the Precipice” into an oak tree before leaping to his death there over a hundred years ago.