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### Close yet Far: Fractured Identities in Nagai Kafū's American Writings

Nagai Kafū (1879-1959) left Japan in 1903 and lived in the United States until 1907. He had recently completed *Jigoku no hana* (The Flowers of Hell, 1902), *Yashin* (Ambition, 1902) and *Yume no onna* (Woman in Dreams, 1903), three works clearly influenced by the French author Émile Zola (1840-1902), whose novels he had been fervently reading since 1900. He had also translated some of Zola's works into Japanese, and in spite of his young age he was regarded as one of the leading figures of the newborn Japanese Naturalism. However, the official reason why he went to the United States (and, later, to Europe) was not so much to pursue his literary ambitions as to fulfill his father's will: Nagai Kyūichirō (1852-1913) wanted him to learn about finance, so that he could enter an honourable profession once back in Tokyo, and sent him abroad to work in the foreign branches of the Yokohama shōkin Bank. Kafū had been given an education which included a profound acquaintance with Western culture, since his father had travelled to the United States himself at the beginning of the Meiji period as one of the first Japanese students in New Brunswick. Like many other *ryūgakusei* (students overseas) of the first generations, even once back in Japan Kyūichirō would feel a connection with America, and the elegiac tone conveyed in the short lines he wrote while heading from San Francisco to New York by train («Runs through the clouds / the long railway / through the foliage and the chill of autumn / from one bay to another / goes the train and never stops / alas / leaving little time to appreciate / the beauty of these mountains green»; Kawaguchi 1984: 827-28) testifies to his profound fascination. Critics agree in attributing great importance to Kafū's experience of the West in the development of his *écriture* (Nakamura 1971; Yoshida 1971; Akiba 1979; Snyder 2000; Minami 2007), but his sojourn was also an opportunity to interact with a different and broader society than the one he was used to in Tokyo: as long as he stayed in Japan his wealthy upbringing never really exposed him to contact with less fortunate people, in spite of his deep fascination with French Naturalism and interest in what he called 'the dark side of society'; it was in Tacoma that he acknowl-

edged for the first time the existence of a silent and exploited community of Japanese: *dekasegi rōdōsha* («immigrant workers»). Mainly employed in the construction of the Northern Pacific Railway, Kafū's fellow countrymen and their families had to endure all kinds of hardship during their life abroad. He soon became aware of the substantial difference between them and himself, and his literary production of the time reflects his unease at the complex, multilayered 'Japanese identity' suggested by their presence. Whilst sharing the same physical features, *dekasegi rōdōsha* were by no means similar to him. Many of his *Amerika monogatari* (American Stories, 1908) deal with this particular topic in a way that reveals a multifaceted process of identity formulation where the central constructs are race, class and so-called 'otherness'. The present contribution will analyse textual strategies and narrative devices through which Kafū represented the identity gap, with the overall aim of defining the meaning of the American experience in the formation of his peculiar sense of 'being Japanese'.

The first official Japanese embassy visited the United States in 1860,<sup>1</sup> and after that the Meiji government sent many missions to the West, the most significant being the Iwakura *shisetudan* of 1872-1874.<sup>2</sup> In this phase the legates were entrusted with crucial diplomatic tasks, most notably the renegotiation of the controversial 'unequal treaties', but another important objective was to gather information concerning the Western countries and to deepen knowledge of their military, social, and economic structures. Despite an intense and often bitter debate about whether formal relationships with Europe and the United States should be cultivated, especially as regards the risk of being put into a position of subordination, and the growing threat represented by the spread of Christianity among the Japanese, public figures from diverse backgrounds and endorsing different political views agreed upon the high utility of *yōkō* (travels in Western countries) – and later of *ryūgaku* (study abroad) – as means of enhancing international competitiveness and productivity growth. Famously, in the last part of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868), the intellectual Yoshida Shōin (1830-59), while promoting absolute loyalty to the emperor and condemning any act of worship of the 'barbarians' of the West, asserted the usefulness of their scientific, technological and military knowledge for the broad plan of a colonial expansion in the rest of Asia that he was envisioning (Beasley 1995: 43). Further, the Imperial Household Minister Toda Tadayuki (1809-1883), from the Utsunomiya domain, encouraged the practice of *ryūgaku* as an opportunity to gain a better knowledge of Christian thought so as to contain its propagation in Japan. Ishizuki Minoru (1992) pointed out the fundamental similarity between Toda's opinion about studying abroad and that of a leading advocate of Western learning such as Ōkubo To-

<sup>1</sup> The 1860 mission to the United States is widely analysed in Miyoshi (1979) and Beasley (1995).

<sup>2</sup> For the Iwakura Mission refer to Nish (1998).



shimichi (1830-1878), in spite of their utterly different expectations: for the latter, *ryūgaku* was an essential step in order to achieve prosperity and full international recognition (Ishizuki 1992: 176-78). As Michael R. Auslin (2011: 55) observed, the diplomatic missions promoted by the Meiji government contributed, as part of the «exposure to a critical mass of things Western», to the dramatic transformation of Japanese civilisation. Further, Beasley (1995: 178) stresses that «most of the Japanese who went to America and Europe between 1860 and 1873 came from the ruling class»; according to Auslin (2011: 61-63), «belief in the superiority of Western education [...] pushed low-level samurai scholars such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Mori Arinori to travel to America and return home to found colleges on the Western model», with the result that many of the political leaders of modern Japan had attended American colleges at the beginning of the Meiji era. *Ryūgaku* thus became functional to *bunmei kaika* (Civilisation and Enlightenment) and fell under the dictates of the authorities, that continued the custom (dating back to the *bakumatsu*, the last period of the Tokugawa Shogunate) of issuing travel permits and broadcasted travel regulations urging the *ryūgakusei* not to borrow money from foreigners nor to argue with them, encouraging the emergence of networks of mutual assistance and solidarity among the Japanese living in foreign lands (Ishizuki 1992: 178-79); Ardath Burks, following Hara, has suggested that such regulations were also aimed at preventing the diffusion of Christianity (Burks, Umetani 1990: 135-36). Ever since the 1860s, leaving with the approval of the domains had ensured the travellers greater support during their life abroad (Beasley 1995: 136); however, the West attracted people from any background and with all kind of purposes, not necessarily backed by the authorities. Not only legates and diplomats but also private travellers visited Western countries to acquire an international education, especially in technology, business and administration. The United States soon became the major destination for these kinds of migration. Firstly, the relatively close distance between Japan and the West Coast made it easier, safer and more convenient to travel to cities such as Seattle and San Francisco than to any country in Europe. But apart from that, as argued by Ishizuki (1992: 207-8), the interests of America and those of some domains had dovetailed since the *bakumatsu* and, more importantly, being an emerging reality, the United States could provide more potent sources of inspiration to Japan than the 'old' Europe could.

While in America, Kyūichirō, like his son three decades after him, was part of a Japanese community, one of those networks of solidarity mentioned above, that secured him to a great extent against the difficulties of living abroad. As for Kafū himself, despite the fact that he had no interest in his job at the bank and spent most of his time reading, studying French and watching plays, the *Saiyūnisshishō* (Diary of a Journey to the West, 1919) and some autobiographical sections of *American Stories* provide evidence that he participated frequently in social gatherings with the Japanese living in the United

States and would often turn to them seeking advice and help. What should be noted, however, is that both Kafū and Kyūichirō had access to this kind of network not only because of their nationality, but thanks to their social status. Even if most regulations spoke of the ‘Japanese’ – «When abroad, the Japanese shall help each other» (Ishizuki 1992: 179) –, only the Japanese from the upper classes, mainly of samurai descent, were actually considered as such; people of lower class origin would find it much more difficult to seek and obtain help from their wealthier compatriots. Nonetheless, what Auslin (2011: 57) defined «the image of America as the pacesetter of modernity» also attracted a wave of migration which was utterly different from the flow of the *ryūgakusei*. Those who sailed towards the United States in order to escape poverty did not share their fellows’ belief in the superiority of the American educational system, but were rather drawn to what appeared as a land of unlimited opportunities. The number of *dekasegi rōdōsha* in the West Coast had increased dramatically by the turn of the century. Ōta Saburō (1988: 107) observed that in 1902, only a year before Kafū’s arrival to Tacoma, work had begun on the construction of the Northern Pacific Railway, providing employment for many Japanese immigrants. Tacoma, a relatively new city, had attracted *dekasegi rōdōsha* since the 1870s, and by 1903, when Kafū arrived, the Japanese population in the region had reached a figure of several thousand. Further, Seattle was home to many Japanese prostitutes, who lived in the low-city together with other Asian immigrants. Kafū’s contact person was Yamamoto Ichirō, head of the Tacoma branch of the Furuya shoten, a bookseller whose main store had been established in Seattle in 1890, but his position within the secure network of the wealthy Japanese community did not prevent him from catching sight of – and becoming interested into – his ‘other’ fellow countrymen. At a time when the mediation between cultures was considered one of the most important tasks for international travellers, as brilliantly epitomised by the publication, in 1904, of *The Awakening of Japan*, the immigrant workers did not play any active role in this kind of diplomacy. According to Auslin (2011: 67-68), although they occupied a liminal space between two countries, *dekasegi rōdōsha* did not contribute to the diffusion of information about their homeland in the United States nor about the United States in Japan: «Their lack of a cultural voice [...] paralleled their lack of a political voice. It was, not surprisingly, the poor emigrants’ elite fellow travelers, those sent for study or business to the United States, who returned carrying the banner of civilization and enlightenment». The fine ambassadors of their excellent traditional culture celebrated by William E. Griffis (1843-1928) in his article of 1874 were those same elite travellers who, like Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913), managed to promote the image of Japan as a civilised and proud country (Tsubouchi 2006: 283), and whose social background was the same as Nagai Kafū’s.

As soon as he saw the *dekasegi rōdōsha* for the first time, Kafū experienced a sense of discomfort, and felt somehow out of place, although this had hardly ever happened to him while he was in Japan. In *American Stories*, diary entries and letters to friends, he depicted the immigrant workers as entirely undecipherable, no matter how hard he tried to mingle with them and how deep his sympathies were. Dialogical sections of his stories show style variation and differences of language which hint at an absence of shared values, whereas in the letters he reported his not being addressed as a 'Jap', drawing attention to the interconnection between racial experience and social class. As argued by Hutchinson (2007: 59), whose work on Kafū's construction of the Western Other and definition of the Japanese Self paved the way for the present study, America is the prism through which the author's very conceptions of 'Other' and 'Self' are reflected: «The American Other acts as a trope through which Kafū investigates ideas of power, freedom, sexual pleasure, gender roles, colonial legacy, nation-building, and the exile abroad. This Other is used for critique and definition of the Japanese Self, and for a deeper interrogation and problematisation of the very idea of Otherness». And the Other, being represented in the short stories of this period by both the Western world and the 'Japs', is constructed along more varied borders than those of nationhood. In fact, during his first months in the United States, Kafū engaged in several reflections on 'Japaneseness', either genuine (by re-reading some of the greatest Japanese classics, such as *Heike monogatari – Tales of the Heike*) or imitated (as in Winnifred Eaton's – also known as Otono Watanna – works). Most of all he appeared struck by the discovery of such a deprived community of people with whom he happened to share the same homeland. Therefore we may maintain that during his stay he gained awareness of the importance of class as an identitarian factor. In *American Stories* he also confronted the theme of race, questioning, as Hutchinson (2007: 69) puts it, «the legitimacy of a political system founded along racial lines». Further, at some point he would mention an 'Oriental colony', den of both the Chinese and the Japanese, showing that he did not even feel the urge, felt by many Japanese, to distinguish themselves from other East Asian immigrants. When introducing the motif of *dekasegi rōdōsha*, he seems to consider race as a marginal element; what really is crucial in Kafū's *critique*, what produces a fracture and can invalidate the entire discourse on the Japanese identity, creating impressions of closeness and distance which transcend the limits defined by the rhetoric of the 'nation', is class rather than race or nationhood.

The differences in the social conditions of the Japanese residents in America triggered a mechanism of strict, sectarian division between the *bourgeoisie*, on one side, and prostitutes and labourers, on the other, Azuma (2005: 36) has discussed the openly contemptuous reaction of the Issei leaders to the latter, whom they considered responsible for the tarnishing of Japan's national reputation, and thus for the rise of the anti-Japanese agitations which eventual-

ly led to the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907-1908 between Japan and the United States. As the 'Chinese question' rose, together with discussion about the 'Yellow Peril', the Japanese elite immigrants immediately tried to distinguish themselves from the other Asians by stressing their social identity. The differentiation between Chinese and Japanese did not apply to *dekasegi rōdōsha* and prostitutes, who were rather identified with an ignorant and uncivilised mass (*gumin*) acting «like the Chinese» and by no means representative of their country of origin:

Frequently described in racial terms, such difference offered a standard against which to measure one's worth as a member of the national community and of the modern world at large, creating a bifurcation of a people into the upper (civilized, Japanese/white) and the lower (uncivilized, *gumin*/Chinese). This entailed class-based racial formation processes, which fabricated the dual cultural affinities between the elite Japanese and the white American middle-class, and between the lowly *gumin* and the excluded Chinese (Azuma 2005: 38-39).

Such 'convergence' among immigrant literati, wealthy Issei and white Americans is reflected in Kafū's experience as he often describes himself and his narrative selves successfully integrated into the local (American) community. He does not, however, share his fellow upper class immigrants' contempt for prostitutes and *dekasegi rōdōsha*. Further, in his American production, both fictional and diaristic, he appears constantly drawn to the districts populated by migrants and itinerant labourers,<sup>3</sup> places where concepts like race do not seem to be relevant at all,<sup>4</sup> although his interest in those who came from other countries appears to be mostly intellectual and poetic,<sup>5</sup> while in contrast *dekasegi rōdōsha* affect his experience in a more problematic way. His wealthy condition freed him from the label of 'Jap', but the thought of what he saw in Tacoma would stay with him forever. What follows is an excerpt of a letter (in English) he sent to his brother Washizu Sadajirō on December 24<sup>th</sup> 1904, when he had already moved to Kalamazoo:

I am very happy here in kalamazoo, as everybody is very kind to me. I am treated no more as a 'Jap'. Our countrymen who want to study in America must come to the East. I am well occupied all day long, speaking and writing English, and am very much

<sup>3</sup> For example, the short story *Chainataun no ki* (Chronicles of Chinatown) is the description of a *flânerie* in the famous Chinese quarter of New York, whereas in *Yowa no sakaba* (Midnight at a Bar) his focus shifts to Little Italy; the Jewish quarter as well appears repeatedly in *American Stories* (Nagai 2000).

<sup>4</sup> In *Midnight at a Bar* the I-narrator is approached by two women «apparently totally unconcerned about racial differences so long as they could make money» (Nagai 2000: 185).

<sup>5</sup> *Chronicles of Chinatown* ends with the narrator's preoccupation that the poor quarter might be saved and thus deprived of its allure: «Oh, I love Chinatown. Chinatown is a treasure house of poetic material for the 'flowers of evil'. I am constantly concerned lest so-called humanitarianism and charity should wipe away this world of its own from a corner of society» (Nagai 2000: 202).

pleased to find that there is so much progression in my knowledge of English. But I shall never forget the bitterest days in Tacoma, because those hard experiences gave me many good lessons (Takemori 1994: XVII, 81-82).

The «good lessons» Kafū refers to obviously include his knowledge of the living conditions of the immigrant workers, those still bearing the ‘Jap’ mark. As soon as he caught sight of them, he felt concerned, but nonetheless distant. In the consistent confrontation with the Other that characterises Kafū’s literary discourse in his American production, *dekasegi rōdōsha* should indeed be regarded as a deeply significant Other. From this perspective, the story *Noji no kaeri* (1905), translated into English by Mitsuko Iriye as *A Return Through the Meadow*, is of particular interest because here the author draws for the first time an imaginary but clear line between the immigrant workers and himself. Having heard by a friend the expression ‘*dekasegi rōdōsha*’, *watakushi* (I), the first-person narrator, engages in a meditation on their difficult condition which eventually makes him realise that the gap dividing them is even deeper than he thought at first.

I cannot help but be agitated anew by the words, ‘immigrant workers’. It is all too easy to recall how I felt looking at this workers from the upper deck while taking a walk, on my voyage last year from my native land to this country.

They are being treated less as humans than as cargo and are loaded to capacity in a small, dirty, and smelly hole; when they notice good weather, they come up to the deck from the bottom of the ship, like so much rising smoke, and stare at the boundless sky and ocean. But unlike the rest of us, oversensitive souls, they do not seem particularly struck by any feeling; they gather in groups of three or four, five or six, and after talking loudly for a while about something, they smoke tobacco with *kiseru* [...] they have brought from Japan and scatter ashes on the deck till reprimanded by one of the crew who happens to go by. Or, later, on moonlit nights, they begin singing some provincial popular songs that reveal their native places. I can never forget one of them, a white-haired old man who appeared proud of his voice (Nagai 2000: 11).

The most striking feature of this excerpt is that Kafū, here, acknowledges *dekasegi rōdōsha* as being «unlike the rest of us», so that it appears clear that he considers these fellow countrymen as utterly different from himself: there is ‘us’ and there is ‘them’. The expression *dekasegi rōdōsha*, meaning literally ‘someone who came out from his country (*de-*) in order to earn money (*ka-segu*) by working (*rōdō*)’, identifies them as basically outsiders, and involved in some physical labour which is very different indeed from the occupation of the narrator, an «oversensitive soul» harbouring the deepest feelings and hardly concerned over money and survival. Right from this first occurrence, in other words, Kafū emphasises the distance between *dekasegi rōdōsha* and himself, and he makes it textually visible by positioning *watakushi* on «the upper deck», whereas the immigrant workers are located down in a «hole» in the «bottom of the ship». Further, the dirtiness and the smell of the space they are confined to parallels their behaviour onboard: they gather in groups and speak

loudly, afterwards they smoke and scatter the ashes on the floor until some form of authority (embodied by the crew) prevents them from doing it. The immigrant workers are described as almost wild creatures, more responsive to the laws of Nature than human law: «when they notice good weather, they come up to the deck» almost automatically, and «stare» at the ocean apparently without feeling anything. Further, their unfathomable future is symbolically represented by the vastness of the sky and ocean. Albeit unconsciously, Kafū was perhaps influenced by the class-based prejudice that informed the process of identity construction of the Japanese elite community abroad, but his description conveys hardly any moral judgement. *Watakushi's* gaze falls on them from above, but his writing does not express any feeling of contempt or disdain. He rather shows compassion and sympathy for them, as the next section suggests:

Sustained by the vision alone, that three years of hard work abroad sow the seeds of ten years' wealth and happiness after they go back home, they leave behind the farmland where their ancestors were born and died, bidding farewell to the eastern skies more beautiful than those in Italy, remain patient all through humiliations such as immigration regulations and health examinations, and arrive in this new continent (Nagai 2000: 11).

Here the narration follows the line established earlier, when *watakushi* recalled the «provincial popular songs» sung by the immigrants on the ship. Kafū maintains the atmosphere of the scene depicted through an elegiac tone which perfectly matches the nostalgic echoes of their tunes, suggesting an attempt at demonstrating genuine empathy with them through the writing, but this impression of closeness is mitigated by the punctualisation that the other immigrants are «provincial», born and raised in the «farmland», therefore very different from the urban elite society of the Yamanote he himself was a part of. Rachael Hutchinson (2011: 24) has considered this story a straightforward example of «Kafū's critical use of language» but also of «his awareness of power dynamics operating in the new continent» and of the divisions within the Japanese community. Through the acknowledgement of the actual situation of the immigrant workers, the young writer became conscious of the delusional nature of the image of the United States then prevailing in Japan: «Not only has the image of America as the 'sacred land of liberty' given way to disillusionment, but the simple Meiji binary of Japan and America is shown to be a mere construct in the face of a vast number of internal divisions». Further, we may argue that the experience in Tacoma proved effective in increasing his awareness of social marginalisation and power relations not only in America, but also in Japan. The model of social practice within which his sense of self and identity was fostered pertained to his time abroad, but the concern with the 'dark side of society', once it ceased to be a mere offshoot of his interest in French Naturalism, became a major part of his literary world and found diverse articulations throughout his production. Back in Tokyo, Kafū would

indulge in the exploration of the *shitamachi* (low-city, the old downtown Tokyo), pleasure districts and of all the shabbiest, most decaying and forgotten parts of the city, losing himself like a *flâneur*<sup>6</sup> in those marginalised spaces which would function as a context for yet another definition of his Self: that of the voluntarily secluded *bunjin* («man of Letters») who used the representation of the urban space as a foil for his *critique* of modern Japan.<sup>7</sup> As Ryū Kenki (1993: 65) has observed, as long as he stayed in Tacoma, Kafū never really immersed himself in the American society because of the ubiquitous presence of the Japanese around him, making his months in the State of Washington an essentially Japanese experience. It was in the United States that for the first time he felt, if not a connection with his fellow countrymen, at least a sense of contradiction for not being able to truly empathise with them. He tried to describe – and by means of writing he probably tried to understand himself – the difficulties they faced and the humiliations they endured in order to *survive* – a concern he would not really feel for himself during his five years abroad. The poor labourers' efforts appeared almost obscure to him, and in the writings of this period he wondered frequently what were their motives for suffering so much. In a letter that he sent to Ikuta Kizan on February 27<sup>th</sup> 1904, Kafū wrote about the funeral of an immigrant worker which he had witnessed recently: «that was really sad. The Japanese workers' community here lives in extreme poverty, and it makes me pessimistic to think that a man, as trying to succeed, can go so far as to end tragically» (Takemori 1994: XVII, 6). This last realisation might as well be considered an implicit note of criticism concerning the Meiji ideal of *risshin shusse* (meaning the ability of making one's way in the world), but it refers primarily to the bitter experience of the *dekasegi rōdōsha*, an experience that Kafū did not share with them; thus it is the detachment from their condition that stirred his sadness and pessimism. Nevertheless, he sympathised with *dekasegi rōdōsha* and blamed their suffering on those who contributed to the construction of an image of America as a land of opportunities, misleading their compatriots until they, like the main character of 'A Return Through the Meadow', sailed across the Pacific to «such a dangerous, hellish place»:

Now, the biggest reason why laborers aspire to come to America is that they hear exaggerated stories told by people who have just returned home. And this man was certainly one of those. He had been living in the fields of Kyūshū where buckwheat flowers bloomed, but it happened that a man had returned from Hawaii after fifteen years and bragged about America where, as he put it, there were gold-bearing trees everywhere (Nagai 2000: 12-13).

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<sup>6</sup> For Kafū's *flâneur*-like attitude see Schulz (2012).

<sup>7</sup> On the subject of urban space in Kafū's works see Seidensticker (1965); Schulz (1997); Minami (2009).

As a Japanese abroad, Kafū clearly felt a responsibility towards his fellow countrymen and felt sorry for them. Nonetheless, as his letter to Kizan shows, given his upbringing, his *class*, it was almost impossible for him to understand what drove them to such a miserable fate. He felt compassionate, but most of all he sensed an unbridgeable gap between them and himself, showing to what extent his approach to *dekasegi rōdōsha* was different from that of the other elite immigrants, who basically considered them as «undesirable» (Auslin 2011: 67). Rachael Hutchinson (2011: 30) stresses the «relational aspect» of identity, seen in Kafū's writings «as something that can shift depending on one's position vis-à-vis other people and other places», ultimately leading to a «very fluid, changeable, complex positioning in Kafū's work, whether applied to the individual self, Japan, the 'West' or any other entity», and she defines it a «flexible positioning». Being in this in-between position allowed him to write of the 'East' and the 'West' by keeping a distance from both, being different from the Americans, but also from the 'Japs' and the labourers. It is this fluid and indetermined position that gave him the opportunity to critically examine the power dynamics at work around him and to problematise it effectively in his work. As Mike Savage (2000: xii) has observed in his *Class Analysis and Social Transformation*, «the structural importance of class to people's lives appears not to be recognized by the people themselves. Culturally, class does not appear to be a self-conscious principle of social identity. Structurally, however, it appears to be highly pertinent». The relation between economic position and cultural identity is therefore a significant one, and class, as he puts it in another work, is a «visible marker of social differentiation» (*Id.* 2003: 536). Probably, for Kafū class was not a self-conscious principle as long as he stayed in his usual environment. As mentioned above, he sensed the difference between *dekasegi rōdōsha* and himself as soon as he saw them on the boat, in the suspended and transitional space of the ocean, *outside Japan*, and later he realised that it was determined by their different social status. In his case, class became a 'visible marker' when the circumstances enabled him to observe the decontextualised, displaced Japan represented by the labourers in the United States, and in his writings of the time he consistently implied that the gap between 'us' and 'them' might be just impossible to fill.

*Akuyū* (Bad Company), written in 1907, shares several narrative motifs with *A Return Through the Meadow*. The story has a complex diegetic structure to which the representation of *dekasegi rōdōsha* is not strictly functional. Nonetheless it shows how Kafū went further in the process of recognition of his own position as separate from that of his fellow citizens. As the story opens, the I-narrator describes himself as integrated within a group of elite Japanese whose gatherings are an occasion to discuss the topics that probably represented the most common subjects of conversation among the wealthy businessmen and the *ryūgakusei* – subjects which do not appear strictly intellectual.



Not long ago, when the issue of discrimination against Japanese schoolchildren arose in California, there was much speculation in the press in New York and elsewhere in the country that Japan and the United States might go to war. Quite naturally, whenever those of us Japanese who were living in New York came together, the topic of conversation was very often developments on the Pacific Coast.

One evening, at a certain place, we were engaged in our usual discussion of such topics as the race question, the yellow peril idea, internationalism, Roosevelt's personality, justice, and humanism, when all of a sudden someone seemed to remember something and asked a totally unrelated question: «Is it true that there are a lot of Japanese prostitutes over there?»

That topic spread in all directions like a shower cloud arising rapidly at the edge of a swelteringly hot sky, and drove away grander discourses on public affairs. Some even pulled up their chairs, as if to suggest that an even more serious subject had been introduced (Nagai 2000: 81).

In the opening line, the author refers to the anti-Japanese agitation in California and in particular to the so-called 'School board crisis' that arose in San Francisco in 1906 and culminated in the order, issued by the Board of Education under the pressure of the Asiatic Exclusion League, to the Japanese and Korean pupils to join the Chinese in schools for 'Mongolian' (Chinese) children (Daniels 1977: 34). The unfolding of these events obviously became a major topic of conversation among the Japanese residents everywhere in the United States, and Kafū, who was in New York at the time, had multiple occasions to join in these discussions and probably to witness, in the wealthy Japanese, the growing sentiment of contempt over the presence of their compatriot labourers that Auslin referred to. The settlers were eager to showcase a distinguished and elitarian Japanese community, but Kafū's ironic remark, that the subject of prostitutes could probably be more serious than all the serious matters they had been discussing until a moment before, aims at deconstructing this same ideal of superiority and integrity. The noble spirit of that sort of «long-distance nationalism», to use Benedict Anderson's (1992) definition, fostering their attempt at promoting a positive image of Japan, is therefore diminished by Kafū, who deprives his fellows of their severe allure. In the space of a few lines, the two communities – the elite immigrants and the prostitutes (and, by extension, *dekasegi rōdōsha* as well) – are put together under the umbrella of the Japanese presence in the United States: power-dynamics and gender roles are still fixed and apparently unquestioned, but the impulsive reaction of the men reflects an interest in, and even a fascination with, a segment of society which they were trying hard to break away from. Kafū does not feel bothered by the sight of immigrants from more vulnerable classes, nor does he manifest any feeling of disrespect towards them, but he does admit to being uncomfortable, unable to understand them completely. One crucial sequence, in this sense, shows Shimazaki, the main character, at the window of a Japanese inn in Seattle, his eyes set upon the gloomy sight of the so-called 'Japantown':

This alley, these squalid wood-frame houses, these made up the den for the Japanese and the Chinese, the Oriental colony, and also the place where unemployed Western laborers and poor, oppressed Negroes found shelter.

Just the sight of the coal fumes distressed me. Thinking that perhaps I should move to a hotel somewhere that was for Westerners, I actually went out to the street with my suitcase (Nagai 2000: 84).

Kafū, here, speaks of an «Oriental colony» that gathers together the Japanese and the Chinese, but also people of other descent. What the East Asian, the «Western laborers» and the «oppressed Negroes» have in common is poverty, and the fact that Shimazaki does not specify or distinguish the Japanese from the Chinese demonstrates that he himself does not feel similar to any of them: this passage is a good example of the «Sinification» (Azuma 2005: 38) of the *dekasegi* labourers discussed above. The differentiation, rather than racial, is class-based, and such a view is so deep-rooted among the elite immigrants that no further specification is required. Likewise, Shimazaki confesses that the sight of that part of the city caused him distress; feeling so uncomfortable, his most immediate reaction is to pack up his belongings and go somewhere else, «somewhere that was for Westerners», emphasising the substantial convergence among the wealthy émigrés and the white Americans. A similar description of Japantown appears in another short story written three years before, *Shiatoru kō no ichiya* (A Night at Seattle Harbor, 1904), where the narrator «furtively walked» into the Japanese quarter:

I say furtively not without reason. I had been told when I landed, by a member of the crew with whom I had become well acquainted during the voyage, that in Seattle I should refrain from going to the downtown area where there were many Japanese. He warned me that this was not a place to be visited by anyone with the least sense of honor. [...]

I covered my mouth with a handkerchief and held my breath as I barely passed under the gas tank with its disagreeable smell; then dim lights came into view, flickering at a distance.

Coming closer, I found that the buildings on both sides were far different from those on the prosperous Fifth Avenue; they were all low, wood-frame ones, as is usually the case in poorer quarters (Nagai 2000: 229).

At this point, the I-narrator looks up at a window and sees a lamp with some Japanese words, so he gets closer and hears the sound of a *shamisen* coming from inside.

As it was a Western-style building with windows shut, I could barely make out the dim noise that was seeping through, but surely it was a woman singing a tune. It was a kind I had never heard in Tokyo, so I stood there, struck with a sense of amusing incongruity as if I were traveling in the countryside and listening to some comic songs in a distant post town in Japan [...] (*ibid.*: 229-30).

When Kafū wrote *A Night at Seattle Harbor*, his attitude towards this specific part of Seattle was still influenced by the curiosity and excitement

about what he expected to be the lively atmosphere of a low-city. This kind of approach had been a characteristic feature of his writing of urban settings since his first trip abroad, to Shanghai, in 1897. He found himself extremely interested in the most vibrant and multicultural parts of the Chinese city, which he described carefully in a diary (unfinished) and in a short story, *Enkoi* (The Opium Eater), that revealed his gift for grasping the *genius loci* of urban spaces and imagining the lives of the most emarginated social groups and individuals. What he saw in the Japantown of Seattle, however, was only a bleak and somber landscape made up of squalid buildings and thick smoke. Shimazaki's reaction in *Bad Company* echoes the impression of the earlier story's narrator, and, most likely, both passages refer to the same experience that Kafū himself had in the district as soon as he arrived in the United States. When he wrote *Bad Company*, in the midst of the Anti-Japanese demonstrations, he was arguably more concerned with the 'Japanese' motif than before, which is the reason why he concentrated upon the *shamisen* player and stressed the impression of inconsistency of the tune with the Western setting as well as with the Japanese mindscape of the I-narrator. Hutchinson (2011: 27-29) has already observed that such a sense of disjunction is even deeper in *Bad Company*, where it is expressed through Shimazaki's desire to move to a hotel for Westerners. Kafū's narrators, in these stories, voice his growing feeling of discomfort for the distance interposed between him and his fellow compatriots inasmuch as it brings in a contradiction as respects the definition of his own Japanese self. In writing, he expresses this apprehension through a peculiar use of language which is essentially spatial-oriented. In both cases, the narrators can only see the examples of 'displaced Japan' from either inside or outside a window: there is always an obstacle interposed, albeit a transparent one. The window acts as a veil symbolising the confusion sensed by the narrator and preventing him from either going out or in and truly interacting with his utterly different fellows. Shimazaki would feel comfortable in a Western hotel, meaning that his background, even if Japanese, has more in common with well-off Westerners than poor Japanese workers. The discriminating factor, thence, is even more clearly class rather than race, and this explains why Kafū could write to his family and friends that he was addressed no more as a 'Jap'. Not being a 'Jap' himself, he is not able to fill the gap: all he can do is watch those close, yet far entities through the glass of a window. He associates himself with a certain community (whose views and purposes he does not necessarily share) on the basis of a notion, that of class, that encompasses racial differences and national borders. Class, in other words, serves in part to focus his identity among a set of widely scattered identities abroad (the Japanese elite community, *ryūgakusei*, labourers, prostitutes, Chinese, Italians, Jews, black Americans and white Americans), and the narratives of *American Stories* faithfully reflect this attempt at image formulation. Difference, in Derridian terms, is the key concept in Kafū's work on identity.

His narrators do not identify completely either with the wealthy Japanese residents or the Westerners, least of all do they feel a close connection with the community of *dekasegi rōdōsha*, but the latter is beyond all understanding for them, so that it defines them in negative terms, for what they are *not*. The window separating Shimazaki from Japantown is a tangible expression of his reticence to blend with the multitude of *dekasegi rōdōsha*, as well as of a sort of unfulfilled attraction towards a (counter-)world which he obviously does not belong to, but that does not wholly exclude him either. It is the junction between two forces opposite but equal in intensity, therefore it is the space of a suspension, of an impasse. The narrator instinctively compares the district to Asakusa, reinforcing the idea of a sense of group belonging based upon socio-economic markers that breaks away from a territorialised concept of identity to assert itself beyond regional boundaries. From this perspective, the story *Akatsuki* (Daybreak, 1907), written only one month before *Bad Company*, is of great interest, insomuch as it is probably the most profound in terms of social analysis. Unlike Shimazaki, who remained safe behind a window glass, the narrator of *Daybreak*, a student working at Coney Island in order to save money with a view to a trip to Europe (which is a clear autobiographical insertion), is positioned inside the labourers' community. The differences in tastes, habits and language between them are emphasised throughout the narration, and the peculiar use of tenses accentuates sudden variations of distance, suggesting that, even if *jibun* (I, myself) has sometimes the impression of being part of his fellow countrymen's network, this is indeed just an impression, since his different social status makes it impossible to develop ties with them. At the very beginning of the story, the narrator tries to establish a connection between the two worlds, but once again he can only compare Coney Island to the popular Asakusa district. He works in a ball-rolling shop (*tamakorogashi*), a game quite popular at the time in spite of its being «nothing fancy» (Nagai 2000: 143), and describes the two different kinds of people involved in the business as follows:

You can tell that most Japanese owners of these shops are over forty years of age, determined to make a killing from this popular enterprise. Their appearance and manners somehow suggest their situation in life as labor bosses, desperados, or hooligans. They have come to the United States experiencing many hardships in their native Japan and, having tried just about everything in America, have reached the stage where they say it's not big deal to live in this world, you won't die even if you eat dirt. On the other hand, those working for them who, every day, count the number of balls rolled by customers and hand them their prizes, are either unemployed people who have not yet been hardened by failures in life but somehow hope to succeed their bosses or young men who have impetuously come to the United States to work their way through college.

I was one of them [...] (*ibid.*: 144).

This section stresses the divisions within the Japanese community by presenting two categories of people distinct from one another in terms of the hardships they have endured, the failures they have experienced and their motives for being in the United States. Moreover, in *Daybreak* the author brings in two notions he has already touched upon in other stories, the contrast of young/old and urban/rural, which become a further articulation of the question of identity. There is a character embodying both the 'old' and the 'rural' whom Kafū depicts vividly.

The oldest of the hired men, about forty years old and looking every inch a peasant, said with a Tōhoku accent, «Well, I'm going to bed. I won't last if I try to keep up with you. You young fellows go ahead and enjoy yourselves all you like. The night is still young... [...] Every night, you seem to be thinking of nothing but sneaking into a woman's bed».

«Don't forget I'm still young», said the student, followed by one of his companions who asked, as if to help out, «Hey you, old man, what are you going to do with the money you are saving? Don't tell me you have children or grandchildren back home». «Oh, sure. I've got a sixteen-year-old mistress waiting for me there. I don't understand why you guys let whores in America fool you and cheat you out of the money you've earned with your sweat [...]» (*ibid.*: 145-46).

The generational gap is an additional element of division within the group. If, at home, the Meiji period was characterised by an increasing dissatisfaction among the youth towards the adult generations,<sup>8</sup> the incompatibility is sharpened here because of the further dualism of the rigid distinction between the urban and the rural whose textual representation is the older man's accent. The narrative of *Daybreak* is constructed in accordance with the overarching idea of difference: divisions are unavoidable (and the group of young workers, after having teased the old one, splits in two) and multifaceted, hence a single identity is seemingly unattainable. The difference, the fracture within the group, is structured into the frame of an enigma. *Jibun*, the narrator, is told a story by a co-worker, a young man with the same background as himself who suddenly became poor when his father, disapproving his choices, stopped sending him money. The young man is therefore a sort of immigrant labourer now, because he has to work in order to make a living, but he is still somehow reminiscent of his former class in his despidal of fellow co-workers «looking for whores and other women of dubious character», and in his physical features, as *jibun* observes: «Indeed, his whole appearance [...] does suggest something fragile and gentle, not like the other young men who used to be doormen, freeloaders, student servants [...] before coming to the United States» (Nagai 2000: 150). The young man tells *jibun* that he is enjoying free-

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<sup>8</sup> According to Kenneth Pyle (1969: 6), «among them there was a shared feeling that – despite filial traditions – the knowledge and responses of the adult generation were unsuited to a time of unprecedented reform».

dom, but still there is something, in his voice, which hints at some sort of anxiety. *Jibun* asks him what is he going to do with his own life, and revealing all his desperation, the young man shouts:

«What am I... going to do, what will happen to me?». His face showed he was worried, but he shouted, «No, no. I'm doing these stupid things so I won't have to worry about such matters. I work, drink, eat and buy women so I won't have any brain power left to think about my own future. I just try to use my body like a beast». He walked away briskly, leaving me behind, apparently because he could no longer bear his agony (*ibid.*: 156-57).

The young man's reaction shows Kafū's conclusion that it is impossible, for someone who is not born a labourer, to figure out what sort of life he will lead in the future if put in the same circumstances. As he walks away, leaving *jibun* without an answer, he reaffirms the sense of a distance based upon *class* differentiation.

Thinking of his later works and the attitude he showed during the rest of his life, it is arguable that, for Kafū, 'Japanese identity' is anything but a fixed and stable conception, and the American production follows the process leading to the formulation of his idea. In the United States, confronted with cultural difference in its most practical and concrete forms, he conceived an idea of community as opposed to other communities rather than as a steady, self-sufficient notion. His later works show counter-worlds, networks and social characters forged by the environment they live in. Further, at some point later on, he would even recognise a «Tokyo-like mood» (*Tōkyō rashii omomuki*) (Takemori 1993: XI, 122-23) as a distinctive feature of the Japanese capital, something that sets it apart from any other city. However, nothing so homogeneous and defined as the so-called 'Japaneseness' can exist in his aesthetic horizon: there cannot be a single Japanese identity, but, if anything, a multitude of fractured identities.

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#### SUMMARY

Between 1903 and 1907, Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), a young man of wealthy descent, lived in the United States, where he witnessed the conditions of the Japanese immigrant workers. I argue that the collection *Amerika monogatari* (1908) reflects his unease at the multilayered 'Japanese identity' suggested by their presence, and that by acknowledging this 'diversity' within the particular frame of the American cities at the turn of the century, he engaged in a reflection upon the notion of 'Self' that informed his entire American production, both fictional and diaristic. I intend to describe Kafū's position within the Japanese network in the United States, and to ana-

lyse modes and strategies characterising his narrative of the identity gap, in order to define the meaning of the American experience in the formation of his sense of 'being Japanese'. Particular emphasis will be placed upon the spatial-oriented representation of the I-narrators' relationship with their 'other' compatriots and with the urban backdrops of their narratives. Being embodied by both the Western world and the so-called 'Japs', the idea of 'Other', in these short stories, is constructed along more varied borders than those of nationhood. Therefore, by concentrating on class, a social marker scarcely taken into consideration so far, I will try to demonstrate to what extent he gained awareness of its importance as an identitarian factor and how this affected his sense of group-belonging, his attitude towards society, and his literary expression.

*Keywords:* Japanese literature, Nagai Kafū, migrations, class, identity