

**Hell of Loneliness:  
The Subversion of the Epistemological Quest  
in Abe Kobo's *Woman in the Dunes***

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Once he had seen a reproduction of an engraving called “Hell of Loneliness” and had thought it curious. In it a man was floating unsteadily in the air, his eyes wide with fright, and the space around him, far from being empty, was so filled with the semi-transparent shadows of dead persons that he could scarcely move. The dead, each with a different expression, were trying to push one another away, talking ceaselessly to the man. What was this “Hell of Loneliness”? he wondered. Perhaps they had misnamed it, he thought then, but now he could understand it very well. Loneliness was an unsatisfied thirst for illusion. (Abe WD 214-215)

**Introduction**

Not content to use merely a single medium to convey his thoughts, the astonishingly prolific Abe Kobo expressed himself in a wide variety of formats throughout his life, including theater, musical composition, photography, screenplays (for his novels *Woman in the Dunes* and *The Face of Another*) and a dizzyingly wide range of narrative genres, from science fiction to mysteries to fantastic adventures. Although he never stopped writing, he was frustrated by the limitations of the written word – produced and consumed in solitude – and the traps of traditional recuperative literary conventions; Abe eventually came to view the collective process of directing staged performances as a more effective mode of expression. Describing his particular frustration with literature, he linked it to a broader philosophical examination of the existential problematics of language itself in a manner that Iles finds “fundamentally Modernist”:

I think that a characteristic of modern literature is this uneasiness regarding human existence which has been superimposed on a desire for new human relationships. That is to say, there is an uneasiness as to

whether the quest for new relationships is meaningful or whether human relationships are worth seeking out at all...Thus we communicate the theme that we are unable to communicate with each other. We terminate our communication. And that's self-contradictory. (Abe, quoted in Iles 7)

This self-contradictory desire – to communicate the impossibility of communication – is deeply embedded in the construction of Abe's densely layered, "referencelessly allegorical" texts. Timothy Iles notes that Abe's later novels "came to contain innumerable interpretive possibilities in the richness of their thematic textures, the exact delineation of which would border on the impossible," which allow "his works to mean a great many things to a great many people," and cleverly employ "frustrations of the usual reading process" as well as the "denial of the unity of narrative voice." (Iles 17-18) Abe's issues with the acts of constructing and reading narrative reflect his doubts as to the success of any efforts at mutual comprehension, a doubt shared by many other modern and postmodern novelists, notably the existentialists to whom Abe owed a profound creative and philosophical debt. Focusing (although not exclusively) on Abe's best-known novel, *The Woman in the Dunes*, this paper will track some of the ways in which Abe quite effectively communicated his inability to communicate, and will discuss some of the subversive implications of his approach to this quandary.

Over several decades, Abe's plays, short fiction, and novels all utilized a recurring body of symbols, thematic patterns, and narrative tropes to address his ongoing themes of urban alienation, existential individualism, the constraints of language, and the tyranny of the group. Yet the very few English-language scholars who have discussed Abe have most commonly done so with a specific eye to the postwar Japanese male identity crisis - whether from a feminist perspective, as in the case of Susan J. Napier, or from a more general literary angle, as with Timothy Iles. While Abe very occasionally makes explicit the connection between his novels and postwar anxiety<sup>1</sup>, I believe his work holds such

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the scarred protagonist of *Face of Another* self-pityingly links his plight to that of a movie

lasting international appeal not because it provides a narrowly specific cultural insight, but because Abe's wildly conceived texts ask universally applicable questions about postmodern urban life and its effect on the consciousness of the individual, most notably questions about the ownership and transmission of knowledge through language. In virtually all of his novels, Abe leads his readers on a metaphysical treasure hunt; clues are scribbled in notebooks, muttered in audiotapes, printed on leaflets or newsprint, but above all, they are inscribed into the very physical characteristics, actions, and fates of his characters.

Authors, theorists and philosophers have long reinforced the symbolic link between the body and the written word. Nietzsche famously invoked the well-established trope in asking his readers to “suppose Truth is a woman,” a supposition cheerfully taken up and deconstructed by Derrida in *Spurs*. For Derrida, de Saussure, Althusser, and many other theorists, it is precisely language that inserts us into the social order, and language that inscribes the laws of that order onto our bodies (and psyches). And in *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* – which will here be my primary means to access Abe’s embodied epistemological subtexts – Peter Brooks meticulously details the myriad ways in which Western aesthetics have reaffirmed the literal and figurative inscription of the word upon the human (usually female) body.

Some may question a Euroamerican-focused analysis of a Japanese author’s work, but Abe himself listed among his primary inspirations Poe, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Proust, Beckett, Rilke, Heidegger, and Carroll; his international sentiments were strong enough

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heroine whose lovely face was burned at Hiroshima. Indirect references include the unspecified but possibly nuclear holocaust feared by all in *The Ark Sakura*, and the post-apocalyptic Aquans who are bred in *Inter-Ice Age IV* to survive a nuclear war. Some of Abe’s plays and short stories also featured injured soldiers in Manchuria, but rather than hearkening back to an idyllic prewar manly state of glory, these are highly critical of Japanese racism and colonialism.

that he joined but was eventually expelled from the Japanese Communist Party (for supporting the independence of Hungary from the Soviet Union), and he went to great lengths to globalize his identity, even choosing to adopt the phonetic pronunciation of his given name “Kobo” rather than the more traditionally Japanese pronunciation of “Kimifusa.” (Iles 26) He further questioned “the significance of belonging to a nation, be it Japan or any nation, or belonging to any society.” (Iles 24) Since his texts are concerned with the inhabitants of a global, ultimately Western-influenced social order, the application of Western theory is particularly apt; although some of Abe’s imagery recalls Japanese mythology and folklore, his novels could be set in any city and inhabited by any people struggling with the loneliness and alienation such cities create in their residents. Like his existentialist forebears, Abe deliberately foils the traditional narrative process in the service of communicating that alienation.

Timothy Iles states, “Abe was trying to avoid limiting the relevance of his work to Japan alone. There are neither cherry blossoms in his writing nor cherry orchards in his theatre[...] his world is an urban one, a vast, dark sprawling one, a city the borders of which shift by the hour stranding their inhabitants in deserts of concrete bereft of signposts or allies.” (Iles 12) Although the bleak worlds created for his protagonists lacked signposts, the pages of Abe’s novels are undeniably rich with signifiers. It remains only to take out our maps and begin to follow the signposts to their destination.

### **One day in August a man disappeared: the plot, summarized**

...a fat but agile spider began to circle around the lamp. It would be natural for a moth, but it was strange that a spider should be drawn by light. He was on the point of burning it with his cigarette, but he suddenly held back. It continued to circle around, quite precisely, within a radius of seven to ten inches,

like the second hand of a watch. Or perhaps it was not a simple phototropic spider. He was watching it expectantly when a moth with dark-gray wings, mottled with white and black crests, came fluttering along. Several times its enormous shadow was projected on the ceiling as it crashed against the lamp chimney; then it perched on the metal handle, motionless. It was a strange moth despite its vulgar appearance. He touched his cigarette to its body. Its nerve centers were destroyed, and he flicked the writhing insect into the path of the spider. At once the expected drama began. Instantly the spider leapt, fixing itself to the still-living victim. Then it began to circle again, dragging its now motionless booty with it. It seemed to be smacking its lips in anticipation of the juicy meal. (Abe WD 205)

On a perfectly ordinary weekend, schoolteacher and amateur entomologist Niki Jumpei (literally “Mr. Plain and Average Niki” (Iles 44)) sets out on a beetle-collecting daytrip to a rundown beachside village, hoping to make a discovery that will earn him a modest measure of immortality in the insect journals. Head down, scouring the endlessly shifting sands for a new (or newly mutated) specimen, he misses the last bus and is consequently offered a place to sleep by a group of elderly local men. Assuming their offer to be innocent, he accepts and soon finds himself being lowered by a rope into a deep sandpit, at the bottom of which waits a collapsing, ramshackle house and a nervous, pretty young widow who soon makes him understand that he will not be allowed to leave. The villagers, fiercely committed to their traditional ways, sometimes need to press outsiders into the service of continually digging out their houses from the ever-encroaching sand dunes; Niki is one such unfortunate conscript.

Initially strongly opposed to his imprisonment and consumed by regret and self-doubt over the last days of his halfhearted affair with his live-in girlfriend, Niki attempts various escapes, from repeatedly climbing the treacherously steep sides of the pit (which collapse around him when he faints from a severe sunstroke), to taking the woman “hostage” and refusing to work (they in turn withhold his food and water), to using subterfuge to climb out of the pit and make a break through the scrubby wastelands

surrounding the village (he is chased by both villagers and wild dogs, and voluntarily returns to the pit, humiliated by the experience), to begging for his freedom in exchange for performing public sex with the woman (she handily fights him off while the watching villagers mock his impotence). In short, there is no escape from his sandy prison – a fact made even more explicit in the filmed version of the story in which “Niki was faced with either an inhospitable tract of desert, or an equally inhospitable open ocean over which to make his journey alone.” (Iles 73)

Over time, his sexual congress with the woman (which results in a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy) and the steady erosion of his free will by grueling labor and mindless routine conspire to render him a semi-voluntary inhabitant of the pit. His desire to escape is replaced with something resembling rueful affection for the woman, and his frantic projects toward escape are sublimated into puttering with an improvised water catchment device. In the novel’s final pages, the villagers carelessly leave the rope ladder in place after rushing the woman to a hospital for her abnormal pregnancy; Niki climbs out, observes that the entire landscape is as yellow and sickly as the inside of the pit, and passively descends back to his shack to await the woman’s return, assuring himself that he has a “two-way ticket” (Abe WD 239) out of the pit and can leave whenever he wants. While he will never be a fully integrated member of his enforced community, he is resigned to playing his designated role. The novel ends as, after many years of absence, his mother finally closes his missing persons file. Niki has ceded victory to the villagers and is swallowed by the dunes.

*Woman in the Dunes* is perhaps Abe’s most traditionally structured novel; quite unlike his later, more patently fantastic novels, it has a coherent beginning, middle and end, as well as characters with understandable motives whose identity and role in the plot remains constant. However, the text is shot through with themes, tropes and

symbols that Abe will use repeatedly throughout his body of work; the outcome, such as it is, remains essentially similar.

Abe unusually posits a rural dystopia, a village at the bottom of a sand pit which can only survive by having the villagers constantly shovel the all-encompassing sand back out [...] *The Woman in the Dunes* is more an allegory, an extended variation of Sisyphus, than a fully realized dystopian critique. But its problematizing of the traditional village social structure, with its intense pressures and obligations, is interesting in comparison to the widespread myth of the pastoral Utopia [...] Abe's hero prefers, finally, to construct his own reality. His ties to the outside real world have grown increasingly weak as his memories have faded and the reader is given to understand that his former life was, in any case, not very satisfying. (Napier 202)

In Susan Napier's explicitly feminist view, *Woman in the Dunes* is a relatively straightforward dystopian tale about social control of the individual, unusual only in that it does not take place in the expected urban setting; Abe sets up an unequal conflict between Niki and the woman, who is wholly passive but also wholly allied with the villagers and, like the trapdoor spiders or carnivorous beetles which are frequently invoked throughout the text, "becomes an agent of entrapment." (Napier 76)

Iles, on the other hand, notes in Abe's work an ideological revolt against *shisosetsu*, the popular, almost mandated Japanese autobiographical prose form which:

...requires of the author a certain willingness to accept the social norm, to record his place therein as a willing participant in a "a language far more contextual and far more strictly oriented than Western languages toward the speaker/narrator's apprehension of the world" and the relations maintained thereby between him- or her- self and the hearer/reader. It requires a capitulation to the social order and a bending of the author's personality to fit into "a society that normally demands strict alliance from [its] members." It is against this very ordering – even on the level of linguistic ordering – which Abe rebels in his work.

(Iles 10-11)

For Iles, an Abe novel such *Woman in the Dunes* is first and foremost a Kafkaesque<sup>2</sup> account of “lost individual identity in an exploitative world,” (Iles 126) as well as a thinly veiled account of Abe’s disenchantment with and expulsion from the Japanese Communist Party (*Woman in the Dunes* and *Inter Ice Age 4* were both written at the time of this falling out). The structure and tone of Abe’s novels is intended primarily to break away from normative literary forms which conspire against individualism. Iles further suggests that existentialism is taken as a “point of departure for a study of Abe’s themes, but only a point of departure and no more,” (Iles 41) because while existentialism deals with the struggle of the individual to gain agency, Iles places Abe’s work squarely in the crosshairs between individuality and social control, a position necessitated by Abe’s outsider status<sup>3</sup> in Japanese society. While both Napier, and, to a greater extent, Iles, undertake thoughtful readings within their specific frames, Abe clearly intended his work to operate along infinite possibilities of interpretation. One need only look on the surfaces of his character’s skins to see the map-markers of the epistemological quest.

### **The sight of her naked back: Abe’s subtly subversive reading of woman-as-truth**

Suddenly she became a silhouette cut out from its background. A man of twenty is sexually aroused by a thought. A man of forty is sexually aroused on the surface of his skin. But for a man of thirty a woman who is only a silhouette is the most dangerous. He could embrace it as easily as embracing himself, couldn’t he? But behind her there were a million eyes. She was only a puppet controlled by threads of vision. If he were to embrace her, he would be the next to be controlled. (Abe WD 90)

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<sup>2</sup> Although the plot brings Kafka to the mind of many readers, Abe insisted that *Woman in the Dunes* was his tribute to Lewis Carroll.

<sup>3</sup> A result of his birth in Manchuria and upbringing there and in Hokkaido – the only two places that could be said to be Japanese “frontiers.”



As previously stated, Nietzsche, supposing that Truth is a woman, asserts that other philosophers less skilled than himself have treated her seduction “inexpertly.” (Nietzsche GE 1) In *Body Work*, Brooks quotes Charles Pinot Duclos, who anticipated the basic principles of Lacan’s “Signification of the Phallus” by centuries: “I don’t know why men accuse women of falsity, and have made Truth [*la Vérité*] female [...] They also say she is naked, and that could well be so. It is no doubt from a love of Truth that we pursue women with such ardor; we seek to strip them of everything we think hides the Truth; and, when we have satisfied our curiosity on one, we lose our illusions, we run to another, to be happier. Love, pleasure, and inconstancy are only a result of the desire to know Truth.” (Brooks BW 97)

Pushing this idea further, Brooks then notes a “semantic convergence of the erotic and the epistemic” in words such as *libertinage*, which could at one time refer to either “free love” or “free thought,” adding that “Man as knowing subject postulates woman’s body as the object to be known [...] seeing woman as other is necessary to truth about the self.” (ibid) This truth is, at its root, the truth of sexual difference, and thus the compounded castration anxiety/awareness of phallic lack this carries. A woman’s naked body in literature, then, most often signifies a profoundly masculine truth, representing a dangerous but absolutely necessary secret which the male protagonist must unveil and possess in order to reach a satisfactory conclusion in the text.

When Niki arrives at the house at nightfall, he is “disarmed” by the woman’s initially coquettish ways, just as earlier in the day he was “completely captivated” by the “mercilessly tantalizing” (Abe WD 12) flight of a yellow-legged beetle which is alleged to use its confusing, circuitous flight pattern to lure small animals into the desert where they die for the beetle to consume. Initially enjoying their conversation, Niki observes the woman’s “amazingly white” face (soon revealed to be a mask of wheat flour) and

“undeniable charm,” and is suitably embarrassed on her behalf when her face registers what he imagines to be a moment of transparent emotion; even this makes him patronizingly muse that “with country folk there is no attempt at pretense.” (Abe WD 25) Clearly, as Niki sits down for a simple meal with this simple country woman, he hopes for an evening of harmless, playful flirting, an exchange as whimsical as the flight of the yellow-legged beetle he’d spent the day chasing. But then, immediately after she tells him that the sands have recently buried her husband and their young daughter, the mask lifts abruptly.

She got down on all fours and stretched out her arm. Laughing, she snapped the lamp wick with her finger. At once it burned brightly again. In the same posture she gazed at the flame, smiling that unnatural smile. He realized that it was doubtless deliberately done to show off her dimple, and unconsciously his body stiffened. He thought it especially indecent of her just after she had been speaking of her loved ones’ death. (Abe WD 29-30)

Despite his embarrassment at her “indecent” lack of remorse for the deaths of her family, his body nonetheless reacts with arousal and excitement because he believes that, albeit artlessly, she is indeed playing the game of seduction on this first night; the next afternoon, he sympathetically imagines that “her heart was throbbing now like a girl’s because they had trapped him and given him to her.” (Abe WD 63) As will be discussed later, however, it is a similar game of seduction and artifice that made his prior relationship such a disaster. Niki simultaneously craves and abhors the veiling masks he associates with femininity.

This problematized notion of female masks – including artful ways, cosmetics, and wigs - is a powerful preoccupation of Abe’s, and is present in many of his novels. The protagonist of *Face of Another*, who has been badly scarred in a chemical accident,

possesses an almost pathological fear of masks, wigs, and cosmetics, but ultimately creates for himself a mask to conceal his own disfigured face; the novel contains a great many passages comparing the misleading ploys of his wife's alleged artifice to the mask he himself wears with the intention of deceiving her. The female shill in *The Ark Sakura* is a professional dissembler, paid to wear a variety of disguises in order to fool the paying customers. Here, too, the protagonist imagines he alone can see through her disguises, and would recognize her essential feminine essence no matter how she conceals it. The sham nurse in *The Box Man*, the young wife who hires the sleuth to locate her missing husband in *The Ruined Map* but who clearly knows more than she is telling, the scientist's secretive wife and treacherous secretary in *Inter-Ice Age IV*, the identity-shifting nurse/vampire Damsel in *Kangaroo Notebook*, and most obviously, the missing wife of *Secret Rendezvous* who turns up at the novel's end as a naked, masked woman named, appropriately, "Mask Woman" all address the persistent doubt that the protagonist is truly seeing the naked, unadorned "truth" of his feminine object of desire. She always retains the ability to keep herself private, inviolable, and enigmatic despite the masculine efforts to disrobe her.

Likening the clue-seeking, metonymy-linking process of reading a detective novel (or undertaking a Freudian analysis of a patient's subconscious) to a hunter tracking his prey by means of "hoofprints, broken twigs, droppings, and other such traces," Brooks discovers a quality that is "characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel<sup>4</sup> as a whole, with its plots of education and recognition and its presentation of reality as enigmatic, requiring an inquest into the nature of its signs in order to decipher them." Such inquests "often lead to discovery of the importance of a certain body that takes on a special meaning, as goal, origin, or both: a body that becomes the signifier of signifiers." (Brooks BW 48) The need to know, to construct a plausible totality from an assemblage

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, one could comfortably substitute "traditionally structured narrative" for "nineteenth-century," as this format is still in common use today.

of “clues” provided by the novel, necessarily saturate the physical bodies of the characters with meaning, while the need of any narrative for a goal toward which to strive necessarily assigns primary significance to one special body – usually the body of the beloved.

Brooks additionally links the Enlightenment-era development and protection of the notion of “privacy” to the need for veiling the “fundamental secret” of sexual bodies. When nudity and sexual difference become personal, private, and secret, they are imbued with value as something to be exposed, possessed, and known. What has been covered is now something that must be uncovered. This need to uncover what is concealed inscribes infinite significance onto the body, making it an ideal subject for narrative symbolism.

When the body, sagging under the weight of so much expectation, is finally exposed to view, it is expected to produce more than mere nudity. Of course, once fully denuded, the body does not hold the same possibility for mystery and epistemological revelation – the uncanny becomes suddenly disturbingly canny. Hence the contradictory urge to “match privacy with an invasion that opens up the private while at the same time insisting that it remains private.” (Brooks BW 51) This womanly truth, the secret of sexual difference, of lack and possession, is a truth that both inflames and haunts literary protagonists.

Following Freud’s essay on the three caskets, Brooks notes that in narrative texts, the denouement of the plot is delayed as long as possible because to choose correctly the first time, to rush through to the logical end of the plot, is to reach the end – the untimely death of the text – “the correct choice of woman – as in the choice of the lead casket in *The Merchant of Venice* – is simultaneously choice of love and death.” (Brooks BW 121) Narrative requires metonymies, false starts, and arabesques of plot if it is to satisfy the

reader's expectations and maintain its traditional structure; the protagonist is only meant to achieve his goals after a novel's worth of struggling toward them. It is the very process of undressing, not the final spectacle of a naked body, which "represents and corresponds to the dynamic of plot, which moves toward the promise of an ending but delays and resists that ending – which will mark its end, a terminal quiescence." (Brooks BW 103) The discomfort of gazing upon "that final object of sight that cannot be contemplated" propels the narrative desire to indefinitely defer a possibly "petrifying" direct contemplation for the duration of the plot. (ibid) Brooks provides several examples of this deferral, among them *Nana*, in which the courtesan's body is progressively unveiled through the course of an evening (Brooks BW 124)

What are we, then, to make of a text such as *Woman in the Dunes*, where Niki awakes after a fitful first night in the sandy, stifling, flea-ridden shack to find the woman, who had been so disarmingly flirtatious the night before, sleeping unselfconsciously stark naked next to him?

She seemed to float like a blurred shadow before his tear-filled eyes. She lay face up on the matting, her whole body, except her head, exposed to view; she had placed her left hand lightly over her lower abdomen, which was smooth and full. The parts that one usually covered were completely bare, while the face, which anybody would show, was concealed under a towel. No doubt the towel was to protect her nose, mouth, and eyes from the sand, but the contrast seemed to make the naked body stand out even more. The whole surface of her body was covered with a coat of fine sand, which hid the details and brought out the feminine lines; she seemed a statue gilded with sand. Suddenly a viscid saliva rose from under his tongue. But he could not possibly swallow it. Were he to swallow, the sand that had lodged between his lips and teeth would spread through his mouth. He turned toward the earthen floor and spat. Yet no matter how much he ejected he could not get rid of the gritty taste. No matter how he emptied his mouth the sand was still there. More sand seemed to issue constantly from between his teeth.

Again he turned and looked toward the woman. But he had no desire to go any closer. A sand-covered woman was perhaps attractive to look at but hardly to touch. (Abe WD 44-46)

Here, the delicious literary buildup is bluntly foreclosed, the symbolic bond between seeing and possessing is confounded. Covered only by the ubiquitous sand (which the text forcefully, repeatedly associates with her in any case), wearing a towel over the face “which anybody would show,” the woman’s nudity represents a truth of sorts, a truth Niki forces himself to blur out, but it is a truth that subverts the expected dynamics. This reversal is represented viscerally as his mouth is immediately and unpleasantly penetrated by the same sand that protects the woman’s body from penetration, sand which seems almost to be rising from deep inside his own body. Niki is given full and immediate access to the woman’s body, but remains barred from fulfillment of the promised possession, not only by the reproachful sands, but also by his own treacherous desire and subsequent fear of impropriety.

In such novels as *Madame Bovary*, the woman’s body can only be approached through metonymy, her articles of clothing or her hair or hands standing in for a complete picture of the feminine whole. This often represents the specular and tactile fetishization of such bodies caught in the gaze of their relentless male viewers (Brooks BW 97), or it can represent the fragmented “inauthenticity of desire” that arises when a body fails to achieve a Lacanian synthesis between internal sense of self and external presentation (ibid 92). This woman’s naked body, however, is not metonymized. Details are blurred, but angles are sharply defined by the crystals of sand, and her body is represented as a totality, although ultimately a monstrous one.

The novel even includes a disturbing, compelling line drawing of the sleeping woman by Abe’s wife – the artist Abe Machi - lest the reader fail to visualize her form. It is her face – marker of her individuality -that is obscured, veiled – she is a silhouette of a woman. All that separates her from Niki is the basic fact of her femaleness and her alliance with the villagers – which, of course, is quite enough. The woman’s bodily

totality and untouchability contrasts neatly with Niki's detached urbanity, sense of impotence, and easy susceptibility to penetration (by sand, or even air); the contrast suggests that Niki himself represents a fragmentation, lack or absence commonly associated with femininity.

The woman also has no name, and no one cares to ask for Niki's. Niki is fortunate, actually, to have a name at all, plain and average as it might be. Most Abe characters lack a proper name, going instead by nicknames derived from animals (*The Ark Sakura's* Pig/Mole, the nurse Damsselfly from *Kangaroo Notebook*), their job title (*Secret Rendezvous'* Assistant Director, who also asks to be called "Horse") unflattering monikers based on fragmented physical characteristics (*Secret Rendezvous'* security guard Steamed Bun, the ghostly orphan Student Cap from *Kangaroo Notebook*), or identities so absurdly excessive as to achieve meaninglessness (*Kangaroo Notebook's* American hell-dwizen martial arts master and graduate student/documentary filmmaker Hammer Killer). Abe protagonists either write from the first person and are never called by name, or are referred to like everyone else by an anonymizing, metonymizing title or nickname.

This is not a mere stylistic tic for Abe, who has his eponymous Box Man react with startled surprise when the slender-legged girl he desires is called by her name (which he omits from his text): "I hesitate even writing her name here and now. I am made to realize anew just how irreplaceable she is to me. Since she was the only person of the opposite sex that I happened to meet, and since I had no one else to compare her with, one pronoun with which to distinguish the sexes would be plenty for me." (Abe BM 8889) As with Niki and his silhouetted woman in the dunes, the box man recognizes that a single, nameless, featureless woman represents a potent threat to

his own (gendered) identity.

Derrida has noted the semantic convergence produced by the word *hymen*, which can mean either a bird's eyelid (thus linking it to sight) or the veil concealing the woman's vaginal entry (thus linking it to the gendered secret "truth" contained beneath). (Derrida *Dissemination* 213) The sand covering the woman's body is, meaningfully, represented as possessing a million eyes. Abe has doubly veiled her at the very moment of premature exposure, and in doing so has reflected Niki's gaze back upon itself, where it reproduces inside his mouth as a sandy emission.

Abe would most likely agree with Brooks when he states that literature is "less interested in the contemplation of the naked body per se than in the body as the locus for the inscription of meanings;" however, in this case, the faceless, nameless, nude, sand-covered body of the woman is not immediately readable as "a signifier, or the place on which messages are written," where "meaning and truth are made carnal." (Brooks *BW* 20-21) She remains a cipher, as enigmatic as a map with alien markings which Niki proves unable to either read or rewrite with a signifying mark of possession – but this enigma only increases his desire. As inevitably as the lizards and field mice who follow the meandering, unreadable path of the carnivorous yellow-legged beetle to their deaths, Niki is dangerously drawn to the woman despite himself.

But although there is nothing inherently radical about an enigmatic, nude female body, and while the woman is semantically conflated with the dunes and the local insect life, I would argue that Abe is emphatically not reproducing what Brooks described as the literary trope of "the woman's body [...] assigned to nature, therefore irretrievable to culture." (Brooks *BW* 121) The dunes, the woman, and the villagers all operate as a collective, profoundly cultural organism which has determined to possess poor Niki,



whether he wants to be possessed or not. While the sand and the woman are clearly marked as feminine throughout the text, it would be an incredible stretch to describe the encompassing village and its inhabitants in feminine terms.

This portrayal stands in striking contrast to traditional narratives of the masculine right of active possession, and does not fit with the traditional notion (common to both Western and Japanese literature) of woman-as-nature; the village, the sand, and the villagers are all profoundly un-natural; in a surreal, through-the-looking-glass way, even the sand behaves nothing like Niki logically expects it to. Niki also remains aware that the woman is as much a prisoner as he in the bottom of the pit, at times feeling intense sympathy for the sheltered, stunted life she now shares with him. In his portrayal of Niki's first 24 hours in the pit, Abe has already begun to twist traditional narrative structure and reverse or subvert gendered literary conventions, but his most startling shifts have not yet been revealed.

### **All men were equal before death and venereal disease (Abe and the dangers of sex)**

She had shut herself in her own Alice in Wonderland tale where she played herself in the main role. And he was left alone on this side of the mirror, suffering with his psychological venereal disease. And so his naked – hatless – member was paralyzed and useless. Her mirror made him impotent. Her woman's innocence had turned him into an enemy. (Abe WD 134)

It does not take Niki long to sense that his attraction to the woman is dangerous to him. This fear can be read as a direct one – the villagers might blackmail or otherwise punish him if he takes advantage of her – but it takes on additional significance as Niki begins to reminisce about his ex-girlfriend, back in the city. Traumatized after a youthful bout with an unspecified venereal disease (a burning urethra and a “waste thread” in his

urine samples are mentioned), Niki remains convinced that any unprotected sexual act will lead to a recurrence of his problem; his doctor's diagnosis after repeated negative test results is that Niki suffers from a sex-related "nervous disturbance." (Abe WD 132) Hurt by his paranoid refusal to make love without a condom, his girlfriend likens their relationship to a department store purchase, which can be returned as long as it hasn't been removed from its plastic packaging, and mockingly accuses him of having "a psychological venereal disease." (Abe WD 134)

But Niki is less afraid of a burning urethra than he is paralyzed by his acute awareness of the modern sexual economy, in which "sexual intercourse is like a commutation ticket" which "has to be punched every time you use it." After all of the verifications, obligations, and mutual observation involved in "civilized" modern sex with his urbane, self-aware girlfriend, Niki feels that "sex is completely buried under a mantle of certifications...like a basket worm" and frets that the mutual lies of polite modernity lead inevitably to "mutual rape;" in an environment of "freedom combined with constant worry – like a curtain that does not quite close – [...] there was no opportunity for his pitiable sex to take off his hat and relax." (Abe WD 137-139) The open curtain, the torn hymen of sundered boundaries creates an irresolvable anxiety in which he feels unable to understand himself as male.

This anxiety is directly addressed by Abe in the opening chapter, which concerns the initial discovery that Niki has gone missing. Assuming that he has run off with another woman, "the police investigators and his colleagues felt vaguely disappointed" when they learn that Niki was last seen loaded down with insect-collecting equipment and "alone, quite alone." Then, a coworker speculates that Niki has committed suicide.

He claimed that in a grown man, enthusiasm for such a useless pastime as collecting insects was

evidence enough of a mental quirk. Even in children, unusual preoccupation with insect collecting frequently indicates an Oedipus complex. In order to compensate for his unsatisfied desires, the child enjoys sticking pins into insects, which he need never fear will escape [...] thus it is far from accidental that entomologists frequently have an acute desire for acquisitions and that they are extremely reclusive, kleptomaniac, homosexual. From this point to suicide out of weariness with the world is but a step. (Abe WD 4-6)

Abe's extraordinary preoccupation with oedipal symbology, which is a central theme in many of his later novels (most notably *The Ark Sakura*), is here directly linked to Niki's presumed socio-sexual dysfunction. The insect collecting indicates his lack of sexual wholeness and weakened masculine potency, as he is only capable of penetrating insects with pins. His girlfriend confirms that Niki is indeed reclusive and emotionally reticent, constantly in flight from the endlessly self-reflecting mirrors of their polite, "mobius circle" relationship in which "pure sex" cannot exist (Abe WD 136), concealed as it is under layers of masking, self-conscious language and the unblinking gaze of the other.

The appetite of meat-eating animals must be just this – coarse, voracious. He fought back like a coiled spring. This was an experience he had not had with the other. On that bed-with the other one- they had been a feeling man and woman, a watching man and woman; they had been a man who watched himself experiencing and a woman who watched herself experiencing; they had been a woman who watched a man watching himself and a man watching a woman watching herself...all reflected in counter-mirrors...the limitless consciousness of the sex act. Sexual desire, with a history of some hundred million years from the amoeba on up, is fortunately not easily worn out. But what he needed now was a voracious passion, a stimulation that would sweep his nerves into the woman's loins. (Abe WD 140-1)

In sharp contrast to his deeply unsatisfying prior relationship, Niki rapidly develops an intense but heavily conflicted sexual passion for the woman in the dunes. Returning repeatedly to imagery that represents her as carnivorous, insectlike and predatory, "like a wasp laying eggs," (Abe WD 119) he compares her attractiveness to that of "some meat-

eating plant, purposely equipped with the smell of sweet honey. First she would sow the seeds of scandal by bringing him to an act of passion, and then the chains of blackmail would bind him hand and foot.”(Abe WD 91) It is not literal blackmail to which Niki refers – the woman immediately makes it quite clear that the village’s payment for his imprisonment is her body.

When Niki confronts her about the missing rope ladder, she promptly crouches nude before him in an obsequious manner he finds obscene (and dangerously seductive) precisely because he knows that “her posture had nothing to do with embarrassment; it was the posture of a sacrificial victim, of a criminal willing to accept any punishment. He had been lured by the beetle into a desert from which there was no escape – like some famished mouse.”(Abe WD 50) Possession and punishment of the woman is equivalent to accepting a life sentence in the pit – “punishment inflicted [...] would mean that the crime had been paid for (Abe WD 52) And yet he cannot prevent himself from imagining just such a scene of sexual revenge:

The sight of her naked back was indecent and animal-like. She looked as though she could be flipped over just by bringing his hand up under her crotch. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than he caught his breath, ashamed. He had the feeling it would not be long before he would see himself as an executioner, torturing the woman, standing over her sand-spattered buttocks. Yes, eventually it would happen. And in that moment he would lose his right to speak.(Abe WD 53-54)

His early feelings of attraction compounded with her enticing/repellent lack of artifice and ready availability conflate in his psyche with her inevitable complicity in his imprisonment. She never tries to prevent him from leaving – in fact, she is quite openly sympathetic to his panicked determination to be the first outsider to escape. (Abe WD 120) But she is a villager, his personal prison warden, and therefore fundamentally against him – she is even, at times, the very “face of the village, bared to him through her.” (Abe WD 223) Far from quelling his lust, this hostility only spurs

Niki on. As Niki makes increasingly desperate attempts to escape, their exchanges become frankly physical, his body responding with hot desire even when what he feels for the woman ranges from pity to disgust to violent rage. Just before the crisis boils over, Niki and the woman engage in a desperate, initially angry wrestling match over a shovel:

It was a petrified moment that would go on and on, if one of them did not do something. He could sense vividly the structure of her breasts outlined against his stomach, and his penis seemed like a living thing completely independent of him. He held his breath. With a slight turn of his body the scramble for the shovel would turn into something very different.

The woman's gorge rose as she tried to swallow the saliva in her mouth. His penis received this as a signal to stir, but she interrupted in a husky voice. "City women are all pretty, aren't they?" (Abe WD 132)

It is particularly meaningful that they are struggling over the shovel, a decidedly phallic object whose purpose is to manipulate the passive, shifting, feminine sands. It is not only his freedom Niki struggles for; it is the perceived manhood his polite prior life has denied him.

Brooks writes at length about the literary representation of female sexuality as devouring, dangerous, and even fatal to male characters who fall under its spell. To gaze upon – more so, to touch – the representation of castration, of lack, of what has been positioned as Other, can call one's own subjectivity into question. In Freudian terms, the little boy's sight of the "castrated" mother's body (heretofore presumed to possess the same phallus as he) prompts anxiety that his penis, too, can be suddenly removed. Lacan refines his description of this traumatic moment to reflect that woman's lack (not precisely of a penis) will always remind man of his own phantasmatic lack – "It is as if the man who has given a place to female passion is always already mutilated because he is marked by the sign of female mutilation." (Brooks BW 82) A certain threat of gender

contagion is ever-present during sexual interchange, a moment of abandon “in which the man’s body receives the mark of the woman’s wound.” (Brooks BW 80)

A common literary response to this fear of being wounded or unmanned by female sexuality is to destroy the woman whose body carries threat – often, disease, suicide, or accident conveniently removes the dangerous female contaminant - but even then, “the man’s body must pay the price of a surrender to the force of that sexuality” (Brooks BW 81) – a price which can range from literal or symbolic castration (loss of a limb, of life, or of a position of power) to venereal disease (as with Niki’s earliest sexual encounter with the prostitute) to impotence (as with Niki’s city girlfriend). Clearly, Niki is right to fear the woman in the dunes above all other women; his desire for her is powerful enough to translate into literal permanent imprisonment.

In discussing frequently recurring tropes of Japanese fiction, Napier notes that women “can function both as textual signifiers of male anxiety toward the changes going on around them, and also offer potential solutions to the problems rising from these changes.” (Napier 24) What solution does the woman offer, and is it a fair exchange?

Niki enters the dunes *already* unmanned, impotent, castrated – the woman’s lacerating otherness and “animal-like” sexuality at least appear to return him to a total desire – whether a vengeful desire to make her feel the same desperate entrapment as he, an envious, possessive desire for her to renounce the village for him, or some more oblique striving. (Abe WD 40) Perhaps Niki can, in fact, be doubly castrated by the woman’s sexuality. And perhaps that is what he has sought all along, even prior to his weekend insect-collecting trip to the village. Textual clues suggest just such an  
u n u s u a l                      n a r r a t i v e                      m o v e .

## **The man, beaten and covered with sand - Abe's porous male bodies**

His dreams, desperation, shame, concern with appearances – all were buried under the sand. And so, he was completely unmoved when their hands touched his shoulders. If they had ordered him to, he would have dropped his trousers and defecated before their eyes. (Abe WD 203)

The supposed intrinsic “leakiness” of female bodies and their unpredictable fluids is portrayed in much of literature as diametrically opposed to the supposed hermetic, sterile male body, always represented as something impenetrable and impeccably boundaried. Injured female bodies in literature are frequently raped, stabbed, pierced, torn, shot, or bled dry, while male bodies, when injured, are more likely to suffer the symbolic castrations of amputation or blinding. In *Woman in the Dunes*, however, the woman's body is rarely penetrated here (other than in specifically sexual ways) and remains largely dry and clean, while Niki's body is represented as leaky, dirty, and porous – easily penetrated even by the hot air in the pit. (Abe WD 50)

This theme of masculine porosity and embarrassingly leaky body fluids is, in fact, a major preoccupation in most of Abe's novels. *The Box Man* contains a long retelling of a dream in which spying on a neighbor woman undressing results in a young boy being forced to undress while she spies at him through a keyhole; the blend of shame and titillation cause him to ejaculate, an emission which is then connected to another dream incident involving public urination. The protagonist of *Kangaroo Notebook* is helplessly laid out on a gurney, and hooked to an IV bag containing disgusting, dirty fluids that eventually generates a raging, blinking giant squid in search of its magnetic mate. The mask worn by the scarred scientist in *Face of Another* causes his face to sweat profusely. *Secret Rendezvous* contains too many scenes of male urination, ejaculation, and shame-laced exposure to catalogue here. Pig/Mole's oedipal and extremely “leaky” relationship to the toilet (in which his clubbed foot becomes trapped) and his abusive father Inototsu

(who initially chained him to the toilet and who later dies in his place) in *The Ark Sakura* is so central to the story – and so layered with oedipal symbolism - as to merit its own lengthy analysis.

Niki's body, like other male bodies in Abe's work, is extraordinarily leaky, constantly ejecting fluids often described, like his sandy environment, as yellow, including urine, bile, and a "yellowish spittle" of varying thickness (Abe WD 221). When he first contemplates sexual aggression towards the woman, a "piercing pain [sticks] his belly" as he is overtaken by an uncontrollable need to urinate. When he attempts to drink some water during his hunger strike, he realizes he is consuming mostly sand, at which "his tears began to flow as he vomited up a yellow gastric liquid." (Abe WD 144) Immediately following a postcoital admission of defeat in his attempted strike, Niki's next drink of water results in an even more dramatic leakage of his fluids, followed by a defensive – but futile – protection of his physical borders: "Suddenly the perspiration began to pour out furiously from his chest, neck, and forehead and along the insides of his thighs. It was the water he had just drunk! The sand, combined with the perspiration, formed a mustard plaster that made his skin smart and tingle, swelling it into a rubber raincoat." (Abe WD 153) The woman, too, urinates during the course of the novel, but even this is a reproach to Niki; after he frees her from captivity and she conceals herself behind a wall to relieve herself, the sound makes "everything seem futile." (Abe WD 125)

He cannot even escape the penetratingly insectlike qualities of the woman when he leaves her behind in the pit and attempts to flee the village. Pursued by flashlight-wielding villagers, "his pores opened, and a thousand prickly little insects, like grains of rice, came crawling out. One of the flashlights seemed to be of a type that had an adjustable focus, and just when he thought the light was dwindling it suddenly pierced



him again like a white-hot needle.” (Abe WD196) It is as if the woman, already compared to a carnivorous wasp by the text, has injected her eggs into his body cavity in a deadly reverse pregnancy.

From the very start of his imprisonment, Niki finds himself under assault from the “unresisting” yet stifling sands, which are implicitly linked to the woman’s acquiescent body and her sexuality which threatens to obliterate him as the sand did her last husband. His first stirring of desire for the woman results in a sense that “the sand which clung to his skin was seeping into his veins and, from the inside, undermining his resistance.” (Abe WD 34) As earlier described, Niki’s first sight of the woman’s sleeping, nude, sand-covered body produces a sudden flow of sand welling up from inside of him, sand he is unable to eject from his mouth. Even within the house the sand “burned in his nose and irritated his eyes,” (Abe WD 66) and the woman warns him that wearing his city clothing will quickly result in a “sand rash” the “festers, like a burn, and then scales off.” (Abe WD 57) The sand collapses on him, breaking his arm. It drizzles through the rotting roof onto his sleeping body, crusts in his eyes, clogs his nostrils, and replaces his drinking water. At one point, he feels as though the sand has replaced him altogether, having filled his whole skin (Abe WD 208) Niki is apparently only able to avoid being savaged by the sand when he is embracing the woman – at which point he loses himself in an ego-consuming, border-dissolving sexual oblivion that makes him want to “sweep his nerves into the woman’s loins” and is described in liquid, unboundaried terms such as “melting” or “boiling” (Abe WD 140-141).

Musing on the sound waves the dunes might produce, Niki imagines they would sound like the cries of a man if “tongs were driven into his nose and slimy blood stopped up his ears...if his teeth were broken one by one with hammer blows, and splinters jammed into his urethra...if a vulva were cut away and sewn onto his

eyelids. It might resemble cruelty, and then again it might be a little different. Suddenly his eyes soared upward like a bird, and he felt as if he were looking down on himself.” (Abe WD 160) This powerful imagery plainly links physical acts of violence against the male (and, implicitly, the now vulva-less female) body to the process of seeing and being seen. As with the Derridean play on hymen as veil, hymen as eyelid, hymen as porous, transparent barrier and link between self and other, the imagery here serves to underscore Niki’s conflicting desires to avoid being seen/read/penetrated by the other, and the desperate need to not be alone, to be seen and heard and needed by the other. The conflict inevitably leaves violent marks upon and within Niki’s body.

The bodily marking not only serves to recognize and identify, it also indicates the body’s passage into the realm of the letter, into literature: the bodily mark is in some manner a “character,” a hieroglyph, a sign that can eventually, at the right moment of the narrative, be read. (Brooks BW 22)

Brooks offers many examples of signifying marks novelists leave on their protagonists. A man with a mysterious birthmark that ultimately reveals his royal (or criminal) parentage, a soldier missing his leg after an erotic tragedy involving a leopard, a woman offering her cheek to be branded as a token of love; the mark be be already extant, only to be revealed at a critical juncture in the plot, or the act of receiving the mark can itself indicate a turning point in the narrative. Frequently, the mark is unveiled or received in a moment of passion; “the body, or a part of the body, becomes a place for the inscription of messages preeminently through scenarios of desire, which endow body parts with an erotic history and thus with narrative possibilities.” (Brooks BW 46-47) But Niki’s body is not marked by the sand so much as thoroughly inhabited by it. If traditional narrative strives to mark the body “in order to narrativize it,” so that the body can “be read as socially signifying, as the key player in a story played out according to

social codes and determinants,” (Brooks BW 87) Abe implies that Niki’s body is always already imbued with the mark of the social order. Further, his time in the pit actually erases (or overwrites) the psychological mark of sexual impotence left by his prior existence, replacing his “one-way commutation ticket” of polite sex with the two-way ticket of mutual bondage. We may surmise that for all his protestations, Niki is not entirely resistant to the sand’s brutal ministrations.

### **Radio and mirror (specularity & epistemophilia)**

(Radio and mirror...radio and mirror...) As if all human life could be expressed in those two things alone. Radios and mirrors do have a point in common: both can connect one person with another. Maybe they reflect cravings that touch at the core of our existence. All right, when he got home he would buy a radio right away and send it off to her. He would put all the money he had into the best transistor on the market.

But he couldn’t promise the mirror so easily. A mirror would go bad here. The quicksilver on the back would peel off in half a year; even the surface of the glass would get cloudy with constant chafing of the sand in the air. Just like the mirror she had now: you looked in it with one eye, and you couldn’t see your nose...and if you could see your nose you couldn’t see your mouth. No, it didn’t matter to him how long it lasted. A mirror was different from a radio; for it to be a means of connection she would first have to have somebody else there to see her. What use would a mirror be to someone who no longer could be seen?

...Whatever she did, it was no longer his responsibility. He was the one who had refused to recognize the necessity for a mirror. (Abe WD 186-187)

This passage, in which Niki ponders which gift to send his captor once he has successfully escaped, neatly distills Abe’s primary concerns: the radio and the mirror are both potent representations of specularity and epistemophilia, both dangerously capable of fragmenting the self even as they purport to connect people with each other. Niki ultimately settles on a radio because his escape will constitute a refusal to look at the woman any more, thus eliminating the need for a mirror. This decision is clearly a willful

denial of his own predicament; not only the woman, but the entire village and its surroundings, have him constantly in sight – he is going nowhere.

The sand is repeatedly described in terms of paranoid mutual specularity: the dunes have “burned themselves onto his retina” (Abe WD 41) so he even sees them when he closes his eyes; the sand looks at him with “a million eyes,” and Niki imagines the woman’s life at the bottom of the sand pit as “a monotonous existence enclosed in an eye.” (Abe WD 63) However, this hardly represents a radical departure from his previous life. Niki recalls frustration with his city girlfriend because of the pervasive sense that they were “a watching man and woman; they had been a man who watched himself experiencing and a woman who watched herself experiencing; they had been a woman who watched a man watching himself and a man watching a woman watching herself...all reflected in counter-mirrors...the limitless consciousness of the sexual act.” (Abe WD 141) In the city, the result of all this dizzying reflection was an imagined impotence and a profound loneliness. In the pit, with every interaction concentrated and stripped of politeness, left alone with the woman and no mirror but each other, the effects are intensified even as they appear to retreat.

While Napier sees in all these eyes and mirrors a fairly unambiguous metaphor in which Abe shows “both the world of mirrors that the solitary individual creates and the world of mirrors erected by society,” a “despairing comment on human nature” she associates with his own outsider status (Napier 103-104), the symbolism serves brilliantly on a deeper level as an embodiment of Derrida’s “Law of Genre” in which the woman’s gaze embodies the law (of difference, of genre, of gender, of society). Here, the woman’s castrating/uncastrating gaze, the sand’s passive omnipresence, and the constant surveillance of the villagers do, indeed, serve to bring Niki into the full sight of the law, which in this text represents semi-willing indoctrination into a

monstrously carnivorous social order. Rather than championing the plight of the alien outsider as Napier suggests, Abe is describing the Lacanian paradox of socialization: we do not exist until we are seen by another, but once the other has seen us we cease to exist. Like the woman's cracked, sand-eaten mirror, we can only show each other tantalizing fragments of ourselves.

Abe consistently includes scenes of highly problematized specularity in his novels. Typically, a male character believes he is "getting away with" a scene of nonconsensual peeping, but is then shamed to discover that his female object of inspection has the better of him. The protagonist in *The Face of Another* stalks his wife through the city while disguised behind his mask, only to find that she knew it was him all along; her playing along out of pity enrages him to the point of an ambiguous conclusion which suggests violent murder-suicide. *The Ark Sakura*'s Pig/Mole is caught spying on a rape scene in his youth and promptly accused of actually raping the girl herself; years later his shame reflects back on him as he is trapped in the toilet and forced to soil himself in view of the girl with whom he is gullibly infatuated. This infatuation allows the other inhabitants to eject him from his own hideout into oblivion at the novel's close. The eponymous Box Man believes he is spying on the slim-legged nurse as she performs sexual favors for his perceived nemesis, the doctor, but when he peers into the room, his shattered vision mirrors back another box man (possibly himself) coupling with the nurse. As already discussed, *The Box Man* also details the humiliating penalties of being caught peeping through a keyhole at a young woman. *Secret Rendezvous* takes as a primary theme the act of spying on others while they masturbate, copulate, or attempt a moment of privacy – even the hospital gowns are bugged. The narrator watches and eavesdrops on dozens of intimate moments, even observing the woman who may be his kidnaped wife copulating with the cyborgian assistant director in an "orgasm contest." But at the final moment, when he himself has become hopelessly lost in the depths of the hospital's abandoned

wings, no one can hear his pleas for help.

*Woman in the Dunes* offers a pivotal scene of male specular agency gone awry, in which the villagers crowd around the rim of the pit and mock Niki's impotent inability to escape. Desperate, he agrees to let them watch him copulate with the woman in exchange for freedom. This might suggest a specifically gendered effort on Niki's part to differentiate himself from the woman in the eyes of the watching villagers. But once again, Niki's porous body betrays him; "perspiration like a layer of flayed skin poured from his armpits, and his hair was soaked as if he had poured water over it." Although this act of dominance might have restored some measure of masculine agency, he cannot even maneuver this attempt to maintain his borders; he feels the presence of the villagers "so clearly they could have been himself. They were a part of him, their viscid, drooling saliva was his own desire. In his mind he was the executioner's representative rather than the victim." (Abe WD 230) Instead of penetrating her, he becomes disoriented by the dozens of flashlights wielded by the watching villagers above, and she begins to pummel him with her fists. He has failed, again, to "be a man."

But the man, beaten and covered with sand, vaguely thought that everything, after all, had gone as it was written it should...The woman's arms, hot as fire, were under his armpits, and the odor of her body was a thorn piercing his nose. He abandoned himself to her hands as if he were a smooth, flat stone in a riverbed. It seemed that what remained of him had turned into a liquid and melted into her body. (Abe WD 232)

Niki's liquifying response to the woman's lacerating, penetrating touch does not seem bound to mere lust. Or possibly, the source of his desire for her is in fact the violence it does to his identity. It should be noted that the villagers do not "win" in this situation either. The promised sexual spectacle does not take place. When the woman begins to beat Niki, a few people initially hiss and throw rocks, but ultimately the crowd shares in

his sense of humiliation and disperses into the night. As Niki had thought, “there was no need to distinguish between watcher and watched.” (Abe WD 230) This could be read as one of the “limit-cases...moments when looking produces not clarity and mastery but trouble, the inability to see, and the disempowerment of the observer” (Brooks BW 8485) described by Brooks as a consequence of and antidote to the possessive phallic gaze that usually brings such scopophilic pleasure. Meaningfully, this event marks Niki’s final true bid for freedom.

In all of these instances, any attempt to obtain visual possession of the feminine body of “truth” results in a self-destructive reflection; the surface of the woman’s body reveals nothing but the man’s own anxiety, shame, or feelings of powerlessness. For Brooks, “the erotic investment in seeing is...inextricably bound to the erotic investment in knowing.” (Brooks BW 99) Abe repeatedly reverses the trope in which “that which is to be looked at, denuded, unveiled, has been repeatedly personified as female: Truth as goddess, as sphinx, or as woman herself.” (Brooks BW 96) His women only unveil to expose a monstrous mirror. More crucially, his frequently naked, vulnerable men expose their privileged signifiers, and “to display the penis is to turn subject into object” (Brooks BW 279) This is an untenable, yet highly seductive condition for a lonely Abe protagonist, and leads ultimately to the complete dissolution of Niki’s already extremely tenuous resolve to escape his fate at the bottom of the all-seeing, all-devouring sandpit.

In chatting with a colleague prior to his abduction, Niki explains that he is fascinated by sand because of its “hydrodynamic properties,” its ability to be a solid which flows as a liquid. He comments that when the principles of sand flow are applied to human interactions, “You yourself become sand. You see with the eyes of sand. Once you’re dead, you don’t have to worry about dying anymore.” (Abe WD 98-99) This conversation underscores Niki’s deep ambivalence about his fate and

reinforces the notion that he both yearns for and is destroyed by his relationship to the woman.

This could be considered a conservative, recuperative act on Abe's part – and in fact Napier cites all those unattainable women as proof of Abe's misogyny, claiming that while men and women alike suffer in his bleak worlds, it is always “the absent woman who starts the protagonist on his course of disaster.”(Napier 76). Traditional narrative (Japanese and Euroamerican alike) is rich with stories of destructively unavailable, castratingly mysterious women. In such cases, Brooks notes that it's not whether the quest for truth-as-woman is ultimately successful, but whether that quest serves to maintain the masculine fiction of agency and identity: “Man as knowing subject postulates woman's body as the object to be known, by way of an act of visual inspection which claims to reveal the truth – or else make that object into the ultimate enigma. Seeing woman as other is necessary to truth about the self. “(Brooks BW 97)

As Napier admits, Abe's protagonists are consistently themselves represented as others, outsiders, and monsters, floundering in a world where everyone is equally, monstrously other. Further, while Niki and Abe's other protagonists certainly do try gamely to define themselves against the women they desire, their patent failure to do so inevitably ends in ostracism, foreclosure, invisibility: total dissolution of the “self.” Once again, Abe subverts the tropes to convey the unavoidable futility inherent in using other people to define oneself.

Love depends on demand – it is the creation of speaking beings – and is in essence the demand to be heard by the other. (Brooks BW 210)

In the weeks following the beating, Niki is despondent and demoralized, worn down by the monotony of his existence. Having originally set a trap for a passing crow in order



to send a message for help to the city, he now discovers that the trap, code-named “hope,” is a passable water trapment device. Overjoyed to the point of mania, he suddenly feels as if “the world had been turned upside down and its projections and depressions reversed” (Abe WD 235) – he imagines that he is already free, as if his ability to produce water from the sand is a guarantee against the villagers using his need for water against him. In researching how to perfect this water source, he now wants the radio as much as the woman does, although her motive is merely a little entertainment. Still, “the radio had become their common objective,” (Abe WD 237), so they begin to work together as a team rather than as uneasy cellmates. Because the craftwork she gives the villagers to sell will pay for the radio, he even helps her with that, in order to acquire a better model. Working together somewhat harmoniously as they are, it is little wonder that the woman becomes pregnant within a month of the radio arriving at the house.

When the pregnancy goes awry and the bloody, weeping woman is lifted out on the rope ladder to be taken to the hospital, the man has his only genuine opportunity to escape. The villagers have left and no one is watching him; he climbs up the unprotected ladder. However, once at the top of the pit, he notes that the longed-for fresh air “irritated his throat, and did not taste as he expected.” Further, both the sky and the ocean are the same “dirty yellow” as the sand, and his own shadow has actually refused to leave the pit, hovering near the water trap that had been intended to gain him an eventual escape. Descending immediately to be sure that the trap has not been damaged during the woman’s rescue, he hears “someone...singing in a rasping voice on the radio” (Abe WD 238-239); it is this sound that seemingly convinces him to remain inert with his hands in the icy water of his “hope,” awaiting the woman’s return from the hospital.

So between mirror and radio, the radio was, perhaps, the more dangerous gift - if he had truly been intending to escape. A project shared despite opposing objectives, a device

that purports to bring people together even though the result is pain and imprisonment – If Niki was afraid of the power of the gaze, he has even more reason to fear the word. In another powerful metaphor for the dangers of verbal communication, Niki had earlier bemoaned that “they might as well lick each other’s wounds. But they would lick forever, and the wounds would never heal, and in the end their tongues would be worn away.” (Abe WD 207) The woman’s failed pregnancy, like Niki’s aborted final efforts to escape, can be traced to the same kind of one-way communication offered by a radio. Abe has demonstrated that neither sight nor speech can produce the kind of freedom that Niki claims to seek; however, Niki is still “bursting with a desire to talk to someone about the water trap. And if he wanted to talk about it, there wouldn’t be better listeners than the villagers.” (Abe WD 239)

Naturally, telling the villagers about his secret “hope” will spell the end of any chance of escape; Napier correctly notes that this collusion with his captors is a common theme for the typical Abe’s protagonist who, “after a long series of aborted movements, searches, escape attempts, etc.” are “usually seen quite motionless, a passive observer to his own fate, often quite literally.”(Napier 203) However, this action seems inevitable given what Niki now understands: whether in the city with his prior girlfriend, or here in the pit with the woman, the basic rules of human interaction will be unchanged. More importantly, Niki himself will be unchanged, as his imagined reversal of depths and heights (at the discovery of water in the trap) makes plain. As he sorrowfully tells the woman, “There are all kinds of life, and sometimes the other side of the hill looks greener. What’s hardest for me is not knowing what living like this will ever come to. But obviously you can never know, no matter what sort of life you live.” (Abe WD 208)

## **A disturbing and unsettling landscape: monsters, maps and the epistemological quest**

In discussing *Frankenstein*, Brooks refers to “...the destructive affect that inhabits the relational order or language, and particularly narrative language, in the transferential situation of telling and listening,” suggesting that the monster’s “narrative of unrequited desire and unappeasable lack” can only pass on more desire and lack – once you have entered into a narrative transaction with the Monster, you are yourself tainted with monsterism.” (Brooks BW 213) Applying this line of reasoning we could infer that, once called by the monstrous woman (and the attendant village and sand), Niki can only respond monstrously; taking her hostage, offering to rape her in view of the villagers, and contemplating using the village children as a human shield when escaping are not behaviors Niki might have expected himself to display as a mild-mannered city schoolteacher. Or conversely, his behaviors and their motives could point to the monstrous lack already present within and around Niki. Napier suggests that, in Japanese literature,

the celebration of monstrosity becomes an increasingly important trend in postwar fiction, although in this case the ideological framework is radical rather than conservative. The most obvious and fervent exponent of this form of linking the political with the alien is Abe Kobo, whose *The Face of Another*...demonstrates Abe’s ability to blend the inner with the ideological alien. (Napier 133)

Once again, Napier tethers Abe’s monsters to the explicitly political, to his own feelings of alienation and to the anxieties of postwar Japan. For Brooks, however, the monster is “that outcome or product or epistemophilia pushed to an extreme that results – as in the story of Oedipus – in confusion, blindness, and exile...It exceeds the very basis of classification, language itself: it is an excess of signification, a strange byproduct or

leftover of the process of making meaning. It is an imaginary being who comes to life in language and, once having done so, cannot be eliminated from language.” (Brooks BW 218) Abe’s novels are incredibly rich with precisely such monsters as Brooks describes here; they are, in fact, overpopulated with monsters – a veritable excess of excess. Where most traditionally structured narratives contain only a single monster, either as antihero or as the heroic protagonist’s tormented other, virtually every character in an Abe novel is monstrous.

The absurdly metonymic nicknames by which they are known, their bizarre pursuits and obsessions, the futility of their intricately described quests, the dreamlike refusal of his later novels to even follow a linear plotline or maintain distinctions between characters all create a landscape where the non-monstrous seems untenable at best. Even the failure of Abe’s protagonists to evolve or face crisis in the manner of typical narrative (indeed, some of them already appear to be dead before the novel begins) is monstrous, since unlike normative bodies which are destined to be marked with signifiers, entered into the linguistic order, “you can’t do anything with a monster except look at it.” (Brooks BW 220) The Assistant Director in *Secret Rendezvous* exclaims, as he waves the surgically-animated penis of a dead man at the protagonist, “Hooray for monsters! Monsters are the great embodiments of the weak.” (Abe SR 172) Although he is horrified by this pronouncement, the protagonist eventually embraces his own monstrosity, clinging obscenely to a melting girl in the pitch-black sewers beneath the hospital.

Niki, too, is imbued with aspects of the monstrous. Supposing himself to be inviolably masculine, he finds himself utterly porous and vulnerable; Brooks suggests that “a monster may also be that which eludes gender definition.” (Brooks BW 219) Impotent at the text’s beginning because he feels his city girlfriend is looking at him too

much, he nonetheless finds potency in the desert of innumerable eyes. He initially imagines himself the helpless victim and the woman his seductive predator; however, in the passage where Niki observes a spider devouring a moth, it is the spider's side he takes, burning the moth to make it easier prey. And when the woman bluntly tells him that the village turns a profit by selling dangerously defective cement to the outside world, he realizes that although "the village was supposed to be on the side of the executioner," and he has imagined himself "a pitiful victim who happened to be in their clutches," that the villagers also see themselves as wronged, victimized, and abandoned. At that point, "his military map, on which enemy and friendly forces were supposed to be clearly defined, was blurred with unknowns of intermediate colors like indeterminate blobs of ink." (Abe WD 223-224)

The theme of blurred, incomplete, or ruined maps – and the quest to which they are crucial – runs through many of Abe's novels. Most obviously, in the detective-themed *The Ruined Map*, the protagonist believes he has been hired to find a missing man, only to discover at the end of the novel that he, himself, is lost. The time-bending mystery of *Inter Ice Age IV* is solved when the doctor discovers that he is the murder victim he has been tracking – the novel closes with the footsteps of his killers outside the door. Both the Box Man and the protagonist of *The Face of Another* keep detailed journals intended to guide them through a harrowing quest for self; in both cases, these journals betray them to the woman they desire and are even unreliable resources for their authors. In *The Ark Sakura*, Pig/Mole shows his map of the underground quarry to the arms dealer:

"All the parts I explored myself are in black. The red lines are hypothetical, based on a map done by the quarry companies, on file in the city hall. Strange, don't you think? – they overlap, but there are no actual points of congruence. Probably because everyone ignored the agreement and went off digging on their own. Small wonder the roof caved in.

“And the blue lines?”

“The solid ones are canals and waterways, the dotted ones are underground veins of water.”

“Those black lines go off the bounds of the map.”

“I’ll add on the rest as the need arises.” (Abe AS137)

Not only do none of the mountain’s explorers manage to communicate or connect within its passageways, but Pig/Mole himself has been exploring areas that do not exist on this garbled, incomplete map. It is little wonder no one has been able to produce a complete representation since “the inside of the mountain’s full of other, smaller mountains, and valleys, and rivers,” (Abe AS 133) a *mise en abysme* that hints at his own imminent destiny.

The rambling hospital in *Secret Rendezvous* has many unmapped wings, and it is in one of these that the protagonist finally becomes hopelessly lost; before this occurs, he has spent months sifting through the hospital’s audio files, hoping to construct an aural code, “some cryptogram hidden within the mass of sounds” (Abe SR 73) that will lead him to his missing wife, only to discover that

nowhere in these recordings was there the slightest trace of my wife. In fact, there was no trace of any woman, let alone my wife. The one being minced, peeled, and poked at by wiretaps and shadowers was a man. A man on display, torn into fragments of tongue-clicking, throat-clearing, off-key humming, chewing, entreaties, hollow obsequious laughter, belches, sniffing, timid excuses...And that man was none other than I myself, running around in frantic circles seeking my vanished wife. (Abe SR 6)

Just as Niki’s effort to maintain control of the gaze ends in catastrophic failure, so

the protagonist of *Secret Rendezvous* is undone by his own misguided quest for his wife, whose impression on his mind is “as pale and light as beaten egg whites,” (Abe SR 78) and who may not want to be found in the first place. The Assistant Director advises him, “If you want to find your wife, first find yourself,” but the protagonist refuses this counsel because “looking for my own whereabouts would be like a pickpocket filching his own wallet, or a detective slipping handcuffs on himself.” (Abe SR 6) He has little choice, however, since all of Abe’s protagonists are ultimately compelled to undertake this very quest. While Niki’s quest initially appears to be one of escape, he, too, is ultimately revealed to be seeking only himself, in the form of that elusive “two-way commutation ticket” of human interaction.

Napier once again connects Abe’s inverted treatment of the quest to the external, to the political, stating that “instead of help, both protagonist and reader are given what are essentially ‘burned out maps,’ ...ineffective charts of worlds that offer nothing beyond dark visions of a failed humanity or, sometimes, a failed Japan.” (Napier 183) However, Brooks points to the “inherently unsatisfiable desire resulting from the drive to know, as from the drive to see,” which “tends to make objects of knowledge graspable, and visible, only in parts, never in the wholeness of vision and understanding that would fulfill the observer-knower’s quest.” (Brooks BW 122) For Brooks, as for Abe, the narrative quest is irreducibly linked with the eroticized struggle to make a coherent whole of the metonymic fragments of a text – or a life. The quest is always a quest for truth, for knowledge of origin – and “this knowledge is ultimately to be sought in knowledge of the body put into erotic relation to the knower.” Where the traditionally structured texts focus this quest on the objects of scopophilia and epistemophilia, texts such as Abe’s “shift our inspection to the very process of seeing, particularly to its limits, and to the problematic place of the observer and the treacherousness of observing.” (Brooks BW 106)

Little wonder that gazing at the woman's naked body only magnifies and reflects Niki's gaze back upon himself, and also little wonder that he chooses to remain in the pit despite the dangers of seeing and being seen. The insect Niki went to the shore to catch would appear to be himself, but he has only the woman and her eyes to pin him – and he knows this, finally, reluctantly. Although “fullness of knowledge strikes the knower blind,” (Brooks BW 122) Abe consistently offers his protagonists no choice but to keep looking to the point of blindness.

### **The beauty of the sands was the beauty of death: the abyssal blindness**

A rope was passed under his arms, and like a piece of baggage, he was again lowered into the hole. No one said a word; it was as if they were at an interment. The hole was deep and dark. The moonlight enveloped the dune landscape in a silken light, making the footprints and the ripples of sand stand out like pleated glass. But the hole, refusing a role in the scenery, was pitch-black...The woman was a black splotch against the black. She walked with him as he went toward the bed, but for some reason he could not see her at all. No, it was not the woman alone; everything around him was blurred. (Abe WD 204)

Abe repeatedly represents this abyssal blindness as the end result of his character's quests, most often as a two-way blindness in which the protagonist can neither see nor be seen. At the conclusion of *The Ark Sakura*, Pig/Mole is pushed through a dark, (vaginal?) tunnel by the girl Shill, who promises him she will follow but then vanishes, along with the quarry. When he emerges from the tunnel, he finds himself bathed in

transparent rays of sun...I meant to take a souvenir photo of myself and the street, but everything was too transparent. Not only the light but the people as well: you could see right through them. Beyond the transparent people lay a transparent town. Was I transparent, then, too? I held up a hand to my face – and through it saw buildings. I turned around, and looked all about me; still everything was transparent. The whole town was dead, in an energetic, lifelike way. I decided not to think anymore about who could or



would survive. (Abe AS 333-335)

The scene plays like an anti-birth, with Pig/Mole erupting from his yearslong gestation in the womblike caverns of the quarry into a bright, lively world that still has no place for him. By contrast, *Secret Rendezvous* ends in complete darkness, with the protagonist clutching the dissolved remains of his youthful charge, licking drops of water from the walls, and calling out desperately to the unresponsive Assistant Director, “clinging tightly to this secret rendezvous for one that no one can begrudge me now.”<sup>5</sup> (Abe SR 178-179) In either case, whether transparent or in darkness, the protagonist is isolated, invisible, and completely alone at the conclusion of the novel. In *Woman in the Dunes*, among his most narratively coherent texts, the trope manifests in his growing inability to see the woman and her sandy environs clearly, and in his own complete disappearance from his prior life – his mother is unable to pronounce him dead for seven years after his disappearance as the court is unable to determine “either the existence or the death of the person in question” (Abe WD 240). Niki does manage to climb out of the pit twice in the course of the novel; his final, voluntary descent is very much like the flight into darkness that so many other Abe protagonists make. But since the novel begins and ends with the fact of his disappearance and the absence of his body, Niki’s story is thematically linked to later Abe texts in which the protagonist will turn out to have apparently already been dead before the events in the novel even take place (as in *The Box Man* and *Kangaroo Notebook*). Is death, then, the ultimate conclusion of Abe’s quest? Napier seems to believe so:

Unlike traditional myth, which started in chaos to create order, Abe’s vision brings the reverse, a high-tech Walpurgisnacht, where women collaborate happily in the dissolution of all order. *Secret Rendezvous*’ vision is a bleak one for both sexes: encounters between male and female are always disastrous and lead

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<sup>5</sup> Napier’s take on the scene is again rather literal: “...even though he holds her tightly, she has almost dissolved into nothingness, another example of a female who can only be absent. Now the protagonist waits only for a rendezvous with death.” (Napier 75)

only to the final encounter, with death. But it is significant that the male characters are still actively searching for something; the narrator for his wife, the assistant director for his potency, while the women are simply passive objects, and disappearing ones at that. (Napier 75)

Leaving aside the argument that most of the female characters in *Secret Rendezvous* are also searching – generally, for emotional or sexual connection, just as the male characters are – let us discuss the critical fact that Abe's male protagonists are the most likely of his characters to disappear, that in fact the narrative theme central to all of Abe's novels is that very disappearance. No Abe novel directly narrates the protagonist's actual moment of death, although that death is usually alluded to rather strongly. But the disappearance, the withdrawal from the rest of humanity, is described in careful, almost ritualistic detail: the nightmarish misadventures of the text conclude with a journey through a vaginal tunnel (or descent into a deep pit or basement), a growing sense of abandonment and terror, resignation and acceptance of the terminal nature of his situation, and finally (usually) a terse postscript from an outside observer – most often a legal document or news article - that allows the reader to speculate on what really might have become of the protagonist. The effect of this disappearance is highly unsettling to the reader no matter how familiar she or he may be with Abe's style, producing a disturbed disorientation which is critical to Abe's project, and which he believed would serve to “immunise his readers against the disease of blind faith” (Iles 205). This inoculation requires the reader to experience the same confusion, loneliness and abandonment as the protagonist who suddenly finds himself without guidelines, boundaries, or a totalizing other. Iles thoughtfully asks, “how can the narrator leave himself abandoned at the end of the work, and yet narrate to the reader that very abandonment?” (Iles 90) Does this otherless narrative necessarily end in obliteration of protagonist, plot structure and readerly continuity alike?

In “Freud’s Masterplot,” Brooks describes the use of plot in narrative as a comforting means for the reader to make sense of his own life and subsequent death. The neat tying-up of metonymy and seemingly disconnected events, followed by the quiescence of the protagonist at the conclusion (if not an actual death, at least a point of stasis), even and especially the notion that one would not even begin a novel without presupposing that it will eventually end (Brooks RP 93) all allow readers the fiction of their own narrative totality and a sense of mastery over death. But in *Body Work*, Brooks recognizes an inherent problem in the realist writing project, especially when – as is almost always the case – scopophilia and epistemophilia are bound up with the body:

It is inherently interminable, since it never can reduce the bodies of others to final stasis and repose. Bodies do not always sleep, they are not always horizons following the setting of the sun. They can, in a sense, be known only in death – but perhaps less in their own deaths than in the death of the observing subject. We go on looking at bodies, attempting to detail them in order to fix them in the field of vision, but also attempting to conjure them away – as the anticipated point of rest, or arrest, that must be deferred as long as possible in the textual web. (Brooks BW 121-122)

By deferring, confusing, or preempting the deaths of his protagonists (and by implication, his labyrinthine texts), Abe insures the success of his inoculation project. His texts consistently, overwhelmingly disrupt and invert expected modes of narrative and plot at every turn, forcing the reader to accompany the protagonist past the event horizon of self-obliteration that most novels are unable or unwilling to chart. This abyssal moment is not properly or precisely a physical death, as is made clear in several novels: *Woman in the Dunes* ends with a living interment, *The Box Man* and *Kangaroo Notebook* end before they have even begun with already-dead, highly unstable narrative voices), and the plot and “conclusion” of *Secret Rendezvous* and *The Ark Sakura* are so patently absurd as to render the notion of a “death” meaningless.

Rather, Abe is charting the terrifying abyss that roars up when the veils between

subject and object, between self and other, are suddenly torn away, and offering a number of possible navigations of such an (ultimately unnavigable) abyss. As a perpetual outsider, as a voluntary and involuntary alien, Abe well understood the problems inherent in requiring an other to create oneself. In an interview translated by Iles, he again explains his passion to communicate the impossibility of communication, expressing frustration that “the relationship between the Other and the self has changed into something unstable and difficult to grasp” (Abe in Iles 6) in the urban landscape:

I’m completely at a loss about it. But in fact, I’m making every effort to discover, through literature, just who this unknown Other [michi na tasha] really is. I don’t know whether or not I’ll find this out. It may be something that cannot be found. But at least I have the feeling that making the effort to seek out some path toward this unknown Other is my mission. (Abe, in Iles 206)

Like Niki and the woman in the dunes, who unwillingly require each other to survive and to make sense of themselves, Abe’s thoroughly urban loneliness both yearns for and deeply mistrusts the other, and in fact resents the very need for an other at all. Only a subversive disruption of the traditional epistemological quest, with its veiled coquette of woman/other-as-truth, can accurately convey this complicated internal struggle to his readers. Despite its apparent bleakness, Abe’s message is in fact at heart one of optimism, liberation and possibility, making the suggestion that there may yet be a way out of the sand pit of the linguistic and social order that leaves us all so profoundly alone.

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