Introduction

This study revolves around the career of the Japanese literary and cultural critic Kobayashi Hideo (1902–83), a man whose interpretive angst fueled a lifelong quest to somehow recover a literary experience unmediated by intellectual machinations. To borrow Lentricchia’s vocabulary, Kobayashi desired to “live” rather than “know” a literary text. To use Sontag’s phrasing, he desired an encounter with art in which the object would not be compromised, in which it could be “just what it is.” The phrase that most tellingly captures his spirit, though, might be that coined by the reader cautiously embracing Lentricchia’s conversion: few would dispute the claim that more than anything else Kobayashi Hideo longed to find a means whereby “his soul [could] truly come home.” Paradoxically, Kobayashi waged his war against interpretation through a genre that is virtually synonymous with it: criticism. In this sense, as Edward Seidensticker has pointed out, “Kobayashi often seems rather close to the great contradiction in the works of the late D. T. Suzuki, who announced his conclusion first, that nothing can be said about Zen, and then wrote volume after volume.” Yet somehow Kobayashi made it work. He is indisputably the most influential critic of Japan’s Shōwa period (1926–89).

Like Lentricchia, Kobayashi came to treat his experience of literature as intimately personal and ultimately beyond articulation; he explored the sources of that sensibility, its ramifications for modernity, and its potential as a cure for the fractured modern subject. In this sense, throughout his career, his suspicion of interpretive endeavors itself served as a critical intervention in literary and cultural
circles. Kobayashi was at times like Sontag, using discursive prose to stem the slide into increasingly invasive abstract interpretations of literature and the world. At other times he wrote more performatively, practicing what he preached, and in the best of these moments he succeeded in restoring what Sontag describes as “works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be . . . just what it is.” At these times Kobayashi realized Sontag’s prescription for healing the pathology of interpretation: “The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.”

In the best of his performative essays Kobayashi imbues literary classics, historical events, famous personages, and his own temporal moment with the aura of immutable, impenetrable “thus-ness.” He clears the interpretive fog surrounding things, and we once again experience their beauty, their power. We viscerally feel the magic, the luminousness, the mystery of them. It is almost, as both Lentricchia and Sontag describe it, an “erotic” experience.

But there is another side to Kobayashi Hideo. During his tour of Japanese colonies on the Asian continent in the late 1930s, Kobayashi marveled at the immediacy of lives so destitute they bridged no thought of the future; on the home front he reveled in the population’s silent acquiescence to the demands of the wartime regime while simultaneously calling on it to recognize its patriotism as something as certain as sexual desire; concerning literature, he called for more aggressive assertions of government thought control and censorship. After Japan’s surrender in 1945, Kobayashi was, not surprisingly, one of twenty-five literary figures accused of bearing responsibility for the war.

These two aspects of Kobayashi’s career, one intimately literary/artistic and the other fully political/ideological, are inextricably intertwined. While the aesthetic vision he embraced holds widespread appeal, the conditions of Kobayashi’s formulation and application of it are, of course, specific to this man and his time. It was Kobayashi’s personal circumstances, his generation’s particular experience of modernity, and his nation’s historical trajectory that fused his literary beliefs to an ideology of repression and imperialism. This study attempts to account for these specificities while exploring, too,
the more universal question of how renunciations of the interpretive act themselves constitute literary and ideological interventions. Kobayashi’s career can serve as a case study of a critical aesthetics, a vision of culture that was both informed by its historical moment and constitutive of it.

The first chapter of this study casts Kobayashi’s aversion to interpretation as a reaction to the phase of modernity experienced by his generation. The devastation of the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 and the radical changes that took root in the subsequent rebuilding of Tokyo ushered in an era of new, almost animate forms of materiality (technology and commodities), and these demanded a renegotiation of humankind’s relationship to them. Recorded in Kobayashi’s “Kokyō o ushinatta bungaku” (Literature That Has Lost Its Home, 1933) is his experience of this confusing deluge of modernity’s “things”; articulated in “Dentō” (Tradition, 1941) is the method by which Kobayashi would restore the aura of mystery and wonder by rhetorically reconstituting texts and cultural artifacts in ways that rendered them seemingly impenetrable to the analytical mind. This chapter completes the broad characterization, begun in the pages above, of Kobayashi’s overriding concerns.

The second chapter narrates Kobayashi’s earliest experience of this new phase of modernity through a discussion of his early fiction, written under the influence of the Taishō-era sensibilities largely embodied in the works of novelist Shiga Naoya, with whom Kobayashi shared an affinity. “Tako no jisatsu” (The Octopus’s Suicide, 1922), Kobayashi’s first published short story, suggests he was on the brink of a Shiga-like career in which art and life, mind and body, spirit and materiality were holistically integrated. Then came the earthquake. Kobayashi’s next story, “Hitotsu no nōzui” (One Brain, 1924), reflects a greatly altered consciousness, one in which the borders between materiality and consciousness are blurred in thoroughly modernist style. While he seemed to be on the brink of embracing a style and sensibility akin to that of the Neo-perceptionists (Shinkankaku-ha), Kobayashi subsequently balked at the prospect of plunging into the alienated, fragmented world of modernism. He dedicated himself instead to the Sisyphean task of somehow restoring that original, holistic, Shiga-esque sensibility that he had tasted before the earthquake.
Kobayashi’s response to this modernist impulse, something he shared with many of his generation, is explored through two important trajectories in the third and fourth chapters. First is Kobayashi’s turn from autobiographical fiction to criticism, the literary genre that best represents the post-earthquake world. The publishing boom of the early Shōwa period had commodified literature and brought it physically and psychologically closer to a broad range of people. This in turn fed the fires of critical interpretation. In order to recover, to recuperate the sensual (as opposed to intellectual) literary experience from within his changed world, Kobayashi had to repel this analytical threat to literary aesthetics. He did just that, redrawing the contours of criticism through a reification of the literary text and an expansion of the role of the intuition of the perceiving subject. In essays such as “Jinsei shakudanka Ranbō” (Rimbaud, Shatterer of Life, 1926) and “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke no bishin to shukumei” (The Muse and Destiny of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, 1927), Kobayashi began to privilege the intuitive act of “seeing,” a cognitive mode contingent at its inception upon a distinction that modernity had obscured: that between perceiving subject and perceived object.5

A second, related trajectory is that which brings Kobayashi’s literary agenda into the world of politics. This move begins with his award-winning essay “Samazama naru ishō” (The Various Designs, 1929), and the attack on the Marxist worldview that he launches there extends into a debate with philosopher Tosaka Jun (1900–45). Tosaka and Kobayashi represent diametrically opposed stances concerning the “stuff” of modernity: Tosaka, a Marxist, would pull it close, scientifically parsing it to understand its ideological underpinnings, while Kobayashi would distance it, rendering it inaccessible so as to wonder at its beauty. Their interchange, and the evolution of Kobayashi’s message from an aesthetic vision to a full-blown worldview, is the subject of the fourth chapter.

The fifth and sixth chapters examine Kobayashi’s career from the late 1930s to the early 1940s. During this time Kobayashi wrote increasingly on history as he turned from European literature to the Japanese classics. His interest in ancient ceramics and antiquities also grew, with modes of aesthetic appreciation from this realm increasingly appropriated for his writing on other topics. While these interests parallel those of many reactionary wartime intellectuals, Kobayashi’s insistence on the intimately personal and ultimately inexpressible nature of the aesthetic experience precluded his participa-
tion in the essentializing discourse on Japanese ethnic identity that rationalized imperialism on the continent. This stance also made possible his hauntingly beautiful paean to Japan’s medieval classics: the six pieces written in 1942 and 1943, and later collected under the title *Mujō to iu koto* (The Fact of Evanescence, 1946). In these essays—perhaps better described as prose poems—Kobayashi rhetorically restores to ancient texts the aura that adheres to an impenetrable, ultimately incomprehensible materiality. In a sense, he approaches these classical works of literature with the same sensibility he brought to the ceramics he so dearly cherished. The manner in which these essays revived a sense of mystery and awe in the realm of literature gave hope to some left-leaning writers, convincing them that art was still possible under the oppressive wartime regime.

The sixth chapter deals with the flip side of this coin: essays from the same period in which Kobayashi focuses his attention not on literature but rather on the subject of Japan’s colonies and the war effort. Here we find the disturbing declarations, alluded to above, that prompted some in the postwar years to label Kobayashi a literary figure bearing responsibility for the war. These pieces are not the aberration that some scholars would label them; they are in fact fully in keeping with Kobayashi’s earlier works. Nowhere is this more apparent than in “Sensō to heiwa” (War and Peace, 1942), a prose poem inspired by a photograph of U.S. naval vessels aflame after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The parallels between Kobayashi’s artistic vision and these political pronouncements are the reason that Kobayashi’s are a critical aesthetics, and in both senses of the phrase: his conception of the beautiful is grounded in a historically and ideologically informed stance, and it engenders subjectivities crucial to the destiny of the nation. More specifically, Kobayashi’s compelling aesthetic vision is one prone to perceiving destruction and repression as intimately suited to revealing the sublime beauties of the human condition.

The epilogue treats Kobayashi during the immediate postwar period. The central pillar of the literary revival at the time, writers affiliated with the journal *Shin Nihon bungaku*, included Kobayashi on their list of writers to be purged for complicity during the war. While this movement soon lost its momentum, its initial impact was sufficient to severely damage the careers of a number of writers, YasuDA Yojirō (1910–81) most prominent among them. Kobayashi, however, soon resumed a position of prominence, and remained an elder
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statesman of literary studies in Japan until his death in 1983. The literary community (both then and now), it seems, has been willing to pardon Kobayashi for his consistent dedication to literary (or aesthetic) principles. Unlike the many who had deserted Marxist literary stances under the repressive wartime regime, Kobayashi had never betrayed his vision, stubbornly pursuing an intimately literary/aesthetic worldview throughout the war years. Ironically, it was precisely the literary/aesthetic nature of that vision that undergirded his fascist wartime stance.

This study of Kobayashi Hideo, then, participates in a number of discourses. It is an exploration of the roots and consequences of an aversion to interpretation, an aesthetic and ideological stance touted by a wide variety of critics from various cultures and historical moments. In its focus on Kobayashi’s obsession with the radically changed materiality of post-earthquake Tokyo, it is also a delineation of this dimension of modernity. The examination of his wartime writings, both the grand achievement of Mujō to iu koto and the disturbing proclamations in support of Japan’s imperialist regime, addresses the relationship of aesthetics to ideologies of violence. Finally, the study offers a portrait of Kobayashi Hideo, the man whom even such radically different thinkers as Karatani Kōjin and Donald Keene place at the very center of modern Japanese critical discourse: Karatani acknowledges his creation of the paradigm upon which Japanese criticism was built, and Keene credits him with “creating” modern Japanese criticism. Concrete evidence of this influence on the world of Japanese letters was offered by Etō Jun in 1964: all six of the established literary critics writing reviews (bungei jihyō) for the major newspapers at that time had careers that were substantially intertwined with Kobayashi’s. Kobayashi’s broad sphere of influence makes the investigation of his ambiguous legacy all the more important.

To be sure, this story is but one of the many that might be narrated about Kobayashi Hideo. The body of secondary literature on him is enormous and continues to grow daily. It began as a trickle even before Kobayashi was recognized by the literary community, with associates and friends remarking on his work as it first appeared. This trickle became a steady stream after Kobayashi garnered an important literary prize with “Samazama naru ishō” in 1929. Thereafter
each new stage in Kobayashi’s career triggered a wide range of responses from colleagues, competitors, and observers.

Important attempts to make sense of his broader significance were part of the widespread introspection of Japan’s literary world in the days after the close of World War II. Building on the work of earlier thinkers concerned with the ideological ramifications of Kobayashi’s literary vision, critics associated with the journal *Kindai bungaku*, the voice of new and renewed left-wing thinkers, had the perspective required to move beyond reactions to particular expressions and to begin an exploration of the wider implications of his overall thought.9 Certain critics continued work in this vein.10

The renowned Kobayashi Hideo researcher Yoshida Hiroo marks the late 1970s and early 1980s as a watershed in Kobayashi studies, but the first true shift in perspective takes place in the late 1950s, with Nakamura Mitsuo’s “Kobayashi Hideo ron.”11 Here Nakamura opens a discussion of Kobayashi that foregrounds the literary and artistic dimension of his work by insisting that Kobayashi is not so much a critic as a prose poet.12 This reorientation calls attention to Kobayashi as the progenitor of a new genre of critical discourse rather than as, say, a particularly insightful explicator of works of fiction and literary trends. This shift in the perception of Kobayashi’s role in the literary community helped readers recognize his importance. Unfortunately, it also served to divert attention from the ideological implications of his work. Readers enamored of Kobayashi as a “prose poet” (or in Hosea Hirata’s phrase, a “poet manqué”), in surrendering themselves to the beauty of his prose and the allure of his literary sensibility, too often overlook the relationship between the literary sensibility and his wartime stance.13

Etō Jun’s book, *Kobayashi Hideo* (1961), followed closely on the heels of Nakamura’s study, and legitimized this approach to Kobayashi’s work. Etō contextualizes Kobayashi by placing him in a lineage of novelists (Natsume Sōseki and Shiga Naoya) struggling to make sense of the self in the context of modern Japan’s intersection with the West. In methodology and format this book is indistinguishable from “critical biographies” (*hyōden*) dedicated to poets and writers of fiction: based on Kobayashi’s loss of his father at a relatively early age and a tempestuous love affair that almost drove him to suicide, Etō draws a psychological portrait that he then posits as the source of particular modes of thought and imagery that surface repeatedly in Kobayashi’s oeuvre of criticism. The result is an interesting portrayal of the per-
sonal life and artistic temperament behind this literary critic. Subsequent studies of Kobayashi have virtually all drawn to some extent on the approach and biographical detail of this pioneering work.

The next shift in the critical reception of Kobayashi Hideo is the aforementioned late 1970s/early 1980s watershed marked by Yoshida. At this point, Yoshida asserts, the literary community began to consider Kobayashi as neither simply a critic nor a creative writer but rather as “an embodiment of Japanese literary culture” (Nihon no gengo bunka no hito taigensha). The impetus for this reappraisal was first the completion of Kobayashi’s magnum opus on the Tokugawa intellectual giant for whom the work is named, Motoori Norinaga, and then Kobayashi’s death in March 1983. Studies from this time period employ a broad spectrum of approaches. Many get at the heart of Kobayashi’s significance through a close reading of a particular work. Others explicate Kobayashi’s thought by juxtaposing it with the various sources of his inspiration, including the French Symbolist poets, Motoori Norinaga, and Henri Bergson. Still others employ a thematic approach: Kamei Hideo focuses on Kobayashi’s struggle with the limits of language, while Aeba Takao contextualizes a number of key essays by revealing how they are in dialogue with both literary and popular culture trends from their time of publication. The interest in Kobayashi continues unabated today; as Yoshida remarks, a study of this writer is very much a rite of passage for all aspiring critics in Japan.

In English there are only a handful of essays on Kobayashi. The earliest are three by the late Edward Seidensticker, who provides a lively introduction to the critic. Seidensticker paints Kobayashi as a writer in conversation with Western thinkers but one who is ultimately heir to an indigenous literary tradition of brief insights and intuitive thinking that, when skillfully exercised, “can be the very music of the race.” These essays include a number of extended translations and a consideration of Kobayashi’s wartime works and stance. Donald Keene also writes on this critic. His Dawn to the West presents the criticism of the Shōwa period in two sections: “Kobayashi Hideo” and “Other Modern Critics”; the former section is ten times the length of the latter. In contrast to Seidensticker’s focus on Kobayashi’s analysis of domestic literary issues, Keene includes an examination of Kobayashi’s work on foreign writers such as Dostoevsky, noting that “it was surely of great importance that a Japanese intellectual should have written with skill and assurance
about a European author—neither disqualifying himself because of his nationality nor attempting to impart any specifically Japanese quality to his account.”

The first English-language work to fully appreciate Kobayashi as a thinker speaking beyond the confines of his national literature is Paul Anderer’s introduction to his book of translations. Though short, his essay convincingly presents Kobayashi as an important thinker addressing such widespread concerns of the twenty-first century as “the culture of cities, the loss and invention of traditions, ideology and aesthetics, narration and the nation-state, the dimensions of the literary self.” The translations that Anderer provides, furthermore, support the incorporation of that voice into the ongoing discourse on these crucial issues. Hosea Hirata’s writing on Kobayashi Hideo advances the agenda introduced by Anderer, particularly in his “Home and History: Kobayashi Hideo and Other Visionaries of the Past,” where he attempts to elucidate some of Kobayashi’s sensibilities through references to ideas articulated by Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes.

Breaking the mold for Kobayashi studies outside Japan, however, is Matthew Königsberg. In addition to his full-length study in German, Königsberg has published an essay on Kobayashi in English, and it is *sui generis*. His intention in this highly critical essay is to right what he sees as a lopsidedness in the approaches to Kobayashi’s oeuvre: in a characterization that is true even today, Königsberg laments the fact that so many of the analyses are “panegyrics” where “[r]espect is the dominant tone.” His own essay uses Kobayashi’s very short 1940 essay “Hitorâ no ‘Waga tōsō’” (Hitler’s Mein Kampf) as a touchstone from which to paint a portrait of Kobayashi as a dangerous, egotistical, and irresponsible public intellectual, however gifted he may have been. It is only with this carefully argued and convincingly documented critique that the field of Kobayashi Hideo studies in the English language attains some measure of balance. This current study hopes to follow the lead of Königsberg, and perhaps contribute to the reinvigoration of the often all too respectful discourse on the “god of criticism” (*hīkyō no kamisama*), as some have designated Kobayashi.

As even this abbreviated overview of Kobayashi studies suggests, there are myriad approaches to this thinker. This study attempts to account for but a few in order to concentrate on the works of Kobayashi Hideo as an important intersection of aesthetics and ideol-
ogy. The texts chosen for analysis do not reflect the full range of Kobayashi’s oeuvre but rather this particular focus. Furthermore, the labyrinth of intellectual and literary influence, an integral part of Kobayashi studies in Japan, is given only cursory attention; in its place is an attempt to situate Kobayashi in a genuine dialogue with his contemporaries and his age. While this perhaps does a disservice to the cosmopolitan, eclectic roots of Kobayashi’s thought, the question of influence seems secondary to a treatment of his formation within, and influence on, a particular historical moment and cultural milieu. It was, after all, these particularities that prompted Kobayashi to seek out the sources he did. The conditions that fostered those choices were part of the modernity Kobayashi experienced. His was an age in which an increasingly porous, mutable materiality prompted a quest to restore the artistic work to a level of concreteness that precluded interpretation and instead inspired awe. These matters are the subject of Chapter 1.