Introduction

The subject of my work is the role of the contemporary Japanese writer Murakami Haruki as a cultural mediator between Japan and the United States. Murakami is probably the most translated among contemporary Japanese writers; at the same time, he has been very active in introducing American literature to Japan, having translated writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Irving, Grace Paley, Tim O’Brien, J. D. Salinger, and Raymond Carver. Although many critics both in the West and in Japan have discussed Murakami’s works, very few have analyzed his role as a literary and cultural mediator between Japan and the United States. My work proposes to fill this gap, in the conviction that studying the works of Murakami Haruki from a comparative perspective can provide a better understanding not only of the author and his works, but also of the status of contemporary Japanese literature within the context of world literature.

Furthermore, I am convinced that looking at Murakami’s work as Japanese-American cultural cross-representation can provide original insights on two major interrelated contemporary debates, both full of varied and complex positions: on the one hand, discussion of issues of modernity and postmodernity, and on the other, theorizations of the concepts of postcoloniality and globalization.
Both the unique position of Japan vis-à-vis the West and the peculiar situation of Murakami Haruki’s works within contemporary Japanese culture provide us with a unique vantage point from which to contribute to the discussion of these ideas. The concepts of modernity, modernism, and postmodernism, as we will see, have been subject to a number of varied and often contradictory definitions. However, while studying ongoing debates on these questions, I was struck by the fact that, despite the nuance and complexity that has been brought to these debates, these theoretical concepts still tend to be mainly West-centered, making it difficult to apply such concepts to non-Western cultures. This apparent disconnect would seem to call for a broader perspective.

To this end, I have tried to address (and question) in my analyses of Murakami’s work a number of assumptions that feature in the discourse on modernism and postmodernism: above all, how these concepts stress the temporal nature of modernity, and how some of the basic themes of postcolonial theory and theories of globalization come into play, particularly the relationship between universalism/imperialism and particularism/nationalism.

The Japanese experience of modernization is full of anomalies and contradictions that can offer interesting perspectives on current definitions of modernity, modernism, and postmodernism, and can open up new critical windows on the discussion of Western cultural formations in the modern (and postmodern) era. Nevertheless, the Japanese case has been largely neglected by theoretical studies on Western modernity.

As evidenced by Karatani Kōjin, Japan offers an invaluable point of comparison for Western modernization, since in a very short span of time it underwent epistemological changes that in the West had occurred gradually over the course of three centuries, between 1600 and 1900. A particularly significant issue in the development of Japanese modernity is the formation of the notion of the modern individual subject, which has been one of the main concerns of Japanese literature since the Meiji era (1868–1912).
In this respect, the case of Murakami is illuminating: modern individuality is central to his work, but his stance on this issue is radically different from that of other Japanese writers of the post–World War II period. In this respect, Murakami may be closer to those writers of the Meiji era who first dealt with the problem of individuality and its relationship with Western culture, such as Natsume Sōseki and Mori Ōgai, than to such contemporaries as Ōe Kenzaburō, who insist on the necessity for the Japanese to acquire a strong subjectivity deeply rooted in history. I would argue that Murakami’s work has given birth to an entirely new approach to modernity and subjectivity in Japanese literature. Therefore, the problem of the individual subject will be one of the main theoretical perspectives from which I will analyze his work.

The history of Japan’s relations with the West also throws into question some of the basic notions of postcolonial theory. Japan was the only country in East Asia to successfully resist colonization and to aspire to a role of equality with the Western powers, becoming in its turn a dominant imperialist power in Asia. At the same time, it experienced a strong cultural colonization both at the end of the nineteenth century and during the U.S. Occupation following World War II. Yet, in both instances, rather than simply accepting a culture imposed upon it from the outside, Japan actively appropriated Western technologies and modes of thought. Some scholars speak of an “internalized colonization” of Japan, arguing that it escaped colonization precisely because it was quicker in “colonizing itself by itself.” All of these features make this country a unique item of comparison for theories of colonialism and imperialism as well as issues of universalism and particularism, two other terms that have been subject to a number of divergent and often ambiguous definitions.

Furthermore, the case of Japan challenges some basic assumptions of the concept of Orientalism as formulated by Edward Said, which is mainly based on an “Orient” that coincides with the Middle East. Finally, in recent times, Japan has been one of the few non-Western countries, if not the only
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one, to pursue a form of “cultural imperialism” in Asia very similar to Euro-American neo-colonialism, a phenomenon that clearly problematizes the common Western-centered vision of globalization.

Although some of the issues raised in this study pertain more to the fields of intellectual history, sociology, or even international relations than to literary criticism, I will address them from the point of view of literature and use them as a framework for a textual analysis of Murakami’s work. One reason for this is that I continue to find value in discussing narrative fiction against such a background, even though in recent times the approach to literature of so-called “Theory” has been contested by works such as Daphne Patai and Wilfrido Corral’s Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent, and by the birth of organizations such as the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, which has revived an emphasis on the aesthetic appreciation of literature in Western literary studies. Most of all, I maintain this position because I am convinced that literature still plays a significant role in the formation of a national culture and in cultural cross-representations, and therefore I believe that an analysis of mutual literary representations can provide an invaluable insight in the study of the relations among cultures, especially in the case of Japan and the United States.

At the same time, I also believe that a comparative perspective is fundamental in order to understand modern Japanese literature, not only because it has been heavily influenced by Western culture, but also because the modern concept of literature (bungaku) was formed in Japan in connection with, and in reaction to, the impact of the West—a view emphasized by several literary scholars, including Karatani Kōjin in his landmark study Kindai bungaku no kigen (Origins of Modern Japanese Literature). In particular, Murakami’s twofold role as writer and translator is especially salient in considering the prominent place of translations in the Japanese literary panorama, particularly in the early Meiji period and in the postwar years.
Murakami Haruki is particularly relevant to the discussion of all these issues, for a number of reasons. First of all, Murakami has deliberately set himself apart from both the literary elite (bundan) and from the class of postwar intellectuals aligned with the so-called ideology of kindaishugi (modernism), which I discuss at length in Chapter 1. For this reason, he has been accused of superficiality and has been criticized for his lack of political and social commitment by other writers such as Ōe Kenzaburō and by critics such as Masao Miyoshi. Because he is not a “modernist” in the kindaishugi sense, many critics have defined Murakami as a postmodernist, usually in a disparaging sense, stressing the commercial aspects of his novels and his compliance with the logic of late capitalist society.

In my opinion, though, Murakami’s work cannot be categorized as “postmodernist” either; those critics who label him postmodern fail to consider his use of typically modernist literary strategies, such as his play with foreign language and with the Japanese writing system (particularly the katakana syllabary), his distrust of the ability of language to represent and communicate, his stress on the arbitrariness and deceptiveness of the linguistic sign, or his use of “fragments of Western culture” as a means to hold back chaos, reminiscent of the function of Joycean myth according to T. S. Eliot, a means to put order in the “immense panorama of anarchy and futility that is contemporary history.”1

Other features in his work are indeed reminiscent of postmodernist literature: his use of metafiction, his attempts to undermine a univocal vision of reality, and the blurring of the boundary between “high” and “low” culture. We see this in his references to classics of the Western philosophical and literary tradition, treated as though they were cultural commodities for popular consumption, easily recognizable icons that give his texts an exotic appeal and a connotation of sophistication and cosmopolitanism.

I address Murakami’s work in the light of Brian McHale’s distinction between modernist epistemological doubt, which interrogates the possibility of knowing the world, and post-
modernist ontological doubt, which questions the world’s very realness. Murakami’s works often oscillate between these two stances, once again undermining a clear-cut distinction between ideas of “modern” and “nonmodern” or, in this case, “postmodern.”

I will scrutinize another frame of reference in this study: the contention that true art should be subversive and critical of the status quo. As argued by New Historicist scholars in regard to modern European literary theory, such a viewpoint is in itself a powerful instrument in containing dissent, since it relegates the subversive elements of society to more or less inoffensive artistic manifestations and brings such elements back under control. According to Tomi Suzuki, an analogous mechanism, precisely in relation to the potentially revolutionary impact of concepts imported from the West, was evident in Japan between 1880 and 1890, when the ideals of liberty and individualism lost their political connotation and simply converged in the newly born romantic literature and in the watakushi shōsetsu, or “I-novel.”2 Something similar happened again in the postwar years with the so-called kaikon kyōdōtai or “repentance community” advocated by Japanese writers and intellectuals, and with the related ideology of kindaishugi; by taking upon itself the function of addressing serious political issues, literature facilitated the disappearance of actual social action, and political activism gradually faded into a less threatening “committed literature.”

Murakami Haruki, by refusing social commitment of a traditional kind and accepting the proposition that books are, among other things, commercial objects, that have to appeal to the public to be read, contests the myth of art as necessarily rebelling against the dominant economic and political system. He refutes a simple opposition between detachment and commitment that remains basically inside a binary system of thought, to tread a radically alternative path, a “complicitous critique,” that is in some aspects similar to that of postmodernism and in other respects closer to the dynamics of postcolonial literature, but cannot be reduced to either.
Furthermore, this apparent absence of critical distance in Murakami’s work is counterbalanced by the cultural and geographical distance that his texts maintain from the Western culture to which they refer. European and American postmodernist authors look at modernism from a temporal distance, but from within the same culture. Euro-American postmodernists consider themselves legitimate children of Western modernity and modernism, and while they relate to them in a critical way, they do it without the anxiety that the non-West has often felt toward modernity.

In my work I have tentatively defined Murakami as a “paranomodernist” who relates to modernity and modernism not as “past” but as “foreign” things. As such, I treat his relation to modernist and postmodernist literature as something akin to the “mimicry of the colonized” as theorized by Homi Bhabha: not a passive imitation of Western models, but a parodic incorporation that transforms the original and ends up destabilizing it. By analyzing his work, I look at what happens when what Harold Bloom defined as “the anxiety of influence” intertwines with the relation between “the West” and “the Rest.”

Murakami has introduced American culture to Japanese readers both by means of numerous translations and by incorporating elements of Western culture into his texts. I have chosen to focus mainly on his use of foreign elements in his stories, and I will not discuss specifically any of his translations; I will, however, treat his activity as a translator as a key frame of reference, especially insofar as his translations have influenced the Japanese public’s reception of American culture, as well as the works of Japanese writers of the younger generation. As Miura Masashi notes in Murakami Haruki to Shibata Motoyuki no mō hitotsu no Amerika (Murakami Haruki and Shibata Motoyuki’s Other America), young novelists such as Satō Yūya, Ono Masatsugu, and Yanagi Hiroshi are heavily influenced not so much by the style of American novelists directly, but by the Japanese translations of Murakami and Shibata.3

Murakami himself is aware of this role and has produced a number of metacritical reflections on the theoretical issues
involved in translation, both in interviews and in the book-length essays *Hon’yaku yawa* (A Night Conversation on Translation) and *Hon’yaku yawa 2: Sarinjā senki* (A Second Night Conversation on Translation: War with Salinger), in collaboration with Shibata Motoyuki. Furthermore, with the conscious aim of introducing literature to a younger generation of readers, he has published *Wakai dokusha no tame no tanpen shōsetsu annai* (A Guide to the Short Story for Young Readers, 1997), a compendium of lectures from his visiting appointment at Tufts University in 1993.

In addition to his role as a prolific presenter of American culture to Japanese readers, Murakami is widely translated in the West and thus serves as an active conveyor of Japanese culture to Europe and the United States. Before analyzing his texts, I look at how Murakami markets his work to the West, particularly to the United States, and how he relates to issues crucial to Japan in the 1980s, the first years of his career as a writer, such as the idea of *kokusaika* (internationalization) and of *ippō tsūkō no bunka* (“one-way” or “trade imbalance” culture).

With the conviction that the image of Japan is shaped not only by its portrayal in American literature and in the media, but also by Japanese works that are translated into English and widely read by the American public, I want to look at Murakami’s work as part of American literature, and I will therefore briefly examine the reception of his work in the United States and how it interacts with (and possibly helps to change) the American image of Japan. My contention is that Murakami belongs to a broader trend of Asian literature translated and published in the United States, an “Asian/American literature,” incarnated by Asian intellectuals who live in the United States and simultaneously capitalize on their “Asianness”—often in self-conscious opposition to the notion of “Asian American culture” as internal to America and obeying its inclusive logic of inner diversification, thus challenging any unitary and essential definition of American literature. I therefore discuss the response of both American critics and the general American public to Murakami’s works against the background
of contemporary American views of Japan as they appear in, and are shaped by, literature and the media, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. My main concern here will be with the concepts of aestheticization, domestication, and exoticization of foreign culture.

At the same time, Murakami clearly belongs to Japanese literature, and I want to highlight the way in which he addresses his role as a Japanese writer in a manner radically different from that of intellectuals such as Ōe. As I will demonstrate, Murakami’s work is representative of a new Japanese mode of relating to the West: one free from the sense of anxiety, uneasiness, inferiority, or hostility that characterized much post-war Japanese literary production; one that actively uses the West’s alienness as a hermeneutic instrument in a playful and ironic way.

Despite the contention of some critics that references to Western culture in Murakami, as in other writers of his generation such as Yoshimoto Banana and Murakami Ryū, are devoid of irony, that in these authors’ works “quotation has been replaced by homage, that is the way in which contemporary Japanese novelists express their gratitude to their models,”4 I would argue that Murakami’s references to American and European culture do have an ironic function, which is not to create a distance from the West but a distance through the West, to move away from conventional reality using foreign literature and culture for their alienating effect.

Analyzing Murakami’s oeuvre in these contexts, I have chosen to concentrate mainly on his short stories, not only because they are less widely known and less translated in the West than the novels, and would deserve greater attention, but also, and more importantly in my opinion, because they are free from the coherent and organic narrative structure of his longer works and are sites of bolder experiments, particularly in terms of metafictional techniques and the use of language.

It is worth noting, in this respect, that this experimental mode is the style in which Murakami first began to write. Al-
though his first two novels *Kaze no uta o kike* (1979; *Hear the Wind Sing*, 1987) and *1973-nen no pinbōru* (1980; *Pinball, 1973, 1985*) would appear to fall into the category of semi-autobiographical fiction, they depart significantly from the conventions of both realist and confessional literature. They lack a strong plot (in fact, it may even be argued that they do not have any real plot), they are interspersed with metanarrative references to the act of writing, and even though, unlike later works, they do not contain any explicitly fantastic or supernatural elements, they are narrated in a rather anti-realistic style.

Another central element of these stories that has since become a defining feature of Murakami’s fiction, in both short stories and novels, is the author’s use of the nameless narrator *boku*. As Jay Rubin has noted, the choice to use almost exclusively the informal pronoun *boku*, instead of the more formal *watashi* or *watakushi*, sets this author apart from the tradition of the *watakushi shōsetsu*. In contrast, Murakami creates what might be called a *boku-shōsetsu*, which, especially if we consider the way he explicitly distances himself from the *bundan*, we can read as a criticism of the dominance of confessional literature in the modern Japanese literary panorama. Unlike the protagonists of I-novels, Murakami’s *boku* is invariably an “ordinary guy” who narrates events with a great degree of detachment and irony. As we will see, this element of seriousness through mockery is central to Murakami’s idea of the role of literature in the contemporary world, as well as to his reflections on Japan’s relation to Western modernity.

In fact, both novels and short stories often rely on Western culture for such ironic effect, and do so on many levels: *boku* constantly displays his knowledge of Western film, music, and literature, and this is what makes him a cosmopolitan and cool character; the narrator describes reality through metaphors taken from Western culture; and the texts make extensive use of loanwords from English and other European languages. As I mentioned before, I believe that the most interesting linguistic experiments are to be found in the short stories. On the other hand, the other main means in which Murakami
distances realism, the portrayal of parallel realities and literal “other worlds,” is central to the novels as well.

Starting with *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (1982; *A Wild Sheep Chase*, 1989), Murakami increasingly introduced supernatural elements into his fiction. In this novel, we encounter once again the character Nezumi from *Kaze no uta o kike*, who is now possessed by the evil spirit of a Mongolian sheep; the story also portrays other surreal characters such as the Sheep professor and the Sheep man.

*Hitsuji o meguru bōken* revolves around the theme of spirit possession and uses fantasy mainly to explore questions of identity and consciousness; its sequel *Dansu dansu dansu* (1988; *Dance Dance Dance*, 1994) also introduces unreal spaces and other worlds, in the form of a hotel floor that only exists at certain moments in time, or, the novel at one point seems to imply, only exists for the narrator. The two novels thus embody the constant oscillation between epistemological and ontological doubt, between questioning of the possibility of knowing the world and casting doubt on its very realness, on the idea of a unitary and clearly defined “reality” that lies at the center of this author’s fiction.

Murakami has also written in a more realistic mode. *Noruwei no mori* (1987; *Norwegian Wood*, 1989) in many respects reads as a fairly conventional *ren’ai shōsetsu*, a love story between college students. As such, it came as a surprise to Murakami’s fans that were familiar with *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* and *Sekai no owari to hādo boirudo wandārando* (1985; *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, 1991). Since then, and throughout his career thus far, Murakami has continued to alternate works in a more realistic mode and works that are more clearly fantastic.

It is noteworthy that Murakami’s more fantastic works are often also the most socially and politically engaged. Whereas *Noruwei no mori* is set in the years 1968–69, it purposefully avoids tackling the issue of the student movement and the New Left. On the other hand, *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* features a “Sheep spirit” (which turns out to be the obscure force behind most of Japan’s history) through which the author investigates
both the country’s dark past in Manchuria and the underside of the economic boom of the 1980s. In a similar fashion, Nejimakidori kuronikuru (1993–95; The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, 1997) revolves around a parallel reality that the narrator enters either in dreams or through a dry well in his neighbors’ yard—a conceit that allows the author to deal extensively with Japan’s colonization of Manchuria.

In Supūtoniku no koibito (1999; Sputnik Sweetheart, 2001), the uncanny experience of one of the protagonists, Miu, of seeing her doppelgänger making love with a man she hates results in permanent emotional trauma and possibly schizophrenia; however, this plot development also serves as an occasion to address the issue of her condition as a zainichi, a Korean national born and raised in Japan, and related issues of ethnic identity and social discrimination. Umibe no Kafuka (2002; Kafka on the Shore, 2005) shifts the focus to psychological and sociological ground, addressing the fifteen-year-old protagonist’s difficult relationship with his father and hinting at the possibility that, by killing him in a dream, he might have caused him to die in the real world.

In this respect, one of the most interesting among the novels is Sekai no owari to hādōoirudo wandārando. This novel is structured on two narrative levels, with two different narrators (watashi and boku), who live in different “worlds.” The first one is a sort of science-fictional future, a Tokyo that is home to strange creatures called yamikuro (INKlings, or Infra-Nocturnal Kappa, in Birnbaum’s translation), as well as to watashi, a keisanshi (a “calcute”), whose human mind contains a device that allows him to encrypt and decrypt data on a subconscious level, keeping them unknown to his rational mind. The other world is a fantastic walled city where boku is separated from his shadow and assigned the task of reading dreams, extracting them from the skulls of the unicorns that live on the outskirts of the town. We gradually discover that the two worlds are connected in the protagonist’s mind: boku is a creation of watashi’s subconscious, a part of his system of data shuffling, and the story ends with the “death” of watashi, who will go on
“living” in the imaginary world of boku. Although this story is often presented by critics on both sides of the Pacific as a paradigmatic example of Murakami’s escapism, it seems to me to epitomize precisely his new notion of engagement. I will return to my interpretation of this novel in the last chapter of this study.

Some scholars in the West do interpret in political terms Murakami’s use of the fantastic genre. Gareth Edwards connects his theme of the “other world” to the representation of a “hidden substratum of power” in Japanese society. This, Edwards argues, can be seen in the character of sensei, and in the sheep that “inhabits” him in Hitsuji o meguru bōken. Edwards interprets these “other worlds” as a means to explore the hidden side of Japan’s “consensus society,” arguing that “Murakami uses unreality to cast light into the shadows of a real world consensually idealized as safe, clean, and fair.”

Matthew Strecher also insists on the political aspect of what he defines as Murakami’s “magical realism.” According to Strecher, Murakami uses the fantastic genre to highlight the decline of the sense of individual identity in Japan in the generation born after the Second World War. Strecher compares Murakami’s novels to those of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, in which supernatural events infiltrate their everyday settings. In his opinion, however, unlike Latin American writers, who associate this use of the supernatural with specific political statements, “Murakami’s use of magical realism, while closely linked with the quest for identity, is not the least bit involved with the assertion of an identity.” He therefore sees Murakami’s use of the fantastic as a critique of the way in which Japanese mass society suffocates individuality. I share Strecher’s view that Murakami’s use of the fantastic is deeply related to his new form of social and political engagement; however, I see it neither as a critique of the loss of individuality nor as an assertion of identity, but as a reflection on the construction of subjectivity in contemporary Japan, which parallels Murakami’s reflection on the relation between Japan and Western modernity. Although my main focus in
this book is on the short stories, I will also include a brief
discussion of the fantastic elements in his novels that are most
relevant to my argument, particularly in Chapter 5, which
deals with Murakami’s use of fantasy.

The book is divided into five parts. In the first chapter, I
provide a brief discussion of the theoretical framework in
which I situate my study of this author’s texts, addressing the
current debate on the notions of modernity and postmodernity,
universalism and particularism, imperialism and nationalism,
Orientalism and globalization. In the second chapter, I give a
short comparative analysis of the reception of his work in Japan
and in the United States. In the remaining three chapters,
through textual analysis of a number of Murakami’s short sto-
ries, I look at the way in which cultural cross-representations
and questions of modernity, modernism, and postmodernism
emerge in his work. The third chapter is dedicated to linguistic
strategies, based partly on the polygraphy of the Japanese lan-
guage and partly on the introduction of foreign words in the
katakana syllabary and sometimes in the Roman alphabet—
approaches that highlight the artificial nature of language and
the linguistically constructed nature of reality. The fourth chap-
ter deals with Murakami’s references to Western literature
and popular culture, and with his use of a number of literary
strategies that foreground cultural categories in order to sub-
vert them, particularly the parody of Western genres and the
use of metafictional techniques. The last chapter addresses the
concept of literature as “other world” as well as the representa-
tion of other worlds in a more literal sense, different levels of
diegetic reality. I examine the way in which Murakami’s texts
often border on the fantastic, staging parallel realities and dis-
torted temporalities, and how these “other worlds” are related
to the construction of individual identity, on the one hand, and
to the problem of social responsibility, on the other.