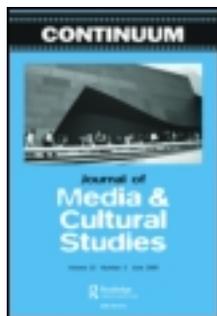


This article was downloaded by: [Tamkang University], [Dean Brink]

On: 19 June 2012, At: 00:39

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccon20>

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Available online: 19 Jun 2012

To cite this article: Dean Brink (2012): Cheerful dissensus: Almighty satirical poetry columns in neoliberalist Japan, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, DOI:10.1080/10304312.2011.645524

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2011.645524>



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Cheerful dissensus: Almighty satirical poetry columns in neoliberalist Japan

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This essay demonstrates how ‘current events *senryū*’ has grafted onto the intertextual structuration of traditional Japanese poetics a foregrounding of contemporary events. As premodern Japanese poetic forms (such as haiku) depend upon working in tandem with matrices of conventional uses and associations, their intertextual deference is extreme. In modern writing, this extreme intertextuality allows foregrounding of multiple intertexts from various discourses, so as to bring to bear a density of reference in the poetry. In articulating satirical observations of current events, *senryū* borrows only this conventional form of extreme intertextuality while largely abandoning (or at best parodying) conventional associations of such poetic matrices of conventional phrasings and association (common to literary *senryū* and haiku). Thus contemporary discourses fulfil the formal function of the poetic matrices, obviating conventional coordinates of linear expressivity in prose or free verse. This satirical poetry’s radically intertextual articulations *necessarily* assert choices of attention as constitutive originary discourses or proto-discursive utterances capable of defying the status quo postmodern deferral of meaning and concomitant reproduction of a static ‘social’ that Baudrillard describes, and sustain what Jacques Rancière calls dissensus in the redefining of what is visible in the ‘distribution of the sensible’.

Some things can only be said in these satirical ditties

Senryū denakereba ienu koto mo ari

—Yamakami Akie (Nomi), *Mai’nichi shinbun*, 1 April 2011

A speaking being, according to Aristotle, is a political being. If a slave understands the language of its rulers, however, he does not ‘possess’ it.

—Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*

This paper explores how present-day use of a Japanese poetic form called ‘current events *senryū*’ – a 17-syllable satirical form of premodern origins resembling haiku but containing no seasonal word and focusing on contemporary events and experiences – exhibits various dynamics of compliance and resistance to the extreme corporate-defined social environment of neoliberal Japan. Though those who would defend neoliberalism and globalization as a natural step in modernization routinely accept the subordination of local cultures to a neutral ‘normal’ corporate culture, which exists side by side the contemporary Western paradigm of postmodern indeterminacy under global capital, contemporary philosopher Alain Badiou argues that there is no neutrality outside of a given local order. He points out that the being-there of things in the world will radically

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differ according to the order within which they appear, and the local order presents a means for maintaining a critical perspective on globalization (2011, 53–6).¹ Moreover, as perceptions of human efficacy and agency have atrophied under neoliberalized economies, globalization ‘blurs the meanings of privacy, freedom and agency due to technological advancements’ and preoccupation with consumerism and an accumulation-oriented ethos (Heron 2008, 87). This paper intends to show how *senryū*, not unlike political cartoons, harness the extreme intertextuality conventionally present in its poetics so as to interrupt the flow of capital and its version of the post-social.

Emphasizing the openly political character of *senryū* in his volume *Introduction to current events senryū (Jiji senryū nyūmon)*, Japanese poetry specialist Taguchi Mugihiko distinguishes four defining characteristics: ‘contemporaneity (in representing the times), criticism (in stating opinion), documentation (in being bequeathed to history), and improvisation (of the sort anyone can generate)’ (Taguchi 1995, 9).² *Senryū* indeed have a long history of taking critical, sarcastic positions towards the prevailing authorities and were prominently included in collections not only of *senryū* but of illicit graffiti from the Tokugawa period (1600–1867).³ Though literary *senryū* (*bungei senryū*) have developed in the twentieth century in contrast to this socio-political critique central to ‘current events *senryū*’ (*jiji senryū*), this study focuses specifically on *senryū* which lean towards such criticism and appear in the *Mainichi shinbun*’s daily ‘Almighty *senryū*’ (*Ban’nō senryū* 2010–2011) column.⁴ According to the ‘Almighty *senryū*’ article on the Japanese version of Wikipedia, read as a measure of popular consensus in Japan on its current status, the comic ditty column is characterized by poems

sharply satirizing current events as well as candidly expressing a broad range of emotions (joy, anger, sadness and delight). Lately the column has been gathering popularity as a feature of the morning edition of the *Mainichi shinbun*, and there is an increase in up-and-coming contributors who introduce new circumstances in their lives, describing the psychological depth latent in familiar events. Every month the newspaper receives about 10,000 postcard submissions (a total of 50,000 poems), the largest in Japan. That these are singlehandedly selected by Nakata is said to be unparalleled in the world.⁵

One may distinguish two coexisting modes of framing enunciation in *senryū*: one is a more linear, rational model of self-centred and *intratextually* unfolding expression; the other is a mode based on reifications of the Japanese poetics of extreme intertextuality within contemporary fashion and product discourse (Brink 2008). In these consumer discourses, various categories, series and matrices appear, in a manner precisely described by Barthes (1983) and Bourdieu (1984), who each explored the construction of consuming discourses and subjects based on criteria of taste and group or class affiliation. This paper attempts to read *senryū* as a discourse which initiates and extends critical analysis and debate within the framework of this mix of these two distinct modes at its disposal. In an age of postmodern, globalized conditions, *senryū* indeed proves to be a surprisingly resilient means of constituting creative and effective articulations that express the otherwise politically invisible and ineffable. Jacques Rancière’s discussion of ‘indetermination’ and ‘delegitimation’ in framing politics as bound up in *what is visible* and aesthetics as bound up in *categories* (as Japanese poetry in traditional forms always builds upon) may apply in particular to problems of globalization, especially aspects which are characterized by compression of time and effacement of spatial difference (Waters 2001; Giddens 1990). *Senryū* may be thus seen as exhibiting a convergence of both politics and art as the form includes in its sanctioned satire a *requisite* foregrounding of the poet’s ‘ability to see and the talent to speak’, which Rancière identifies with politics and socio-political efficacy (2004, 13).

Thus *senryū* is a uniquely positioned politically involved (if not always engaged) poetic art presenting snapshots of daily news and events in creative complaining about the state of the world in a spirit of cheerful dissensus. As *senryū* often reassert the underlying relevance (if only humorous) of specific discourses and subjects (positions) in pairs, as will be explored below, the form enables regular opportunities for reassessing what Rancière calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’,

the apportionment of parts and positions ... based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. (2004, 12)

Senryū interrupt the division of discourses and the assumed places and roles one is to take within the visible, thus committing itself to a form of ongoing dissensus, in Rancière’s sense of ‘the reconfiguration of worlds of experience’, which in *senryū* introduces ‘new forms of visibility established by artistic practices [that] enter into politics’ own field of aesthetic possibilities’ (2004, 65).

Since ‘*senryū*’ like haiku are 17 syllables, the form name is sometimes translated as ‘comic haiku’, but the relation between these two forms can be quite distant in practice. There are two divergent modes of intertextuality in *senryū* and haiku; simply put, haiku, like its ancestor the 31-syllable *tanka*, are extremely bound to a seasonal matrix of topics, while *senryū* – also a form of premodern Japanese poetry – adhering to the convention of brevity coupled with intertextual dependency – in lieu of participating directly in the seasonal matrix, instead engage contemporary historical events as *implied intertexts*, forming the specific mode of intertextual engagement found in current events *senryū*. This switch leads to criticism that current events *senryū* are too bound to ephemeral contexts and are short-lived as such (instead of following Pound’s dictum that literature is what stays news, it merely reflects what *is* news). However, as Taguchi writes, there are ephemeral *senryū* and *senryū* with staying power as documentation of important events; that *senryū* include criticism makes them even more valuable (Taguchi 1995, 45).

Coinciding with the modernization of Japan, the early twentieth century saw a movement for literary *senryū*, what were dubbed ‘new *senryū*’. Many *senryū* published in newspapers and (often self-published) books today are more refined than premodern ‘old style’ or Edo *senryū*, which were more direct and satirical with respect to socio-economic issues; yet ‘current events *senryū*’ carry on this Edo critical role in society (along with the more modern and universal political cartoon found in newspapers around the globe). One *senryū* handbook even claims that ‘*senryū* from long ago have been valued as the main support of satirical literature’ in Japan (Saitō 2007, 33). The Almighty *Senryū* column has a wide range of *senryū*, but it retains a prominent place for the average person and includes many plainly non-literary ‘current events’ *senryū* as well as poems which are clearly neither literary nor engaged in communicating social criticism. This spectrum reflects the tastes of the editor, Nakahata Takashi, who founded the column two decades ago. He wrote in a preface to a selection of *senryū* from his column that in part the book held an historical value in being a ‘time capsule packing together all the lives people live at the start of the twenty-first century’ (2005, 2). But he also sees a personal pleasure being derived by discovering that in any given *senryū* another has articulated what one may readily recognize from one’s own experiences. He attributes the enjoyment in reading *senryū* to sympathetic, resonating thoughts in a world where ‘everyone is lonely’ (2005, 1).

Indeed not a few *senryū* he chose reflect this loneliness, which certainly is a product of modern life:

Making meat and potato stew myself for one
Nikujaga o jibun hitori no tame tsukuri Hirohiro (Yonezawa)
 (Nakahata 2005, 16)

Meat and potato stew is something more suitable for a family, thus suggesting a loss of familial connections and loneliness. The Japanese word for ‘one’ here suggests being ‘lonely’ (*hitori-botchi*). But such a poem is hardly a current events *senryū*. Other examples of bittersweet poems on daily life gathered in the same volume include:

Finding poop of my dead dog I cry all over again
Naki-inu no fun o mitsukete mata namida Fuwa Kareeda (Ube)
 (Nakahata 2005, 32)

I have the experience of having stepped on a slug barefoot
Namekuji o suashi de funda koto ga aru B Onna [lit. B Woman] (Munakata)
 (Nakahata 2005, 28)

A night of confusion over where to put my hands before falling asleep
Te o doko ni oite neyō ka mayou yoru Mari-chan (Satte)
 (Nakahata 2005, 22)

Though one might expect a satirical form like *senryū* to foreground wordplay and puns, according to one highly respected *senryū* association it is to be avoided; communication is most important (Fun'en 2002, 32). The following two examples from the early 2000s are more ambiguous, and depending on the exact date they first appeared in the newspaper, could suggest a more politicized context and meaning:

As one goes down the age bracket there are many jobs in certain areas
Neirei o sageru to takusan aru shigoto Medake Puro (Kanagawa)

Having made a reservation at the recommended restaurant there's only one customer
Osusume no mise yoyaku shite kyaku hitori Kata Kuriko (Maizuru)
 (Nakahata 2005, 26)

The first suggests loneliness in work, getting older and unable to find a job. The second focuses on a consumer being out of touch with fashionable restaurants as one eats out alone – suggesting alienation from friends and being duped by advertisements.

Though one might reduce *senryū* to one manner of ‘ultra-political’ *illusion* of political engagement that is a disingenuous disavowal of the political, to paraphrase Žižek's ‘Afterword’ in Rancière (2004, 69–71), the form nevertheless articulates in a public forum what might otherwise remain confined to private conversation and thought.⁶ It does so in part by preserving a good-humoured ethos of always (ideally) adhering to a non-vituperative mode of expressing grievances and lampooning what is observed.⁷ Here is an example that gives expression to what may be very obvious but which no one but a *senryū* poet would likely have the opportunity to bring into focus and articulate, for it goes against the very grain of the capitalist economy and plays on the most basic irony of modernization and its endless ‘improvements’ to the natural land:

Stop calling getting rid of the greenery *development*
Kaihatsu to iu na yo midori nakusu koto Grandpa (Sakado)
 (BNS 10 October 2010)

The verse refuses the most fundamental premise of Japanese society: endless development, and presents an implicit challenge to the myth that Japanese love nature (Ackermann 1997).

In contemporary Japan, the problem of extreme compliance with neoliberalists, corporate culture in general, and globalization came to the fore during the Koizumi Administration (2001–2006), when the Post Office and its banking services began to be privatized under the excuse of stimulating the economy.⁸ Tokyo University philosophy professor Takahashi Tetsuya situates neoliberalism, which he identifies with ‘market fundamentalism’, as deploying ‘the euphemism of ‘open competition’ to make it seem as if everybody stood at the same starting line’, even though ‘in the world of finance or education’ an ‘unequal race is launched . . . to produce “winners” and “losers”’, so that not only do the ‘winners’ ‘internalize the ideology of neo-liberalism’ but also the so-called ‘losers’. Takahashi sees the end of the “classless society” or a “total middle-class” society’ of postwar Japan, and ‘a new “class society”’. He writes that

Neo-liberalism has been adopted as the new national policy, and the notion that this is the only way to survive global inter-national competition, that Japanese’s status as an economic power is in danger, is pervasive among Japanese officials. (Takahashi 2007)

The following *senryū* from the early 2000s on the initial step of transforming the post office into a government-owned corporation suggests that the Koizumi Administration rhetoric of privatization was merely window-dressing for the creation of an exploitative elite class while an underclass must choose from among the corporate banks, giving up the security and relative equity of a more neutral government institution:

Though they call it an age where one can select one’s own bank
Ginkō o erabu jidai to iwaretemo Itō Sayasu (Funabashi)
 (Nakahata 2005, 21)

The Post Office would be fully privatized in 2007. Though one can quibble over the intricacies of the political struggles in Japan in relation to the privatization of the Post Office, no one can doubt that Japanese corporate-dominated neoliberalized society has changed from the post-bubble economy of the 1990s to the present.⁹ Whether one attributes greater unemployment and more visible homelessness in Japan to domestic economic forces or to an American-styled neoliberal focus on the welfare of corporations at that expense of citizens, Japan is widely understood to have been in a period of stagnation (the Lost Years) since the collapse of the 1980s bubble. *Senryū* provide a record of how people experience unemployment and the strange sense of living in a world that functions well at the corporate business level, but leaves the population subject to it, whether conforming to it, excluded from it, or rejecting it.

Following Badiou’s focus on events in situating ‘the relation between things and objects, . . . between indifferent multiplicities and their concrete being-there’ (Badiou 2011, 53), one can recast Japanese satirical poetry as a means of mediating between events, subject-positions and the being-thereness of the world so as to stage events in the *senryū*, which themselves become history-mediating and historiographical events in their own right. As Simon Critchley writes on Badiou, ‘an event is that which calls a subject into existence, into the creation a truth, whereas ‘being’ or that which is belongs to the order of knowledge’ (Critchley 2007, 45). These poems are situated in the following manner: they position the subject at the cusp of events, bound up in the being-there of the world and its ‘indifferent multiplicities’ that frame the importance of these verses, which are merely

a dense focusing of traces that refract the conditions of subordinate being imposed in various social situations. This positioning helps us situate the short satirical verses to be examined below as products of larger series, multiplicities, and forces that are bound up in history and which are presented as offering fresh ethical engagements if not interventions.

For instance, though perhaps not significant enough to merit a political cartoon or a critical article in a left-leaning publication, the following sustains a critical eye on the use of public relations and media to whitewash corporate images:

Not a hawk but a dog: SoftBank's image
Taka janaku inu no imēji sofutobanku Manafuyu (Himeji)
 (BNS 10 January 2011)

The discrepancy between the corporate ruthlessness of a hawk and the advertised mascot, a dog, is satirized here. However, in maintaining an obligatory focus on ironic unconcealment in the best tradition of poetry (stating otherwise unspoken social truths), *senryū* refuses to be depoliticized. The following *senryū*, published in the days following the Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis, marks an irony of a company announcing its good deeds, so as to profit from the sequence of events in its public relations, rather than simply volunteering in the spirit of selfless giving:

The company advertised it is volunteering
Borantia shiteru to senden suru kaisha Kashiwabara no Mimi (Kashiwabara)
 (BNS 23 March 2011)

Also, as it is the company, many employees may actually be doing the work as pressured volunteers, further confounding issues of volition in helping. *Senryū* columns provide a place to criticize hypocritical practices while they still are visible, before becoming more widely accepted.¹⁰

Awash in categories: Discursive double séance

Often the categories invoked draw multiple discourses into one utterance. The language used may appear to be conventionally metaphorical, but these *senryū* do not merely present a play of figure and ground. They more precisely recontextualize *given* and *observed* contemporary events in terms of the underlying logic of the dead metaphors they engage in creating a satirical backdrop that transforms events. They are a perfect medium of 'expression' or engagement within the reified, alienated context of postmodern globalization. To adapt the language of Lakoff (1989, 2008, 209–21), one can see the metaphorical inheritances of schema and attributes which prepare the comic poetic references in a *senryū* as constituting the structuration of nonsense specific to it, according to the *discourses* drawn into it. Consider the following three verses which appear to articulate social absurdities or nonsense:

Goods weapon kill off many at no-frills prices
Yoi buki wa ōku korosete tei kosuto Terada Katsu (Fujieda)
 (BNS 6 January 2011)

What a difference a few millimeters makes in standards of beauty
Bi no kijun sū miri no sa ga mono o iu Shirano Dog (Sapporo)
 (BNS 7 January 2011)

I don't know if it's poverty or fashion
Binbō ka fashon'na no ka wakaranai Sweet Bottles (Kyōtanabe)
 (BNS 20 January 2011)

The first deals with military spending, while simultaneously satirizing both consumer and military cultures and discourses. It in effect fuses these intertextual lines of reference so as not simply to create an alternative, playful and nonsensical articulation in Susan Stewart's sense of extremes of verbal playfulness in nonsense, understood as tightly compressed play predicated on 'intertextual levels that pack alternative interpretative rules' (Stewart 1978, 38).¹¹ Rather, this *senryū*, representative of many in this column, can be understood as more Brechtian in its presentation of intertextual compression not for the sake of ludic escape and ironic force (reinforcing cynicism), but rather to press readers to examine the *specificity* of the absurdity of obsessing *both* with low costs and with the rationalization of war, treating weapons as toys on sale. In effect, such *senryū* challenge not only the immediate satirized assumptions but also parallel, reinforcing metaphorical inheritances. They foreground in their mode of juxtaposition what the early Derrida called the traces of destabilizing other texts, so as to render the seriousness of current events carnivalesque, but manageable as a 'double session', a 'double séance' (1981). Similarly, the second verse satirizes consumer esthetic salons, suggesting how absurd it is to quibble over standards of beauty according to fine quantifications, when judgment at such an imperceptible degree becomes subjective. In the third verse, whether the clothing is fashionable or a sign of genuine poverty suggests not only Linda Hutcheon's discussion of transideological irony (1994), but the commoditization of poverty itself, its naturalization within the norms of a neoliberal globalized society and the inequities it generates.¹²

In the 'Almighty *senryū*' column, if one does not exactly find poems exhibiting resistance to the imminent alienation under an extreme consumerism which usurps all semblance of will in subjects, there is sensitivity to it. Though the column includes many literary *senryū* on trivial experiences at home, work or other places, many of these same poems also speak to larger issues of the day. In fact, while satirically modeling self-effacing life within a rationalized, conforming, and largely corporate-defined contemporary Japan, the poems often offer little more than critical description and tacit support for the status quo of consumer and production discourse which fills the media (news, game and variety shows, etc.). Yet *senryū* in this column tend to stand with the people on the margins of the dominant corporate, neoliberal model of cultural production; here people come first, in the way reportage is predicated on trust in an undeniable first person point of view which includes a non-conventional event horizon that as such can be upsetting, even kindle a sense of the uncanny.¹³ Directly expressive free verse by comparison is more bound to maintaining syntactical continuity and tends to generate a satirical *narrative* mode that *inhibits* the sort of intertextual engagement inherent to *senryū*. As we have seen, *senryū* often mock and satirize localized and overlapping positions by inhabiting them, ultimately foregrounding the discursive disjunctions lurking in broadly accepted bureaucratic categories and questioning them as symptoms of the post-social in Baudrillard et al.'s sense (2007, 79–94). For instance, consider the naming and implicit categorization in the following verse, which directly addresses the fixation on categories in consumer discourse:

Big selling points: cheap, cute, and seeming eco-friendly
Uresuji wa yasui kawaii ekoppoi Kaminari Saku (Kōnosu)
 (BNS 25 March 2011)

The word translated as 'seeming' here is a playful suffix indicating resemblance and focusing the satire on the *appearance* of being eco-friendly while the advertising discourse alluded to may very well be misleading. The satire is based on a rational, orderly, fixed,

assumed categorical frame, which is exactly the sort of categorical matrix that traditional short-form Japanese poetry relies upon and which current events *senryū* turns on its head by foregrounding contemporary occurrences and experiences. As society today in Japan is also filled with consumer as well as medical and bureaucratic categories, particular words and phrases in a given *senryū* unfold intertextual lines of reference not to literary allusions, but rather to the status quo commonsense of the day. Any satirically framed statement can invoke categorically oriented consumer shrewdness, even as in the following simple observation:

How horribly the dust stands out on the black furniture
Monosugoku hokori ga medatsu kuroi kagu Kimura Michiko (Tōkyō)
 (BNS 29 March 2011)

Perhaps everyone has heard that black furniture or cars are easy to show dust, but here the categories of *dos* and *don'ts* are manifest and underscored by the ‘horribly’, which insures the satirical frame. The poetic distinctions and matrices now are extended through material and cultural changes made through capitalist production and fashion and advertising discourse, which itself builds on the condensed language of poetry, which has thus become ubiquitous in Japanese society in turn through poetic advertising. Yet one can not only find Japanese *senryū* poetry critically used today to examine and expose alienation – unemployment, disengagement, loneliness, etc. (Sugimoto 2010) – but to show how the social as simulacra has been constituted so as to defer authority to an anonymous mix of consumer and production discourse dominating the news media: taste and distinction become, this essay argues, part of the reification of poetic matrices of association across media and genres.

The following *senryū* integrates the controlling practices of consumer culture and the evasion of consumption in the common practice of in-store reading:

I make the rounds of in-store reading from one convenience store to the next
Tachiyomi o suru konbini no rōtēshon Mugi Soyogu [lit. Wheat Whispers] (Kawagoe)
 (BNS 19 March 2011)

Here the common practice of literally ‘standing and reading’ without necessarily purchasing anything itself becomes the job – literally the ‘rotation’ – of ‘making the rounds’. ‘Rotation’ suggests this practice has itself become a substitute form of employment, suggesting un- or under-employment (perhaps contrasting with earlier generations, when the economy was booming and people took breaks from work in the magazine aisles without being cautioned). That the reader has to ‘make the rounds’ suggests a more aggressive seller-controlled consumer environment in which customers must move from store to store to avoid the embarrassment of being asked to purchase a magazine. Moreover, this verse again exemplifies the yoking together of two (or more) discourses: a consumer practice and unemployment. These discourses enter the poem as intertexts of an associated discourse, but in their pseudo-metaphorical joining they force a disjunction, a tension reflecting antagonisms and dissensus.

With intertextual disjunction – the introduction of vectors of reference to discourses at odds with one another – the poetry becomes a textual and intertextual act of selecting subject-assuming or -assimilating ideological force and omitting or demoting other discourses, so that an immediate imposition or violence is built into the language of *senryū*. Prose largely conforms to a rationality that is readily intelligible to so-called master narratives, to which we researchers, for all our reflexive and psychological

explanations, are still bound. Current events *senryū*, on the other hand, being focused on intertextual disjunction, as such produce visible ideological (Lacanian) imaginary resistance. In Žižek's sense of a 'radical rearticulation of the predominant symbolic Order', *senryū* resituate dominant and marginal discourses and interests, thus undermining the hegemonic ascendancy of one socially accepted propriety. To put it in more material terms, they refashion discursive debts, refashioning alliances with some people while distancing others: 'when a new *point de capiton* emerges, the socio-symbolic field is not only displaced, its very structuring principle changes' (Žižek 1999, 262).

Because of the highly intertextual focus of *senryū*, as well as its critical function, it is a poetic form honed to have just such an ideologically corrective potential in its writing action: within the prismatic focus filtered through the form itself, the foregrounding of discursive concentrations of power and libidinal redirection of existing power assumptions allows for the radical review of contextual framing and alliances. One can see, in critically framing satirical *senryū* that the *choice of intertexts* plays a fundamental role in shaping the authorial *actions* in the very orientation detailed in a poem's choice of intertextual, discursive orientations. Poems on poverty, for instance, take many forms, depending on their affiliations. Here is one satirizing oneself by way of comparison to one of the robber-barons of our era:

In the next world even Bill Gates will be flat broke
Biru Geitsu anoyo ni ikeba muichimon Koishi Kawa (Tokyo)
 (BNS 21 January 2011)

This *senryū* merely intimates poverty, but it does satirize the extreme concentration of wealth which is related to the system which allows poverty to grow along with laws protecting the interests of those with capital. It joins entirely different economic points of reference.

Situating *senryū* as an alternative critical mode

As Laura Hein argues, 'By the mid-1990s, government and business leaders finally adopted neo-liberal policies on a massive scale' and 'just as social inequality mounted, a relatively small number of influential figures built a classically compensatory cultural nationalist movement, asserting the right to national pride, including an offensive military force, and blaming foreigners for all of Japan's troubles'. Thus, 'since 2001 the trend toward both neo-liberalism and compensatory cultural nationalism has become far more pronounced' (Hein 2008, 462). Though blaming the West would simplify any number of problems arising from neo-liberal policies in Japan, even before contact with the West, Japan had been well on its way towards destabilizing premodern life, in part through the rise of merchant lenders (the forerunners of modern banks) who formed a new bourgeoisie that displaced the ruling samurai class and inverted the feudal social order. The real question today is whether life would be better by continuing to destroy the environment by way of full embodiment of the global modern capitalist market and its ethos of accumulation, or would some forms of more local, simple self-sustained economies in the end not be better; the risks taken for the expediency of competitive development have been tragically exposed in the recent Fukushima nuclear disaster.¹⁴ Simply waving the Japanese flag in fact avoids real controversies in daily practices; yet *senryū* poets *do* address these issues without leaving such clichés of nationalism in Japan standing.

These satirical poetry columns in newspapers are important forums for interrogating daily life and offering critical resistance to visible, embodied practices. *Senryū* arguably

allow for ethical judgments that contain and transcend manifestations of globalization or corporate ascendancy (reflected in Koizumi's introduction of American-style neoliberalism: privatization and stoically naturalized corporate greed). *Senryū* preserve a satirical tradition and a critical culture rooted in the ethical act of synthesizing relationships between discrete parties through implied intertextual diversity, as opposed to the abstractly unifying rhetoric of Japanese national unity, appearing as what Rancière calls the 'police consensus' (2004, 65). *Senryū* act as anamorphic dividers of language, *both* framing the subject as bound to a fantasy frame which projects a conventional sense of self or national identity *and* bringing this subject into contact with its other, something which challenges this comfortably ascendancy *as a given*. On the one hand, *senryū* accomplish this doubled movement by virtue of simply being accepted as a long-established form similar to its more widely known and respected haiku but arguably of far more historical value, obliged to openly present challenges to the ascendancy of the status quo. On the other hand, the anamorphosis accomplished in the creative production of *senryū* builds a division between the unified plane of equilibrium, predicated on neoliberalist capitalist exchange and the experiences of people who do not necessarily conform in lifestyle or thinking to its ascendancy in Japan.

From awash in categories to pointed engagement: Finding critical coordinates in *senryū*

If global capital or neoliberal corporate culture has as a system of *controlled* exchange become so ascendant in our lives that it shapes the very media by which we fritter away our lives, insures our alienation and atrophied capacity to engage the world critically in true democratic dissensus, how may one articulate a complaint or even a sardonic observation in a meaningful way? Do the language games and the cultural conditions of a neoliberal society relegate all meaning to a 'post-authority' – a self-effacing subjectitude – whereby the status quo itself is left to flourish, taking on a ubiquitous and omnipotent force of insinuating anonymity? As Baudrillard writes, the social has ended precisely because of the 'implosion of meaning' and the 'destiny of inertia in a saturated world' (1994, 161). If we live in 'a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning' (Baudrillard 1994, 79), the problem we face is how to recover a staging ground for concentrated focus on meaning where meaning is due. For instance, if there is a scandal or an injustice, must we throw up our hands in despair and say to ourselves: it is too complicated to explain, to prove; we should just let it go. Of course political cartoons are often able to serve a function parallel to *senryū*, but they are usually limited in number, whereas 18 *senryū* appear in the *Mai'nichi shinbun* everyday, typically covering a broad range of news topics as well as mundane odd observations of oneself in various social situations. Extreme intertextuality, commonly functioning in Japanese poetry in traditional forms, intersects with the world of capital precisely at this juncture with the productive absencing of social discourse and the suspension of the social itself. Thus Baudrillard's postmodern post-social world of alienated others and pure exchange insures alienation by way of phrases such as 'indeterminacy' ('it's open to interpretation'). As one recent *senryū* puts it: there seems to be no spirit of protest against injustice in Japan:

The fine youth today see nothing in demonstrations
Demo nante wakai okata wa kusa o hamu Momota Eizaburō (Ise)
 (BNS 7 January 2011)

The diction implies that the youth have vainly risen above ideals, as if demonstrations were a dirty job. Everyone just goes along with a profound *jouissance* of passive engagement by way of a disavowal of their very possibility of protest. Meaninglessness is enjoyed; and as nonsense is cultivated – *demanded*, we may even say – *by the post-social*, the mediated experience of contested, historical life is postponed, forming post-life. Here *senryū* suggest a form of critical writing that stands out – like political cartoons in Western newspapers and magazines – as a form of social critique that deserves attention. A sense that children have become the new youth police exposing parents for crimes against the global order by failing to achieve consumer aptitude is satirized in the following verse:

Upon verifying the phone call fraud, it was just my son, testing me
Sagi denwa kakunin shitara ko no tesuto Eguchi Meteorite (Kasuga)
 (BNS 19 January 2011)

The son is presented as fanatically worried that the parent is an incompetent consumer, but the verse intimates a *senryū* tradition of embodying a reversal of power, as well as expressing social criticism in feeling one's family permeated by mistrust and alienation. It satirically suggests the advent of a post-Cold War totalitarian-like capitalist dystopia in Japan. Complementary poems can be found in the following poems on the relation of the individual to groups:

I found myself as well within a group turning a blind eye
Minu furi o shita shūdan ni boku mo ita Carefree Grandfather Mountain (Saitama)
 (BNS 1 January 2011)

A sense of automation and alienation are conveyed here as the poet documents being swept up into a group activity which is associated with corruption or the perpetuation of an injustice. Similarly, the following two poems document alienation in relation to other individual subjects:

I imagine the life of the person going before me
Mae o iku hito no jinsei sōzō shi Otsuru (Kitakyūshū)

Mail from my friend is read in my friend's voice
Tomo kara no mēru wa tomo no koe ga yomu Saka no Ue no Kaze [lit. 'Wind on the Hilltop'] (Kumamoto)
 (BNS 5 October 2010)

The first poem suggests how one can sometimes see life as something others live, so that one merely lives vicariously, so that the blind follow the blind in a circular, meaningless world. The second poem is also about alienation, but of a variety closely tied to new technologies. This 'mail' certainly refers to an audio voice message accompanying an email, yet leaves ambiguities, as 'mail' can be postal mail, so as to suggest simply reading the message from a friend in the friend's voice as we remember it *in our heads*. The literalization of this common projection of friends' voices in our minds not in a recording creates an uncanny virtual presence, removing the creative memory from our lives through this convenience. Thus *senryū* allows expression of catching oneself being transformed by the procedural changes accompanying new technologies (driven by capitalist invention of products and markets). Similarly, the following poem simply suggests how the mind is colonized by discourse on monetary value itself:

I keep thinking about the price of land for the police box in front of the station
Ekimae no kōban no chika ki ni kakaru Sakura (Kawasaki)
 (BNS 29 March 2011)

It satirizes a compulsively capitalist mindset, so that one's thoughts continuously contemplate useless issues, such as the value of prime real estate under a police box, which is never for sale.

How Japanese religious practices have been influenced by the rise of the consumption- and taste-defined subject is explored in the following poem, which satirizes the contemporary obsession with comfort at the expense of tradition:

Visiting the grave is cut short by mosquito bites
Ka ni sasare mijikakunatta haka-mairi Pooh (Osaka)
 (BNS 3 October 2010)

The irony is that performing one of the most important religious observations for Japanese families has given way to performing Japanese identity as expressed in self-centred interest in the pursuit of a controlled, pleasurable environment, reflecting the overdetermining effects of consumer discourse and its matrix of categories governing an aestheticization of daily life and, here, an obsession with safety and comfort (Mori 2010).

Conclusion

Current events *senryū* can be characterized as a traditional form of Japanese poetry that has grafted onto the intertextual structuration of Japanese poetics in general a foregrounding of contemporary events. Traditional Japanese poetry may be understood as exhibiting *extreme intertextuality*, since the various brief Japanese forms all depend upon working in tandem with *matrices of conventional uses and associations*. Extreme intertextuality merely foregrounds this referencing of multiple intertexts – and in modern verse *any* discourse – so as to bring to bear in the poetry a density of reference, not the density of an intratextual textual construct as self-expression per se. Current events *senryū*, one should note, borrows only this conventional form of extreme intertextuality but largely abandons (or at best parodies) conventional associations of such poetic matrices of conventional phrasings and association (common to literary *senryū*). As such, it articulates satirical anamorphic observations of current events situated with reference to two or more divergent discourses (one often dominant, and implicitly resisted). Thus contemporary discourses fulfil the formal function of the poetic matrices, and have been doing so since the birth of this satirical form in the eighteenth century. This essay suggests that the intertextual structuration of *senryū* as a form has properties exceeding conventional capabilities of linear prose or free verse expression. Its radically intertextual articulations *necessarily* assert choices of attention *as constitutive originary discourses* or proto-discursive utterances capable of defying the status quo postmodern deferral of meaning and concomitant reproduction of a static 'social' that Baudrillard describes. Rather than reproducing an accepted, televisable version of events with journalistic 'objectivity' within accepted narrative patterns, *senryū* becomes, in the way reportage innately reaffirms speaking in the first person, a crucible for presenting new discursive fusions and considerations.

Notes

1. This point echoes Slavoj Žižek's own use of Badiou to dispel the myth of cultural relativity and tolerance, exposing it as a refusal of the other's otherness, reducing its order to a version of a universal Anglo-American-styled capitalist order. See for instance, Slavoj Žižek, writing on

- being and event in Badiou: ‘the subject emerges in the event of “exaggeration”, when a part exceeds its limited place and explodes the constraints of balanced totality’ (Žižek 1997, 92).
2. Taguchi gives the example of how one *senryū* poet, Tsuru Akira (1909–1938), in a period when open criticism of the government was unheard of, was arrested by the special police and died in prison for writing *senryū* protesting the Japanese use of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (9 July 1937) as a pretext for all-out war with China; he writes that *senryū* today still maintain this critical social function (Taguchi 1995, 13, 17). Even a *senryū* handbook published by a *senryū* association which prefers literary *senryū* (*bungei senryū*) holds proletarian leftist and anti-war *senryū* poet Tsuru Akira in esteem as a current events *senryū* poet (Senryū Fun’en Ginsha 2002, 58).
 3. See for instance Kamisaka 1930; Kida 1967; Suzuki and Okada 1984; Sakaraki 1905.
 4. This study began as an investigation of contemporary *senryū*, thus the examples taken directly from the column are selected from summer of 2010 through March 2011. The original intention was to include *senryū* from other major newspapers, but the just popularity of the ‘Almighty *senryū*’ column and its preponderance of current events *senryū* led to focus on it alone. The translations are mine unless otherwise indicated and opt for the strategy of recreating the antagonisms in each poem in more or less idiomatic English rather than literally word for word.
 5. See ‘*Ban’nō senryū*’ [Almighty *senryū*] [In Japanese.] Wikipedia. <http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/>. Translation by author.
 6. See Žižek’s extended discussion in his ‘Afterword’ in Rancière (2004, 69–71).
 7. Apparently the *senryū* column editors at least once felt the need to clarify this point, including at the bottom of the column the following explanation: ‘Humor plays a large role in enriching expression. Yet in the spirit of humor the temptation to ridicule others should be avoided. [Before submitting your *senryū*] let us double-check that the poems we submit do not make mean-spiritedness their focus’ (‘Note from the Editor’. [In Japanese.] BNS 10 February 2011). According to *senryū* handbooks as well, libelous exposure of people’s secrets and personal attacks are not acceptable subject matter (Senryū Fun’en Ginsha 2002, 32).
 8. A general discussion and history of privatization in relation to neoliberalism, globalization and processes of dispossession can be found in Harvey 2005, 157–69.
 9. For an in-depth but ultimately unconvincing contrarian view of the impact of neoliberalism on Japan, see Murphy 2006, 51–54.
 10. The complexities of *senryū* on events related to the recent March 11 disaster deserve extended study in a separate essay and are not treated here as such. How the disaster – especially the nuclear dimension – will influence corporate status in Japanese society after the exposure of mismanagement of the Fukushima plants has yet to play out. Numerous related *senryū* appear in the months following March 11.
 11. Susan Stewart utilizes M.K. Halliday’s idea that ‘antilanguages create a reality which is inherently an alternative reality, one that is constructed precisely in order to function in alternation’ (Stewart 1978, 39, n. 99).
 12. On general inequalities see Sandra J. MacLean, ‘Globalization and the New Inequalities: Threats and Prospects for Human Security’ (2004); on health-related inequalities in globalized societies see David Coburn and Elaine S. Coburn, “Health and health inequalities in a neo-liberal global world” (2007).
 13. Another subgenre of *senryū*, called ‘businessman *senryū*’ (*sarasen*, from *saririman* and *senryū*), document the absurdities and everyday ennui of servitude in corporate offices, various concerns over comfort and mediating work and family life. For examples, see books such as Yamafuji, Bitō, and Dai-ichi Life Insurance Company 2001.
 14. Among the many articles appearing on this topic, one may begin with McNeill and Adelstein 2011.

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- BNS. See Ban'nō senryū, [Almighty senryū].
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