

TO THE STRAY DOGS: A CASE STUDY ON MULTIMEDIA VIRTUOSITY AND  
JAPANESE LITERARY TRIBUTE IN KAFKA ASAGIRI AND SANGO HARUKAWA'S  
*BUNGOU STRAY DOGS* (2013-2024)

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By

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## Abstract

In “Contemporary Japanese Literature,” Prem Motwani states, “[The] Japanese literary scene is among the most active anywhere in the world today, with numerous coterie journals and first rate literary magazines and the highest number of publications per head in the world” (415). This status comes from a large, worldly shared cumulative context, making a “panoramic view” (Motwani 415) of Japanese literary history essential to understanding the current global literary canon. Yet, outside of East Asia, Japanese literature is very rarely recognized within Western academic settings, as there are multiple cultural and stylistic gaps lost in translation that discourage non-Japanese readers curious about the medium. By contrast, manga and anime — Japanese graphic novels and animation, together called animanga — are generally more available in the international market due to their entertainment and commercial value. For example, since 2013 Kafka Asagiri and Sango Harukawa’s animanga series *Bungou Stray Dogs* (*BSD*) has gained widespread attention and an ever-growing fanbase. Though seeming to be a standard *shounen* (action-filled plot) series, *BSD* differs through its literary inspirations and nuances, which use more contemporary multimedia speculative elements that draw new audiences into the otherwise traditional world of Japanese literary history. This unconventional nearness to the “original” sources invites not only a general appreciation for the works’ authors and literary history, but also a necessary acknowledgement of their inherent value in the global literary sphere.

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge the liminal position I occupy as a non-Japanese immigrant settler doing graduate research on Japan in Canada, but who was also born and raised in the Philippines, a country that has been colonized by Japan and still endures many of its aftereffects. I do not believe this position impairs my capacity to critically engage in the academic discourses I participate in; rather it equips me with a valuable postcolonial perspective that past scholarship on this topic has been severely lacking. Nevertheless, the utmost respect, cultural sensitivity, and care has been dedicated to this project. Any potentially disrespectful, inaccurate, and/or inappropriate statements made are unintentional and are a result of my (inevitable) limitations as a Western scholar in Japanese literary and cultural studies.

## A Note on the Text

Japanese terms and other words a Western reader may not be familiar with are italicized and given definitions and context in the footnotes or the brackets following them. To better pronounce Japanese names and terms, standard macrons are included when necessary to indicate long syllables but have been eliminated from well-known place names like Tōkyō, Yōkōhama, etc. For Japanese names, standard Hepburn (*Hebon-Shiki*) romanization is used due to its greater familiarity in the West. Unless otherwise stated, the spelling and name orders are as they would appear in English publications (i.e. surname last), hence the person whom Japanese readers know as Dazai Osamu is referred to here as Osamu Dazai. This “Western order” differs from the traditional Japanese, which puts one’s surname first. However, following Japanese practice, the writers discussed in this text with traditional sobriquets are referred to by those rather than by their surnames out of respect. In an attempt to establish difference between the real author and their respective *Bungou Stray Dogs* (*BSD*) character of the same name, traditional Japanese macrons and apostrophes have been given to the former whereas the latter are written in a more colloquial style most commonly used in animanga fandom spaces to refer to Japanese names and places. Hence, the real-life version is Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (again note the Westernized name order) and the anime character is Junichrou Tanizaki.

Lastly, there appear in this paper two different spellings of the title word — “*bungou*” and “*bungo*,” a result of transliteration: “*Bungo*” is usually intended to include a standard macron over the ō, making it a long syllable. Without this macron it is romanized as “ou.” Since including macrons requires the use of special characters, more casual fandom spaces disregard them altogether. However, linguistically speaking, “*bungou*” is the correct romanization without using a macron, hence it takes precedence in this essay out of respect to Asagiri and Harukawa.

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“ . . . [T]here are certainly people who need stories like oxygen still. I always hope that *Bungo Stray Dogs* will become the oxygen for such people.”

—Kafka Asagiri in an interview with *Game Rant*, 2023.

## Introduction

I do not consider myself either a Japanese animation (anime) fan or a manga (graphic novels) reader. I prefer reading books. My sister, on the other hand, watches and reads a lot of animanga, so when she *insisted* I watch a show called *Bungou Stray Dogs*<sup>1</sup> (*BSD*) back in 2019 because it “was about books,” I barely noted the recommendation, the same way she would have disregarded a book I might *insist* she would like. At the time I was also worrying about transferring from my initial Biology major, which my parents approved of, to Honors English, which was disappointment incarnate. Half of me was convinced it was the right decision, but the other half felt completely lost and wavering. I — according to my undergraduate self, at least — had hit rock bottom. It was during this weird liminal period of my life that my sister tactfully decided to watch *BSD* in my room on her laptop. By then, she had already gotten through the show’s first season and was onto the second, which made me reject it even more because the only thing worse than starting new shows is starting new shows alone. This stubbornness, however, immediately left me once I heard one of the characters say, “H.P. Lovecraft.” I grabbed my sister’s laptop and demanded explanations: Why is H.P. Lovecraft in a Japanese animated series? Is it an adaptation of Lovecraft the person or his works? What even is the premise of this show and why does it have famous authors in it?

I then proceeded to inhale the anime adaptation’s seasons, movie, manga, etc. in one delirious weekend like oxygen, and *BSD* has never left my mind since. To my delight, the series did not just feature Lovecraft — admittedly not my favorite author — but many other familiar ones I knew, like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, Louisa May Alcott, etc. However, I did not know much about a significant majority of the cast because they were based on literary figures from Japan. None of my Western English education, and by extension *none* of the books I read and enjoyed studying up to that point, focused on Japanese literature. I realized that, to understand the historical and literary context of the animanga, I needed to know more about the Japanese authors themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> The literal translation of the title is “Literary Stray Dogs.” A literate, native Japanese audience would be able to immediately infer that the series must have (Japanese) literary inspiration, but a Western audience might not.



My fascination with the series only amplified as I kept pursuing my English degree. After exhausting the patience and attention spans of everyone around me, I decided to make an account on Twitter (now called X) dedicated to *BSD*.<sup>2</sup> With an unhinged devotion summonable only by someone who had finally thrown all expectations to the wind and started earnestly pursuing her passion in literature, I busied myself with learning anything I could, (ab)using my lucky position as a newly transferred English undergrad to get involved within the small, though steadily growing, online *BSD* Western fanbase. Within a year, I had about half a thousand followers who were just as excited about the series as I was and eager to get my insight on everything *BSD* because of my major. By the middle of 2020, I was comfortable enough to ask *BSD* Twitter a general question: Why do they love the series so much?

I received a torrent of replies. Similar to myself, people informed me that what drew them to *BSD* was its in-depth incorporation of real-life authors and their works — many of whom they were more clueless about than I was!<sup>3</sup> Those who realized *BSD* is about literature also genuinely wanted to read about the texts and people that inspire the series, specifically the unfamiliar Japanese authors they had never heard of before. Like me, people had raided their local bookstores and scoured an endless array of internet links looking for any kind of information that would make them understand and appreciate *BSD* better. That was over four years ago and my account is still active, attesting to the fandom's unceasingly passionate curiosity to learn about the series' literary ties.

However, as non-Japanese fans of *BSD* eventually know all too well, Japanese literature is very rarely recognized outside of East Asia, especially within Western academic institutions beyond Asian-related cultural studies and world literature departments. The main reasons Donald Keene cites for the West's "neglect" of Japanese literature in 1971 are the same in the twenty-first century: "The intricacies of the Japanese language prevent all but a handful of foreigners from approaching the literature in the original, and the uninspired nature of many translations often causes the enthusiasm of the more adventurous-minded reader to cool" (1). This lack of

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of privacy and academic professionalism, the username, as well as any further information regarding this account and how to access it, shall remain a mystery.

<sup>3</sup> Many longtime non-Japanese *BSD* fans only realize the series is inspired by world literatures much later in the series (or long after consuming it), most often when familiar Western authors like Fitzgerald or Dostoyevsky are introduced into the plot.

general recognition of the Japanese canon largely stems from an ingrained eurocentric<sup>4</sup> bias within the global literary sphere, which, in addition to ultimately possessing the power to decide what classifies as “good” and “bad” literature on an international scale, is dominantly Western and therefore more inclined to favor its own texts. This systemized literary hierarchy is evident in the fact that education systems across the world teach F. Scott Fitzgerald and other white authors but hardly ever writers of color like Osamu Dazai (1909-1948) or Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1886-1965), regardless of their renown in Japan and the rest of Asia.<sup>5</sup> This truth is further emphasized by the fact that most Japanese literature is not part of the general literary market, making the act of finding trustworthy, accessible, and readable translations in any other language an especially onerous task for non-Japanese seekers of the local literature. There are also cultural gaps, linguistic barriers, and different writing stylizations and aesthetics that get lost in even the most careful of translations, discouraging readers even further from delving into this unfamiliar — but all the more exciting — world of Japanese literature.

By contrast, animanga are generally more available on the international market due to their entertainment and commercial value, making them ideal mass media alternatives to the otherwise elusive literary canon. Unlike Japanese literature, which can (and often does) require enormous amounts of effort to even acquire, animanga are easier to both access and consume,<sup>6</sup> as there are numerous digital anime streaming and manga reader services that provide unlimited content for free — or, at least, relatively cheaply compared to buying officially translated works from booksellers and online databases. Due to its high demand, animanga also have a never-ending surplus of translators ranging from local amateurs to highly paid professionals, making anime and manga texts almost immediately available for worldwide consumption the moment

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<sup>4</sup> As a term, eurocentrism is normally capitalized, but this paper consistently uses the lower-case when referring to it so as to take away from some of its hegemonic authority.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the push for antiracism and de-colonizing literatures in a postcolonial context, many “third world” and non-Western countries still give precedent to Western literature in academic and professional settings. For example, William Shakespeare is taught in schools from the Philippines to Ethiopia, and is often given more attention and literary merit than each of these nations’ local literatures and literary figures.

<sup>6</sup> This statement should be taken with a grain of salt because visual and animated media are not passive forms of consumerism; watching a movie can be just as engaging as reading a book. The point being made here is that there are associations people give to certain texts and mediums, hence why it is believed watching TV “rots your brain” while books enhance it, which is fundamentally untrue but nevertheless believed, especially in the late-stage neo-capitalist twenty-first century, where reading for pleasure is considered rare amidst younger generations.

they are released in Japan.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there is a synergistic link in animanga between commercial success and mass media availability that the modern Japanese literary sphere simply cannot match due to the barriers mentioned above.

Kafka Asagiri and Sango Harukawa's *Bungou Stray Dogs (BSD)* tackles these barriers related to accessibility and availability by capitalizing on animanga's burgeoning commercial multimedia dissemination to uplift the "neglected" Japanese literary canon.<sup>8</sup> Since the series' first manga volume publication in 2013 and anime adaptation by BONES Studios three years later, *BSD* has gained widespread attention and ever-growing popularity, earning it the title of Anime of the Year 2023 for its fifth season according to Anime Corner, a popular Twitter account for animanga fans across the world. Due to its mass appeal, the series has had to expand beyond manga and anime in order to keep up with its audience's desire for more content. These expansions range from mobile *gacha* (lottery) games<sup>9</sup> to official merchandise to *dōjinshi* (self-published or fan-created works), which all contribute towards the series' increasing celebrity and expanding industry. Even though *BSD*'s anime adaptation just finished its fifth season in 2023, with no definitive confirmation of any future animated projects, the primary creators Asagiri and Harukawa, along with a myriad of other artists and content creators, still consistently generate widespread attention for the series, as well as keep fans interested through various animanga spinoffs, stageplays, anthologies, light novels,<sup>10</sup> etc. As of August 2024, the manga is currently on its 117th chapter with no signs of stopping.

*BSD* mainly revolves around eighteen-year-old orphan Atsushi Nakajima, who becomes a member of the "truly eccentric" Armed Detective Agency after he discovers he is "Gifted" with

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Crunchyroll is one of the top leading streaming sites for anime-related content in the West due to its promise of releasing English-translated Japanese anime, films, and TV series less than an hour after they have debuted in Japan.

<sup>8</sup> Not much (verifiable) information is known about either of them. This anonymity is typical since animanga artists in Japan have a culture of privacy where they almost never reveal their faces or substantial facts about their lives, mostly for personal protection but also to sustain the "purity" of their creation(s). When animanga creators make public appearances, it is common for them to wear masks, don elaborate costumes, or use audio modifiers to warp their voices.

<sup>9</sup> *Bungou Stray Dogs: Tales of the Lost* developed by Ambition is a mobile puzzle-solving game where players may collect event-specific image cards of *BSD* characters. It is available for free download on all major app stores and has enjoyed over 10 million downloads since its Japanese release in 2017 and English language version in 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Japanese light novels are a type of popular literature media usually classified as young adult fiction targeting people in their late teens to twenties. Although the term is not that much different from the Western definition of "light novel," its native Japanese context is noteworthy.

a supernatural ability that allows him to transform into a white tiger by moonlight (Asagiri 56).<sup>11</sup> The Agency, which also contains several other ability users, performs private investigations of crimes and local mysteries that are “too dicey” for the non-Gifted Japanese “military or police to handle” (Kosaka 18). Outside of the Agency, the story also stretches across to the everyday streets of Yokohama, a “city packed with strange, wondrous mysteries” and its official government circles, as well as its crooked Underground and red-light districts, most notably the Port Mafia, where other literary-inspired Gifted like Ryuunosuke Akutagawa and his Rashoumon lurk ominously in the darkness (Asagiri 56).<sup>12</sup> Almost all the significant characters in *BSD*’s main cast are inspired by real-life authors, their lives, and the literature they produced, with the names of their abilities often referencing their most well-known work(s).

It is not an understatement to say that the series’ premise is built on the idea that writing — the very act of storytelling — can be a superpower, which is why the main characters with these special skills are called “Gifted,” “ability users,” and elite wielders of “otherworldly” supernatural powers (Kosaka 18). The abilities in *BSD* serve as extended metaphors showing the indomitable human force and inherent power within writing, which allows people to overcome mortal boundaries and explore otherwise unreachable ideas through fiction and text. Thus, though seeming to be a standard *shounen* (action-filled plot) series, *BSD* differs from the rest of its genre because of its literary (*bungou*) inspirations and nuances. Though they are derived from literary and world history, the series’ plotline — as evidenced in its modern, action-packed, and weird synopsis — does not at all adhere to factual accuracy. Instead, it merges the historical, literary, and fictional to thank “the people involved in the literary world” in hopes that “more people find interest in literature with this series” (*PixiVision*), raising important discussions on the subjects of memorialization and legacy. Even before its relatively recent fame, *BSD* addressed, problematized, and sometimes even poked fun at the aforementioned eurocentrism of the global literary canon, particularly its critical prioritization of white authors in well-established institutions across the world. The *BSD* manga in particular is far from apolitical

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<sup>11</sup>*BSD*’s protagonist is inspired by Japanese writer Atsushi Nakajima (1909-1942) and his 1942 story “The Moon Over the Mountain,” sometimes also known as “Tiger-Poet.” The white tiger (*byakko*) the writer Nakajima specifically evokes in his tale has several positive associations (righteousness, strength, good luck, majesty, etc.) that span across East Asia due to its rarity in nature, making Atsushi as *BSD*’s protagonist a fine choice.

<sup>12</sup>*BSD* Akutagawa is inspired by Japanese writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927) and his short story “Rashōmon” (1915).

towards modern Japanese socio-cultural politics in conversation with the global literary sphere because it uses its featured Japanese literature alongside (and sometimes even in contradistinction with) the Western (North American, Russian, French, Irish, and English) texts that inspire *BSD*. These are then cleverly adapted and reimagined in the plot to explore, as well as critique, the West's cross-cultural bridges with modern-day Japan, especially through the animanga and local literature's linked mediums. Despite dealing with the literary, historical, and cultural contexts of what was arguably one of Japan's most chaotic and turbulent periods, as well as some of the modern age's most notoriously troubled figures such as Osamu Dazai, *BSD* manages to illustrate a perspective of hope and humanistic perseverance that is otherwise obscured by the West's common (mis)understandings of Japanese literature and animanga as mere copies of the Western canon. Thus, *BSD*'s merger of the historical and literary with present-day discourses concerning the global literary canon not only pays deserved tribute to underrated Japanese authors who tend to be overshadowed by their white counterparts across the world (and even within Japan), but also implements both criticism and reflection regarding the West's outmoded domination over the global canon, and by extent its self-given authority to decide which textual pieces are worthy of study, analysis, and promotion in formalized academia.

Though the series is distinctly linked to Japanese literary history, *BSD*'s plotline does not confine itself to what adaptation studies call "fidelity" to the texts and authors it draws inspiration from. Instead, Asagiri and Harukawa deliberately coalesce the historical and alternatively fictional together, creating an entirely new and visionary plot that stands on its own regardless of its sources. This acceptance of anachronism and adaptation is not meant to disrespect or falsely portray the authors' lives and works. Instead, it is *BSD*'s continuous references to them and their literature that invites reflection on "[what] these individuals left behind for future generations" (Asagiri 170). The series' rich myriad of scattered historical and literary references spans numerous historical events and writers from the early nineteenth century to the twenty-first. However, unlike the literature that inspired its creation, *BSD*'s more contemporary speculative elements draw new audiences into the otherwise traditional world of Japanese literary history by bringing both the past and present into an experimental new plotline that does not necessarily require vast amounts of prior literary, cultural, or historical knowledge to understand its basic themes. This virtuosity makes *BSD* not just aesthetically and

commercially attractive in the modern age, but also a more accessible starting point in terms of interacting with Japanese literature through the medium of animanga. From this point, audience members and readers from across multiple backgrounds — not just literary-oriented scholars or animanga fans, but everyone in between and even outside of these communities — may pursue various lines of inquiry and discourses that the series opens up through its multilayered historical and fictional nuances. *BSD*'s narratively unique adaptation of the primary literary sources therefore welcomes not only a general curiosity and appreciation for the works' authors and complex history, but also a necessary acknowledgement of their place within the collective worldly literary sphere. Rather than concerning itself with issues of faithfulness and “correct” adaptation, Asagiri and Harukawa focus more on uplifting the literatures and people that make up the series, forging for themselves and *BSD*'s fans a space rife with both celebration and potential, glimmering with memorialization as much as possibility.

### **The Inverted Genealogy of Anime, Manga, and Modern Japanese Literature**

Put simply, anime tends to be an adaptation of manga.<sup>13</sup> Both tend to adapt and take elements from modern Japanese literature. In a globalized multimedia age, where all three mediums are mass produced at an astounding rate and influence one another through countless artistic processes, transactions, and channels, their lines of intersection are not easy to trace, making the “genealogy” of anime, manga, and the Japanese literature quite tangled. In the field of adaptation studies, theorists Gary R. Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon propose “not an analogy, not a metaphoric association — but a homology” between biological and cultural adaptations (444). By homology, they refer to the scientific term that indicates a similarity in structure, physiology, or development between seemingly different species due to a common evolutionary ancestor or, in terms of adapting narratives, they suggest adaptations are “homologous” when they are “understandable as processes of replication” because “[s]tories, in a manner parallel to genes, replicate; the adaptations of both evolve with changing environment” (444). This biological framework is potentially helpful when considering the cultural and aesthetic ties between anime, manga, and modern Japanese literature, but not necessarily the structural and material, as all three are distinct forms of art media. While it is true anime comes from manga, which has in turn always taken inspiration from Japanese literature, with constant reciprocal exchange between all three, they are in themselves never finished products one may pin onto a

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<sup>13</sup> The vice versa also happens, but not as often.

static historical timeline. Unlike fixed adaptations of the same story, such as a standard novel-to-film adaptation, these media texts do not illustrate a neat, homological line of descent, though they can be traceable in time.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, on a material level these three mediums are fundamentally different, as adaptation scholar Imelda Whelehan suggests: “Apart from analytical work on narratological perspectives, *auteur* theory and genre, there is little that unites the study of visual and written narratives in academic work — even though there are clearly shared processes in the study of both” (3). Thus, there is no definite common ancestor between anime, manga, and Japanese literature, meaning a genealogical inversion of Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s theory — an *analogy*, not a *homology* — better conveys the complex relationship between anime, manga, and modern Japanese literature, especially when considering their roles in Japan’s increasingly globalized mass culture and multimedia industry.

Since anime is the most recent and least studied of the three, it is a valuable, albeit chronologically inverted, starting point to begin tracing this multimedia genealogy. In “Contemporary Anime in Japanese Pop Culture,” Gilles Poitras provides a twofold definition of anime: “(1) anime is simply the word used by the Japanese for all animation, without regard to its nation of origin; and (2) outside of Japan, the common use of the word anime is to refer specifically to Japanese animation” (48).<sup>15</sup> Yet Susan Napier points out that to define anime as just “Japanese cartoons” accommodates for “no sense of the depth and variety that make up the medium,” resulting in many Western (mis)interpretations of anime and unfair comparisons to American animation, specifically ones catered to children like Disney (6). While anime does include children’s classics and kids cartoons, the comparison to Disney is lacking because “anime works include everything that Western audiences are accustomed to seeing in live-action films — romance, comedy, tragedy, adventure, even psychological probing of a kind seldom attempted in recent mass-culture Western film or television” (Napier 6-7). Animated media is

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<sup>14</sup> In terms of novelty and “which came last,” anime is the newest product among the three mediums mentioned here, with the Japanese cartoon industry roughly starting around the 1950s, thus succeeding the manga form by a few decades and Japanese literature by centuries.

<sup>15</sup> For the purposes of this paper, both definitions are in play, though the second is most often used to refer to anime in Western animanga studies due to the fact that, on a technical level, “[a]nime has no special origin; it comes from the same nineteenth-century roots that all animation comes from” (Poitras 49). However, even Poitras acknowledges that anime has emerged from time-specific causes in Japan as a result of the “rich flow of technical and artistic knowledge between the Japanese, European, and American cultures” (49), thus making the extent to which calling anime “Japanese” a complex endeavor.

significantly more important in Japan than in the West, culminating in “a mainstream pop cultural phenomenon” that is “accepted by virtually all the younger generation of Japanese as a cultural staple” (Napier 7). Unlike in North America and Europe, animanga and its related paraphernalia are omnipresent throughout Japan: “They are used for education (one manga explains the Japanese economy), adornment (numerous shirts are emblazoned with popular manga and anime personages), and, of course, commercial enterprise” (Napier 7). It is for these reasons that anime also has a reputation of being a useful gateway or mirror of contemporary Japanese society and people, offering an “array of insights into the significant issues, dreams, and nightmares of the day” through its “enormous breadth of subject material” (Napier 8), making it “an immense aid in bridging the disconnect” for non-Japanese trying to understand Japan (Schodt vii). Studying anime within this context is therefore particularly appealing to those interested in contemporary Japanese culture and art, as anime with its distinctive narrative and visual aesthetic both “harks back to traditional Japanese culture and moves forward to the cutting edge of art and media” (Napier 8). According to Napier, anime’s success as a cross-cultural export mainly stems from what she calls its “uncompromising ‘otherness’” that is “appealing to a Western audience satiated on the predictabilities of American popular culture and also remarkably approachable in its universal themes and images” (9-10). She cites anime’s distinctive aspects, such as its narrative, pacing, imagery, humor, psychology characterization, genre, and visual styles, which “usually run a far wider gamut and often show greater depth than do American animated texts” as attractive qualities that “initially capture Western viewers’ attention (and for some viewers these may be the main keys of attraction), but for others it is the engrossing stories that keep them coming back for more” (10). Commercially, anime plays a significant role in the transnational entertainment economy in relation to the exponentially increasing number of non-Japanese enterprises that also deal with anime. Its reach extends around the world, with many considering it to be Japan’s “chief cultural export,” allowing the country to become an “increasingly significant player in the global cultural economy” (Napier 5). To summarize, Napier says anime

is a medium in which distinctive visual elements combine with an array of generic, thematic, and philosophical structures to produce a unique aesthetic world. Often this world is more provocative, more tragic, and . . . contains far more complicated story lines than would be the case in equivalent American popular cultural offerings..... Anime



texts also explore (sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly) the meaning of history in contemporary society. These works usually involve a specifically Japanese context, such as the period of *samurai* warfare, but even the most specific texts . . . implicitly suggest larger issues, including the political nature of historical memory. (11-12)

Thus, anime is not only important for its growing economic impact, but also its sociocultural effects, which “reach across arbitrary aesthetic boundaries to strike significant artistic and psychological chords” (Napier 14). As a product of a far-reaching popular culture, it builds on traditional Japanese influences like *kabuki* theater<sup>16</sup> and woodblock prints (originally popular cultural phenomena themselves), while also integrating artistic practices from across the world as Japan globalizes. Napier adds, “In a world where American domination of mass culture is often taken for granted and local culture is frequently seen as either at odds with or about to be subsumed into hegemonic globalism, anime stands out as a site of implicit cultural resistance. It is a unique artistic product, a local form of popular culture that shows clear indications of its Japanese roots but at the same time exerts an increasingly wide influence beyond its native shores” (9). Investigating anime’s cultural impact alone yields valuable insight into the shifting relationships between current international and local cultures, and it sheds light on other major issues of global society like cross-cultural exchange through media distribution, the subject of Japanese ethno-nationalism, and postcolonial historical memory in the twenty-first century.

One of the most crucial aspects of anime is its symbiotic relationship with, and extensive artistic adaptation of, Japanese manga. Poitras states, “The source for the stories used in the majority of anime is manga. In fact, in many ways the evolving diversity of anime follows the lead of the manga industry” (61). Although the word “manga” is often translated into English as “comics,” manga are “not only distinctively different from American comics but they also exercise considerably wider influence in Japanese society than their American equivalents do in theirs” (Napier 19). Luca Raffaelli goes so far as to suggest the West with its “prejudice and preconceptions about what constitutes ‘good’ animation” is incomparable to Japanese-style cartoons that “[unites] different families under one roof” and have “an indispensable object in every household” (130). The main reason behind this difference between the West and Japan is

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<sup>16</sup> A form of traditional Japanese drama with stylized song, mime, and dance techniques usually performed by (male) actors using exaggerated gestures and body movements to express a variety of emotions and themes taken from historical plays, domestic dramas, and dance ensembles.

manga's enormous range of subject matter, as well as its wide distribution across (and outside of) Japan. Even more so than anime, manga supplies "an open window onto the Japanese id, a view — not necessarily of reality itself — but of a culture's aspirations, dreams, nightmares, fantasies, and fetishes<sup>17</sup>" (Schodt vii). The medium covers an infinite range of topics, including "child-oriented fare," as well as "beautifully drawn *shojo* manga produced for young girls" and "a vast variety of manga for adults ranging from etiquette journals to the so-called Ladies Comics (*Reideezu komikku*)" (Napier 19-20). Compared to anime, manga is more versatile and requires less money to produce, making it a diverse and widely respected source of material that can be adapted into not just anime, but other spinoff mangas, light novels, stageplays, TV shows, etc.<sup>18</sup> Although manga has been a mainstay in Japanese popular culture, the form does not exist in a vacuum: Echoing some of manga expert Frederik Schodt's statements, animanga scholar Ito Kinko says, "[Manga] are closely connected to Japanese history and culture, including such areas as politics, economy, family, religion, and gender. Therefore, they reflect both the reality of Japanese society and the myths, beliefs, and fantasies that Japanese have about themselves, their culture, and the world" (26). Manga thereby both reflects and shapes everyday Japanese society, as is evidenced in the fact that "virtually everyone reads them, from children to middle-aged salaried workers"<sup>19</sup> (Napier 20). As Mark W. MacWilliams points out, reading manga and watching anime has become "a significant part of daily life for millions of Japanese," with Japan's literacy, newspaper circulation, and TV viewing rates amongst the "world's highest" due to its creative multimedia environment that is "replete with stories" (3). As a result, manga's mass cultural impact within Japan has attracted the rest of the world's attention, with fans first sprouting in surrounding (East) Asian countries, then in Europe, and finally in North America.

Like with anime, there are multiple reasons for manga's popularity in the West, but it is generally agreed that a large part of their allure is the fact that they are easy to access,

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<sup>17</sup> Schodt makes a lot of (well-intentioned) generalizations like this that are, although sweeping, nevertheless still noteworthy and somewhat rooted in truth.

<sup>18</sup> Poitras points out that the link from manga to anime is comparable to the one between novels and cinematic adaptations of the same story. This tie to traditional literature is significant, as Japan today, on top of being extremely literate, is "one of the only countries in the world where comic books have become a full-fledged medium of expression, on par with novels and films, and read by what often seems to be everyone" (Schodt vii). MacWilliams in 2015 cites that over 90% of anime borrows from manga in one form or another.

<sup>19</sup> Napier says some estimates go so far as to suggest that 40% of the material published in Japan is in manga form, although this figure has definitely grown since her book's publication in 2001.

inexpensive forms of entertainment that are meant to be enjoyed — in other words, pure pleasure commodities. MacWilliams writes,

Manga and anime are not fine arts on display in a museum; they are popular art forms created by an industrialized, corporate, capitalistic culture found on TV, in the movie theater, at the local bookstore, or in manga cafes (*manga kissa*) . . . Manga and anime attract fans, both Japanese and Western, . . . because of what Jean Marie Bouissou has called their “aesthetic of excess, conflict, imbalance, and overt sensuality.” (5)

Thus, animanga, as avidly consumed pop cultural exports, are an increasingly important part of the global culture industry. Their synergistic relationship plays a key part within both modern Japanese visual culture and the world’s extensive mediascape and entertainment market.

To go even further back into the genealogy of this multimedia form, a seminal source for animanga is Japanese legends, history, novels, ancient plays, and recited tales. A brief history of the nation’s conceptualization of the modern literature in conversation with Japan’s veneration of the West — and, by implication, its eurocentrism — is needed to understand its impact on animanga, and vice versa. According to Ivan Morris, contemporary literature in Japan, despite its “remote ancestry,” may be regarded as “a new literature, scarcely beyond its formative stage” (9). The reasons for its relative novelty mainly derive from the fact that the Meiji Restoration (1868), which ended two and a half centuries of national isolation (*Sakoku*), also marked a sharp departure in Japanese writing, as it did in practically everything else. Morris comments,

In few countries is the dividing line that marks the beginning of the “modern” period so clear as in Japan. . . . . In the years that followed [the Restoration], every effort was made to abolish feudalism, . . . . . and to turn Japan into a centralized nation-state on the European model. . . . . In the effort to become “modern,” countless old customs, habits, and heritages were scrapped in a wave of cultural iconoclasm. (10)

Following 1868, every effort was made to adopt the techniques and aesthetics of the West (mostly Europe), from which Japan had been relatively isolated for the previous two hundred and fifty years. The Meiji period would soon witness Japan frantically trying to absorb everything from the outside world in hopes that foreign influence would turn the country into a modern nineteenth-century state.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Morris falsely claims Japan intended to modernize so that it “might be able to deal with foreign nations on a basis of equality and, above all, to avoid the fate that had overtaken other

The massive cumulative effect on Japan's literature due to all these immense changes cannot be overestimated. Morris explains, "In the 1880's the trickle of Western works grew into a stream and, by the end of the century, into a mighty torrent which is still continuing in the present day. Several of the most gifted writers of the Meiji period devoted much of their energies to the translation of one or more European authors; indeed, it was mainly through these translations that the reading public first became acquainted with the various aspects of modern fiction" (12). A good example that demonstrates this dramatic shift in Japanese literature is the country's transition from a highly exclusive literary language only used by the ruling class to a common literary vernacular that eventually trickled down to the increasingly more literate lower (and eventually middle) classes. The Japanese language up until this point had "undergone a continuous development since the earliest times," meaning "modern fiction derives *stylistically* from classical and medieval writing," but it was the Restoration that directly brought the Japanese literary language closer to that of the ordinary, everyday speech it is known for today (Morris 9, my emphasis). The most major change, however, can be traced from the foreign works of Western literature introduced into Japan after about 1860 and among certain important writers of the Meiji period. During this period, they were encouraged to break away from "sterile traditions and to describe in a more or less realistic way the brave new world that they saw growing up about them" (Morris 12).<sup>21</sup> With such "progress" rooted in eurocentrism and Western superiority, it is unsurprising that the Japanese texts produced during this maladroit period of European assimilation failed in their hopes of straightforward imitation. In fact, Keene even states that the Western world found these earnest attempts at following in its literary footsteps "distinctly comic" (98) due to Japanese misinterpretation of European literary models.<sup>22</sup> These early texts showcase "the dilemma" Japanese writers faced "at the same time with an avalanche of new ideas and new ways of expressing them, and with the problem of how much, if anything, to retain [of] the old ideas and ways" (Keene 98). Thus, it is safe, albeit sweepingly general, to

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materially backward Asian countries" (11), which fails to account for Imperial Japan's rigid Pan-Asianist agenda against its neighboring Asian countries. The "fate" Morris casually deflects from explaining further here is centuries of colonialism.

<sup>21</sup> What Morris means by "realistic way" here is Western literary realism, which was seen as modern and progressive as opposed to pre-modern Japan's more lyrical poetic style.

<sup>22</sup> There is an unspoken sense of racial superiority in Western reception of Japan's "failed" attempts to assimilate European aesthetics. For example, Morris amusingly cites Japanese critic Mr. Yoshida Kenichi, who points out that Leo Tolstoy's novella "Resurrection" was "considered to be merely a romantic tale of unhappy love" when it was first introduced to Japan (12).

say that Japan from the mid-nineteenth century onwards has tried very hard to exemplify the West and its cultural aesthetics, as evidenced through its swift but awkward venture in adopting Europe's well-established literary practices. Japan's desire to model itself after the West persists to this day, even in literary terms: One may thereby infer that there is an underlying trace of this tendency to venerate and prioritize Western literature over their native texts even now,<sup>23</sup> which fundamentally roots modern Japanese literature to a eurocentric function that comes from a well-documented history of cultural repression borne from the Meiji Restoration.

However, despite the Restoration's significant national upheaval, it is often the *degree* of Westernization in post-Meiji Japan that makes the specifically Japanese qualities stand out. One need not look further than the distinct stylization, content, and themes modern Japanese texts illustrate about everyday life in Japan (e.g., "the social position of women, the geisha system and its ramifications, the attitude to authority, the Buddhist sense of fatalism, the absence of any sense of sin regarding suicide") to perceive a sense of cultural and stylistic continuity from the pre-Meiji Era (Morris 32). In the case of contemporary Japanese literature, there was indeed an almost complete break from premodern literary practices and tradition. Yet, like a shoddily amputated limb, the fissure of which was then gilded over in a panic using European influence, there still remains in the very point of that imperfect dislocation the distant, yet still preserved, echoes of the past literary era. It is therefore easy to imagine how this unique blend of intercultural diversity exemplified by modern literature in Japan also now bleeds into the more recent but altogether derivative art forms of animanga, which then also gets sent back and forth between the three. Hence, there is an undeniable genealogical link between modern Japanese literature, as well as its Western intercultural exchange, and present animanga mass media. The latter's combined exponential growth as an international pop culture and economic phenomenon continues from a long literary and folkloric legacy that both continues the Meiji Restoration's rapid modernization and distinctly branches off from it, entangling the genealogy even further. To apply Bortolotti and Hutcheon's idea of homology wholesale onto this multimedia interchange is therefore difficult, albeit still somewhat helpful in understanding some aspects of the three mediums' interrelatedness with one another through biological terms.

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<sup>23</sup> Napier mentions Japanese people's deliberate efforts to "evade the fact that they are Japanese" by quoting Studio Ghibli director Hayao Miyazaki to the effect that "the Japanese hate their own faces" (25).

## The Elegiac Mode in Address of “Cultural Odorlessness”

As a result of Japan’s adopted eurocentrism and rapid Westernization after the Meiji Restoration, questions of whether anime, manga, and Japanese modern literature’s status as “true” and “purely authentic” Japanese products are brought up consistently.<sup>24</sup> Even as early as 1962, Morris asks about the latter: “To what extent, then, is current Japanese literature influenced by that of the West?” (24). If indeed one only needs to go back a little more than a century to 1868 and Japan’s rapid Westernization to get a general understanding of the contemporary Japanese literary scene, as Morris claims, then the opinion has been made that perhaps the country’s literature is not wholly its own. Even further, Morris seems to suggest that *all* modern Japanese literature is essentially an imitation of Western literary practices: “[T]he fact remains that the modern Japanese novel and story are essentially Western forms; in so far as literary influence has played a part, most Japanese prose writers are indebted to modern Western literature far more than to their own country’s classical tradition” (25). These same concerns regarding the extent of Japanese literature’s “Japanese-ness” also come up in animanga discourse through the controversial concept of *mukokuseki*, which literally translates to “cultural odorlessness,” and means “lacking state and/or national identity.” Amongst some of the main arguments for *mukokuseki* is the view that even though animanga is geographically made in Japan, the many worlds of animanga, which are drawn wholly out of the creators’ “stateless” imaginations, occupy an alternative “space that is not necessarily coincident with that of Japan,” therefore existing outside of any past or present cultural context (Napier 24). Although no one denies animanga is inextricably linked with the Japanese culture that manufactures them, many like and even prefer to interpret animanga through *mukokuseki* due to its appealing neutrality and abstraction of “de-Japanizing” animanga characters, which implicitly “offers up an alternative world to its Japanese audience” by “[evading] the fact that they are Japanese” (Napier 25). Some even claim an equalizing, postcolonial and/or “postethnic,” appeal to *mukokuseki*, since its concept of “de-Japanification” allows for a “safe” and “stateless fantasy space” wherein both Japanese and non-Japanese can “revel in a safe form of Otherness” that then enables a unique sort of identity exploration that is “unmatched” anywhere else (26-27). A central aspect of

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<sup>24</sup>This statement is historically problematic. As with all cultures, there has arguably never been a “pure” Japanese one, even during the country’s period of isolation (*Sakoku*). For more information on Japan’s (consistent) connections to the outside world in ancient times and beyond, please refer to Frankopan.

*mukokuseki* posits that virtually all animanga texts depict human and/or anthropomorphized characters that are visibly “not Japanese” — a detail many audience members, particularly white ones new to the medium, often point out, asking why the characters look “Western” with their light skin, multicolored hair, and bright, non-black eyes. The eurocentric ignorance and racism embodied in these comments are obvious: While many anime do include figures without the expected darker skin, hair, and eyes of the stereotypical Japanese, these universal human attributes are not exclusively “Western” styles of figuration. Napier therefore prefers to see anime characters as “drawn in what might be called ‘anime’ style,” which ranges from “the broadly grotesque drawings of characters with shrunken torsos and oversize heads of some anime comedy” to “the elongated figures with huge eyes and endless flowing hair that populate many romance and adventure stories” (25).<sup>25</sup> With these points in mind, it does not take much critical brain power or sensitivity to recognize that *mukokuseki* as a concept is idealistic at best and offensively colorblind — with undertones of racism — at worst, especially when considering the “non-Japanese” animanga fans (of which there are many) who are also victims of Japanese and Western colonization and thus cannot afford to “de-Japanify” the multimedia they consume. At no point in her book does Napier account for this key demographic, nor does she provide any of the thoughts or feelings of such victims regarding *mukokuseki*’s supposed “postcolonialism.” Hence, this paper is inclined to not only reject its very idea, but also argue against *mukokuseki*’s “neutral” renunciation of anime, manga, and Japanese literature as authentic Japanese products.

This discussion of *mukokuseki* echoes back to the aforementioned disputes regarding modern Japanese literature’s “origins” and “Japanese-ness,” but these points do not consider premodern Japanese literary and narrative elements that remained even after the Meiji Restoration’s rapid Westernization. In particular, there is what Napier refers to as the elegiac mode, a premodern form of Japanese storytelling that strongly persists in the present. With its “lyrical sense of mourning often connected with an acute consciousness of a waning traditional culture,” as well as its “implications of loss, grief, and absence,” the term “elegiac” recalls ancient poems about death, written in a “style of lamentation” tinged with “a wider sense of

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<sup>25</sup> While many anime characters do possess, for example, blonde or light brunette hair — physical features most commonly associated with white people — the vast majority of them have even more bizarre hair colorings such as pink, green, or blue, which no human being is naturally born with — a point that immediately problematizes the idea of *mukokuseki* when remembering the fact that North American animated characters are also given similarly “unnatural” features, but their ethnicities (or rather their whiteness) are never put into question.

national mournfulness and melancholy, perhaps mixed with nostalgia” (Napier 31-32). This sad, wistful mood is inherent in Japanese cultural expression, dating back to the long lyric tradition in premodern Japanese literature and storytelling, particularly in poetry and drama: “The lyric and elegiac have long been a part of Japanese culture, providing an emotional underpinning to poetry, *Kabuki* theater, and many other forms of Japanese high culture” (Napier 220). The mode is emphatically intertwined with poetry and romance, as well as a celebration of transience amidst the bittersweet pleasures that can be derived from the passing of love, death, youth, memory, and beauty. In the past, this mode has been frequently linked to the natural world, which explains why much of premodern Japanese literature’s focus is on nature, an object that still remains today.<sup>26</sup> The elegiac’s persistence throughout the modern age is nothing short of extraordinary, especially when considering the Meiji Era’s initial attempts to erase Japan’s cultural and artistic heritage in favor of European aesthetics. Keene writes, “The survival of old forms [like the elegiac] would scarcely have been predicted at certain times in the past eighty years when it seemed as though European literature and ideas would overwhelm the native culture” (17). Thus, as anthropologist Marilyn Ivy puts it, contemporary Japan has developed into a culture that “is on the cutting edge of consumerist and capitalist development,” while also possessing a tendency for “thematizing loss” in the modern world (Napier 220).<sup>27</sup> Rather than vanish as the country shifted into modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the elegiac mode and practice only deepened, as evidenced in animanga’s longtime and frequent use of Japanese historical settings, themes, icons, names, etc. as material for its content, infusing it with a specific cultural “odor” that cannot be dismissed. It is the elegiac’s unification of mourning and irretrievable loss in animanga that also allows for an accompanying sense of nostalgia and, most notably, the desire to commemorate and remember, effectively undercutting *mukokuseki*’s veneer of “statelessness” and postcolonial neutrality.

### ***BSD, Adaptation, and The Faint Glimmers Left Behind***

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<sup>26</sup> For example, the changing of the seasons is a common theme in premodern Japanese literature for describing an abstract feeling of transience. Thus, the classical Japanese expression of ephemerality *mono no aware* (“the sadness of things”) is often connected with natural objects like *sakura* (Japanese cherry blossoms) or water (e.g. Katsushika Hokusai’s “The Wave”).

<sup>27</sup> What is exactly “lost” in the modern sense is amorphous and dependent on context, as well as often thematized through an obsession with a personal and usually problematic past. For many other Japanese, however, this idea of loss comes from “the broader past of the nation itself that is lost and must be reclaimed,” whether because of casualties acquired from geopolitical disasters, industrial modernization, war, and/or other foreign conflicts (Napier 233).



It is with this reflection of the Japanese elegiac mode that this paper now shifts to consider the case of Kafka Asagiri and Sango Harukawa's *Bungou Stray Dogs (BSD)*. Regarding *mukokuseki*, scholars like Napier tend to only address animanga of the stereotypically "odorless" variety — in other words, works that, whether deliberately or not, try to have little to no references to its own "Japanese-ness," at least on the surface.<sup>28</sup> While it is true not all animanga may be considered elegiac, *BSD* brings its main themes of sentimentality, nostalgia, and melancholy to the focal point: The series is inspired by a desire to honor and pay tribute to some of Japan's most beloved authors, along with the turbulent period they lived in and helped define through their literature. However, though inspired by literary history, the series' plot does not at all commit itself to plain historiography. When discussing other animanga that similarly feature socio-historical subjects and overtones like *BSD*, of which there are many, Napier observes that they often "add some elements of their own" by evoking thematic reflection on "the quintessential elements of traditional Japanese culture, such as the soaring roofs of a farm house or the glittering horizontals of wet rice paddies," which "almost take on a life of their own, evoking a hyperreal alternative past that is cleaner, tidier, and more beautiful than what actually might have existed" (159). None of these "rich renderings" are necessarily historically accurate but present "history as vision" through both "selective and even ideological" portrayals that "still contain universal images of great power and resonance" (160). Following this same principle, *BSD* also merges the historical, literary, and fictional together into what some critics have said to be an act of disrespect against the real people and events on which it is based.

Because of the many liberties it takes, *BSD* has been accused of spreading misinformation, false narratives, and sullyng the names of very real human beings, many of whom still have living descendants who never consented to their loved ones' likenesses being depicted so brazenly — and through such strange, inaccurate, and often contradictory portrayals. Similar to the issues raised during the process of adapting a classic novel to film, "where often a well-known work of great literature is adapted for the cinema and expectations about the 'fidelity' of the screen version come to the fore," these critiques display an "almost unconscious prioritizing" of the historical writers, who are deemed the "original," and therefore more

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<sup>28</sup> Napier in particular pays much attention to animanga set in alternate realities outside of Japan, known as the *isekai* genre (literally "other world"). Yet, even these cases, such as anime set in "stateless" outer space or an unspecified techno-dystopian future, still carry "Japanese-esque" aspects that are difficult to ignore.

preferable, to the *BSD* characters (Whelehan 4). Hence the main purpose of comparison becomes the measurement of the latter's success in conveying the supposed core meanings and values of the real-life authors, their lives, and literature; however and whatever this core "spirit" or "essence" may be is inevitably arbitrary and impossible to discern, though often the ones who fail to see that are also the most adamant on its validity. It is the prioritization of a theoretically "original" source that leads people to claim *BSD* should not exist at all, as its characters "don't share everything in common with their real-life counterparts" and so "[t]here are a number of discrepancies in the series' setting that contradict historical fact" (Asagiri 170). These critiques are not altogether unjustified, as designing the animanga incarnations based on some of Japan's most revered authors who do not look anything like their real-life counterparts may seem in bad taste. For example, *BSD* incorporates much dark, existential humor to pair with its cast of characters' traumatic backgrounds, the most striking being the character Osamu Dazai, a self-declared "suicidal maniac" (Kosaka 12). *BSD* Dazai's suicidality is a reference to his real-life counterpart of the same name who, on top of dying by suicide in 1948, is also well-known for his several other disastrous failed attempts.<sup>29</sup> When met with this portrayal, people are understandably offended and concerned, most especially Western audiences unfamiliar with real-life Dazai's mixed reputation as an author in his home country and the common Japanese tendency to joke about suicide.<sup>30</sup> These concerns with *BSD* Dazai, along with many other points, raise important discussions on historical legacy, authorial intent, and the very nature of memorialization, but it is also important to note that Asagiri and Harukawa never swear an oath of complete authenticity. Instead, they wish to pay simple tribute to the authors they reimagine, wanting to thank their involvement in shaping Japan's literary world in hopes that "more people find interest in literature with this series" (*PixiVision*). *BSD* is an honorary testament: an attempt

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<sup>29</sup> See Alan Wolfe's *Suicidal Narrative in Modern Japan: The Case of Dazai Osamu* (1990).

<sup>30</sup> Suicide in Japan is most often associated with the practice of *seppuku*: a traditional form of ritual suicide via disembowelment historically practiced by the elite *samurai* warrior and military class to demonstrate one's purity, amongst other noble values. *Seppuku*'s influence still persists throughout Japan in the modern day, as demonstrated through author Haruki Murakami's commentary in the Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories*: "Occasions calling for the physical slicing open of the belly may have ceased to exist. But the readiness to commit *seppuku* would still seem to be functioning as an aesthetic influence on the Japanese psyche. In the world of the contemporary salaryman and bureaucrat, one often hears a person say 'I've got to cut my belly open' or 'They're gonna make me cut my belly open' to mean he is going to take responsibility for something" (xviii).

to reconcile the past with the present in hopes of sparking more interest, research, and overall appreciation for the authors and narratives it adapts into the storyline. It does not promise, nor is it bound to, anything else. Addressing some of his audience's common concerns, Asagiri says in his afterword to the *BSD* light novel *Osamu Dazai and the Dark Era* (2014), "There are a number of discrepancies in the series' setting that contradict historical fact . . . I have no qualms with readers treating [the characters] as entities independent from the actual history" (170). *BSD* is not and has never aimed to be a historiographical text. Asagiri and Harukawa have always embraced their work's unique use of adaptation and their "virtuoso approach to literature, where the artist attempts to do essentially the same thing as his predecessors but in a slightly different way," which is "characteristic of Japan" and dates back to premodern literary tradition (Keene 15). *BSD*'s blending of the historical with the literary captures its real-life subjects' essences yet still manages to subvert them through its inimitable presentation, calling forth a cultural specificity and Japanese "odor" that other animanga (uselessly) attempt to shy away from in favor of "neutrality" — really a form of eurocentric projection. *BSD* thereby differs from these quasi-avoidant types of animanga because, rather than subduing its Japanese heritage and discouraging any kind of critical reflection on its offbeat mixture of pre and postmodern elements, the series fully embraces, as well as invites celebratory discussion of, its intercultural multimedia hybridity. This self-awareness of its own multimedia eccentricity makes understanding and considering *BSD*'s intercultural context crucial.

These age-old concerns about authorial respect and accuracy also relate well to literary adaptation theory and its discourses of fidelity; ergo a brief but deeper discussion on some of its fallacies may also prove to be helpful. Speaking on some of adaptation studies' contemporary dilemmas, Whelehan says, "Although the study of literary adaptations on film and TV is becoming more common and indeed more 'acceptable' as a feature of English and/or Media Studies in higher education, it is still surrounded by knee-jerk prejudice about the skills such study affords, its impact on the value and place of the literary 'original' and the kind of critical approach it demands" (3). Though *BSD* is not a straightforward adaptation of literary work(s) — which is undoubtedly a chief source of anxiety for its naysayers — the problems associated with studying the process the story undergoes as it passes from fictional text to animation/graphic narrative are identical to the ones Whelehan brings up, particularly in "making decisions about giving the 'appropriate' amount of attention to each medium, and fostering the skills specific to

each form,” as well as “teasing out our own and others' conscious and unconscious prejudices about this kind of 'hybrid' study” (3). *BSD*'s strongest asset as a virtuosic, ultra-hybridic adaptation is arguably both a double-edged sword and wild card, as Asagiri and Harukawa's intention of celebration is so easily — and so often — misinterpreted as insolence. Yet, while it is true that a large part of the “manifest pleasure (and risk)” of dark horse adaptations like *BSD* “lies in their relation of proximity to (or distance from) their adapted texts,” it is equally true that what adaptation theory calls fidelity to the “original” can “be seen as irrelevant to the actual evaluation of the ‘success’ of an adaptation” (Bortolotti & Hutcheon 444-445). In adaptation theory, it is recommended that adaptations be taken as independent works on their own, separate from their “source,” as they can thereby be judged accordingly. Bortolotti and Hutcheon add, “[T]he language of ‘original’ and ‘source’ so treasured by fidelity discourse” suggests “the (post-)Romantic (and capitalist) valuing of the originating creative artist-genius,” which “explains in part the denigration of adaptations: specifically, the relegation of the adapter to journeyman status in Hollywood (and elsewhere) and of the adaptation itself to the trash heap of the secondary and imitative in critical evaluative discourse” (445). Traces of this denigration and (un)critical practice of prescribing cultural and artistic precedence (and, implicitly, inherent value) to the “source” to which the adaptations are then judged either faithful or unfaithful — that is, good or bad — can be found in some of the discourse surrounding *BSD*'s “right” to exist. Despite fans tirelessly insisting there needs to at least be some sort of “fidelity” to the “original” authors and texts, the series has no “source” because *BSD* in itself is a subversive “adaptation” of literary history.

These complaints quickly fall short when considering the aforementioned multimedia genealogy, as well as the complicated intercultural literary history that informs the series. Firstly, there is no “one” or “primary” source that singularly accounts for *BSD*'s creation, as both its inception and continued execution rely heavily on multiple “sources,” which in turn also rely on several others. Even though *BSD*'s protagonist Atsushi can be traced to the real-life author of the same name and his work “Tiger-Poet,” the simple connection is a basic one, as that sole association, though undoubtedly foundational, reveals very little about Atsushi the character, let alone his depth and complex development as *BSD*'s narrative unfolds. Obviously, the real-life Nakajima could not transform into a white tiger, nor was he an orphan, and he certainly did not possess any of *BSD* Atsushi's physical features, which includes, amongst other striking

attributes, spiky silver hair and segmental heterochromia consisting of purple on the top half of his iris and yellow at the bottom. All these details are uniquely in-canon facts about *BSD* Atsushi that are established in the first chapter and episode, signaling a deliberate *variation* on real-life Nakajima, not imitation. Thus, *BSD* Atsushi stands on his own as both an “original” character and separate entity bolstered and contextualized by a rich literary history, but not defined by it. Asagiri and Harukawa deliberately take from numerous transverse springs of inspiration to enhance *BSD*’s impact and narrative allure, masterfully combining intertextuality with the metafictional. Their portrayals of *BSD*’s authors and subsequent texts are neither straightforward nor even conventional in their adaptation but are, rather, entirely new narrative instruments reimagined and amplified according to their story’s independent intents and purposes.

Secondly, in *BSD*’s case, even if the real-life literary history and the animanga are emphatically separate, therefore eliminating the possibility of either taking precedent, Asagiri and Harukawa vehemently encourage their fans to look back on the series’ many inspirations in an age where anime, manga, and Japanese literature coexist. *BSD* constantly brings attention to its own virtuosity by inviting its audience to recognize “some of the practical realities involved in producing a commercially successful [animanga] — such as pruning culturally anachronistic features, trimming sophisticated narrative strategies into a recognizable popular film genre which is, in turn, an adaptation of other films, with intertextual links with its contemporary . . . counterparts” (Whelehan 4). Namely, in addition to its cast of characters inspired by literature, *BSD* also contains scattered historical and literary references — events and writers from the past three to four hundred years. These “Easter eggs” are numerous and cleverly ingrained into *BSD*’s narrative — to the point where they can be overwhelming, with no consistency or specific reason for most of them in sight. Since the series’ genesis, there is not one body of official work or ultimate archive in which all the references are cataloged, listed, and explained, making it difficult to keep up with Asagiri and Harukawa’s witty and resourceful storytelling. However, regardless of this sometimes chaotic whirlwind of arbitrary references, their randomized abundance also brings forth much versatility and adds to the series’ charm and celebratory nature: “[M]y belief is that the faint glimmers that these [authors] left behind for future generations . . . are the very nature of a great author . . . I feel as though this series wouldn’t be able to live up to its name — *Bungou* — without these glimmers” (Asagiri 2014). Small allusions are trivial and made in passing, while others refer to major historical events and form

the basis of complete, ongoing, and fully developed aspects of the series. For example, the main plot happens in the port town of Yokohama, well known for Commodore Matthew C. Perry's (1794-1858) momentous arrival in 1853 and 1854. Joined by a fleet of American warships, Perry demanded Japan abandon its policy of national seclusion (*Sakoku*) by opening up several of its ports for commerce, to which the reigning Tokugawa shogunate at the time agreed by signing the Treaty of Peace and Amity (1854). This event singlehandedly ushered in the Meiji Restoration and a rapid onslaught of foreign influence and industrialization that followed Japan into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yokohama, in addition to being a historically-important city and symbol of Japanese modernization, is also known to have housed several famous authors during their lifetimes and active careers, making it a known epicenter for literature and the arts. Thus, past and present become intertwined and reflected in one another through *BSD*'s countless "glimmers," not only (and literally) setting a rich contextual foundation for the main storyline, but also equipping its narrative with a uniquely anachronistic, and thereby anarchistic, premise.<sup>31</sup> These combined historical and literary references allow Asagiri and Harukawa to portray an intriguing, kaleidoscopic story that not only encourages others to be interested in the Japanese literature, but to also be inspired by their lasting, ever exhilarating impact. *BSD* is therefore not and has never aimed to be a history or English lesson; it is an imaginative tribute to history and to literature. The series itself is more than a collection of textbook examples or indexes of fun facts, for its very existence endeavors to praise and draw attention to Japanese writers who have been overshadowed by Western ones for far too long. The original stories,

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<sup>31</sup> The Yokohama in *BSD* is of the present day, as indicated by the state-of-the-art technology used by the characters such as the internet, artificial intelligence systems, espresso machines, robotics, etc. However, there is also a sense of narrative anachronism because the main characters exhibit characteristics, behaviors, and preferences their real-life counterparts were known for in their own time periods. The most basic example is the type of clothing and accessories the *BSD* characters wear: Some don traditional Japanese garb like *kimonos* and *geta* clogs, which would have been what the historical figures themselves would be more familiar with in their own periods, even though now these clothes are rarely worn outside of designated cultural contexts and spaces in present-day Japan. Other characters are also armed with classic Japanese weapons (hence, the *Armed Detective Agency*) like *katana* swords to evoke *samurai*, though of course it would be impractical (not to mention dangerous) for someone working a typical detective job today to be in possession of such weapons. The anachronisms in *BSD* also go beyond character design and fashion, resulting in much of the series' more subtextually comedic moments like showing Osamu Dazai using a flip-phone.

along with its storytellers, are in the spotlight once again — not faint glimmers, but brilliant illuminations that blaze through vast distances across time, space, and the future.

It is for these reasons that *BSD*'s wide-ranging success cannot just be measured monetarily or through its large viewership, as its popularity has also brought substantial new attention towards the literature and authors from which it derives. As Kinko states, "One facet of the growing interest in anime and manga is a growing interest in Japan" because "[f]ans want to have a greater understanding of the shows they enjoy, so they study foods, geography, history, clothing, martial arts, contemporary pop culture, etiquette, and any other aspect of Japanese society that may catch their fancy" (65). Decades after their heydays, — most of them being in the early to mid-twentieth century — the authors and their works are revitalized and given another chance at the current mainstream through *BSD*. One of the best examples of this self-serving and reflexive initiative towards the Japanese literary realm and mass media in general is the aforementioned Osamu Dazai and his *BSD* counterpart. In *BSD*, Dazai is the second character introduced right after Atsushi, the protagonist.<sup>32</sup> On top of being a fan favorite, he is a member of the Armed Detective Agency and is the reason Atsushi manages to pass the entrance exam required to join its employ. He serves as one of the series' most important deuterogamists, acting as guide, mentor, and antihero (amongst other roles) throughout the plot, making him only second to Atsushi in terms of narrative hierarchy. Though most Japanese *BSD* fans would have certainly known about Dazai the famous Japanese writer, his artistry and literature are rarely recognized outside of his home country. However, since *BSD* has come out, two of real-life Dazai's most well-known novels *No Longer Human* (1948) and *The Setting Sun* (1947) have become some of the most popular and well-read books across social media platforms and readership communities worldwide.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps coincidentally, (though perhaps not), there have also been a slew of new adaptations and Dazai-related works that have popped up since *BSD*'s debut, including two films that came out in 2019, an *isekai* manga series that has been recently

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<sup>32</sup> He is introduced mid-suicide attempt via drowning in a nearby river. A literate, native Japanese audience would have immediately caught this bizarre introduction as a reference to real-life Dazai even before he announces his name once Atsushi fishes him out of the water.

<sup>33</sup> On top of Dazai's well-established fame in Japan, *The New York Times* has noted in an article called "Osamu Dazai, With Help From TikTok, Keeps Finding New Fans" that he has acquired thousands of new readers during the past few years, as content creators on Tik Tok, Instagram, YouTube, online book clubs, etc. have consistently put both him and his books on the trending lists. Pop-culture newsletter *Dirt* even cites *BSD* as a direct instigator for Dazai's revived vogue in an article "Dead Novelist's Society: Osamu Dazai, BookTok's Problematic Fave."

adapted into anime, an ambitious three-volume horror retelling in manga form from the master horror artist Junji Itō, an award-winning Chinese musical, and much more.<sup>34</sup> Like *BSD*, all of these fresh, different versions of the 1948 novel pay tribute to Dazai’s storytelling and legacy as a writer, generating not just newfound intrigue and curiosity for the man who inspired it all, but also an unspoken appreciation for the story’s various changes and adaptations years after the author’s death. As both an adaptation and salutation to the real-life writers and their works, *BSD* succeeds in its simultaneous preservation and extension of these “glimmers” left behind, but not forgotten.

It is through this atypical virtuosity that *BSD* reveals itself to be a superlative product of the genealogy of literature, anime, and manga. The sum of its collective whole as a burgeoning new series (the parameters of which are still ever-changing) far exceeds anything measurable by the degree of proximity it may or may not have to its (nonexistent) “original” sources. As with many alternative works of its kind, *BSD* renders the matter of fidelity null and void due to the issue’s “less than useful evaluative aesthetic criterion” and stubborn insistence on arbitrary, ergo extraneous, degrees of proximity to an undefined and often problematized “source” that, in this case, cannot even be traced because it simply does not exist (Bortolotti & Hutcheon 445). To track down a definitive “common origin” in *BSD* then takes away from its own originality and innovation as a contemporary hybrid text; claiming Asagiri and Harukawa are disrespectful to the real-life authors and their works would be the same as admitting to illiteracy and a reductionist capacity for critical thinking — similar to citing the immeasurable body of modern Japanese literary canon as the mere precursor to the equally vast domain of animanga. *BSD* might therefore be seen as a self-reflexive celebration of the multimedia genealogy: subversive, intercultural, and a weird amalgamation of both modernity and the past. In its contemporaneous celebration of the fictional, the historical, and the imaginative, *BSD* affirms two of its most attractive qualities — the potential in creative virtuosity, as well as the series’ chance to tell and retell some of the world’s greatest stories again and again, and again.

### **Critiquing the West and the Global Literary Canon**

In addition to these scattered historical and literary references — perhaps the quality that invites the most scholarly interest to the series — *BSD* also presents clear and iconic imagery from history and literature that sheds critical light on the global literary canon at large,

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<sup>34</sup> All of these may be found in the Works Cited and Consulted list.



particularly its eurocentrism. Specifically, the series draws attention to world literature's biased prioritization of Western texts and writers, as well as its implicit self-establishment as the default academic and literary standard through colonization and white hegemony. In Japan's case, Keene outlines the country's reputation of supposedly "copying" the West and mimicking their aesthetics, especially in literature, which reveals an unbalanced cultural hierarchy that then reaffirms Western narratives as the global precedent by using these unfounded misconceptions. An element of racism and academic elitism also accompanies the canonical reading of these texts in relation to the global literary sphere, which *BSD* then challenges by drawing attention to the (sometimes outrageous, oftentimes catastrophic) clashes between Japan and the West, as well as some of the cultural anxieties that prevailed across Japan during the early stages of the Meiji Restoration and beyond.

As mentioned in my introduction, *BSD* succeeds on a commercial level mostly through its oddball premise of featuring and honoring Japanese writers and their literature in its manga and anime adaptations; the series deliberately capitalizes on each medium's worldwide mass consumption and uses it like a sort of ultramodern form of advertisement for the authors and literature alongside *BSD*'s main storyline. Unlike the classic texts that inspire *BSD*, which have, at least in terms of sales and revenue, declined in popularity as the works and their authors become older and more passé in the mainstream public eye, the series has consistently gained new and dedicated followers within a short amount of time, resulting in a positive reception by many. This suggests at least a peaked — if not previously dormant — interest in the Japanese literature *BSD* draws from, which fundamentally challenges the eurocentrism found in the global literary sphere's authorization of Western texts as the default canon.

Yet, on a more basic, subdued level, *BSD* achieves subtle, literary-oriented critique by reimagining some of modern Japanese literature's most active authors, as well as several of their most relevant works that address and criticize Western bias. Asagiri and Harukawa present a primary example through Japanese literary master Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1886-1965), whose *BSD* counterpart is, predictably, inspired by the real-life writer and his works — in particular the ones poking fun at his fellow countrymen's vacuous and unmindful craze for the West: In *BSD*, the character Junichirou Tanizaki has a little sister named Naomi (though it is not confirmed whether they are biologically related). The idea for Naomi comes from real-life Tanizaki's 1925 novel of the same name *Naomi* (*Chijin no Ai*, sometimes translated as *A Fool's Love*). Said to be a more

comical adaptation of W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1915), *Naomi* was written in light of Meiji Era Japan's social concerns and frequent problems with modernization, most notably its heedless attempt at Western assimilation. Tanizaki's novel tells of a clownish and pathetic man Jōji and his gradual obsession with a waitress curiously named Naomi.<sup>35</sup> He first meets her at a Western-style café and is immediately smitten because of her "Eurasian features" and "un-Japanese" mannerisms (Keene 101). Jōji describes Naomi as a girl who has "definitely something Western about her appearance . . . [A]nd it's not only her face — even her body has a distinctly Western look when she's naked . . . At the time, I could only imagine the beauty of her limbs from the stylish way she wore her *kimono*" (Tanizaki 1). By contrast, Jōji is "ashamed of his shortness, dark complexion, protruding teeth — all typically Japanese features" (Keene 101). The two eventually enter into a torrid love affair that leaves Jōji, much like Japan after the wave of rapid Westernization, humiliated and monetarily capsized, but, even after enduring much abuse and betrayal, he finds he still cannot extricate himself from Naomi, almost as if their relationship is unavoidably resolute. Tanizaki's metaphor, although an exaggerated and humorous caricature, is very tongue-in-cheek yet altogether scathing in its critique: "[Jōji] feels it somehow an honour even to be insulted by his European-looking mistress, and the thought that he possesses her fills him with pride, even when he sees her coarsely made up, and looking for all the world like a Eurasian prostitute" (Keene 101-102). Keene adds, "Undoubtedly a feeling of racial inferiority existed and still exists in Japan, and Tanizaki's novel was an attempt to combat it, rather than a simple description" (102-103). The novel ends with the two lovers getting married and living together, though they tell everybody they are cousins.<sup>36</sup> In his novel's conclusion, Tanizaki emphasizes Jōji's "abject surrender" to Naomi through his pathetic acquiescence to her requests of having "whatever male [European] friends she chooses" and living as she pleases off his money so long as "she remains his wife" (Keene 101). Though meant to be satirical, Tanizaki clearly mocks his protagonist's irrational adulation of the West and internalized sense of inferiority about his own race. *Naomi* serves as a cautionary tale for Japanese readers who, like Jōji, considered themselves modern and progressively "Western"

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<sup>35</sup> Unlike most traditional Japanese names (like Jōji), Naomi's name is "written with three Chinese characters" and "Roman letters," which Tanizaki's hero thinks is "splendid" due to the fact that "it could be a Western name" (1).

<sup>36</sup> As expected, there was much controversy over *Naomi*'s explicit sadomasochism and fetishistic content, and it did not help that Tanizaki based Naomi on his own sister-in-law Seiko Ishikawa, whom he was obviously not married to.

without any self-reflection or sense of accountability. Similarly, in *BSD* the character Junichirou and his “sweet” (Kosaka 98) sister mimic that of Jōji and his exotic Naomi, including their relationship’s subtextual sadomasochism: Whenever the “siblings” appear in *BSD* they are almost always engaged in a sexually implicit act, with Naomi’s “overly intense displays of affection” leaving her brother blushing and “bending backward” to indulge her (Kosaka 90). Understandably, most fans find this pseudo-incestuous dynamic discomforting and plain weird, even with the historical context that real-life Tanizaki, amongst other sexual exploits, had an affair with his sister-in-law, whom he would have referred to as his actual sister through marriage but not blood. Hence, just as they did when the original book was first published during the chaotic years of the Meiji Restoration, Tanizaki and his Naomi have sparked multiple discourses — this time, in *BSD*’s twenty-first century fanbase. These socio-political discussions have followed the series since its debut, though over the years popular interest and debate has dwindled down to a lukewarm stalemate. Still, these same present-day discourses amongst the *BSD* fandom are almost identical to the ones that arose upon *Naomi*’s first publication almost a century ago. *BSD*’s Naomi is therefore a representative of the series’ many subtle yet layered historical and literary references now revived in a contemporary critical context, with unexpected twists and facetious jabs at both Japan and the West reminiscent of real-life Tanizaki’s sharp eye and sense of humor. The Tanizaki siblings’ recurring presence in *BSD*, though not central (they are, to the relief of many fans, not main characters), call back the Meiji Era’s focal topics concerning Japanese Westernization, thereby tactfully bridging the gap between these past and present discourses through the medium of the animanga.

*BSD* goes a step further from these subtle literary allusions in its criticism of the West by clearly linking blatant historical imagery to its author characters according to their nationalities.<sup>37</sup> Though *BSD* focuses mainly on modern Japanese authors, as part of its project of drawing more attention to them, other texts and writers from different countries are also integrated into the plot using the same virtuosic reimaginings and allusory channels Asagiri and Harukawa apply to the Japanese ones: After Chapter 12 in the manga and Episode 12 in the anime, acclaimed world-class authors from North America, England, and Russia are introduced into the narrative — all of them essentially antagonists from abroad who are said to “exist above the law” and cause the

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<sup>37</sup> In particular, the foreigners in *BSD* are heavily associated with their native countries and are sometimes simply referred to by addresses like “The Russian” (Fyodor Dostoyevsky) or “The French spy” (Paul Verlaine).

main characters a never-ending stream of problems (Asagiri 62). The first of these foreign arrivals comes in the form of the North American<sup>38</sup> Guild, a “secret society” (Asagiri 61) with elite members who “retain top roles in politics, finance, and military circles,” but “behind the curtain, they use their vast wealth and ‘abilities’ to engineer all manner of conspiracies . . . like the villains of some clichéd dime novel” (Asagiri 88). The self-reflexive, almost metatextual jab at the Guild being like the stereotypical bad guys from late nineteenth and early twentieth-century popular fiction is meant to be ironic, but it by no means reduces the group’s colossal impact on the plot. Led by F. Scott Fitzgerald,<sup>39</sup> the Guild abruptly arrives via helicopter and parks it on an adjoining street to the main characters’ headquarters (the Armed Detective Agency), effectively disrupting the flow of nearby traffic. Fitzgerald, uncaring of the disturbance he has caused and joined by two of his lackeys, proceeds to barge into the Agency and demands to speak to its president Yukichi Fukuzawa,<sup>40</sup> whom he constantly (mis)addresses as “President Fukuna . . . er, Fukuda . . .” (Asagiri 92) — a micro aggressively racist mistake he also uses on other Japanese characters who supposedly have difficult names to pronounce. As an antagonist, Fitzgerald is, at first glance, greedy, arrogant, and condescending, which are all attributes of the stereotypical rich white American businessman who is as ridiculously pompous as he is disrespectful towards Japanese values of humility and hospitality. Fitzgerald’s American background is overtly emphasized — almost to the point of satire — as he introduces himself as not just the leader of the Guild, which he modestly calls “a little group over in the Americas,” but also a person with “interests” in “three conglomerates, five hotels, a major airline, a rail company,” and, in the anime, he also has a university named after him (Asagiri 93). While his large-scale influence and overwhelming charisma is an implicit reference to real-life Fitzgerald’s legacy as an American author, — who indeed has a handful of institutions and organizations named after him, not to mention the respect of literary academia worldwide — *BSD* Fitzgerald also functions as an iconic representative of the West, along with its sociopolitical, economic, and racial power. Just like the Europeans coming into Japan at the start of the nineteenth century, Fitzgerald and the Guild infiltrate the Agency with huge amounts of money, manpower, thinly

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<sup>38</sup> The distinction between “America” and the “West” is important to note here; even though the Guild in *BSD* is mostly made up of American authors, Canadian L.M. Montgomery plays a significant role both in and outside the organization. Hence, the Guild is a *North American* group, not just American.

<sup>39</sup> Inspired by American author F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940).

<sup>40</sup> Inspired by Japanese *samurai* writer Yukichi Fukuzawa (1835-1901).

veiled prejudice, and, as is later found out, plans to incinerate Yokohama via explosives, with a whale-shaped airship planned to detonate above the city should the Japanese author characters not bend to their will.<sup>41</sup> Their arrival in the plot plunges the city and *BSD*'s main characters into a "three-way war" among the Agency, Port Mafia, Guild, and their special "skills" (Asagiri 124). Although initially enemies, Atsushi and the Agency must now (reluctantly) team up with their rival Port Mafia using their combined powers and assets to combat these new outside threats and protect Yokohama. Rather than surrendering to the all-powerful Guild, the Japanese ability users then engage in several battles with the North American ones, with each side demonstrating exceptional skills, tact, and intelligence that drags the war on to its bombastic, season finale showdown with the highest stakes imaginable. On every level, the Japanese authors prove themselves to be on par with their foreign enemies, which subtly goes against the eurocentric prejudices and stereotypes that claim Japanese literature to be a mere "copying" of the West. At first glance, this war between Gifted seems to be a plain metaphor for the realm of Japanese literature, in spite of its internal differences, coming together and going against the West to fight for figurative top dog, calling out the global literary sphere and its unjustified eurocentrism. Yet, Asagiri and Harukawa do not pursue that narrative route, as it would be an oversimplification of Japan and the West's shared and complex history of multicultural exchange since the Meiji Era. Instead of being diametrically opposed enemies swept up in polarized race and identity politics, the Japanese and Western authors in *BSD* eventually find common ground with each other through mutual experiences, hardships, and humanity, bringing to fruition the full meaning behind the series' title "*Bungou* Stray Dogs."

**[Fig 1.0: IMAGES WITHHELD FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS]**

To note, the Guild does not solely bring intercultural conflict or villainous characters. Perhaps out of a fondness for the world-renowned authors they represent, Asagiri and Harukawa take time to flesh out and expand on the personal motivations of some of its most significant

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<sup>41</sup> This airship (literally named *Moby Dick*, inspired by Herman Melville's 1851 novel of the same name) is a large aircraft in the shape of a whale, weighing "a grand total of 29 000 tonnes" (Asagiri 14). When dropped from an altitude of two kilometers, the *Moby Dick* is estimated to have a detonation force equivalent to "140 tons of TNT" going off, which would "dig out the soil and leave behind a massive crater" and kill everything within its impact radius (Asagiri 14), eerily similar to the two nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

members, such as Edgar Allan Poe,<sup>42</sup> who starts off as the Guild’s vengeful master architect but soon betrays them due to his close relationship with Agency member Edogawa Ranpo.<sup>43</sup> This “redemption” — or perhaps the more accurate word is “reconsideration” — of the North American authors even gets to a point where Atsushi and his friends must go to Fitzgerald for help later on in the storyline, this time in dealing with the Russian terrorist Fyodor Dostoyevsky and his group called The Rats in the House of the Dead.<sup>44</sup> Thus, even though the Agency and Port Mafia’s alliance in the three-way war of the Gifted does eventually result in Fitzgerald and the Guild’s defeat, it is neither a clean nor permanent victory, as Fitzgerald himself manages to survive their joint attack by hiding away in the depths of Yokohama’s Underground to bide his time and await an oncoming revelation. The underlying suggestion here is that Western influence, though not as superior as it claims itself to be, is in Japan to stay, and that total defeat of foreign enemies is not only impossible, but ultimately detrimental to establishing a sustainable peace in the face of a globalized future. The struggle between the literary stray dogs is not an epic decisive showdown to determine who between Japanese or Western literature “wins” (whatever that means); Asagiri and Harukawa do not wish to throw all the authors into petty competition, though they do acknowledge a natural rivalry amongst the sparring nations through the literature, which is perhaps inevitable in a world that insists on national borders. Despite this admission, *BSD* is nevertheless uninterested in declaring an ultimate “winner” of the global literary sphere. Rather, the series advocates for literary diversity that both recognizes and celebrates other non-Western texts, specifically Japanese ones, as valid contributors to the world’s collective canon — not copies or imitations, but powerful independent bodies of literature with their own complicated, fascinating histories that merit their own appreciation.

This push for literary diversity is all too quickly emphasized in *BSD* soon after the Guild is (temporarily) defeated, as it does not take long for new villains to arrive in Japan, this time coming from Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and beyond. Like the Guild, these foreigners are each represented in-universe by some of their respective nation’s most prized authors, such

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<sup>42</sup> Inspired by American Gothic and mystery author Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), who is much more favored in Japan than writers like Fitzgerald for his crime and detective stories.

<sup>43</sup> Inspired by Japanese mystery writer Ranpo Edogawa (1894-1965), whose (pen) name is a “Japanization” of Edgar Allan Poe’s, whom Ranpo greatly admired.

<sup>44</sup> Inspired by Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) and his book *The House of the Dead* (1860-1862). Dostoyevsky is a big name in Japan, as Russian literature was amongst one of the first ones to be translated into the native language and distributed across the country.

as Arthur Rimbaud<sup>45</sup> from France or Agatha Christie<sup>46</sup> from England, who are then backed by powerful organizations that apply enormous pressure and political violence on Japan and the *BSD* authors. In some form or another, all these alien threats to the nation attempt to seize martial control, whether motivated by money (*BSD* Fitzgerald wants to buy the Armed Detective Agency), politics (*BSD* Rimbaud is a French spy who comes to Japan to capture a dangerous military-engineered weapon for his country), or religious fanaticism (*BSD* Dostoyevsky wishes to eliminate all supernatural ability users because he sees them as sinful impurities) — all of which are, of course, common incentives behind the West’s interactions with Japan post-Meiji Era. As *BSD*’s plot progresses, these foreign influences colossally change the trajectory of its initially straightforward *shounen* premise of detectives versus mafia, bringing with them a spectrum of small to large-scale conflicts that echo international sentiments and key moments from world history, such as Japan’s rapid push to modernize during the Meiji Era, the Russo-Japanese war, the two world wars, the occupation of Allied military forces under General Douglas MacArthur, and the devastating nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Yet, rather than be weighed down by the national trauma and complex literary histories that inform it, *BSD* transcends these contexts to provide a more hopeful story that, on top of illustrating a shared human love for literature, also pays tribute to its focal Japanese authors and their texts that has long been denied them by the West. *BSD* therefore strives to celebrate traditional Japanese narrative elements from both old and new literature while also acknowledging the post-Meiji Era’s Western influence, although not venerating it to a eurocentric degree like the global literary canon has a knee-jerk tendency to do.

Thus, the Guild’s entrance into *BSD* marks a significant shift in the narrative’s course, as the series is no longer just operating from within a closed Japanese circuit and has now become irreversibly entwined with outside (Western) parties.<sup>47</sup> True to real life, Asagiri and Harukawa do not present a black-and-white depiction of the West and Japan, as, even though they are first introduced as antagonists, the North Americans later become accomplices, allies, and, in cases

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<sup>45</sup> Inspired by French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891).

<sup>46</sup> Inspired by English mystery writer Agatha Christie (1890-1976).

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, it is revealed that there never was a closed Japanese circuit to begin with, as the bounty on Atsushi’s head that sparks the series’ opening conflicts between the Armed Detective Agency and the Port Mafia was actually set in motion by the Guild prior to the story’s beginning. The Guild’s invisible yet nefarious presence at the start of *BSD* is a metaphor for North America’s looming influence over Japan and some of its underhanded domestic conflicts.

like Poe's, friends and loved ones. Their entrance into the world of *BSD*'s Japanese writers, though initially meant to be occupational, eventually develops into one of coexistence and mutual exchange that benefits (as well as deters) both sides, which more or less reflects the long and complicated history of modern Japanese literature's intercultural dealings with the West after the Meiji Era, and by extent the reality of an ever increasingly globalized planet. Beyond encapsulating Asagiri and Harukawa's virtuosic originality and cleverness, *BSD*'s combination of the intertextual with the metafictional irrevocably ties the series and its discourse to the modern Japanese literary tradition, which in turn extends to all of Japan in the twenty-first century, making it both an alternative window into the past and a mirror-like reflection of reality.

### **Closing Thoughts**

*BSD* is both a tribute and a counterattack against the eurocentric global literary sphere — an artistic piece to offset the wide gap between Japan and the West, yes, but, most importantly, it is also an act of kindness to a countless number of beloved Japanese authors who for so long have not received the praise and renown they deserve despite their lifelong commitments to what is now considered to be the world's collective literature. To encapsulate this worthy goal, in Chapter 36 of the manga and Episode 24 (the second season's finale), *BSD* Dazai says, “[Y]our anguish isn't yours alone. What should one do when what they want to be isn't what they're best at? Everyone fights, searching for the correct way to live their lives. What do they seek by fighting? How ought they live? No one can say. All we have is the right to waver, like stray dogs that have hit rock bottom” (Asagiri 90). Through Dazai's words, which are more for *BSD*'s audience than anyone else, Asagiri and Harukawa testify to the humanistic strength people derive from literature and its creators. In *BSD*, stories and writing are revealed to be intimate connection points between humans separated by time, space, and death: A poem, a book, or even just a line written over a century ago can still touch a person's soul now, whether they are hardcore animanga fans looking for an action-filled plot to stave off their boredom or English graduate students reading *BSD* from the West. While these stray souls cannot “vividly see” the authors that inform the series, they can nevertheless feel “closer to them and their existence, which [is] no more” (Asagiri 73). Thus, through its reimagined characters and their literary associations, *BSD* shows that the writers who inspire the series are neither forgotten, bygone figures nor numbers on a page doomed to oblivion. Like a legacy or memory passed on over time, their writings endure and are proof of humanity's most precious abilities and gifts.



Admittedly, even with this paper concluded I still do not consider myself a “worthy” animanga fan, although I do consume *BSD* with a fanaticism only matched (and complimented) by my love of books, as I am one of the numberless people “who need stories like oxygen still” (*PixiVision*). In an interview with *PixiVision*, Asagiri reveals his and Harukawa’s reasoning for choosing the series’ title: “In truth, every character [in *BSD*] suffers from some sort of pain or darkness in their hearts. It may be presumptuous, but through the theme of [these] great writers . . . I thought I could bring that world even a bit closer . . . I want to put that sort of depth into the story . . . And, I’d like to spread an interest if possible, for reading and enjoying the works of these great authors.” The stray dogs metaphor applies to all the writers, not just the Japanese ones, thereby bridging whatever differences the characters have or may have with one another through a shared connection to literature. Fans are then encouraged to take *BSD* as more than its base components, to not just enjoy the animanga’s clever virtuosity and reimaginings of some of the world’s most well-known stories and authors, but to also give thanks to “the people involved in the literary world” by cultivating “an interest in literature with this series” (*PixiVision*). Asagiri and Harukawa’s animanga does not belong amidst biographies, English textbooks, or primary academic sources. *BSD*, with resounding clarity, is not a history lesson. It is a love letter. As Asagiri says of the dead in *Osamu Dazai and the Dark Era*, these authors “all found peace,” and “[n]obody can take that away from them,” but “[t]he information in this book is evidence of their lives and . . . legacy” (73). The series greatly honors this peace whilst also serving as celebratory proof of the authors’ lives and, most essentially, their right to waver, like stray dogs whose anguish is no longer theirs alone.

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