Convenience Store Woman
and
The Hole

Convenience Store Woman, by Sayaka Murata. Translated by Ginny T. Takemori. Grove Press, 2019; 172 pages; Paperback, $15.00.
and
The Hole, by Hiroko Oyamada. Translated by David Boyd. New Directions, 2020; 92 pages; Paperback, $12.95.

Reviewed by C. S. Schreiner

One of the unexpected themes discussed by reporters and athletes at the 2021 Summer Olympics in Tokyo was Japanese convenience stores or *konbini*. Due to COVID restrictions, many visitors were not allowed to eat in restaurants, so they frequented 7-11s, of which there are 25,000 in Japan. As reported by CNN and other news media venues, many of these foreigners were astonished by the prodigious variety and quality of food items in the *konbini*, and they communicated their gustatory and aesthetic observations to their home audiences. If *konbini* are viewed as symbols of being that distinguish a psychosocial trend and the cultural milieu which supports it, it seems somewhat less peculiar that for both Japanese *shosetsu* under review in these pages--one with a rural setting, and one, urban--the *konbini* is an indispensable structure of the lifeworld for alienated souls, much like an oasis is for parched travelers. I had not planned to review two novels about convenience stores; the coincidence is genuine; but *konbini* serve different life-sustaining or existential purposes for differently alienated souls, as the present review will show.

When Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that the human is a being of *distances*,[1] he primarily meant the existential space, the intimidating abyss between one's given identity and the identity one projects as a goal to be achieved. Unlike a stone or creature, which cannot relinquish their essence to become something else, the human is free to question its inherited status and transfigure itself, its identity or essence. Hence the

existential credo, “Existence precedes essence.” People tend to flee from themselves less to shirk commitments than escape the difficult freedom in which commitments are formed and responsibilities assumed. In other words, many prefer to have choices but flee from choice itself and would rather be chosen or commanded due to their insecurity, indecision, servility, distraction, ignorance, anxiety, or cowardice. So many flaws—apparently it is difficult to become an engaged and compassionate individual who is *socially responsible but true to oneself*. The problem with obediently assuming a role that has been imposed or enforced by social norms is that this false choice haunts the individual who becomes disindividuated such that a gap or ambiguous space of self-doubt lingers between their assumed role and the potential of their true selfhood. Under ordinary conditions, existentialists like Sartre conceive this ambiguous space as a positive envelop of choice in which the individual can pivot from one role to another in pursuit of personal authenticity. If you need to change your job or career, you can choose to do so. But what if existentialism has finally exhausted its resources in the new millennium? As we will see in the novel, *Convenience Store Woman*, first published in Japanese as *Konbini ningen* (2014), certain contemporary individuals like Keiko, the Convenience Store Woman of the title, become utterly fatigued by existential ambiguities and forcibly seek to close the “gap” such that they totally absorb and are absorbed by the role they assume at work. By doing so they can say, “I am doing something that genuinely constitutes me.”[2] But in Keiko’s situation, would this pronouncement mean victory or defeat? Does she express existential authenticity in establishing her functional niche at the convenience store, or pure nihilism which devalues traditional human values such as personal enrichment, choice, and privacy? Earlier generations would probably accuse her of reified behavior and soulless conformity.

The feminist philosopher, Anne Dufourmantelle, has argued that human beings tend to flee or hide from their passions because they are associated with sin, and they *avoid risk* by fearing the possible instability provoked by passion.[3] People revere passionate individuals and idealize passion but cringe before its consequences, which can be chaotic, even

fatal. Nonetheless, passions define us even if suppressed. It has been said that a sure way to find out if someone is alienated is to ask them to identify their passion in life. If they draw a blank, then go mute, or become despondent, or confused, or apologetic, they are alienated—their passion rendered insensible or impotent. Contemporary alienation, which occurs in a digital milieu Bernard Stiegler calls "generalized automation" within hyper-industrial societies like Japan,[4] is interrogated by media-focused Marxian thinkers concerned not only with brutally repetitive and inequitable working conditions, but attention capture algorithms. They see alienation deepening in those who are unaware of their unfreedom, such as the worker who is exploited, or those who blithely exploit themselves and their children for free on Instagram, or those who blithely "personalize" their social media pages incognizant that modes of expression are preselected by software design (algorithms). This is the meaning of "disindividuation" as evoked by Bernard Stiegler in defining *proletarianization*: isomorphic doubling *toward* identity as objective codification (factory worker with brand loyalty to Chevrolet trucks) and *away* from creative self-determination.[5] Hence workers bond with their workplace as a primary mode of identification and self-understanding. It is also a mode of alienation characterized by stupefaction and hyper-consumption. The reliable individual who works all day in a Libby cannery producing cans of corn feels like a can of corn--dense and insensible--when she gets home. Unlike the agronomist, she does not understand much about corn; and the college courses the worker takes at night are all but opaque to her sleep-deprived proletarian consciousness, servile as it is and oversaturated with stray puzzle pieces from Google in search of their unique puzzle. Information is ceaselessly incoming but remains diffuse and unsystematic, hence *never becomes knowledge*. (As Robert Frost said, "If you don't know something specifically, you don't know it.") Any nascent passion (for gospel music; motocross racing; fly fishing; philately; gardening; cybersecurity, etc.) has itself been rendered alien and incommunicable in the context of the mute and senseless industrial production in which the worker has invested all her energy and time.

Rarely except in the world of the compulsive neurotic does labor take on the gripping existential intensity we typically associate with passion, as we see in the case of earnest, hardworking Keiko, the salesclerk protagonist of Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman.* Is alienation more severe if a singular passion has never formed or been empowered to individuate the worker? A worker can be productively alienated, ever more excited and seemingly satisfied with a mercantile surrogate for a more unique becoming which stalled out long ago or never took form at all. That surrogate is Keiko's mode of employment, "convenience store worker," and she channels her passion into *belonging there* so thoroughly that there is no gap between her selfhood and the operations of the convenience store. Keiko ultimately declares her love for the store where she works: "I was eighteen when we met…I don't suppose either of us could pinpoint the exact moment we fell in love" (167). This seemingly sincere and heartfelt development demands close analysis, for it is not easy to discern if Keiko's devotion evinces a hyper-reified corporate instrumentalism that is darkly comical and almost grotesquely compliant (*otonashi*) or an existential choice that expresses Keiko's innermost freedom of subjectivity, her love of the structure provided by a consistent labor-intensive format. Is she a sovereign, active subject, or a passive being subjected abjectly to postmodern industrial conformity? Is such binary questioning obsolete? What if Keiko is a *hikikomori* whose private world (*Eigenwelt*) has melded with a corporate ideology and task set (*habitus*) such that they are for all practical purposes indistinguishable? In that case, Keiko has closed the gap, taken possession *of* as much as been possessed *by* her situation, and alienation has either been neutralized or reached its most perfect (perfectly reified) sociocultural form as an act of *generational nihilism*.

Homelessness is often cited as a prime example of social alienation, but the *hikikomori* hiding away at home is another mode of alienation. Alienation is a multifarious mode of distancing and estrangement, and not every *hikikomori* resembles others who share the label. Some of them stay in their rooms obsessively playing video games either solo (first-person shooter) or in multiplayer mode with other *hikikomori*; either way, they remain oblivious of their surroundings. By using the

bedroom primarily as a purely functional space to play video games, share drawings, shop, search for collectables, do social media, etc., the hikikomori as *otaku* never really inhabits it, never personalizes it—hence the space feels sterile and alien except when he is sleeping. In other words, the bedroom becomes a *digitally depersonalized personal space.* Other *hikikomori* or *otaku* become intimately familiar with their room and its contents in a highly personalized construction of a niche or comfort zone exhibiting every childhood toy, manga, collectible action figure, hobby model, book, magazine, and video game. In these cases, the social world and the environment have been integrated into one's private world (*Eigenwelt*). Their bedrooms, which resemble either hobby shops or Egyptian tombs where all the Queen's precious belongings are stored near her corpse, serve as a surrogate identity. "I do not need to speak. Look closely at my room and its contents, and you will understand me."

As we will see, this latter mode of being a *hikikomori* is inverted by Keiko such that she stages her niching project at the convenience store, not her bedroom. She bestows all the convenience store tasks, objects, and policies with the value and significance that other *hikikomori* bestow on their bedroom. By doing so, she can consistently care for them.

The modern concept of alienation was not invented by Marx but refined and developed by him in the context of a certain post-Hegelian, Darwinian socioeconomic determinism. This perspective made alienation appear all but inescapable because work was inescapable, often in deplorable conditions. According to a recent article on Marx, one can be alienated by (1) *the object produced or manufactured*—whether cans of WD40 or jugs of Clorox; (2) by the *industrial process* or means of production, such as a loud and dangerous factory, or an autobody painting shop that supplies subpar facial masks for workers exposed to highly toxic fumes; (3) by *one's fellow workers* and employers who bully coworkers with racist innuendo, and (4) one could be *alienated from oneself*, an alien to oneself (the one who peers into the mirror and asks, "Is that me?").[6] These types of alienation presuppose the existential framework of the worker's concrete being-in-the-world. They are

essentially negative modulations or distortions of embeddedness in the work world, a common world of coworkers. Their transformative "value" as such is contingent upon the clarity with which the worker becomes self-conscious of his conditions at work. Alienation is productive when, for example, the employee who spray paints automobiles recognizes the danger of flimsy masks and successfully petitions for upgraded safety equipment for all employees.

In Keiko's case, her compulsively diligent solicitude overcomes predictable forms of alienation through productive alienation. She uses her willpower to transition her servility in the store into *taking care*. Take number one above, *alienation from products*: her care of store items, product arrangements, inventory, shelf decorations, and so on, is so assiduous and loving that it overcomes whatever residual estrangement she had first felt upon being hired and dealing with such things on a routine basis. As time goes by, Keiko interacts with coworkers by absorbing their distinctive traits such as facial tics, gait, and speech habits, and becomes *more like them* by emulating them in social acts of mutual self-affirmation. This is surely an uncommon way of ameliorating alienation and can arguably be described as a more complete (totalizing) form of alienation. Does this manner of inhabiting the workplace *comprehensively* make Keiko more or less servile than the others who often complain and dither?

The landmark Japanese publication in alienated literature was Kobo Abe's *Sunna no Onna*, which appeared in the early sixties, with the English translation by Dale Saunders, *The Woman in the Dunes,* coming soon after in 1964. It has never been equaled for its artistically rendered wry, often quirky profundity, nor for the darkly romantic struggle it stages in the sand dunes between Marxism and Existentialism. It is arguable that *The Woman in the Dunes* accomplishes the reconciliation of Marxism with Existentialism sought by Sartre in *Search for a Method*; to borrow the phrasing of Sartre's translator, Hazel Barnes, for Sartre's own ambition, Abe's novel "makes room for the individual in a Marxist framework."[7] The intensely stubborn desire for independence demonstrated by the bug collector from Tokyo, who often brutishly

asserts his existential sovereignty after descending int the sand pit hovel, looks petty if not comical when confronted by the dune woman's seemingly selfless spirit of labor and sacrifice needed to keep the sand from encroaching on their district. Of course, she digs to save her own life as much as the lives of the villagers. The "dig or die" expediency of the dune dwellers forces collective engagement whose existential exigency (imminent death by suffocation due to premature burial) is more convincing than that of the bug collector's claim to freedom by refusing shoveling tasks. Junpei, the amateur entomologist, gives in, starts digging, and hence conforms to the vaguely socialist framework enforced by the villagers who seek to preserve their lifestyle and residual economy in the sand dunes on the coast of Japan. But one can hardly ignore the bug collector's assiduous focus on his osmotic water invention as the novel ends, a contraption that might ultimately provide water for himself, the dune woman, and the villagers. By personalizing this technical endeavor, taking ownership of it, protecting it, Jumpei compartmentalizes his crisis of freedom and reaffirms his scientific identity in an encompassing framework of socialist design. In this manner, existentialism and socialism can be said to sort of coexist in the hovel ceaselessly threatened by sand.

It is easy enough to list a bounty of literary motifs spawned by Kobo Abe's distinctive novel, some of which appear in the novels under review. The sand pit in which the bug collector finds himself corralled is of course much larger than the hole into which the alienated housewife, Asa, tumbles in *The Hole*. And the labor-intensive existence of Keiko in *Convenience Store Woman* resembles the way work becomes a social form and the primary mode of existence in *Woman of the Dunes.* The issue here is not literary imitation. These thematic parallels show that the problem of reconciling the demands of personal development and corporate culture is renewed for each generation, but writers nonetheless find a common vehicle for posing the problem in fictional works. As literary forms, both *The Hole* and *Convenience Store Woman* are conspicuously more minimalist and plainspoken than *The Woman of the Dunes*. The latter, recognized internationally in 1962 as an artistic and philosophic achievement, appealed to an audience blessed with

advanced literacy and discerning aesthetic tastes. One can for now only speculate as to the reasons for the transition to a more minimalist prose style in the more recent novels. Surely changes in the literary preparation and tastes of readers today bring pressure on authors to communicate more effectively and broadly. If, has been argued by some critics, the audience is but a mirage, a fictional construct, then the change in prose from a literary style to a more modest or pedestrian sort of writing in recent novels could merely signify that for the authors themselves the primary mode of cultural engagement is not literature but television, film, and social media. Hence there is no need to "meet" or comply with the audience's literacy level and taste since the author's already share these with their readership.

Asa, the narrator of *The Hole*, is a housewife whose husband has been recently transferred to a rural district where his parents raised him. Although Asa worked part-time for a company in Tokyo, she was never fond of her work and felt no compunction in leaving her job behind. Unlike her only friend at work, another woman with a part-time position that would gladly accept a full-time assignment, the narrator is indifferent about employment in general, and feels no pressure to look for work after she moves to the country. "Well, it's way out in the country. I'll try to find something, but who knows. Either way, we should be alright. We're going to live in a house my husband's family owns" (10). She feels equally indifferent about having children, to the perplexity of her friend, who can't wait to start a family. Overall, Asa's situation is not different in kind than the type of marriage described by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*:

> Many young couples give the impression of perfect equality. But as long as the man has economic responsibility for the couple, it is just an illusion. He is the one who determines the conjugal domicile according to the demands of his job: she follows him from the provinces to Paris, from Paris to the provinces, the colonies, abroad; the standard of living is fixed according to his income; the rhythm of the days, the weeks, and the year is organized on the basis of his occupations; relations and

> friendships most often depend on his profession. Being more positively integrated than his wife in society, he leads the couple in intellectual, political, and moral areas.[8]

To be sure, Asa's attitude to social conventions like child rearing and employment suggests that she has an independent mind that measures aspects of existence with her own set of values. But what are those values? You might expect her to be excited about the possibilities of a new homestead and slower-paced lifestyle where she can exercise her freedom. But her whimsy and nonchalance carry over into her natural attitude and slacken the field of embodied consciousness like a tranquilizer. The reader senses that Ana drifts and wanders more than she mobilizes herself with a plan. This mode of freedom does not involve what Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* calls a "transcendent projection" (573) toward some goal in keeping with Ana's integral self-determination. This is an unstructured freedom that does not project itself into concrete forms of actualization but lends itself to chance. It drifts and wanders.

Within a short span of time after moving to the province, Asa discovers she has lots of time on her hands, so she walks to the local 7-11, observing rustic scenery along the way, with the town's river and riparian life forms coming into conspicuous salience. Before long, Ana suddenly glimpses a "big black animal" on the riverbank, and when she tries to chase it, plummets neck-deep into a hole in the soft earth near the river. "I wasn't hurt," says Asa. "I wasn't even uncomfortable. I could smell something, maybe the grass or the river. I let it fill my lungs and body. There were a few rocks and bits of plastic on the flat grass surrounding the hole. I could see some black ants and red ants in lines, soldiering around" (31-2). Eventually an old woman helps pull Ana out of the hole, and she makes her way to the 7-11. There, by chance, she meets a gregarious *hikikomori* that has lived in a shed near her house incognito for twenty years. The students that typically hang out at this 7-11 have become fond of the eccentric fellow, who they call "sensei," and who with a friendly attitude engages Ana in conversation. He knows all about the river and its holes and strange creatures, and often cavorts

with the children in the river area. In this role of one who espouses naturalistic wisdom he recalls the *village idiot* of yesteryear insofar as the Greek meaning of "idiot" was an intensely private citizen who keeps to himself. Ana is absolutely stunned to discover that this *hikikomori* is her husband's older brother, as it was her assumption that he did not have a sibling. Her husband never mentioned his brother, who is now Asa's brother-in-law. The scope of such a deception is deranging to consider, prompted by something as trivial as vanity or shame or both.

In the *hikikomori's* conversation with Asa, he offers his own homegrown epistemology of the creature in the hole. He says he has never bothered to identify it scientifically, has never used the internet, but knows the creature's behavior, habits, and habitat. He knows and understands things by paying attention to them, not by compiling data and scientific nomenclature about them. He says that everyone always ignores the creature: "Who knows, maybe they never even noticed him. People always fail to notice things" (67). Asa concurs with him, says to herself that even if she looked the river creature up online, "what would I do with that information. I guess that wasn't really what I wanted to know" (60).

The million-dollar question, then, is what does Asa want (desire) to know? One obvious answer is that she subconsciously desires another way of knowing—an alternative epistemology to the boring world of the office worker, a sort of corporal epistemology of the bristling riverbank. She does not explicitly seek it cognitively, this alternative epistemology, but she does not reject it either when it engulfs her as an alternative mode of Being-in-the-World. This means an alternative, earthbound mode of comporting herself in the lifeworld that overlaps with the common sense, information-based lifeworld of the Japanese. That this way of knowing is slow, nonlinear, unscheduled, and based in lived experience and intuition instead of Big Data, does not disqualify it in Asa's mind; its elemental novelty distinguishes it and her encounter with the *hikikomori* as an original experience.

At one point, the *hikikomori* scolds her for falling into the hole. "What kind of idiot falls into a hole? ...Who do you think you are, Alice in Wonderland?" (61). Asa is taken aback by this onslaught and recognizes her husband's occasional outbursts of peremptory judgment and criticism in his older brother. But she continues to listen to the *hikikomori* with perverse curiosity, since her preunderstanding of *hikikomori* was that they are not typically prone to loquacity. The fact that Asa does not dismiss or rebuke the *hikikomori* based on his conspicuous idiosyncrasies evinces her inner tolerance for aberration if not psychopathology.

Another topic on which the *hikikomori* likes to expatiate is the meaning and significance of the 7-11 for the village children. "This store is a godsend!" (61). His claim sounds at first counterintuitive, for a convenience store is hardly a cultural mecca:

> Before the store opened, the kids had to go all the way to the farmers' co-op to get ice-cream. We couldn't read manga unless we went to the bookstore, and that's way too far to walk. This store is a godsend! The store and the river—those are our main battlegrounds. Which probably means I'm not a real *hikikomori*. I like to come outside and play" (61).

A confession like this redefines the *hikikomori*, who is now outside among other members of society loosely assembled by national citizenship in a rural village whose casual lifestyle and social forms bind them more securely than anything else. This is one of the novel's noteworthy contributions to the growing literary subgenre of the *hikikomori*—it designates certain regions and their citizens as hospitable and tolerant places to wander outside, make friends, and express themselves freely without coercion or discrimination. In short, there are hikikomori-friendly places.

But if we wish to speculate as to the meaning and significance of the hole, let's first consider the fact that the translator decided that the protagonist's name (changed from "Ana" in the Japanese novel to "Asa"

in English) and the hole are synonymous; why else substitute the English word "Hole" for the Japanese title, which is simply "Ana/Asa"? As Sartre writes in his famous essay, "The Hole," the hole, as a "symbol of a mode of being," invites one to plug it up in an act of bodily self-sacrifice.[9] But is this what happens in Asa's case?

By stumbling into the hole in the riverbank, by being encased and immobilized inside the hole along with soil and animal life, she arguably *encounters herself outside the immaterial mode of drifting and floating* that characterizes her daily motion. The earthen hole arrests her drifting psychophysical mode of comportment and closes the distance between Asa and herself. The abrupt trauma of the earth enclosing her tightly as if she is an earthworm is not a conversion experience for Asa but a psychophysical reorientation, a releveling of her horizon (field of consciousness) on the plateau of elemental and wild things, which becomes more salient to her perceptions. She experiences an initiation to an organic order of meaning based in riparian adventure, not purposeful employment. The hole resets her gaze and attentional channeling to be more earthbound and inclusive. Since becoming a housewife who is not the primary breadwinner, and accustomed to part-time employment, her adult life has been one long "gap year" extended indefinitely. If as Sartre argues the hole represents the existential anticipation of an emptiness to be filled, then the world Asa aimlessly occupied before falling into the riverbank hole *was* the Hole, metaphysical emptiness, whereas the riverbank hole is secretly enlightening as burrowing and belonging, an act of *transdescendance* to borrow a clever phrase coined by Jean Wahl, who defines it as follows: "A hierarchy or even hierarchies of transcendence can be conceived. If we can put it this way, there is a hierarchy directed toward the below, of which, say, (D.H.) Lawrence has been aware when he presented the unknown God beneath us, in the depths of being. There is not only a *transascendence*, but also a *transdescendence*."[10] One could suggest in this context that Asa is introduced to the unknown God beneath her village by the hikikomori, who is alienated from the world beyond the village but intimate with the natural world beneath and around it.

To clarify our distinction, Asa's former "floating" or "drifting" mode of existence was not due to her own emptiness, but the nothingness immanent to the conventional roles of part-time worker and housewife. They offered her nothing that would engage and arouse her attentional powers. The main issue is that a person like Asa is not "lacking something" but has not been sufficiently exposed to unscheduled experiences of life, of nature, or sufficiently impressed by an experience to engage with its contents wholeheartedly with undistracted attention. Asa is blessed with a capacity for active attention which only needed to be awakened by the raw and muddy contingencies of riparian life enjoyed so much by her husband's brother, the *hikikomori*. Such experiences are not officially measured and ranked. Yet Asa has no trouble with the seeming insignificance of her life "offline" so to speak, and tends to value them for their own sake, their own intrinsic value for her self-understanding… much as the *hikikomori* does.

Perhaps the most interesting revelation about Asa is her easy congeniality with her husband's *hikikomori* brother, which suggests she has always been a *hikikomori* hiding in plain sight. Surely there are many of them among us, outside. This insight, if publicized with research support, will help dissolve the cruel social norms that now exclude them from feeling normal.

Not unlike *The Hole*, the novel *Convenience Store Girl* is slight in length and, as mentioned earlier, conventional in form and style. These are not experimental fictions, but minimalist depictions of interesting women in tortuously banal circumstances no different in kind than those of Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the mountain forever. The protagonist of this story is a part-time convenience store (*konbini*) worker in Tokyo. And what is her story about? Her part-time work at a "Smile Mart." Aside from her compulsive diligence, what distinguishes Keiko from your average *konbini* worker are her powers of mimicry and empathy, between which there is a complex inner relation best described as *interpersonal intuition*. As she says, "I absorb the world around me, and that's changing all the time" (32). If taken at face value, that declaration precludes identity as typically understood. Keiko's absorptions are

always individuated. For example, she absorbs and simulates the speech patterns of certain customers and fellow workers. She picks up on their clothes, mannerisms, and speech rhythms. This is not done as a comedic performance for coworkers, but as Keiko's inner experience, which is uncannily intersubjective and ventriloquistic. She populates herself with actors in the cozy theatre of her mind. Who can blame her for such intuitively vibrant antics given her endlessly dry, repetitive tasks at Smile Mart? At first glance, such behavior would suggest a common postmodern condition: she has no "core" self or selfhood but only role diffusion, is not a "person" but so many personae in so many ever-changing masks whose deployment is always situationally determined. True enough, but Keiko does not suffer from it, she transindividuates her existence and gives herself a so-called identity by sticking with Smile Mart, whose culture and tasks have become second nature, even while individuating herself via her cognitive style and spirit in a performative niche all her own. She is herself—inevitably—at Smile Mart, even while she obediently conforms to its rigid framework and relies on its durability. It pays to recall that when introducing yourself in Japan, your corporate namesake/moniker comes first, before your family name, like this: "Smile Mart no Furukura Keiko" or "I am Smile Mart's Keiko" (I belong to the Smile Mart family). You might say the *konbini* structure of repetition, the slavish and banal exterior or scaffolding of a franchise provides a steady shelter for Keiko's inner transformations. We know her spirit exceeds that framework through the record of her behavior both inside and outside work. She understands how to manage people's reductive and stereotypical expectations about her form of employment. When old schoolmates ask about her career status, Keiko has a smooth, well-rehearsed response. She tells them she has never been very strong or vigorous, and this physical condition limits her choices to parttime work. When her family and friends condescendingly inquire as to the reason for her working part-time at Smile Mart, they admonish her with insults such as, "You need to wake up, Furukura. To put it bluntly, you are the lowest of the low…a burden on the village, the dregs of society" (105). Keiko's reply candidly reflects her self-understanding acquired through experience:

> "I see. But I'm not capable of working anywhere else except the convenience store. I did give it a go, but it turns out the convenience store worker mask is the only one I'm fit to wear. So if people don't accept that, I have no idea what I can do about it" (105).

Keiko is referring to the fact that she has already tried other kinds of work, but the only work that she is fit to do, to which her spirit can be enslaved while exercising noetic freedom, is *konbini* work. Her noetic activity, mentioned above, transcends the otherwise purely transactional interactions with customers. Every person expresses their relative individuation or disindividuation via the position they take in relation to the labor market. Keiko's boyfriend, Shiraha, who inhabits her bathtub, is in retreat from the world, *hikikomori*-style: "I want to spend my whole life doing nothing. For my whole life, until I die, I want to just breathe without anyone interfering in my life. That's all I wish for" (108). The problem with Shiraha's attitude is not his nihilism, but the hypocrisy with which he accepts shelter from Keiko while disparaging people who work at *konbini*. He is the most caustically judgmental character, excepting Keiko's sister, and Keiko ultimately throws him out—her first boyfriend, but not before he spits out every commonplace prejudice against *konbini* employees, repeatedly referring to those employees as "losers"—an obvious projection of his own fear of failure in a competitive job market.

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Emergent literatures of the new millennium depict experiences that problematize world belonging and participation for individuals even while digital modes of communication have proliferated. Postmodern theorists such as Felix Guattari and Bernard Stiegler would recognize the psychosocially disoriented portrayals glimpsed in recent Japanese fictions such as *The Hole* and *Convenience Store Woman,* which suggest the elusiveness of finding one's place in the world of digital capitalism, and the consequences of such for personal psychology and wellness. This sort of adjustment is supposed to be easier in Japanese society! The common but anachronistic perception of Japan as a culture whose

citizens share a unified worldview makes its recent novelistic treatments seem incongruous and disquieting. Even when in striving for critical rigor we try to suspend stereotypes, it remains difficult not to expect of the Japanese people social concinnity and tacit mutual understanding, traits that would precede politics and homogenize the lifeworld of the Japanese. To deconstruct, as certain novels do, the world status of individuals like Asa and Keiko, the tenuous quality of their membership, is to challenge the bedrock assumptions of the common reader in Japan, where only foreigners are perceived as detached from the Japanese lifeworld. But European existentialism takes it as a matter of course that individuals are in the world but must struggle to belong in their own way, and not take membership or purpose for granted. The world is the horizon in which existence seeks to negotiate its furtive essence: this is the basis for Sartre's credo, "Existence precedes essence," mentioned earlier, which describes a situation fundamentally alienating because inherited identity is meaningless. One *is* what one *does vocationally* with that inheritance, whether renouncing it for another destiny, or adopting it for empowerment. The struggle to overcome alienation becomes a question then of closing the gap between one's vocational calling (if one hears it) and the demands of the lifeworld in which one lives and seeks shelter. This struggle might for some individuals appear to be a dissociative identity disorder, but as was said above, existentialism argues that anxiety (*Angst*) and dereliction (*Geworfenheit*) are integral to personal development. In any case, by reducing the demands of Japanese culture and identity politics to the finite and *workable* space of the convenience store, Keiko successfully compartmentalizes her existential challenge and becomes functionally assimilated on her *own terms* which become *identical to those of the convenience store*. Hence, she depersonalizes herself and becomes an ideal convenience store employee, and this mode of existing—this niching strategy--is satisfactory for her, however robotic it appears to her coworkers. Likwise, Asa's experience in the hole by the riverbank presents an opportunity to re-niche her existence on another ontological level—with the creatures of the river and the local *hikikomori* who sort of plays the role of Beatrice, the tour guide in Dante's *Inferno*.

Today, as millions still battle viral contagions, there is more appreciation for *konbini* workers as "frontline" citizens whose public labor endangers them. When Asa of *The Hole* gets hired by the local 7-Eleven *konbini* toward the end of the novel, the meaning and significance of the event is fundamentally different than Keiko's employment at the Smile Mart. For Keiko, the meaning of the *konbini* is pragmatic as a sustainable framework, which provides a nexus of in-order-to relations, or habitus; and the significance is *existential* insofar as she chooses *konbini* work over other kinds of work. For Asa, the meaning is less concrete, more ethereal, which defines her. At the end of the story, Asa's unpressured decision to seek employment could be nothing more than a general feeling of cultural conformity in a society where indolence is judged harshly, where a housewife without children is a bit suspicious, and work has a connotation of moral rectitude, associated as it is with the common good and national prosperity. As the *hikikomori* says, the 7-Eleven is a lively place with schoolchildren and farmers and salespeople all passing through. At least it will not be boring for Asa. And if it is boring, ask Keiko, from *Convenience Store Woman*, how to make *konbini* work more tolerable if not stimulating.

Notes

1. J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956): 51.

2. Jean Wahl, *Human Existence and Transcendence*, trans. William C. Hackett (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2016): 24.

3. Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Praise of Risk*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham UP, 2019): 46.

4. Bernard Stiegler, "For a Neganthropology of Automatic Society," in *Machine*, edited by Thomas Pringle and Gertrud Koch (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 219): 30.

5. Bernard Stiegler, "For a Neganthropology of Automatic Society": 33.

6. Jonathan Wolff and David Leopold, "Karl Marx", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/marx/.

7. J.-P. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1968): 3.

8. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde (New York: Vintage, 2011): 521.

9. J.-P. Sartre, "The Hole," in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985): 84.

10. Jean Wahl, *Human Existence and Transcendence*: 28.

PLEASE ELIMINATE THE LINE BELOW. I COULDN'T FIND A WAY TO GET RID OF IT.