

Kirino Natsuo Meets Izanami

Angry Divas Talking Back

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This tale may be spun from my words but I speak for the goddess, the one who governs the Realm of the Dead. My words may be dyed red with anger; they may tremble in yearning after the living; but they are all, each and every one, spoken to express the sentiments of the goddess. . . .

—Kirino 2012:3

But Izanami's anger did not abate. . . .

—Kirino 2012:136

Japanese goddess Izanami has every reason to be angry, at least from a twenty-first-century perspective. Betrayed by her erstwhile partner, Izanagi, and shamed by his judgmental regard of her body, she is locked for all eternity into the dark world of death. Meanwhile, Izanagi is free to roam both the heavens and the earth, giving birth of his own accord to one celestial deity after another. And what did the primal goddess do to deserve such treatment? She suffered a mortal wound in childbirth and as a result was designated the embodiment of death and its attendant impurity. It wasn't fair. And while all eyes were trained on her prolific ex and his shining progeny, she was forgotten, save for the occasional celebration of conjugal union that brought her forward as a paragon of wifely chastity. The irony must surely have been infuriating. But other than one momentary expression of wrath, Izanami is denied

access to even a residual anger in traditional sources. Rather she is treated—if she is treated at all—as the vessel of modest silence.

The Izanami-Izanagi sequence is an integral part of the Japanese foundation myth as related in the eighth-century *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters). The primal pair are the first of the myriad gods to take human form. And from their sexed bodies they produce a multitude of offspring representing natural matter in the Japanese archipelago. All is well until Izanami is fatally burned while giving birth to fire. She slips off into Yomi, a separate realm, once she has died. But her consort, Izanagi, longs for her. He chases after her and discovers her in a darkened chamber. She forbids him to look upon her but he cannot contain his curiosity. He lights a torch and finds her fetid body. Repulsed, he flees. She gives pursuit and is close to overtaking him when he hurls a giant boulder into the passageway to Yomi, sealing her permanently in her realm of death. At their parting, she pledges to kill 1,000 lives a day in Izanagi's world. In turn, he pledges to build 1,500 birthing huts. He goes on to lustrate in a nearby river, purifying his body of the taint of death. And Izanami retreats into a dark silence, never mentioned again.

How would the silent Izanami have reacted if she were a twenty-first-century woman, aware of the inequities in the system and unrepentant in her anger? Might she have given voice to her fury, lashing out at Izanagi and the system that saw her marginalized and barricaded from her former power? Perhaps she would have taken on the mantle of Lauren Berlant's (1997) "Diva Citizen" and allowed her anger to flash up like a glorious flame. Author Kirino Natsuo, herself something of a diva citizen, imagines just such an outcome. In *Joshinki* (The Goddess Chronicle, Kirino 2008), her creative retelling of the Izanami-Izanagi myth sequence, Kirino picks up where the *Kojiki* leaves off, inventing an angry afterlife for the female goddess Izanami.¹ In doing so she forces readers to wonder why only the female is consigned to the realm of death, while her male consort produces the deities who will shape the imperial line. And she questions how the positioning of the female deity predicts the status of real-world women. In the process Kirino invents not only a sequel to the *Kojiki*, but a parallel story that unfolds in the mortal realm, suggesting a human counterpoint to the fancifulness of myth. In this chapter, I discuss the way Kirino defies earlier gendered expectation and stereotypes by reconstituting Izanami with a diva-esque interiority. After briefly introducing the author Kirino and the concept of diva citizen, I explore the way she activates Izanami's angry voice in resistance to the mythic imperative that would see her anchored with both the precarity and potency of national symbol.

KIRINO NATSUO: ANGRY DIVA WRITER

Kirino Natsuo (b. 1951) is a writer diva. In many ways, she is larger than life, her image frequently projected on bookstore posters and featured prominently on her book jackets. She is a striking woman.

In one of her iconic, black-and-white book jacket photos she stares pensively off to the side as she lifts the edge of her dark turtleneck collar over the corner of her well-formed lips (Figure 7). Her fingers are perfectly manicured. Her posture projects poise, sophistication, and intelligence. Although she does not appear to brandish a particularly difficult ego—part and parcel of the stereotypical diva image—she is a performer of celebrity status. Thus, she fits the definition Jeffrey Jung (1999:4–5) notes of *fin-de-siècle* actresses in the West: she is “one whose power and influence within her profession allow her to dictate the terms of her performances, asserting control over her peers and putative directors. . . . She cultivates a personality that befits such attention: a magisterial and confident pose, elegant diction, graceful movements, and a studied indifference to the mundane and tedious elements of daily life.” Kirino has perfected her performance of aestheticized smartness. But it is a performance that is all the more provocative because it suggests defiance. With her carefully tousled shoulder-length hair, her porcelain-smooth skin, and her penchant for clothes that accentuate her figure, she is intensely feminine and exudes a magnetic sexuality. Even so, the uninformed often assume that she is male, based on the intentional ambiguity of her chosen pen name, Natsuo. A popular writer, she has nevertheless earned the accolades typically awarded more highbrow authors. In many ways, then, her diva status is all the more potent because it derives from these moments of transgression. She is difficult to define, or name, or own because she defies easy categorization. And in refusing to be pigeonholed, she both exerts her control while she simultaneously removes herself to the margins where she is excluded from normal channels of power.

Kathleen Abowitz and Kate Rousmaniere (2004), drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant, identify the elements that characterize the “diva citizen.” I list these elements here because they apply equally to Kirino Natsuo and her goddess diva, Izanami. In the first place, the diva citizen, though marginalized from both knowledge and power, gains strength through marginalization by being disruptive. She twists her differences in ways that draw attention to the limitations and falsehoods implicit in the structures of power that would marginalize her. Her disruptiveness



7. Kirino Natsuo. Book jacket publicity photo by Watanabe Makoto, 2003.

is often derived from her ability to use “humor, irony, and bombast” (Abowitz and Rousmaniere 2004: 11). Diva citizens have strong, dynamic personalities that sometimes discomfort. In discomforting, they work to improve the lot of others who toil on the margins. Of this last point Lauren Berlant states that the “diva citizen” does not change the world. Even so, her acts of resistance not only force a reconsideration of the status quo but by “flashing up and startling the public,” she is able to take control of the dominant narrative and retell it “as one that the abjected people have once lived sotto voce, but no more.” The diva citizen “challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has narrated and the courage she has had to produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent” (Berlant 1997:222–23).

Often heralded as a pioneer of feminist noir (Davis 2010:222), Kirino Natsuo has made a career out of putting “the dominant story into suspended animation.” Since her earliest works Kirino has explored the social constructions of gender, class, and ethnicity, critiquing contemporary Japanese society, picking uncomfortably at our assumptions, and digging beneath the surface of polite lies.² Her stories feature immigrant workers, transvestites, homosexuals, older women, and others who have

been chased to the fringes of society. She has been recognized as the voice of “new proletarianism” (Gregus 2014:12), or as “Fighting Kirino” for the way she champions the so-called “yellow trash” (as opposed to America’s “white trash”) of society (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2012:20).³ But whereas Kirino *does* fight social injustice in her novels, she is also just as apt to fight the labels used to promote her works. Her novels struggle against the boundaries of genre expectations. They are layered with different narrative approaches: diaries, letters, reportage, and frequently, unreliable narrators and quixotic endings, confounding readers. *The Goddess Chronicle* is no exception as it is at once fairy tale, myth, science fiction, and modern horror tale.

If Kirino has been consistent in anything over the course of her career it is her anger at the unrealistic and unequal expectations women have been made to endure. Her novels bristle with rage and her female characters invariably are two-faced, dangerous, and socially aberrant. Not only do they defy stereotypical images of Japanese womanhood, they defy readers’ expectations of feminist rebellion. Her heroines frequently let us down. They don’t stand and fight, not for the downtrodden and sometimes not even for themselves. But by presenting their unhappy stories, Kirino stages her own protest. She will not adhere to seamless narratives of success or cater to expectation. In order “to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship” that Berlant (1997:222–23) describes, Kirino must dismantle it wholesale, and often with the finesse of a sledgehammer. Frequently she presents readers with competing narratives—none of them trustworthy—and each of them vulnerable to extinction in the end. From the shards, between the gaps, we piece our way back to a new understanding.

Kirino enjoys lifting the masks Japanese women have been expected to wear, uncovering the dark visages that lurk beneath. In her 1997 bestseller *OUT* (AUTO, in Japanese), for example, she explores the murderous rage that simmers within the breasts of those women who have been exiled to the darkness of the home—the middle-aged housewife. The novel draws together four unlikely women who bond over their experiences working part time on a factory assembly line. When one of them snaps and kills her philandering husband, the other three rise to her defense. With assembly-line precision they dismember and discard the body. Before long they find themselves caught up in the body disposal business. All but forgotten by the media, the workforce, and in many cases their own families, these invisible women launch a lethal rebellion. In an interview with journalist Howard French (2003),

shortly after *OUT* debuted in Stephen Snyder's English translation (Kirino 2003a), Kirino noted that she was less concerned with writing about the particulars of a crime, the police procedural, or the reinstitution of order that inevitably concludes a crime novel. Her interests lay with the way crimes expose the psychology of the criminal and the callousness of society. "A crime is like a crack in reality, and it is the author's role to explore those cracks. As a writer, I like to see how they impinge on people," Kirino explained in the interview. Society is ever vigilant to maintain the polite façade of order and normalcy. But a crime challenges this order and allows an opening, a way to peer beneath the myth of civility. Many of Kirino's works, appropriately, employ an archeological motif as she scrapes away the surface, digs into the cracks, and peers down into the darkness below.

Grotesque (Gurotesuku, Kirino 2003b), for example, refers to Cambrian fossils, to a prehistoric life beneath the sea, to a subterranean survival of the fittest. Based on a sensational crime in which the murder of a prostitute uncovers her secret double life as a successful career woman, Kirino's 2003 "re-narration" reveals not so much the hidden identity of the protagonist as the seedy double life of society itself. The crime that inspired the novel offers Kirino the crack that she needs to expose the perverted sense of justice in contemporary society and the utter invalidation of former value systems. The female protagonists in this novel drill deeper and deeper into the depths of degradation, chasing dark desires into self-destruction and nihilistic extinction. It is not surprising, then, that in her *Kojiki* retelling, Kirino (2008, 2012) pulls us down into the cavernous underground world of death. "Huge stone pillars towered above the cold rock floor, each set an equal distance from the next. . . . They extended as far as the eye could see, the distant ones melting into the darkness. They were massive, so wide that three people could join hands around one and still not encircle the girth, and so tall the tops disappeared into the darkness above" (Kirino 2012:98). Here we accompany Izanami on her daily task of taking one thousand lives. We open into a story that the *Kojiki* had closed.

INTRODUCING "THE WOMAN WHO INVITES"

The first Japanese god to have taken female form, the *iza* in Izanami's name means to beckon or to invite while the phoneme *mi* identifies the female. Thus, Izanami is "the woman who invites." Or as given in the translation below, "She Who Beckoned." Having assumed a bodily

form, she and her consort, Izanagi, descend from the heavens to the island beneath and build a palace there. Having done so, Izanagi turns to his partner and asks:

“How is your body formed?”

She replied, saying:

“My body is empty in one place.”

And so the mighty one He Who Beckoned proclaimed:

“My body sticks out in one place. I would like to thrust the part of my body that sticks out into the part of your body that is empty and fill it up to birth lands. How does birthing them in this way sound to you?”

The mighty one She Who Beckoned replied, saying:

“That sounds good.”

And so the mighty one He Who Beckoned proclaimed:

“Well then, let us walk around this mighty pillar of heaven and then join in bed.”

So they pledged thus, and then straightaway he proclaimed:

“You circle from the right to meet me, I will circle from the left to meet you.”

So they pledged thus and then circled around it.

The mighty one She Who Beckoned spoke first, saying:

“What a fine boy!”

The mighty one He Who Beckoned spoke after her, saying:

“What a fine girl!” (Ō no Yasumaro 2014:9)

As the myth unfolds in the *Kojiki*, Izanagi betrays Izanami, usurping her power, on several occasions. First, following the encounter described above, their initial offspring are flawed—one is a “leech child” unable to stand. The other is too small to be considered worthy, and both are cast out to sea. Concerned by their failure to produce excellent children, they consult with the heavenly beings and are told to redo their greeting. And so they circle the pillar again and this time the male speaks first—appropriating the female’s language. When they again unite, they produce the varied islands of Japan and the various natural elements. The worthiness of these offspring underscores the silencing of female initiative and the advancement of male privilege. Aggressive, confident women are doomed to produce failure.

In a second betrayal, Izanagi ignores Izanami’s request. Following her death, she retreats to the underworld. After Izanagi comes in pursuit of her, she beseeches him not to look on her but he refuses her request and



8. Izanami in a state of decay (Shintō no Kokoro o Tsutaeru 2016).

lights up her chamber where he beholds her putrefying corpse covered in maggots (Figure 8). Gazing upon her body without her consent, in fact, in a direct violation of her request, demonstrates another of Izanagi's attempts to enact control. Sight leads to knowledge, knowledge to power. And the power he wields over Izanami keeps her locked in her state of dark shame.

But perhaps it is what follows that results in the final humiliation. Once Izanagi leaves—having sealed Izanami in her tomb—he bathes in a rushing river and produces from his now purified body the Moon God, Tsukiyomi, the Wind God, Susa-no-o, and the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu. These three gods, produced singularly from the body of the purified male, will become the most important deities in the Shinto pantheon. While Izanagi is thus linked to the wholesome power of harvest, fecundity, and life. Izanami—the mother of the Japanese archipelago—becomes the embodiment of death. She is, in one body, both life and death. In many ways Izanami becomes the container of the nation—the source of its mythic power and the site of its vulnerability as well. She represents the danger of contamination and the need to enforce rigid borders. Jennifer Coates (2014), in writing of the diva persona in Japanese cinema, describes the often abjected, dangerously unbounded female body on screen in terms that apply equally to Izanami as mythic mother: “The reflexive image of the female body as nation and nation as female body is. . . self-perpetuating, in that the ideology of nationhood is figuratively housed within the female body; the female body then

comes to symbolize aspects of the nation, particularly those gendered ‘feminine’ (Coates 2014:30). Those “feminine” qualities reside precisely in the acute accessibility of her body, a body that is known for its precariously permeable boundaries.

Read as a symbol of a “diva nation,” Izanami stands for both the sanctity of origin and the threat of incursion. In one body she houses the power of national identity as well as the fear of its abjected, leaky border. As such, she has features in common with primal female goddesses and deities the world over. Like Kali in India or Persephone in Greek myth, Izanami represents both life and death—the terrible mother. Unlike Eve, however, in the biblical traditions, she is not inscribed with sin or evil. Her desire and her bodily decay are represented as natural processes—natural but nevertheless untoward. They need to be recognized, controlled, and quarantined. And as with other myths featuring powerful females from around the world, the traits that identify Izanami (fertility, defilement, and containment) become inscribed on later generations of women. Or perhaps more accurately we might conclude that the treatment of women that existed when these myths were evolving, was written back into the story, thus serving to legitimate contemporary attitudes toward women.

FEMINIST READINGS OF THE *KOJIKI*

Furukawa Noriko (2011:54–56) in her exploration of Izanami focuses on the importance of fire in the myth sequence. Fire is associated, symbolically, with the birth of civilization—with the advent of pottery and more importantly iron products. Kirino (2012:120) makes the association explicit in *The Goddess Chronicle*: “Fire and the sword have an inseparable connection, do they not? The sword is borne from fire, and the right to fire is controlled by the sword.” In Izanami’s case, fire springs from the body of the earth mother. And it is by fire that she dies. It is also through her association with the fires of the underworld—the ingestion of the products of those fires—that she is bound to her role as death. The suggestion is that to develop into the brilliance of civilization, the earth mother—with her raw sensuality and unlettered wisdom—must be isolated and controlled. Izanami must be sealed into the realm of death and silenced where she—and by extension all subsequent women—are associated with impurity in the Japanese psyche—an association which Alan Grapard (1991:7) refers to as the “bio-degraded” female condition. Women, by their own physiology, are perforce contaminated. And they

are controlled by the threat of the sword—this most potent of phallic symbols that could not exist without the earth mother’s life-giving fire.

Other *Kojiki* scholars note the way these creation myths have been used for centuries to retroactively enforce gender roles by rendering women inactive, fixed in place. In a sense, Izanami had been the original *nampa*—or “pickup artist,” inviting, desiring, naming man, as Nakayama Chinatsu (1994:16–28) playfully notes in her feminist study of Izanami and other goddesses. Whereas her male counterpart was allowed to wander, indulging his desire at whim, she, like other women after her, was forced into grottos—the unnatural state of silence and stasis constructed for her by a system eager to control reproduction. It is her fixed position—the original womb located within a womblike enclosure—that renders her an image of female chasteness, and thereby, a heroine of model behavior. In the seventeenth-century handbook for women, *Onna chōhōki* (A lady’s treasury), for example, author Namura Jōhaku (1989) holds Izanami up as an example of purity. Seemingly eliding Izanami’s fate as impurity personified, Namura revises the myth to fit his message and views Japan’s primordial mother as pristine, uncorrupted, and genuine. He places stress on her procreative role and assigns to her “a vision of female lifestyle crafted on purposeful fertility . . . and, importantly, epitomizing a woman’s larger sense of moral clarity in offering her body and mind in obedience to the needs of her husband and in-law’s household” (Lindsey 2005:47).

In contrast to the stasis of these female deities, the male deity is free to roam and stake his claims, replicating over and over the female deity’s saucy *nampa* (seduction). Izanagi travels to Izanami’s cave of his own volition. Later he is allowed to exact order and rule—as a consequence of his ability to travel to the river in Himuka where he purifies his body.⁴ The six *kami* (deities) that are born from his purified body become culturally and politically the most important *kami* in the Shinto pantheon—undergirding the tripartite functions of the politico-religious, agricultural, and military realms. Or as Grapard (1991:11) notes: “Culture, i.e., social partition, organization, and management is a male prerogative that required the death of a woman . . . as well as a distancing from nature through the performance of a symbolic act of violation and its corollary, purification.” Without a placeholder for all that is abject, unknowable, and untoward, there can be no pure; no sacred without the profane. Izanami becomes that placeholder in Japanese myth—allowing the near “immaculate” conception of the Japanese state. Kirino exposes the constructed nature of this social partition—

particularly of gender roles and our assumptions about their presumed *natural* state—by inventing not just an afterlife for Izanami, but juxtaposing it alongside that of a mortal society.

THE GODDESS CHRONICLE: BRIEF PLOT SYNOPSIS

Kirino's alternative story is set in the human realm—on a beautiful tear-drop-shaped island known as Umihebi, or “The Isle of Sea Snakes.” Namima, a young priestess on the island, becomes the linchpin who bridges the mortal world with Izanami's realm of death. Upon her premature death, Namima finds herself in Izanami's dark underworld court. She speaks for the goddess. And she weaves her own sad story into her narration of Izanami. Namima had enjoyed an idyllic childhood, frolicking near-naked along the seashore with her elder sister Kamikuu until one summer she learns that she is destined to serve the island as the priestess of darkness, entrusted with tending to the dead. Her sister, on the other hand, inherits the role of priestess of light, charged with praying for the seafaring menfolk and serving as a model of fecundity. Their separate roles are determined by their birth order and an elaborate yin-and-yang ordering system, as Namima explains:

And so it came to pass that sisters who had been the best of friends were forced to follow separate paths. “Separate” is not quite the right word. Our paths were more distinctly different, as if she were to follow the day and I the night; or she the inner road and I the outer; she to traverse the heavens and I the earth. This was the “law” of the island—this was our “destiny” (Kirino 2012:19).

The importance of these binaristic positions is emphasized on the island by the presence of a large stone that blocks the passage to the sacred precincts where the pure sister performs her prayers. The stone physically draws a line between the sacred and the profane. Known in Japanese as the *oshirushi*, or more literally “the mark, the sign,” the island stone echoes the enormous boulder that Izanagi uses to seal Izanami in her realm of death. The placement of the stone suggests an end but also a beginning. It marks the beginning of our recognition of life/death; pure/impure—in a word, the beginning of our ability to discriminate, to see the world as a system of dualities. The stone creates the original slash (/) mark. Like the *oshirushi* on the island, it marks, literally, the point of difference and warns of the outcome to any disruption of the order it imposes.

Although the ritualistic aspects of the island's culture suggest that Namima's position as the fallen is destined by the gods, readers are soon made aware of just how capricious this "destiny" really is. With a clever use of seduction and murder, the islanders easily defy destiny. Purity/impurity, though represented as divinely determined, are nothing more than a human mechanism for social control. When Namima gives birth to a daughter, by all rights she should be counted among the "pure." But due to the sinister machinations of Namima's erstwhile lover, the daughter's identity is obscured, and she is presented as the next "priestess of darkness," tender of death and other impurities. By digging down into the foundational myths of Japan, the myths that buttress the platform upon which the patrilineal emperor system is built, Kirino reveals the origins as no more than corrupt manipulations, the lie of power. The corruption in Kirino's parallel world leaks over into the world of the *Kojiki* myths. If it is easy for mortals to manipulate sacred functions, then why not manipulate the accounts of the gods themselves? The scapegoating of Izanami as the vessel of impurity and death is as much a fabrication as we would find in any account of the victor's justice. With one pillar of the foundational myths thus undercut, it does not take much to topple the sacredness of the emperor system itself. The nation is bogus. And gender roles—heretofore represented as *natural*—are constructions of convenience.⁵

It is not surprising that in her excavation of patriarchal myths Kirino would lead us into Izanami's womb of darkness. In effect, it represents another "crack in reality," a kind of crime that lays the blame on Izanami, one that requires excavation in order for justice to be done. Mother of Japan, mother of female corruption, Kirino's Izanami represents the mythic source of female desire and female failing—undone by her own body. She disintegrates into maggots and filth while her consort ascends to a position of purity. Namima, as her human counterpart, also dies after giving birth to the child that liberates her lover from his position as social pariah. Childbirth links the two women, tied as they are to their fallen state by their own female biology. Both are equally connected to experiences of betrayal at the hands of the men they had trusted—a betrayal that fixes them in positions of defilement. As Namima says, "The trials she has borne are the trials all women must bear" (Kirino 2012:309).

Izanami is not only trapped in her role as the dark mother by the giant boulder that imprisons her in her place, she is also locked in by language. Kirino uses language to mark Izanami's capture visibly and

aurally. We see this most emphatically in Kirino's second chapter, where she introduces the creation narrative. Izanami tells Namima how she came to be, her voice taking on a new solemnity:

Perhaps you are wondering what it was like at the time? Indeed, the earth floated upon the seas as formless as oil, bobbing through the waves like a jellyfish. And so here as well two gods came into being. The first was the god Umashi-ashi-kabi-hikoji, the Esteemed Deity of the Reed Shoots, who gave life to things by blowing upon them with a vital force. The other was Ame-no-toko-tachi, the Heavenly Eternal Standing Deity, who guards the heavens for all eternity. These gods protected the permanence of the heavens, and spurred the development of the earth below—their very existence points to the value of both. Neither Umashi-ashi-kabi-hikoji nor Ame-no-toko-tachi took a physical form. And so the five gods that I have just now introduced, having neither body nor sex, are known as the Five Separate Heavenly Deities (Kirino 2012:107).

Izanami's recitation of the creation myth goes on for pages. Prior to this section, the narrative had been melodious and magical, as befits myth, but the radical departure at this juncture marks a telling point in Izanami's access to language and in her ability to narrate her, and the nation's, story. Some of the critics of the English version of *The Goddess Chronicle* censured Kirino (and by extension her translator) for the way this lovely language comes to a screeching halt. For example, a reviewer for *The Independent* writes, "there is a second strand which seems weighed down by the author's reverence for the source material; an almost biblical retelling of the intricacies of the legend that slows the story unnecessarily" (Epstein 2013). As the translator, I do not think this mode of telling is unnecessary: I think the heavy ponderousness of the narrative *is* the point. Here we see the power of a masculinist logos. The section in question details the creation of the Japanese archipelago, the origin of binaristic logic, and the naming of the original deities—the founders of the Japanese race and the source of its patriarchal triumph. It is this proud lineage, this history of creation that surrounds Izanami, locks her in her dark cave, and refuses her self-fulfillment. It is the same narrative that releases Izanagi from a similar fate, allows his purification, and sees him as the single source of the Imperial line—untainted by female interference. It is also a language that Izanami cannot bear to speak. Midway through her recitation of the creation myth, when she comes to the occasion of her death, she halts abruptly and another denizen of the underworld takes over.

DIVA BODIES AND NATIONAL ANXIETIES

Kirino Natsuo's foray into mythic retelling was occasioned by an invitation from Canongate, a press in the United Kingdom, that challenged authors from around the globe to retell one of their country's or culture's myths "in a contemporary and memorable way."⁶ Kirino's decision to write about the Izanami-Izanagi sequence from the *Kojiki* allowed her to take her customary exploration of male privilege and female bitterness to a foundational level. As Susan Sellers (2001:22) has suggested of the act of rewriting myth, it "is not only a matter of weaving in new images and situations but also involves the task of excavation, sifting through the layerings of adverse patriarchal renderings from which women were excluded, marginalized or depicted negatively to salvage and reinterpret as well as discard." In *The Goddess Chronicle*, by imagining Izanami voicing her own narrative, Kirino uses the opportunity to delve beneath the surfaces of Japan's foundational myths, sifting through the loamy legends of Japanese nationhood to find there the origins of male primacy and female subjugation.

In Coates's (2014:24) exploration of screen divas she suggests that their images are "invested with particular affects that reflected and mediated national issues." Whereas the issues Coates discusses are keyed to the aftermath of Japan's defeat in World War II and the resulting occupation, we can see similar affects at work in the image of Izanami—the body of precontinental, pre-logos Japan. Hers is a powerful body that is unbounded and porous, vulnerable to invasion and susceptible to form-altering subjugation. Lacking the rigid dependability of her male counterpart, the female body threatens to live beyond its borders, to ooze, and to defy, thus calling forth, as Coates (2014:30) suggests of the film star Yamaguchi Yoshiko, an abjected figure that challenges the certainty of national boundaries. Referring to the boom in monster movies of the late 1950s, Coates (2014:34–35) notes: "We can understand this motif as a process of abjecting threatening bodies; seemingly non-threatening bodies are made to assume the appearance of threat in order to provide a body upon which to practice the boundary-affirming process of abjecting. In this way, the female body unmasked as formless provides a suitable target for abjecting." Izanami, the first deity to be given female form, is unmasked and in her malleable formlessness, made to assume the guise of all that terrifies and threatens—death, taint, impurity, invasion. By making the female body the site of fear, masculinist discourse is able to contain her, entomb her,

and thus erect borders around her that not only keep her in her place but solidify the boundaries of the known, the ordered, the nation.

In Kirino's imaginative retelling of the *Kojiki* story, Izanami and the other denizens of her Yomi world are wraithlike—hardly corporeal. They drift in an abject, uncertain world of death. The goddess herself, though purportedly with a regal bearing, has a body that shimmers with light when she angers, and her face offers no reassurance. “Her eyebrows were drawn tightly together in a deep frown. At one moment she seemed ready to rage and at the next as though she might cry. I had never met anyone with such an unreadable face” (Kirino 2012: 91). Hers is a body that cannot be understood. It inspires both awe and fear. And the space that it inhabits—as limitless as it may appear to the others around her—is nevertheless limned by the presence of the boulder. Izanami can never escape.

The politics of national borders is invoked in yet another way in Kirino's tale. The parallel world that she offers in juxtaposition to the realm of death features a “real” world of mortality, but it is no less mythic. The Isle of Sea Snakes is modeled after Kudaka-jima in the Ryūkyūan archipelago that includes Okinawa, a highly contested region of Japan that in its own right gives rise to uncertainties about national identity and porous borders.⁷ Okinawa and other Ryūkyūan islands have long been imagined by scholars as the originator or the repository of indigenous Japanese culture. What was eventually lost on the main islands—due to the imbrications of modern (Western) customs—has been preserved in the more “backwards” and provincial Okinawa.⁸ But the colonialist fantasies about Okinawa, rather than recognizing the former Ryūkyūan Kingdom on its own terms, circumscribes the space into a mythic grotto. The imaginary Isle of Sea Snakes, Okinawa, and Izanami are equally marginalized—forced to carry the freight of the noble primitive. Their irrational anger and messy emotions—in refusing to be checked—threaten to disrupt the tidy narratives that would see them silent, accessible to interpretation, and exploitable.

ENTERING THE MATRIXIAL BORDERSPACE

In her retelling, Kirino eviscerates the mythic stereotypes that continue to assign women and ethnic others such as Ryūkyūans the negative pole in binary constructions that deny their freedom of movement and rob them of their creative genius. Kirino takes the tropes that had earlier been used to shore up male authority and pushes them to extremes, in

the process depriving those tropes of their power. Most prevalent in *The Goddess Chronicle* is the trope of binarism and the assignment of the negative to the female or the female-identified half of the binary. The two realms that Kirino portrays are both dominated by the female principle yet defined by male-policed borders. The Yomi underworld is clearly ruled by Izanami. It is her space. But it was a space that was invented by male belligerence. Had Izanagi not sought to “know” that space—to define it—it might have continued in its indefiniteness. It is also a profoundly female space. The characters who inhabit the space are female (Izanami, Namima, and Hieda no Are). The only male presences admitted are deprived of the ability to act or to assert male privilege. They are blinded, confused, and unable to legitimize their claims to knowledge or selfhood. While the Yomi underworld would appear on the surface to be frightful and sterile, it is surprisingly also full of positive potential. And we sense this in the relationships between the women who come together in their adversity and find common ground, even comfort, in their shared anger.

The characters in the Yomi underworld, having relinquished their physical forms, continue on as the memory of an embedded female essence. They draw together in what becomes a sort of sanctuary, an interior womb-like haven beyond the exterior world of trauma and binaristic difference. Here we have what we might call, using Bracha Ettinger’s (2006) term, a “matrixial borderspace.” This space points to the prebirth experience shared by all humans in which the developing consciousness enjoys simultaneously the pleasure and pain of sharing and separating and sensing the inchoate. It is a space pregnant with a powerful sense of immanence, or of potential becoming that is prior to the imposition of logos and knowing. It is, as Ettinger (2006: 90) describes, a “border-space” in which plurality and partiality are conjoined. “In that open space where presence-absence conjoin . . . where a beat of pulse acts against the stability of visual space and the coherence of visual form. . . . In this space of plurality-and-partiality, it raises the enigma of the shareability of trauma and phantasy and the possibility of *co-response-ability with/for* the unknown Other” (Ettinger 2006:90).

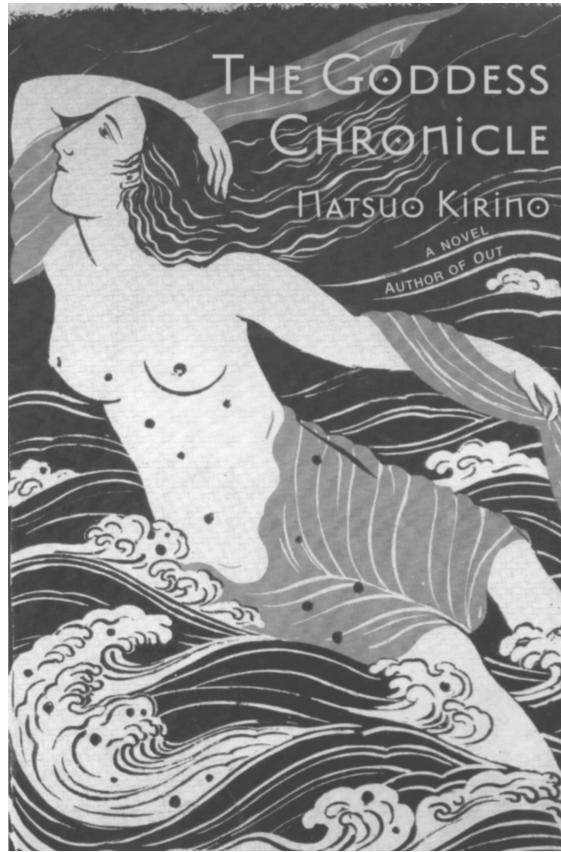
The matrixial borderspace thus moves us beyond the either/or binarisms in which any reappropriation of male-authorized myth merely inverts the power hierarchy and introduces a realm where, as Ettinger (2006:90) explains: “In the phallus, we confront the impossibility of sharing trauma and phantasy, whereas in the matrix, to a certain extent, *there is an impossibility of not sharing* them.”

The female-centered world in the parallel realm of the Isle of Sea Snakes is far from a woman's paradise, and much of the tension and drama in Kirino's work resides in the way the women's sacral roles are co-opted for personal gain by others, particularly by men. Kirino's underworld realm seeks to restore this power by offering an alternative that in its deviance is hardly desirable. There is in Kirino's text a mobius structure where woman is the beginning and the end. She is the victim and the victimizer—the source of her own undoing. Kirino does not offer spiritual redemption or even a political accusation. The goddess is herself cruel—her vindictiveness exacting a high price. But in her underworld of death Kirino calls out the problematic aspects of the foundational myths, criticizing the institutionalization of the emperor and the inevitability of corruption. She foments a powerful counternarrative that while celebrating the power of subversiveness, also hints at its own limits and potential for abuse.

A DIVA IS NOT A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

Readers of *The Goddess Chronicle*, frequently female, tend to report a near visceral reaction to the novel. Regardless of their nationality, they see the myth as speaking to their national origins and to their contemporary social situation (Figure 9). For example, one British reader posted: "This book put me under a spell. I loved it so much it hurts, seriously. . . . In a way it was the perfect book for the person I am right now—while the book is about many things, what stood out most for me was how it captured what it means—and meant—to be a woman, the pain, the expectations, what happens if women refuse to fulfill the role 'society' (read: men) want them to fulfil" (Sophie 2016). Whereas another reader had this to say about exactly the same point: "But, really, this book made me angrier and angrier with every page I turned. The unfairness of basically every female character in this book, made my head boil. . . . I think the sad part of it all is that it's so close to the truth, the world is changing to a better place (hopefully) but it's a slow process . . ." (Zombiehero 2013).

At its core, Kirino's novel is about anger, about the power of anger to seep through the fissures of barricading boulders, to resonate across borders of time and space, between the pages of myth and reality, and to activate recognition and identification. As the novel nears its conclusion Izanami confronts her erstwhile lover, who returns to her cave to seek forgiveness and to implore her to relinquish her anger. Izanami is



9. Cover from *The Goddess Chronicle* copyright © 2012 by Natsuo Kirino. Used by permission of Grove Atlantic, Inc.

allowed a choice. She can work to establish good in the world of the living and help comfort those who fall into her realm. Or she can go on with her deadly ways. Izanami rebuffs Izanagi's effort to redeem her:

My defilement bothers me not in the least, and I have no interest in saving anyone! All who end up here will stay here forever, doomed to drift, directionless. . . . It is my lot, my *choice* to accept all of the world's defilement. And should one delve deeper and deeper still into the heart of this defilement, one might discover there something entirely unexpected. But, Izanaki, that has nothing to do with you (Kirino 2012:306).

Izanami refuses to play by Izanagi's rules. After all, he never had to play by hers. He broke her injunction, he pushed his way into her sanc-

tuary, and he violated her with his sight. As the story ends, she deprives him of his own. She asserts her power by choosing her own destiny and acting on her own will. But her choice is unsettling. It goes against the grain of our readerly expectations. She stays behind in her world of death, stewing in her anger. A blogger who reviewed the translation calls the ending “strangely anticlimactic and unsatisfactory. There were no resolutions whatsoever” (Azad 2013). In fact, there are resolutions, just not the ones we wish for or expect. Trained as we are on “happy ever after” fairy tales . . . on Cinderella leaving with her Prince or Sleeping Beauty awakening to hers, we anticipate that Izanami will just be a good girl, agree to leave her dark surroundings, step out into the sun, and smile. When she asserts her divine privilege to choose the unthinkable, we are nonplussed. But should we be? Might we consider that perhaps Kirino has in fact created a character who steps outside the system of representation by choosing that which cannot be represented, choosing instead the diva nation?

To rephrase the choice using fairy tale tropes, Izanami refuses to be a rescued “damsel in distress.” She will not be defined by a restoration of her purity or a rescinding of her power. As a rescued damsel she would be expected to submit meekly to her fate so that her rescuer might be seen as heroic. But Izanami will not be a mere conduit to Izanagi and his tale of suffering or his quest for happiness. After all, what lies beneath the surface of the rescued damsel story is always the story of the male hero’s weakness or guilt over his inability to perform his socially prescribed patriarchal duty to protect family (Sarkeesian 2013). Izanami will not accept a position of victimhood or a loss of power to advance Izanagi’s story. He has entered her realm, her story for the last time.

In a way Izanami refuses to allow, as Sara Ahmed (2010: 20) describes in *The Promise of Happiness*, “the happy ending” to beguile her back into socially appropriate behavior. “To kill joy . . . is to open a life, to make room for possibility, for chance.” Hayashi Kumiko (2012:6) suggests that Kirino offers us a new beginning, with her story’s ending. She celebrates Izanami’s will to survive on her own terms. Izanami refuses to be overcome by hope. Instead, she stands proud as the Goddess of Yomi. She wraps her anger around her like a regal garment. Hers is an anger only she as a diva goddess can manage; the other spirits who surround her cower in her presence, dismayed and confused. And yet, her anger speaks for them, too. Her anger invigorates the stories they refuse to speak. Or, as Namima states: “She was the goddess who invited our desire and also our defilement; she bore the weight of the past and lived

on into the future forever. . . . Izanami is without doubt a woman among women. The trials that she has borne are the trials all women must face” (Kirino 2012:308–9.)

Through the vector of Izanami’s unbridled anger, Kirino Natsuo challenges her readers, as Berlant (1997:223) suggests, “to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent.” To quote Jennifer Waelti-Walters (1982:82), “Any woman, then, who speaks out, who thus has control over her situation . . . who makes choices and carries them out with authority, who recognizes and fulfills her own desires, is almost certain to be found inconvenient by the men around her, and runs a great risk of being labeled eccentric or mad by them, as they attempt to diminish her sphere of influence, undermine her strength and confidence and prevent her speech from being heard.” Kirino invents an angry diva, whose inconvenient speech refuses to go unheard.

NOTES

I am grateful to the many friends who read early drafts of this paper, including Jan Bardsley, Nancy Berg, and most particularly Laura Miller. In fact, Laura lit the initial spark in the spring of 2012 by hosting a day-long symposium, “Pop Heroines and Female Icons of Japan,” where I first had the opportunity to present a version of this paper. From there I took the work on the road, reading different renditions on a number of campuses in the United States and Japan. For this I am indebted to Seth Jacobowitz, Elizabeth Oyler, Giorgio Amitrano, and their students and colleagues who offered helpful feedback. I also appreciate the opportunity to share the paper with the Midwest Japan Seminar.

1. *Joshinki* was published in 2008 by Kadokawa Shoten (Kirino 2008). The translation was released in 2012 by Canongate. In the novel, Kirino refers to the male deity as Izanaki. Premodern references to the *Kojiki* preferred to use the spelling *ki*; the *gi* became more commonplace in modern reference. Whether spelled *ki* or *gi*, the phoneme identifies the male principle, whereas the *mi* of Izanami refers to the female. In both names, the *iza* means to invite. In this essay, I will follow Kirino’s “Izanaki” when citing from her novel.

2. Kirino Natsuo is the pen name of Hashioka Mariko (b. 1951). She spent her childhood in Sendai, until her architect father moved the family to Tokyo when she was fourteen. After graduating with a degree from Seikei University, Kirino worked in various occupations, including magazine editing. She married at twenty-four, and it wasn’t until she was thirty, when she had had her first child, that she began to write professionally. Her early works conformed to romance fiction. She began writing mystery fiction ten years later and it was then she started to receive critical recognition. Since that time, she has written over twenty novels and her interests have turned from mystery fiction to crime fiction to psychological noir. She claims as her influences writers “as diverse as Flannery O’Connor, Anne Tyler, Hayashi Fumiko, and Reinaldo Arenas” (Davis

2010:10). Her works have won numerous awards, including the Edogawa Rampo Award and the Naoki Prize. *Goddess Chronicles* won the Murasaki Shikibu Literary Award. For more on Kirino's biography, see Davis 2010.

3. Gregus (2014:120) refers to the studies of Lisette Gepphart (2010).

4. Susa-no-o, inheriting his father's mobility, blows willfully through Amaterasu's palace, motivating her temporary removal to a cave. (For more on this episode, see Tomoko Aoyama's Chapter 2 in this volume.) And even after he is banished from Heaven, he is free to roam about Izumo slaying dragons and rescuing maidens.

5. As Hara Takeshi (2008) notes, it is surely no coincidence that Kirino's novel appeared shortly after the controversy over the gender of the emperor's successor erupted in 2005 when government officials began to discuss publicly solutions to the "heir crisis." On September 6, 2006, Princess Akishino delivered a baby boy, which largely diverted the crisis. But discussions of allowing women to succeed to the throne (once again) are ongoing—drawing into question binaries of male/female and pure/impure.

6. Authors in the Canongate series include Margaret Atwood, Karen Armstrong, AS Byatt, David Grossman, Milton Hatoum, Natsuo Kirino, Alexander McCall Smith, Tomás Eloy Martínez, Victor Pelevin, Ali Smith, Su Tong, Dubravka Ugresic, Salley Vickers, and Jeanette Winterson. Website at <http://www.themyths.co.uk/> [accessed 12 July 2016].

7. Kirino based her descriptions of the fictional Umihebi, or "The Isle of Sea Snakes," and its sacred matrilineal functions on Kudaka Island in Okinawa and its Izaiho rites. Kudaka is a sacred island a thirty-minute ferry ride from Chinen in southern Okinawa. Known as "the island of the gods," it is believed that the original goddess and creator of Okinawa, Amamikiyo, descended upon this island. During the era of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, men were prohibited from entering certain sites on this island, which were kept sacred for the performance of important ceremonies. One of the most important ceremonies was the Izaiho, in which women between the ages of thirty and forty-one made the symbolic transition from young females into celestial beings. The ceremony was performed every twelve years for over 600 years. But the last occurrence was in 1978. It has ceased to be performed because apparently there are no more participants. See Hara (2008:261–62).

8. Okinawa historian Ifa Fuyū and folklore scholar Yanagida Kunio claim that the Okinawan shamanic religion—with women at its center—was the forerunner to Japan's Shinto. See Barske (2013:76).