

Imaginary Finland in Contemporary Japanese Fiction

Serena Ceniccola

Pembroke College, University of Oxford

Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi

UCL and Uppsala University

Abstract

This study analyses representations of Finland in three contemporary works: the fantasy manga and anime series *Tsubasa: Reservoir Chronicle* by CLAMP, Haruki Murakami's novel *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, and Yōko Tawada's dystopian novel *Scattered All Over the Earth*. We conduct the analysis using the concepts of nation/country branding, social imaginary, and the Self-Other dichotomy. The imagined Finland, with its cultural exports and stereotypes such as *sisu* 'guts, perseverance', nature, and Moomins, functions as a mirror image of Japan. In our data, Finland is used to code characters, advance the plot, and understand history.

Keywords

Japan, Finland, Murakami, nation branding, country branding, Tawada, CLAMP

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Introduction

In this study we approach an often-overlooked topic, that of the fictional representation of Finland in Japanese contemporary literature and popular culture. In the narratives that follow this structure, the imaginary, sometimes stereotypical Finland built by the authors functions as a mirror image of Japan, with which it shares a hidden darkness and political efforts to rebuild the national reputation after the end of WW2. This study also aims to connect Finland's country-branding strategy to its perception and representation within contemporary Japanese culture, as well as its use as a literary device in the Japanese imagination and in Japanese fiction.

This article features three case studies: the fantasy manga and anime series *Tsubasa: Reservoir Chronicle* by CLAMP (ツバサ-RESERVoIR CHRoNiCLE, 2003-2009 and 2005-2009), Haruki Murakami's novel *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (色彩を持たない多崎つくると、彼の巡礼の年 *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to, kare no junrei no toshi* 2013. Henceforth *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*), and Yōko Tawada's dystopian novel *Scattered All Over the Earth* (地球にちりばめられて *Chikyū ni chiribamerarete*, 2018). We will organise our analysis in a chronological fashion, highlighting how the popularity of Finland in Japanese literature interconnects with the phenomenon known as Finland Boom, that started in the early 2000s. These three contemporary works all depict or suggest an imaginary 'Finland' where real elements blend with fictional ones. This imaginary 'Finland' enhances our understanding of the meaning and message of the works, the inner worlds of the characters, and the development of the plots. Furthermore, it reflects on the Japanese experience and world history through the prevalent themes of self-discovery in Japanese contemporary narrative. Furthermore, the audience's shared practice of engaging with the imaginative world of fiction raises questions about the authenticity of the representation of Finland in visual media. Finally, it also prompts discussions on the extent to which such representations can stretch before transforming Finland into a Finnish-coded whimsical place that mirrors Japan, and why this phenomenon occurs.¹

Representations of Finland in Japan

Ipatti (2018) summarises the development of Finland's country branding strategy and especially its reception in Japan. Finland's national image underwent strategic transformation beginning in the Cold War era, as

authorities sought to redefine international perceptions through initiatives like the Jakobson Committee's report in 1961, which laid the groundwork for a modern portrayal of Finnish identity. Outdated stereotypes rooted in peripheral exoticism including the northern lights, the thousand lakes, and Sibelius, were replaced with symbols of progress such as democracy, education, and innovation. This rebranding extended to Japan, where Finland projected a government-crafted autostereotype that was reflected back through Japanese perceptions. Over time, Finland's image was repeatedly reconsidered through various campaigns and committees, aligning with evolving national, political, and commercial goals. Notably, branding efforts like Mission for Finland 2010 emphasized abstract values – conflict resolution, clean technology, and education – over slogan-driven marketing. Finland has actively promoted its culture and development in Japan through exhibitions and media, many of which continue to influence Japanese narratives today.

One notable early cultural example relevant to our analysis is the collaboration between the Japanese designers Katsuji Wakisaka and Fujiwo Ishimoto with the textile brand Marimekko in 1968 and 1974 (Ipatti 2018: 112). However, it was in the early 2000s that Finland experienced a cultural boom in Japan. This period coincides with the release of the Japanese film *Kamome Shokudō* (かもめ食堂 2006, En. *Kamome Diner*, Fi. *Ruokala Lokki*), which contributed to a growing fascination with Finnish fashion and lifestyle in Japan. Years after its release, *Kamome Shokudō* remains popular among Japanese tourists and vloggers in Finland, as evidenced by numerous vlogs documenting the film's locations on platforms such as YouTube (see for example 'Wonderful trip to Helsinki to visit the filming locations of the Japanese movie "Kamome Diner"' by megane's Sweden life). This boom is also visible in Japanese education; Finland is associated with northern European 'simplicity, functionalism and closeness to nature'; and buying Finnish design products 'is no more limited to a small group of enthusiasts', but has become an 'option for all fashion-conscious Japanese' (see also Matilainen and Santalahti 2018). Ipatti (2018: 103) quotes a Finnish business representative in Tokyo who says that Japanese consumers seem to have developed a 'special likening [sic] to Finland, its culture and people' (Ipatti 2018: 103).

The expression *Finrando būmu* (フィンランドブーム in Japanese; Finnish cultural boom/Finland boom in English) began to appear in the Japanese media around 2003. This concept expresses a strong interest in Finland and

implies that Finland deserves attention because it is a ‘fascinating’ country to the Japanese (Mitsui 2012, also Fuse 2021). Indeed, the interest shown by Japan towards Finland did not start as a cultural phenomenon, instead the main focus used to be on the social institutions of the country. According to Fuse (2021: 24) ‘the wholesomeness of Finland’s social institutions has been a focus of Japanese interest since the 1960s’.

However, the portrayal of Finland in Japan in the key decade, the 1960s, is not a completely positive one. Although aspects of culture, tradition and education had been well-received and even praised by the Japanese media, the political aspects of Finnish history were regarded in a less positive light, with frequent speculation concerning the position of Finland in regard to the Soviet Union. Finland was sometimes depicted in Japan as a mere ‘satellite state, while at other times it was seen as strongly ‘anti-communist’ stigmatized by ‘bitter experiences caused by the Soviet Union’ (Ipatti 2018: 113). Finnish life in general was pictured as tranquil, in line with the tone of the culture section news, but the picture was disrupted, for instance, by writings on an International Youth Festival organized in Helsinki in 1962, when Finns were seen both as friendly and as ‘rude and unwelcoming’ (Ipatti 2018: 113). It is noteworthy that these are the same decades during which, after the defeat of Japan in World War II and the consequent seven years of American Occupation, Japan was finding itself increasingly isolated from the rest of Asia and reduced to almost exclusively trading with the US.

Japan and Finland both rely heavily on their Nation Brand for representation and use soft power to harness their competitiveness in the globalized market economy (see Browning 2015). Japanese authors, like Murakami Ryū, have noted similarities between the two countries. Externally, both nations exhibit “othering” tendencies in their branding histories. This is often caused by the way the nation-branding process interacts with the national identity shaping it. For instance, Finnish and Japanese have both incorporated numerous loanwords due to language contact—Finnish from Germanic languages, especially Swedish, and Japanese from Chinese (see e.g. Ceniccola 2024: 85-86, Frellesvig 2010: 145). American cultural influence has further introduced new terms, including *wasei eigo* (English made in Japan) in Japanese, which refers to English-based words created or adapted in Japan (Miller 1997: 123). This hybrid quality is central to contemporary Japanese narratives, often featuring whimsical elements.

Previous studies of Finland in Japan consist, in addition to Ipatti’s (2018) seminal study, of dissertations and articles that have focused on perceptions

of Finnish design among the Japanese (Nousiainen 2012), the representation of Finland in the manga *Finlandia - Fairy Vocational School* (Mähönen 2021), the soft power of then Finnish Embassy in Japan's twitter account (Kekäläinen 2023), representations of Finland at the same embassy and the Finnish Institute in Japan (Lehtola 2009), the Moomins in the Japanese imagination (Mitsui 2012), and the reviews of the iconic Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki's films in Japanese magazines (Fuse 2021).

Fuse's (2021) study includes a 1998 review of Kaurismäki's films *The Match Factory Girl* and *Drifting Clouds* in the magazine *Shūkan hōseki* by the Japanese author and filmmaker Ryū Murakami. Concerning Finland he says:

[Finland] is a country that has a famous sky jacket brand and F1 driver, and everything is expensive there. Although it is actually very difficult to answer what kind of country Finland is to those who have never been there, I claim from my experience in visiting the country that it is a very dark and lonely country. Finnish food is tasteless, and women are not particularly beautiful. There is no fine alcohol and no exciting music. At the bar at night, I found young people with overcast dark eyes, gathering and at the cabaret at the street corner, and dissolute-looking middle-aged men and women dancing...What kind of country is Finland? It is difficult to answer, but it looks like Japan. (Fuse 2021: 141)

It is worth noting that Murakami Ryū's own narratives often portray Japan in a disturbing light. The quote illustrates the way in which one author perceives Finland having visited it. The imagined and the real blend, and Finland resembles Japan. Our study complements the previous studies by focusing on this blending and expanding the analysis to pieces of contemporary fiction that have not been analysed from the perspective of Finnishness or nation branding before.

Theory: Social Imaginary and Self-Other

In light of Finland's purposeful nation branding, Charles Taylor's concept of the social imaginary is useful for our analysis. Taylor (2002: 106) described new ideas as something that 'start off as theories held by few people [and] may come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first that of elites, perhaps and then the society as a whole' (Taylor 2002: 106). Valaskivi has connected this to nation branding in her study of 'cool Japan':

Through the circulation of the transnational idea of nation branding and its various local practices, a particular social imaginary gets formulated, represented, and reproduced; through these processes, it is also transformed. It is through the circulation not only of images, representations, meanings, values, and practices, but also of people and objects, that a community formulates, maintains, and reformulates its values and shared understanding of identity in the social imaginary. (Valaskivi 2013: 486)

Valaskivi's perspective provides a solid foundation for our study, as in stating that the social imaginary is transformed by the transnational circulation of nation branding, she confirms that elements of such transformed social imaginary can be found across different media, including literature, as indeed she confirms by stating that 'then, it is possible to study the formation of social imaginaries by tracing values, practices, meanings, and actors in different acts of circulation: media texts, speeches, strategy documents, and interviews.' (Valaskivi 2013: 486). Our study aims to do precisely this, to look for traces of the marketed and imagined Finland in literary texts.

Ipatti (2018: 106) explores how Finland's state-crafted self-image was communicated to Japan and subsequently mirrored back to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs through Japanese perceptions, illustrating how Finland, as a conceptual nation, was represented abroad. She further explains that these shared national self-images evolve within societies through a dynamic framework of contrasting identities—between the Self and the Other, between Japan and Finland.

Gabriel and Snyder (1999) note that, beginning with the Meiji era, Japanese modern literature—and arguably popular culture as well—has consistently focused on themes of selfhood and its portrayal. They emphasize that narrative fiction in Japan has long served as a vehicle through which many writers express and explore the inner dimensions of personal identity. Thus, the idea that the individual remains unaware of their own selfhood, a realisation that sometimes even scares them, becomes the focal point of these narratives. Works such as Murakami's *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, as well as Tawada's *Scattered all over the Earth* both focus on such dynamics. In the case of Murakami's main character his pilgrimage leads to a new understanding of himself, while Tawada uses the language as the central element of self-expression, considering that by losing their native language a person must reinvent themselves around the realisation that part of them will

be lost together with the language they were born in, unless they create a new, more personal one. In both texts, Finland is mentioned, and while it may not play a central role in the development of the narrative, the fact that it is mentioned and the way it is represented appear meaningful, reflecting the way in which Finland's nation branding has permeated the Japanese consciousness and how the Self-Other dichotomy works on two levels—the personal and individual, as well as the national and collective.

In our data Finland is either mentioned or heavily coded, however, it is not necessarily the real Finland that the narrator describes, it is often just an idea of Finland that both mirrors Japan and provides a whimsical narrative space. It also perpetuates the tendency to other Finland as a mirror-image for Japan itself. In other words, Finland appears to stand as Japan's counterpart or double.

Analysis: Fictional Finland in the works of Clamp, Murakami, and Tawada

We have selected the two authors Murakami and Tawada and the collective Clamp because their works include a prominent representation of Finland. We will analyse these three works in chronological order, starting from the oldest one, ending with Tawada's novel as the most recent one CLAMP's *Tsubasa: Reservoir Chronicle* (2003) is the oldest of the three works representing popular culture which provide evidence for our argument that the Finland boom entered popular culture before it appeared in literature. All three are popular globally. The analysis of Murakami's novel will be longer and more detailed than the analysis of Tawada's and CLAMP's works, which in turn work more as a frame. On the one hand this is because Murakami writes the most about Finland in his work, on the other hand, he is the most well-researched author/creator out of the three. However, Tawada, who resides in Germany and writes in both Japanese and German, also explicitly refers to Finland, describing it through the nation branding stereotype popular in Japan.

***Tsubasa Reservoir Chronicle* (2003–2009) by CLAMP**

The representation of Finland in manga and anime in the context of the Finland boom and the post-boom has undergone a steady development. More recent manga and anime, and even games have started openly mentioning Finland. For instance, the character of Luviagelita Edelfelt from the franchise Fate/Stay Night is a secondary recurrent character in the

anime series *The Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II* (2019). It is stated that she is originally from Finland even though the most noticeable elements that confirm her nationality are her colouring (blond hair and blue eyes) as well as the colours of her clothes, blue and white. Another significant example is the controversial 2006 manga and anime series *Hetalia Axis of Power*.² Hetalia is a 'gag comic and animation series depicting historical and military relations between (so far) more than 40 nations, anthropomorphized as cute-looking and incompetent boys and kids' (Miyabe 2013). Japanese popular culture is clearly one of the areas where the continued negotiations between the myth of uniqueness encouraged by Japan and the western neo-Japonisme based on such a narrative are the most evident.

While both *Fate/Stay Night* and *Hetalia* explicitly mention Finland, the presence of Finnish-coded characters in manga and anime is not new. A narratological representation of Finland does not start with literature, but with popular culture. We argue that the literary representation of the country follows a much more whimsically dark representation. To analyse this trend, we focused on a particular case study, CLAMP's 2003-09 manga series and later anime adaptation *Tsubasa Reservoir Chronicle* and more specifically its Finnish-coded main character Fai D. Flourite.

CLAMP is a collective of female manga artists that have been active and quite popular in the manga and anime scene across genres and demographics since the late 1980s. Their series like *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1996-2000), *xxxHolic* (2003-2011), and *Tsubasa: Reservoir Chronicle* (2003-2009) are connected, and the various characters appear across the production. The themes vary, but in many of the storylines the characters can change their destiny and there are various soulmate couples in the multiverse. Even though it started being serialised more than two decades ago, *Tsubasa* is one of CLAMP's most recent works with its sequel *Tsubasa Nirai Kanai Hen* being published between 2014 and 2016. Its companion series *xxxHolic* is still being published.

Tsubasa follows four main characters and several recurring characters, most of which originated from other works by CLAMP, giving *Tsubasa* a peculiar anthological quality. Syaoran and Sakura (originally from CLAMP's *Cardcaptor Sakura*) are childhood friends, so when Sakura loses her memory Syaoran travels to a different world where they meet the dimensional witch, Yuko, to ask for her help. Yuko, who trades in wishes, explains how in order to retrieve Sakura's memories they need to travel

across different worlds. They will not travel alone, but will be accompanied by two other characters: Kurogane, a ninja from a place called Nihon, reminiscent of ancient Japan, and Fai D. Flourite, a mage from a mysterious cold world called Ceres.

Koichi Iwabuchi (2002: 28) observes that characters in Japanese animation and video games typically lack distinctly Japanese features, a phenomenon he terms *mukokuseki*, meaning 'without nationality.' This concept suggests a deliberate removal of racial or cultural markers, resulting in designs that do not reflect any specific ethnic identity. While *mukokuseki* is contentious³ – often criticized for promoting a form of whitewashing by portraying characters as white or white-passing – it also allows creators to use colour and design symbolically. This approach is particularly evident in CLAMP's manga *Tsubasa Reservoir Chronicles* (2003–2009).

Natsu Hama (2021) analyses CLAMP's works from the perspective of modern myths through the lens of Levi Strauss' discourse on mythology. However, Hama's focus remains on the CLAMP's corpus of works, without focusing on a specific character or work. In their mentions of Tsubasa, they refer to the balance of power/misfortune as well as the one between granting a wish and paying it back. Reincarnation or transference in the action of jumping from one world to the next is also an element highlighted in the article. Our argument expands from Hama's by analysing the way in which in Tsubasa CLAMP present a transcultural environment and specifically introduce the mirror image dynamics between Japan and Finland embodied in the characters of Kurogane and Fai.

CLAMP often use visual elements to symbolise something. In the context of Tsubasa, the popular scene in which Fai is shown wearing a furisode, implying the romantic subtext of his relationship with Kurogane (*shonen ai*, non-explicit male-to-male romantic relationship, is a recurring theme in CLAMP's works) provides a significant example of this. Colouring and details are employed in a similar way. Specifically concerning Fai and his backstory, it can easily be seen that several elements seem to refer to Finland and Finnish Lapland. One of the most evident elements, in addition to Fai's appearance, is the colouring of his clothes as shown on the cover of the fifth volume of the manga. Fai's original clothes include a heavy fur-lined winter coat and a long vest both in white and light blue, incidentally the same colours as the Finnish flag. While he is rarely shown speaking his native tongue, and it is usually vaguely Slavic-sounding (*Tsubasa Tokyo*

Revelations, ep. 3, 2007), it remains impossible to identify the language as it is an invented one based on sounding different from Japanese and reminiscent of cold places.

The fact that Fai calls Kurogane names such as *kuro-sama* and gives him the role of *otōsan* (father) to reinforce the makeshift family dynamics that he tries to convey throughout most of the story (*Tsubasa Tokyo Revelations* ep. 1, 2007). When directly confronted about the inconsistencies of his attitude by Kurogane, Fai simply smiles without answering, showing that the fakeness of his attitude is never hidden (*Tsubasa Tokyo Revelation* ep. 1, 2007). Indeed, Kurogane often comments that he finds Fai unnerving, even annoying precisely because of his act. Additionally, Fai completely abandons this behaviour after being turned into a Vampire against his will, instead starting to address Kurogane by his proper name (*Tsubasa Tokyo Revelation* ep. 3, 2007). His demeanour changes to cold and detached, with the exception of his relationship with Sakura; however, Sakura soon becomes aware of the inner turmoil of her companion.

To summarise, Finnish characters and plot lines have entered Japanese pop culture, which we could see as an indication of successful nation branding and marketing. In *Tsubasa Reservoir Chronicle* (2003–2009) by CLAMP the character Fai is what we call Finland-coded, coming from a distant cold place, being associated blue and white, wearing fur, and speaking in a Slavic-sounding tongue. Fai's relationship to Kurogane, who represents Japan, is close as if they were family, perhaps reflecting the close relationship of the two countries. However, Kurogane finds Fai unnerving because of his silence, and the two drift apart following Fai's transformation into a cold and distant vampire. This could be seen as an indication of the impossibility of understanding the Other following political and historical changes.

Haruki Murakami: *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (2013)

Haruki Murakami (born 12 January 1949) is a best-selling and award-winning author whose works have been translated into dozens of languages. When discussing the production of Murakami, it is important to note that while his works are exceptionally popular around the globe, they have also been heavily criticised by eminent figures in the Japanese literary landscape such as Ōe Kenzaburo and from abroad such as Masao Miyoshi (Snyder and Gabriel 1999: 8); Miyoshi specifically sees in Murakami's literature an

attempt to please a non-Japanese audience (Rubin 1999: 183), while Ōe included Murakami among the reasons why he complained that 'pure literature is being elbowed out by contemporary Japan's increasingly prominent popular culture' (Napier 1999: 15) and therefore denied him the status of *junbungaku* (pure literature) writer. 'This is closely related to his new approach to Western culture, very different from that of the Japanese intellectual elite' (Suter 2008: 47). Murakami's literature has often been associated with US popular culture in a way that feels both similar to and drastically different from his contemporary Murakami Ryū's literary production. Indeed while Murakami Ryū's relationship with the US stems from him growing up in Sasebo, near to an American military base, Murakami Haruki's work as a translator of American literature provided a different angle that, as Suter claims, 'straddles the United States and Japan and shows how the cultural interactions between the two entities challenge dominant discourses through a "complicitous critique"' (Suter 2008: 35).

Murakami's surrealist and whimsical work has been described, for example, as magical realism (Strecher 1999), fractal realism (Weinberger 2014), and 'sushi noir' (Mussari 2025). He is known for using first-person narrative, which also applies to *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*. The themes in his work include search for identity (Strecher 1999), self therapy (Dil 2022) or a way to deal with cultural trauma and catastrophes (Dayıoğlu-Yücel 2015, Kim 2023). Murakami has been influenced by Western culture and literature while de-exoticising Japan to global audiences while criticising capitalism (e.g. Suter 2008). What remains Japanese in his fiction is the Japanese characters and world view (e.g. Li and Xiao 2024), and the nonlinear approach to time as well the use of Japanese literary genres (e.g. Clerici 2016, Weinberger 2024). A recurring theme in Murakami's work is the idea of a journey (e.g. Strecher 2020), which features even in the title of *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*.

The novel revolves around the railroad engineer Tsukuru Tazaki whose group of university friends suddenly stop talking to him. Years later Tsukuru decides to reconnect with them to understand what happened. The novel describes this quest or pilgrimage where the colourless main character searches for and tries to reconnect with the friends whose nicknames are colours. He travels to his hometown Nagoya, back to Tokyo and then via Helsinki to Hämeenlinna where one of his female friends has a summer house. This friend Kuro 'black' (real name Eri) works as a ceramic artist in Finland and is married to a Finnish ceramic artist Edvard Haatainen. After the trip to Finland Tsukuru returns to Tokyo. On his pilgrimage in Finland

Tsukuru finds the answer he has been looking for, which includes certain disturbing details about his group of friends. He discovers that another member of the group had accused him of rape and the others decided to ban him, although they knew that the accusation was fake, as they thought he could handle being alone. Strecher (2014: 196) notes that *Colorless* is typical of a Murakami novel by telling two stories: one current and one in retrospect with several embedded stories.

Firstly, one could see the trip to Finland and a Japanese woman being married to a Finnish man and spending time at a summerhouse as something representative.⁴ The fact that this particular female character is a ceramic artist, like her Finnish husband, is also representative considering the mutual appreciation of design, arts, and crafts. However, the Finland of the novel is not the real Finland. For example, in the taxi on the way from the airport to central Helsinki the signage is in Finnish only (Murakami 2014: 200). In reality, the signs in the Helsinki region are both in Finnish and the other official language, Swedish. The taxi driver is jolly and sociable and exclaims 'Friends and vacations are the best things in life' (Murakami 2014: 201). This type of positive and friendly behaviour is not necessarily typical for Finns. Even Tsukuru wonders whether all Finns make clever witticisms about life (Murakami 2014: 201). Next we find out that Tsukuru has not studied the guidebook that he has brought with him and a handsome blond bellboy escorts him to his room (Murakami 2014: 201). It is as if the fact that a guidebook was not consulted matches the fact that the author did not research the country and is basing his view of it on assumptions, such as bellboys being blond and goodlooking. Tsukuru pays the taxi driver and the bell boy who both appear to look pleased and grin back, respectively, to receive tips that are not actually common in Finland. This is a transactional Finland that has a function in the story. The hotel room is old-fashioned and it is bright outside in the evening (Murakami 2014: 201-2), both facts that create an otherworldly atmosphere. Tsukuru receives a map and navigates the streets that intersect with tram lines.

A Finnish woman called Olga helps Tsukuru to find Kuro. Olga looks healthy and appears smart and capable (Murakami 2014: 203-4). Olga listens to the voice message where Kuro's husband sounds like 'a straightforward, positive person' and he has '[t]he voice of a healthy man who lived a comfortable, relaxed life' (Murakami 2014: 203). The contrast between the husband and Tsukuru highlights Tsukuru's unhappiness and discomfort, and supports a portrayal of Finland as a Nordic utopia, a better version of Japan. These false representations and similarities are echoed in a scene in

Helsinki where Tsukuru can smell fish that is reminiscent of Japanese grilled mackerel (Murakami 2014: 209). However, this smell fades and he cannot find the source. This could be interpreted as echoing the similarities between the two countries that are there at first but disappear when looking more closely.

People drink wine and beer (Murakami 2014: 208), students eat pizza, smoke cigarettes and speak loudly (Murakami 2014: 209), and elderly men play street chess without saying a word (Murakami 2014: 211); the whole city is alive and colourful and full of dogs while Tsukuru is alone. This buzzing Finland is generically European and cosmopolitan. An old street performer plays the accordion with a repertoire ranging from northern European folk tunes to Elvis Presley's 'Don't be cruel'. This seems to symbolise Finland as a place where the North/East and West meet, a place that is not Japan, where the character's journey into himself and his past can stand out and be magnified.

Tsukuru asks the receptionist about a swimming pool (Murakami 2014: 211). This question is absurd in a country with thousands of lakes and the fact that the coastal city Helsinki has several beaches near the centre. Olga warns Tsukuru about elk (Murakami 2014: 213-214), which also makes little sense considering the motorway from Helsinki to Hämeenlinna is lined with fences for this very reason. This impressionistic and unknown Finland is evident also in the quote below where Finland is all the famous things or nothing.

'What's there in Finland?' his boss asked. 'Sibelius, Aki Kaurismäki films, Marimekko, Nokia, Moomin.' Tsukuru listed all the names of famous Finnish things that he could think of. His boss shook his head, obviously indifferent to all of them. (Murakami 2014: 190)

Incidentally Hämeenlinna, the region of Kuro's summer house, is Sibelius' hometown. This is even stated by Kuro's husband: 'Did you know that the first railway line in Finland ran between Helsinki and Hämeenlinna? That's why the people here are so proud of their station. As proud as they are that it's the birthplace of Sibelius. You've come to the right place.' (Murakami 2014: 219). It is as if Tsukuru has arrived at the heart of imaginary Finland. Edvard the husband says later when Tsukuru compliments him on the summer house: 'Thank you. It's very quiet, and I can get a lot of work done. We live a simple life. The kids love it here too. They enjoy the outdoors.' (Murakami 2014: 221). This is the idyllic peaceful and visually pleasing designer Finland where artists live peacefully in the forest and their happy

children frolic in nature. As it happens, Edvard worked for the Finnish ceramics company Arabia that is known for their Moomin mugs. Later Tsukuru 'prayed that Eri wouldn't be caught by any bad elves of the forest' (Murakami 2014: 264). This quote shows that the Finland in the novel is magical, whimsical yet scary.

Indeed, as stated by Hayashi Makoto in her article 'The Interaction between Haruki Murakami's Travel Writings and Novels from the 1980s to 2010s,' (村上春樹の紀行文と小説における相互影響について –1980年代から2010年代まで–) the places that Murakami brings to life in his novel, as opposed to the depictions in his travelogues, depart from their 'everyday quality' to be translated into something 'extraordinary' (Hayashi 2020: 28). This is clearly what happens with Tsukuru's Finland in the novel. We agree with Hayashi (2020) that there is no way of knowing whether Murakami has intentionally visited Finland before writing his novel, but the Finland that he describes possesses an unreal quality that is only enhanced by the fact that it becomes the place that finally reveals the truth to Tsukuru. According to Hayashi, Murakami has written about visiting Finland in two different instances in his 1990 memoir *Tōi Taiko*, where he claims to have visited Helsinki in 1987, during the time in which he was living in Italy with his wife, and in his travelogue 'What on Earth is There in Laos?', specifically in the chapter entitled 'Visiting Sibelius and Kaurismäki' where he relates that after inquiring to his Finnish editor where people from Helsinki go on holiday, he learnt about Hämeenlinna which he decided to visit (Hayashi 2020: 28–29). Perhaps the most interesting thing is Murakami answering to a question from a reader then reiterating on the same note in the appendix to *Where on Earth is There in Laos*, that he did not visit Finland before writing *The Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his year of pilgrimage*, but that instead he went back there after finishing the book to check whether he had made any mistake, and was fortunate enough to be able to confirm that he had got almost everything right (Hayashi 2020: 25, 28).

After the urban Helsinki, the landscape starts changing during Tsukuru's drive to Hämeenlinna. The whole country appears to be covered in trees that are different from those in Japan. The journey scene, the *michiyuki* of Japanese theatre, the drive to Hämeenlinna in Finland, is reminiscent of similar journeys in Murakami's works *Pinball, 1973* or *A Wild Sheep Chase* (cf. Strecher 2014: 201–202). Finland functions here as the other world, the *over there* where changes can take place. The lack of understanding between the east and the west or more generally between people is

reflected in an encounter in the central square of Hämeenlinna where Tsukuru eats a croissant, another more generally European delicacy like pizza, or the sandwich and Chablis Tsukuru consumes in Helsinki before returning to Japan (Murakami 2014: 266-267). Two girls ask Tsukuru whether he is Chinese and he says he is Japanese; then he asks the girls whether they are Russian (Murakami 2014: 216). This seems to capture the fact that we cannot fully understand each other or insult the Other by not knowing enough about them. The protagonist then tells the girls that his flight took 11 hours and on the plane he watched *Die Hard 12* (Murakami 2014: 216). The American film with the incorrect sequence number distorts reality further and brings the ever-present American culture into this scene as well.

Tsukuru meets an old man on a bicycle on the way to the summer house: 'With his horny fingers, like old tree stumps, he pointed out the path that Tsukuru had to take' (Murakami 2014: 216). The man ends up accompanying Tsukuru all the way to the summerhouse: 'Like the Grim Reaper having shown a dead person the road to Hades, he never looked back.' (Murakami 2014: 218). Strecher (2014: 202) sees the old man as a guardian spirit of the forest who indicates that the protagonist has reached his destination of *over there*. The summer house is not the land of the dead nor quite the land of the living, it is a liminal unsettling dark space where the main character can confront his past and be reborn (cf. Strecher 2024: 207-208). After travelling from Japan – the place where he is supposed to exist according to societal rules – to Finland – where he can finally see who he actually is in the eyes of the people around him – Tsukuru finally faces this dichotomy rebuilding his own identity. Indeed, for Dhar (2023) the *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Year of Pilgrimage* is about memory and identity, how the main character needs to return to the past and lose his equilibrium to find their value, which echoes Charles' (2016) psychoanalytic reading of the novel. Adding to the general disorientation and dream-like otherworldly quality of Finland are the linguistic repertoires: the girls in central Hämeenlinna speak English, Kuro's husband knows Japanese, his dog barks, and the old man switches from German to English. The pottery of Kuro and Edvard is unique yet mixed together with northern European and Japanese influences intersecting like their black-haired and one blond-haired daughters. This is reminiscent of the way Europe and America mix with Finland in the earlier scene in Helsinki.

To place the novel in Murakami's production it is worth returning to Rebecca Suter's *The Japanization of Modernity: Murakami Haruki between Japan and*

the United States where the author refers to Murakami as 'a cultural mediator between Japan and the United States' based on his popularity in the US. However, such popularity is juxtaposed by harsh criticism from others such as Ōe and Miyoshi who define Murakami's works as 'the symbol of a literature complicit with Japanese capitalism and Japan's worship of American culture.' (Geniccola 2024: 48). Suter (2008: 44) states that:

Murakami's use of Western culture is in fact very complex. On the one hand, he consciously markets his works to the United States, fosters a personal relationship with his translators, travels often to America, and in lectures and interviews tends to encourage this view of himself as 'Americanized.' On the other hand, he 'Japanizes' American culture in his texts and even resells this Asianized version of Western popular culture to China and Korea, where his novels are very successful. In this sense, his role recapitulates the Japanese government's policy of the 1980s known as *kokusaika*, internationalization, in its double meaning of 'becoming more modern and progressive by attaining international standards' and of 'making Japan go international by exporting its culture,' putting an end to *ippō tsūkō no bunka* (one-way culture)—Japan's tendency to import foreign culture without exporting its own. Most importantly, however, Murakami appropriates Western culture for its alienating effect, as a means to represent the complexity of reality. A creative use of American culture lies at the center of the narrative strategies deployed in this author's texts. (Suter 2008: 44)

Based on our analysis, Murakami appears to do the same with Finland in *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*.

To further relate our analysis to the influence of nation branding on the social imaginary and the Self-Other dichotomy, we can note that Murakami's depiction of Finland includes several of the elements that influenced the Japanese view of the country, such as the Moomins, Nokia, and Sibelius. Furthermore, Tsukuru soon leaves Helsinki to visit Kuro in Hämeenlinna, a smaller place which shrinks further to Kuro's actual location, a stereotypical *mökki* 'summerhouse' on the lakeside, especially considering that Tsukuru comes from Tokyo, a bustling metropolis. The opposition between the two countries, highlighted by the presence of Kuro (black) in Finland, and Shiro (white) in Japan - the fact that Shiro is dead solidifies in the reader the understanding that she is in Japan, she is part of Japan - creates once again

a system of mirror images. There is also an affinity between Tsukuru and Kuro; she is a pottery master now, creating her pieces in Finland, a detail that reminds the reader of the popularity of Arabia or even Iittala, whereas Tsukuru's name is reminiscent of the Japanese verb *tsukuru*, 'to make' but also 'to create'. Thus, it is not a coincidence that these two people meet again in Finland, the scene seeming to imply that Japan stands still, frozen in the too fast modernity, whereas Finland, rural as it may be, can and will still change and therefore create.

There is of course another point that should be questioned, which is whether Murakami intends Finland to be seen as a Western country. However, given the glimpse of the country provided by the novelist, it seems that he does not consider it a real country at all. Murakami's Finland exists suspended in an oniric dimension that shares much more with Tsukuru's dreams in the novel than with the real world. This seems to align with Komori's opinion that 'Murakami ultimately lacks the political engagement of Sōseki' (Suter 2008: 52) and Miyoshi's that 'his tales are remarkably fragmented'; they are 'an entirely easy read—a smooth, popular item of consumption'; his novels *1973-nen no pinbōru*, *Kaze no uta o kike*, and *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* are 'story-less stories of nameless characters'; and that *Noruei no mori* 'erases history, converting the 1960s to a mood, a sentiment, a style' (Suter 2008: 48). However, it also recalls the use of the whimsical scenery used by CLAMP in their manga series, highlighting a pattern in the representation of Finland in contemporary Japanese culture.

Yōko Tawada: *Scattered All Over the Earth* (2018, translation 2022)

Murakami's depiction of Finland is crafted to evoke an image akin to a broadly generalized, somewhat Americanised Western country. In Murakami's novel, Tsukuru visits settings that are not markedly distinct from the Denny's diner described in *Afutādāku* (2004), which is characterised by its American-inspired name, nondescript interior, and background music (Murakami 2017: 7). The portrayal of Finland in this context clearly lacks the natural features that are typically associated with northern regions – such as snow and ice – which, as we have discussed, are prominent in CLAMP's Finnish-coded settings. Conversely, in *Chikyū ni chiribame rarete* (2018, translated as *Scattered All Over the Earth*, 2022), Tawada Yōko (b. 23 March 1960) portrays Finland as a land inhabited exclusively by Moomins who once immigrated to Japan only to return to Finland to enjoy better social welfare. Indeed, unlike Murakami's depiction, Tawada presents Finland as an absurd, stereotype-driven setting, particularly through references to the

Moomin. Her portrayal includes familiar Finnish cultural elements like sauna, Sibelius, and sisu. *Sisu*, defined as determination and inner strength (e.g. Lahti 2022), has gained attention internationally in a similar way to Danish *hygge* ‘cosiness, comfort’ and Swedish *lagom* ‘just right, in moderation’, becoming associated with mindfulness (Nylund 2018).

Tawada, who writes in both Japanese and German, frequently employs unsettling elements in her work, sometimes using body horror as a form of metaphor – for instance in *Das Bad* (1989), where the body of the protagonist, a Japanese resident in Germany, ‘experiences unusual transformations (growing scales and losing her tongue among others).’ and ‘[i]n the end her body becomes a vessel for a dead woman who visits the world through the protagonist’s material presence’ (Höller 2023: 57). Tawada’s narratives explore the strangeness inherent in language, experimenting with neologisms and wordplay (Mehl 2023). Her novel *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* deconstructs human-animal boundaries (Johnson 2021; Yeung 2023), while *The Emissary* interrogates alternative post-nuclear lifestyles (Otsuki 2022). Following the Fukushima disaster, Tawada expressed concern about her ability to return to Japan (Maurer 2016; Kimura 2017), an element that can be found in *Scattered all Over the Earth* as well. Recurring themes in her work include traversing boundaries and confronting post-disaster realities, positioning her writing within a transcultural framework (Kraenzle 2008; Yildiz 2007; Simonis 2023). As Arslan (2021: 289) observes, Tawada ‘urges spatial and temporal reorientations that subvert existing power structures that yield such designations as “the Far East” and “Europe.”’ Central to this process is her focus on translation and linguistic identity (Slaymaker 2007; Tobias 2015).

In *Scattered All Over the Earth*, Tawada transitions from the dreamlike, nightmarish atmospheres of earlier works such as *Das Bad* towards a dystopian narrative shaped by climate change. Nonetheless, Tawada’s descriptions are frequently fantastical; for example, the disappearance of Japan is attributed to a man’s attempt to level mountains, resulting in the nation sinking beneath the sea – a narrative move reminiscent of Lewis Carroll’s nonsensical logic in *Alice in Wonderland*. Consequently, despite historically accurate representations of Finland’s place in Europe, Tawada populates her literary Finland with Moomins rather than actual Finns. This novel is the first instalment in a trilogy that also includes *Hoshi ni honomekasa rete* (2020, *Suggested in the Stars*, 2024), and *Taiyō shotō* (2022, *The Archipelago of the Sun*).

Scattered All Over the Earth primarily questions the ramifications of a post-national world where nation-states have either physically or ideologically dissolved. Tawada's exploration begins with historical instances, such as the dissolution of East Germany and the hypothetical disappearance of Denmark following Greenlandic independence, before turning to a scenario concerning Japan – never referred by name – in which the country has physically disappeared. This scenario raises questions regarding the survival of a language once its originating country has vanished. Within this fictional, dystopian universe, Hiruko, the protagonist, witnesses how cultural and linguistic elements originally acknowledged as Japanese become embedded in other languages, often with misattributed origins (e.g., matcha purportedly deriving from Spanish, likened to macho [Tawada 2022: 19]).

Similarly to Tsukuru's journey in Murakami's novel, the protagonists in Tawada's trilogy embark on an odyssey to recover Hiruko's lost language and homeland, beginning in Denmark and culminating in a quest for the remnants of Japan by the third volume. In this sense, it can be argued that Hiruko's determination to collect fragments of her native language embodies the Finnish concept of 'sisu' in their quest for their language, country, and national identity.

Scattered All Over the Earth opens in Copenhagen, with the Scandinavian setting being repeatedly emphasised. On the one hand, the Scandinavian setting is especially relevant to the linguistic discourse pursued by the narrative, with Hiruko communicating using a pidgin-like evolving blend of Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic vocabulary supplemented with Danish phonetics, structured according to Japanese syntax (in translation), or, in the original, through inventive *kanji* compounds prioritizing semantic innovation. On the other hand, the central role played by Scandinavia highlights that, while mentioned, Finland remains at the margin of the narrative. The historical presence of the Soviet Union notably shapes the protagonist's conceptualisation of Finland, as demonstrated in passages referring to the Moomins:

Moomin to my country as exile came. finland between ussr and western europe in difficult balance was caught, great stress for Moomin loss of weight caused. to restore round body shape moomin exile became. as lover of snow, in my area lived. (Tawada 2022: 15)

The Moomins' displacement is depicted as a response to Finland's geopolitical balancing act between Eastern and Western blocs. Their eventual return to Finland after the Cold War is attributed partly to welfare considerations, distinguishing Finland from the protagonist's native land: 'about old age worried. unlike finland, in my country pension no so much paid.' (Tawada 2022: 15). This subtly both invokes Finland's reputation as a welfare state, as studies like Ipatti's discuss at length, and obliquely refers to the genesis of Tove Jansson's character in the aftermath of World War II.

To summarise, Tawada's Finland is a place between East and West that is inhabited by Moomins who react to stress by losing weight. Historical developments such as the struggle with the Soviet Union and the welfare state, and its perhaps greatest export to Japan, the Moomins, reflect Finland's representation in the social imaginary. Tawada's Self (Japan) and Other (the rest of the world) are fragmented in a dystopian future where a simple Finland-Japan mirror image reflection is not possible.

Conclusions

In summary, our study began by examining the representations of Finland in Japan and Finland's purposeful nation-branding efforts. We examined three works of fiction that featured Finland one way or another. Our discussion demonstrated how fictional depictions of Finland as a mirror image of Japan offer insight into the underlying darkness beneath the orderly and cute representations that characterize Japanese nation branding. Although the phenomenon known as the Finland boom was initially popularized through anime and manga, it has subsequently permeated literary works as well, reflecting Finland's prominence in the Japanese social imaginary. Accordingly, our analysis commenced with CLAMP's ambitious project, *Tsubasa Reservoir Chronicle*, where we identified Finnish-coded attributes in the development of the character Fai D. Flourite who is in an ambivalent and changing relationship with a historical Japanese character Kurogane. We then explored the portrayal of Finland in *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* by Murakami Haruki and *Scattered All Over the Earth* by Tawada Yōko. In contrast to the explicit references found in the works of Tawada and Murakami, Tsubasa does not directly introduce Finland; even Japan itself is depicted as a variety of fictional worlds. Nevertheless, several Finnish-coded characteristics are evident in the protagonist, Fai D. Flourite. Positioned between the approaches of Murakami and Tawada, Tsubasa's implicit representation of Finland is both whimsical and marked by solitude. The theme of acute loneliness (*kodoku*) emerges as a connecting element

between Fai and Tsukuru and is echoed in the Finnish or Finnish-inspired landscapes. In Tawada's dystopian narrative – where Japan no longer exists and nations vanish due to climate change – Finland is portrayed as inhabited by Moomins, blending whimsical elements with contemporary concerns such as pensions and the welfare state. Furthermore, to underscore Finland's role as a mirror-image of Japan, Tawada depicts the transfer of certain Japanese cultural practices, like sushi, to Finland after the disappearance of Japan, while some Finnish elements, such as *sisu*, fade from memory. Murakami's Finland, on the other hand, is a Western place, not quite real but in many ways recognisable and full of key elements of the Finland boom and country branding like nature, Sibelius, ceramics, and happiness. The narrative plays with the similarities and differences between the two countries, while at the same time offering a backdrop for the protagonist's journey. Ultimately, the fictional portrayal of Finland in Japanese fiction operates on a whimsical level that draws attention to concealed aspects of Japanese society and highlights parallels between the two nations. This analysis underscores the potential for further comparative studies in this field.

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¹ With 'Finnish-coded' we intend the insertion in the narrative of elements such as snow, specific colour palette (especially in those media such as manga and anime that make use of illustrations), and aesthetics that are connected to the idea of Finland, while not explicitly mentioning it.

² While the kawaii aspect of the *Hetalia* franchise contrasts with the general feeling of *Lord El-Melloi* as a fantasy mystery narrative, it remains at odds with the military setting that provides the background to the story. As opposed to Luvigelita in *Fate/Stay Night* and *Lord El Melloi II*, Tino Väinämöinen, the personification of Finland, has a quintessentially Finnish name clearly inspired by one of the main characters in the 1849 Finnish national epic poem *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnrot. The comedic elements in *Hetalia* are based on how the characters' relationships are influenced by BL (Boy's Love) narratives, national stereotypes, and geopolitical alliances during World War I and World War II. For instance, Finland remains a secondary character whose main storyline focuses on his life with his housemate Berwald Oxenstierna (Sweden). However, he appears in episode 28 dressed as Santa Claus, another clearly studied attempt to rely on the Finnish nation branding narrative, casually mentioning that 'Christmas happens even when people are on the battlefield.' thus, highlighting the contrasts between the cute design and dynamics and the horrors of war.

³ We argue that this interpretation is similarly problematic as it perpetuates the stereotype of an ethnic homogeneous Japan. Indeed, there are cases of Asian non-Japanese characters being represented in an equally stereotypical fashion. More recent anime and manga are relatively more open to provide a more diverse representation and a less stereotyped one, including black characters (*Jujutsu Kaisen* by Akutami Gege, among others), latinx characters (for instance in *Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens* by Kisaki Chiaki), and Asian American characters (*Banana Fish* by Yoshida Akimi). Additionally, as Ceniccola states: 'it is also true that the absence of specific ethnic features in manga and anime has itself become a distinguishing trait of Japanese illustration and animation products. In addition, by virtually erasing distinctive features that can be linked to specific ethnicities or cultures, *mukokuseki* produces an alternative kind of homogeneity based on the lack of elements against which to measure said homogeneity. In turn, even though it can be said that Japanese popular culture lacks authentic representations, it is also true that this is not its purpose' (Ceniccola 2024: 68-69), instead, it 'fuel[s] a yearning or attraction for the so-called real Japan' (Allison 2008: 105).

⁴ According to Statistics Finland, at the end of 2023 there were 1696 people of Japanese nationality in Finland out of which the majority (1104 people, 65%) were women. <https://pxdata.stat.fi/PxWeb/pxweb/fi/StatFin/> (Accessed 7 November 2025)