

# MIMESIS

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# NARAKU

## Discord, Dysfunction, Dystopia

Edited by  
Christopher Craig and Olga Kopylova

**MIMESIS**  
INTERNATIONAL

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CHRISTOPHER CRAIG<sup>1</sup>

## FOREWORD

### From Hell's Heart

“...to the last I grapple with thee;  
from hell's heart I stab at thee;  
for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee.”

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or the Whale*

The current volume was, at least in its earliest stages, a product of spite. While the final result, contained within these pages, presents work informed by much more subtle, complex, and rational sensibilities, its beginnings lay in the current editor's finding in a particular academic trend – itself a response to the myriad challenges posed by the then-current state of the world (more on this below) – a target upon which to focus his own festering feelings of inchoate resentment and omni-directional rage. The planning for the long-delayed Hasekura League annual conference at the beginning of 2022 provided the opportunity to cast this redirection of spite in reality, taking form in Sendai at the end of summer in the symposium ‘*Naraku*: Discord, Dysfunction, Dystopia.’

The COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged the world at the start of the 2020s wreaked its own particular forms of havoc upon academia. Most extensively discussed at the time were its deleterious effects on various aspects of education and research. The atmospheric dangers of tightly packed classrooms led to a mass exodus toward online classes and lectures, limiting and inhibiting classroom functions ranging from instruction to

socialization. Entire undergraduate and master's degree cohorts completed their programs without ever meeting their classmates or even their instructors in person. Research projects involving travel – both domestic and international – were cancelled, forcing reworkings and downsizings that rarely improved scholarship. Connections among and between scholars and institutions similarly suffered. Collaborative projects were paused, altered, or cancelled, and interactions of all types between universities were put on hold. And conferences, symposiums, and workshops had their ostensible functions as forums for sharing research forced into uncomfortable online spaces, while their important secondary roles of facilitating network-building, maintaining existing relationships and forging new ones, and providing an informal venue for the discussion and development of new ideas were rendered entirely void.

But the pandemic inspired another development in the scholarly sphere, one which was, if not as directly or viscerally harmful as the outcomes above, in many ways as odious as any of them. Alongside the much-lamented move to online conferences came a subtler movement in themes. Subjects relating to holding onto hope and remaining optimistic began to appear in calls for papers. Announcements of conferences on overcoming adversity and the strength of the human spirit filled my inbox. Academic venues all over the world held events dedicated to perseverance, love as an antidote for despair, and the promise inherent in rebuilding. Nor was the present editor innocent of these excesses. The theme chosen for the previous Hasekura symposium was ‘*Yonaoshi: Envisioning a Better World*,’ at least partially inspired by the disruptions that forced the event to be moved online.<sup>2</sup> By 2022, however, these hopeful expressions had begun to ring hollow as all the positive feelings in the world were failing to have any discernable impact on the various crises afflicting the globe. It was in this context that the plans upon which the current volume is based were formulated, focused not on gentle admonitions to

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2 The proceedings of the symposium were published as: Christopher Craig, Enrico Fongaro, Luca Milasi, et al., *Yonaoshi: Visions of a Better World* (Milan: Mimesis, 2022).



keep one's head up nor blurry promises of a better future, but instead a challenge to embrace a despair in tune with the times and to acknowledge and engage with the multifarious failings of humanity in a world that seemed to be threatening to come apart at the seams. The theme outlined in these plans was *naraku*.

But what is *naraku* and how does it represent the antithesis of the plague of hopeful exhortations that flooded academia in the wake of the pandemic outbreak? As the theme of a multidisciplinary anthology designed to appeal to humanities and social sciences scholars focusing on regions throughout the world, this question is one that needs to be addressed. The earliest form of the word, *naraka*, emerged in the context of early Buddhism and referred to the various hells in early Buddhist cosmologies.<sup>3</sup> It moved from Sanskrit to Chinese, assigned the logographic characters 奈落迦 (*naraka*) and then further simplified to *naraku* (奈落) en route to Japan. The key meanings associated with the term followed the same path from India through China to Japan. The first of these is the idea of a site of torment and punishment, drawn directly from the functions in the Buddhist tradition of the hells it describes. The second is a more abstract conception of abysmal depths, more suited for metaphorical than literal application, connected with the spatial conceptions of early Buddhist cosmology, which was laid out in astronomical vertical spans.<sup>4</sup> From an explicitly religious context, the term and its central meanings migrated into the general Japanese vernacular, being adopted as a term for such uses as an underground chamber connected to kabuki stages, a character name for cartoon antagonists associated with absolute evil, and a generalized figurative expression for subjects of profound and negatively inflected depth.<sup>5</sup> The theme shared

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3 For a detailed history of the evolving meanings of *naraku*, see Aldo Tollini, 'The Japanese Buddhist Approach to 'Degenerate Society': Past and Present,' in the current volume.

4 See Caroline Hirasawa, 'The Inflatable, Collapsible Kingdom of Retribution: A Primer on Japanese Hell Imagery and Imagination,' *Monumenta Nipponica* 63, no. 1 (2008): p. 3.

5 See, for example, Kohei Furukawa et al., 'Digital Reconstruction of a Historical Kabuki Theater,' *2009 Fifth International Conference on Intelligent Information Hiding and Multimedia Signal Processing* (Kyoto:

by the symposium and the present volume is most closely related to the latter application and derives directly from the widespread current use of *naraku* as an extremely negative condition or set of circumstances, expressed most clearly in the phrase ‘*naraku no soko* [奈落の底, the worst possible situation].’ It links *naraku* to ideas of discord, dysfunction, and dystopia in an anthology of scholarship by researchers from around the world working in a variety of humanities disciplines and concerned with regions all over the globe.

This book divides the work of its contributors into five parts. The first of these, ‘Conceptualizing Collapse,’ features papers that situate *naraku* and analogous ideas in the realm of ideas and draw connections between them and systems of thought that developed in concert or opposition to them. In the first chapter, Aldo Tollini examines the evolution of the concept of *naraku* within the long tradition of Japanese Buddhism and connects it to persistent criticisms of human society. Chiara Robbiano follows, with a chapter that turns to the possibilities for a better kind of politics and leadership that can be extrapolated from the writings of the classical philosopher Plato and the Buddhist monk Dōgen. The first section closes with an examination of the persistent tension between utopia and apocalypse in the thought of twentieth-century British intellectual Bertrand Russell by Javier Pérez-Jara.

The book’s second part, entitled ‘Politics of Dystopia, Death, and Apocalypse,’ examines the development of ideologies and the formulation of political policies in the context of flawed systems, faulty understandings, and failed conceptions. The part opens with a chapter by Abdoulaye Imorou and Ulrich Douo, who chart the discourse on Africa and its challenges through two contemporary African writers while pointing out the weaknesses that the central idea of alienation imposes on both. Bernard de

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2009), pp. 1160-1163, doi: 10.1109/IIH-MSP.2009.306; Deborah Shamoan, ‘The *Yōkai* in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime,’ *Marvels & Tales* 27, no. 2 (2013): pp. 276-289; and Dazai Osamu 太宰治, ‘Mugen naraku’ [Hell without End] 「無限奈落」, in *Dazai Osamu zenshū* 『太宰治全集』, vol. 12 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1999).

Meyer provides the next chapter, which examines Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe, his identification of a *naraku*-like enmity at the heart of the institutionalized chaos left by colonialism, and his vision of a way forward. Ozaki Akihiro closes out the section in a piece that probes the weaknesses of the ‘sustainable development goals (SDGs)’ promoted by the United Nations as a flawed approach that attempts to balance countermeasures against climate apocalypse with the requirements to maintain capitalist systems, highlighting their religious, philosophical, and artistic failings.

‘Historical Danger and Dysfunction’ is the book’s third part, focusing on misconceptions and misrepresentations between Japan and other countries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its first chapter by Sonia Favi looks at how British periodicals in the 1890s portrayed Japan as a mirror exposing the dystopian dangers at the heart of modernization. Eric Han’s chapter comes next and considers the mythologized idea of Japan’s wartime period as a dark valley by challenging popular historical narratives surrounding the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi.

The third part of the volume is titled ‘The Poetry of *Naraku*: Murder, Disaster, War, and Trauma’ and presents scholarship dealing with poetic presentations of war, collapse, and trauma in Japanese and French poetry and prose. Kuroiwa Taku provides the first chapter, which charts the numerous translations into Japanese of the French classic *The Song of Roland* and the various ways that the disastrous military defeat in the story was portrayed in service of nationalist ends. The next chapter comes from Corinne Denoyelle, who also takes French literature as her subject, examining the central themes of civilizational collapse and apocalypse in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century classic, *The Romance of Perceforest*. This is followed by Joshua Mostow’s chapter using poetry to examine the shift of the concept of *mujō*, the ephemerality of existence, from a generalized sentiment about the ineffability of life to a concept associated with calamitous collapse. Ivo Smits’ chapter finishes the part with a study of war trauma in Japanese *waka* poetry emphasizing the differences

between poems depicting this theme and better known and celebrated pieces focusing on aesthetic concerns.

‘No Relief, No Escape, No Solution: *Naraku* and Literary Persons and Personalities represents the final part of the volume and contains works considering the marginalization of authors, futility in artistic dreams, and the ultimate connections between literature and apocalypse. It opens with a chapter by Christina Yi exploring the disastrous confluence of literary national identity and the chaos of military defeat and decolonization in the life and work of Chang Hyökchu, a writer caught between the prewar and wartime Japanese empire and postwar Korea. This is followed by Evdokiia Kaur’s chapter on Lafcadio Hearn and his ultimately self-defeating quest to preserve a cultural heritage to which he never belonged. Elena Fabbretti provides the next chapter, a deep study of the works and thought of Nagai Kafū that refutes the idea that he abandoned a chaotic present to languish in decadent nostalgia. Eva Vaglini’s chapter closes the volume with an extended rumination on the potential of literature to chart a path through humanity’s current spate of existential crises.

Very fortunately for the current volume, this remarkable assemblage of scholars has taken the callow spasm of spite informing the initial selection of the *naraku* theme and developed it in varied and valuable directions. What began as a petulant attempt to stab from Hell’s heart at an unsatisfactory world has, with the help of a remarkable collection of scholars, produced a work that examines a failing and increasingly horrifying world to draw out insightful analyses and – dare I say it – even offer some measure of hope for the future. While it would certainly be a difficult proposition from the current moment in 2025 to argue that the world has improved in any way whatsoever since the symposium planning three years earlier, this book might be a good place to start.