4

Aokigahara Jukai, Sea of Trees

In the 2015 Hollywood film *Sea of Trees*, Matthew McConaughey plays a suicidal American man who googles "a perfect place to die" and immediately discovers his destination: "Aokigahara, The Sea of Trees. The perfect place to die." Two clicks later, he finds statistics reporting that more than a hundred bodies are retrieved there annually and that the most common methods used are hanging and drug overdoses. He shuts the computer as the screen goes black.[1]

This scene is one of the many flashbacks that interrupt the central story of our protagonist's suicidal crisis in Aokigahara forest, where he meets a Japanese salaryman (played by Ken Watanabe) whose own suicidal crisis interrupts and eventually thwarts the protagonist's own attempt. The flashbacks lead us through the men's motives in a series of melodramatic twists and turns, false leads, and impossible coincidences that land the protagonists in the forest together. As the Japanese title suggests, the place is a "forest of memory" (*tsuioku no mori*) where one man, a "quintessential American, a rational scientist who denies the existence of God," transforms thanks to his encounter with this "prototypically Japanese" suicidal salaryman with a spiritual bent.[2] Although the film does, as critics charged, fall into the trope of "Spooky Japanese Thing, But With Caucasians To Root For," in the end, the dynamic is reversed in yet another well-worn trope.[3] The wise Asian mystic reveals to the lost American traveler that Aokigahara forest offers not the perfect place to die but a purgatory of sorts where one can confront the past and even reunite with one's own dead.

The film transports the protagonist to this notorious locale with ease. In the opening scene, planes, trains, and automobile trips are accomplished in mere minutes to bring McConaughey to the site. His journey moves from the virtual to

the actual and ultimately to the spiritual plane. Even beforehand, the spectator is whisked there in the film's opening shots that offer panoramic and overhead views of the eponymous "sea of trees." But neither the protagonist (nor the spectator, naturally) is actually in Aokigahara at any point in time. Although stock footage of its exterior views is used for these overhead shots, *Sea of Trees* was filmed in Worcester, Massachusetts. A ban on filming in the forest since September 2012 ensures that representations of Aokigahara are rarely ever shot inside the forest.

This policy is predicated on a belief that foreclosing access to, and representations of, the forest will translate into reduced access for those seeking to die there.[4] Even fictional reproductions not actually set there are accused of inviting indiscriminate access. It is the less literal version of this paradox that I explore in this chapter. I ask, How do representations of a *jisatsu meisho* transport the character and audience alike to the site and to what end? And conversely, how might texts bar or inhibit entry to this final destination?

In the case of Aokigahara, even well before the notorious 2018 incident when YouTuber Logan Paul posted a vlog of a dead, hanged body of an unidentified man in Aokigahara, representations have been blamed for establishing and propagating its image as the "perfect place to die." As we will see, this is not without reason. Many texts set in Aokigahara seem designed to capitalize on the forest's infamy as the top suicide site in the world.[5]

As a well-known lyrical toponym, the place-name comes with an established mythology and iconography. In English, it is often called the Suicide Forest or Aokigahara, which means "plain of green trees," while in Japanese, its more poetic name is Aokigahara Jukai, or just Jukai (樹海) (sea of trees) (fig. 13). It was named for the dense thickets that formed on this plateau on the northwest side of Mount Fuji after a volcanic eruption in 864 CE. Stories circulate repeatedly of uneven terrain with tangled roots and trees so thick that they block the sky from view and hinder operating a compass; images of winding lengths of tape strung amid the trees indicate paths taken by those who left them like a trail of breadcrumbs that could lead them back to the path if they changed their mind or recovery teams to their bodies if not.

The dominant image of the forest that emerges is a place of no exit, of losing oneself. This is both a literal statement about the disorienting terrain—as the locals warn, "once you enter, there's no getting out"—and a more metaphorical one about the promise offered therein. As *The Complete Manual of Suicide* puts it, the forest "guarantees that you will go missing and disappear from people's memories," offering an eternal rest, undisturbed and undiscovered.[6] Dr. Takahashi Yoshitomo, a psychiatrist who investigated suicides and attempts in the forest back in the mid-1980s, found that this location was chosen out of a "desire only for a quiet death, only to vanish."[7] Suicides there were even less apt than the general suicide population to leave behind a note (at 20 percent versus 30 percent generally). Like the promise of a volcano to obliterate the body, the forest is said to "swallow up"

FIGURE 13. The tangled forest of Aokigahara Jukai. Courtesy The Evenesce Photographer/ Alamy Stock Photo.

(*nomikomu*) the dead. Imagery of skeletons and skulls, especially the iconic one with the lower half of its jaw missing, may run counter to the notion that you will never be found, but they do confirm that discovery is far from immediate or assured.

The sense that ghosts linger there fuels this New Age "power spot" (*pawā spotto*) and the many western cultural productions set there, from Hollywood productions like *Sea of Trees* and the 2016 supernatural horror film *The Forest* (directed by Jason Zada) to the dark touristic impulses of vloggers like Logan Paul. As we will see below, Japan, too, has had its share of sensationalist productions critiqued for fueling the attractions of this site as a suicide destination. But as I hope to show, the presumed causal relationship between texts and real life is far from simplistic, even in the seemingly most one-dimensional narratives set in this tangled terrain.

COPYCAT SUICIDE: THE WERTHER AND PAPAGENO EFFECTS

In 1974, the skeleton of a young woman who had committed suicide was discovered in Aokigahara forest with a copy of a mystery novel—*Nami no tō* (Tower of waves, 1959–60) by the well-known detective writer Matsumoto Seichō—as her pillow. In 1993, two suicides in this forest left behind a copy of *The Complete Manual of Suicide*, one with it open to "Suicide Map #1: Jukai." A third man who

attempted but survived explained to authorities, "I came because I saw it in the book" (*Hon de mite kita*).[8]

Although worlds apart, the two texts and their placement at the site offer seemingly indisputable proof for claims of copycat suicide, or what is somewhat less pejoratively called "suicide contagion." Such claims invoke social science theories of imitative violence that are predicated on unspoken assumptions about audience identification, on the ability to map oneself onto another, and to map a fictional locale onto a real one. This chapter seeks to complicate such overly simplistic assumptions about the effect of representations of self-violence on real-world behaviors by reintegrating literary analysis into a subject that has been largely hijacked by social scientific discourse.

The World Health Organization's *Suicide Prevention Guidelines for Media Professionals* (first translated and distributed in Japanese in 2008) defines the impact of media depictions of suicide as either "harmful" or "protective." Intriguingly, both are named after fictional characters: the Werther effect and the Papageno effect. The Werther effect was named after the lovelorn protagonist of Goethe's 1774 *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (fig. 14). Despairing that he is in an unresolvable love triangle involving his best friend's fiancée, Werther shoots himself in the head with a pistol. Countless readers were said to have taken to imitating the protagonist both in his fashion choices—a fad for yellow pants and blue jackets was dubbed "Werther fever"—and his suicide.

The Papageno effect refers to the half-man, half-bird character from Mozart's 1791 opera *The Magic Flute* who overcomes a suicidal crisis thanks to the intervention of three child-spirits who advise him not to kill himself but instead to play his magical bells and summon his lover, Papagena, which works to great success and a very happy end.[9]

While the lesser-known Papageno effect was a later addition by a team of German psychiatrists in 2010, the Werther effect was coined in the mid-1970s by the American sociologist David Phillips, who has explained his choice in this way: "I was proud of the title I gave that paper. … I named this thing the Werther Effect, after Goethe's famous hero. … After the book came out, all sorts of people were said to be copying the fictional hero. And I said, 'Hey let's see if this works in real life as well as in fiction.'"[10] The conflation of real life and fiction here is less egregious than it might at first seem. In his research, Phillips was not interested in linking suicides in fiction to those in real life but rather in identifying the link between publicized newspaper reports of actual suicides by famous people and a spike in suicide rates among the general population.

Nonetheless, in naming these media effects after fictional characters, there is a distinct causal relationship presumed to exist between fictional characters and texts, on the one hand, and readers, on the other.[11] Goethe himself noted the trend while placing the blame squarely on readers' shoulders: he wrote, "My friends … thought that they must transform poetry into reality, imitate a novel like this in

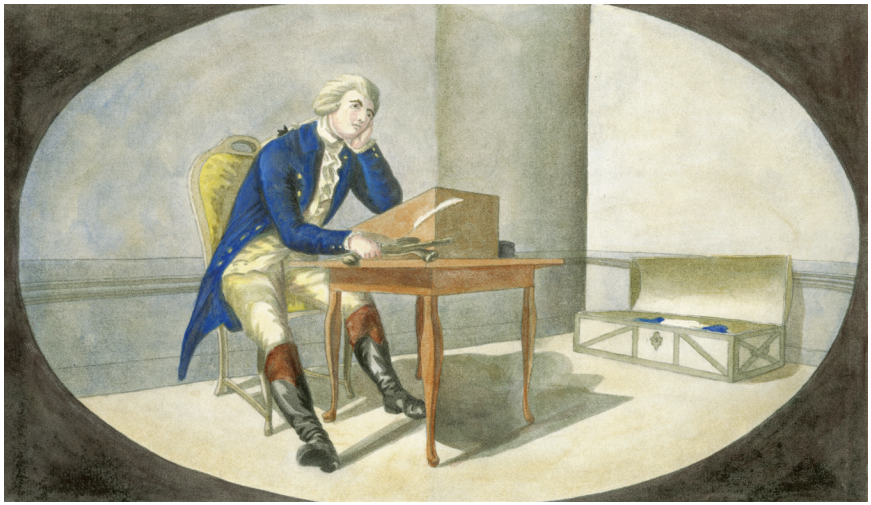

FIGURE 14. The Werther effect. "Werther at the desk, the gun in his hand," contemporary watercolor by unknown hand (with later coloring) based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). Courtesy akg-images.

real life and, in any case, shoot themselves; and what occurred at first among a few took place later among the general public."[12] Researchers posit that imitative suicide is most pronounced in readers whose age, gender, and circumstances dovetail closely with that of the model. This is what is somewhat counterintuitively called "differential identification theory." Both effects, I would stress, depend on exposure *to* representations of the harmful behavior. If the Papageno effect depends on catharsis, the Werther effect rests on notions of contagion. And both would seem to work exclusively at the level of plot and character.

The doubling of fictional and real worlds does not end, or begin, with the reader, however. As Phillips explained, "The famous German author himself was suicidal, … and he wrote his novel … as a way of purging himself of his self-destructive feelings."[13] The novel is indeed semiautobiographical, based on Goethe's own youthful experience of unrequited love with a woman also named Charlotte. As Goethe himself put it, "That was a creation which I, like the pelican, fed with the blood of my own heart."[14] Here, he likens authorship to the act of a self-sacrificial mother by invoking Christian imagery of the pelican who wounds her own breast when no other food is available for her starving chicks. His quote nicely suggests the ways that these fictional creations are presumed to be far from entirely fictional but are instead parasitic blood-fed creatures living off the author's body. Rather than offering any catharsis for the author, writing is instead an act of self-harm and sacrifice.

Although both protective and harmful media effects are theoretically possible, there tends to be an overwhelming presumption of harm that the delayed

introduction of the Papageno effect has done little to disrupt. Werther prevails, notwithstanding 2003 research by German scholars who found few actual cases of copycat suicide after the publication of Goethe's novel.[15] One Japanese mental health researcher has half-jokingly suggested renaming the Werther effect after the doomed lovers Ohatsu and Tokubei from Chikamatsu's play *Sonezaki shinjū* ("Love Suicides at Sonezaki"), reasoning that this incident and text predated the Werther copycat suicides by over a half century; he offered no Japanese Papageno, however.[16]

Naming these media effects after a singular character would suggest a fairly simplistic mode of identification whereby readers follow that character in a literal sense from the beginning to the end of narrative and life. At face value, the young woman who made the novel *Nami no tō* her pillow certainly seems to confirm this simple causal model. In line with the differential identification theory, a young female reader maps herself onto the female protagonist who dies in the forest. In a chain of interlinked readings, later readers of the novel and of this sensational incident in the news emulate the suicidal acts described therein. Textual and real bodies and locales are inextricably linked. And descriptions of the text often mischaracterize it in a way that further fuels this interpretation.

NAMI NO TŌ (TOWER OF WAVES)

Before turning to look more closely at this novel that is said to have incited copycat suicides at Aokigahara, let us first consider the news media's role in propagating the image of Aokigahara as a *jisatsu meisho*. The following excerpt is from the April 25, 1974, edition of *Mainichi shinbun*:

> At around 1 p.m. on the afternoon of the 24th, approximately 400 meters into Aokigahara Jukai on the northern side of Lake Saiko wind cave in Ashiwadamura village of Minamitsuru district in Yamanashi prefecture, there was a skeleton-corpse of a young woman. According to the investigation by the Fuji Yoshida police, she was about 23 or 24-years old with the book *Nami no tō*, a novel set in the famed suicide spot [*jisatsu meisho*] of Aokigahara forest as her pillow. … It is being regarded as a suicide.[17]

Several things are notable about this news item. First and foremost, the flat, concise reporting is conspicuously lacking in any sensationalism. Second, the descriptions meticulously pinpoint the exact spot inside the forest. While its restrained tone puts these media professionals well ahead of their time, they go against later WHO media recommendations to "avoid providing detailed information about the site of a completed or attempted suicide."[18] Even so, this particular spot did not apparently become a hotspot for suicides. And even more importantly, as this news report acknowledges, the forest was already a famed suicide spot prior to this incident or the novel.

The seductive narrative that locates the origins in this single incident and in this single book has taken on a life of its own, however. Making the book into one's death pillow naturally invites an interpretation that seamlessly links acts of reading to acts of self-death. If the physical presence of the book at the site was not enough de facto evidence for such readings, the timing of the novel's republication earlier that year as part of Matsumoto Seichō's *Complete Works* and the wildly popular TV version broadcast by NHK the previous year fueled this claim. (This also may have helped explain away the time lag between the novel's initial publication fifteen years earlier and this incident in 1974.)[19] This origin story for the birth of the suicide forest has become so very commonplace that few are able to resist asserting a cause-effect relationship between texts and acts that locate suicide inside the famed forest. Fewer still seem compelled to read the novel at all.

Instead, commentators rely on the error-ridden plot soundbites that circulate repeatedly in print and online news. That is, when they are not talking about another novel entirely. *Tower of Waves* is often confused with another serialized mystery by the same author that refers to Jukai in its title—*Kuroi jukai* (1958–60)—but whose plot is largely unrelated to the suicide forest of Aokigahara. (This mistake is so ubiquitous that the forest has been called the "Black Sea of Trees," or "Kuroi jukai" in Japanese, an error that is amusingly compounded in English-language accounts that mistakenly render it as "Kuroi kaijū," in an inadvertent reference to monster movies.)

When people do discuss the correct source novel *Tower of Waves*, the most common mistake is to claim that it depicts the double love suicide of two doomed young lovers. This is just wrong; the man never attempts suicide and lives on. Others claim, not entirely accurately, that it depicts the suicide of a young woman in "the most aesthetically stunning setting in Japan. … It is *here* that Yoriko kills herself. The act is depicted in the novel as extraordinarily beautiful."[20] The associations between reading and dying are so strong that few are able to resist the pull to locate suicide *inside* the forest. Even the newspaper's restrained factual account claims this is "a novel set *in* the famed suicide spot of Aokigahara forest" (emphasis mine).

In fact, the young woman's suicide is not depicted at all. Even in the final chapter, titled "Inside Jukai," we never actually get inside the forest. Instead, in the final scene, the young woman has just started heading in, but we see this only from the periphery of a peripheral character. An elderly couple and their daughter are farming their fields on the forest outskirts when one of them sees her walking toward the path of no return. In the regional dialect, the old woman warns this "apparent Tokyoite" in what becomes a constant refrain in the novel and one that is often repeated about Aokigahara: "If you enter that path, you'll never ever be able to return."[21] When the farmer's daughter next glimpses a flash of white on the path, she calls out worriedly but is told she is imagining things. In the next moment, a white rabbit emerges suddenly, causing the leaves in the grove to sway, and the

novel ends with this line: "Just then, the pitch-black darkness descended upon the sea of trees."

On the one hand, this is an aestheticized and highly symbolic vision of death. Like the cicada metaphor used to describe Matsumoto's transformative flight as she leaped off the crater's edge at Mount Mihara, this final refrain suggests that death offers not an ending but instead a reunion with the vast natural world. At the same time, it seems important to point out what it is not: a depiction of the act of suicide. Her suicide may be anticipated, but it is not depicted. The tendency of commentators to suggest that the act of self-violence occurs onscreen is telling, however. It accords with social science assumptions about the contagious effect on the reader/viewer being predicated on the act of representation. The second important point about this novel's ending is that it takes an abrupt detour from the point of view of our Werther character, with whom we have traveled from Tokyo in what resembles a fairly drawn-out *michiyuki*-like journey to the place of death. In the final chapter, with this abrupt addition of three entirely new characters, we are instead left gazing only into the darkness from the perspective of these locals who are external to the drama.

This splintering of point of view at the end is, in fact, characteristic of the entire story, in which love triangles, bribery scandals, and impossible coincidences abound. The novel often offers the perspective of this central female protagonist, Yoriko, an unhappy but uncomplaining wife in her mid-twenties, but just as often, it relays the perspectives of other characters entangled in the drama. Yoriko is having an affair with a young prosecutor, Onogi, who ends up heading the corruption charges against her husband, who himself is having multiple affairs but refuses his wife a divorce. The novel occupies the minds of so many characters (by my count, at least ten) that it becomes difficult not to sympathize to a degree with them all (even the unlikeable philandering husband, as noted approvingly by one male critic).[22]

It skirts the points of view not just of the three characters in the central love triangle but also importantly that of another woman, Wakako, who has recently graduated from college and who represents a younger version of Yoriko. The novel opens with Wakako bristling at the many pressures and expectations for marriage, children, and so on that are imposed by society and by her family, especially her overprotective father (who coincidentally is a police chief also implicated in the corruption scandal). Like a detective, she tries to piece out the mystery behind the love triangle and the unfolding political scandal that embroils all the central characters.

When we are privy to her perspective, it is clear that Wakako sees herself and her future in Yoriko's own plight, just as Yoriko sees her past in Wakako's present; after hearing that Wakako has just graduated, she tells her, "'Well, then, it's all starting for you now.' (*Jya, kore kara desu wa ne*.) The way Yoriko said it made Wakako feel as if there was a bit of envy in her statement" (2:33). That Wakako will literally take Yoriko's place becomes even more obvious toward the end, when Yoriko

FIGURE 15. Yoriko and Onogi, serial adaptations of *Nami no tō* (dir. Nakamura Noboru, Shōchiku 1960).

resigns herself to dying alone and thinks of what a good match Wakako "with her youthful shining cheeks and purity" will make for Onogi once she removes herself from the equation (2:364–65).

As should be clear from its unending plot twists and doppelgangers, there is a seriality embedded in the story that suggests its solid grounding in the generic conventions of a mystery-love story that itself was serialized in the women's journal *Jyosei jishin* (May 1959–June 1960) and in numerous subsequent film adaptations (fig. 15). The journal editor explained that he and Seichō were aiming for a "work that would make women cry but would also be a high-quality literary love novel" and reports that they succeeded beyond expectations, reaching over one million in circulation. Women, he said "went totally crazy over the heroine's tragedy," suggesting with his choice of wording that these female readers "lost or forgot themselves" (*muchū ni natte*) in this single character.[23] And yet the unremitting nature of the work's seriality works against any reader's ability to occupy any single position, instead fracturing our sympathies and attentions unto the end.

I hope this close reading of the story helps to complicate the dominance of the social science model of "harmful or protective media effects" with their singular characters and singular choices—to be Werther or Pagageno. The notion that female readers, in particular, were unproblematically collapsing themselves with the female protagonist in choosing to die in Aokigahara is easily debunked by the statistics as well. As Takahashi's 1980s study shows, "contrary to the widespread view," men, not women, were both attempting and completing suicide in the forest at ratios even higher than the general population.[24]

Moreover, it is not so easy for an audience to lose themselves in fictional others as literary and film theorists have shown. For example, Lisa Zunshine's work on theory of mind demonstrates how literary narratives often compel readers to inhabit the minds of multiple characters at multiple levels of remove and proximity but also often test the limits of this propensity. Carol Clover has shown just how slippery and gender-bending an audience's identifications can be even in horror films that posit only the starkest options of victimizer and victim.[25] Emplacing oneself in the mind or body of a single fictional character is a tricky proposition.

But what about emplacing oneself in the forest? To return to the question at the opening of this chapter, what about these fictional depictions of the locale might have invited or inhibited access to this *jisatsu meisho*?

While the final scene in *Tower of Waves* shies away from bringing the reader and character inside the forest, in other parts, the novel resembles a travel guide. Travel guidebooks, local tour guides, and even maps appear that root the fictional narrative in actual locales, as do detailed descriptions about the characters' journeys there by trains and taxis and on foot. For both the lovers and for the young Wakako, travel offers a temporary escape from the pressures of urban, modern life and its associated pressures. Traveling to the country allows them "to escape things, like the complexity and hassle of human relations … that pressed down day after day" (2:315). For readers, too, the novel and its many filmic adaptations offered a means of escape, even said to spur a boom in leisure travel, especially among young women. The restaurant and inn near Jindaiji Temple in Mitaka, where the illicit lovers have their secret rendezvous, became a favorite meeting spot for young lovers said to "look just like Onogi and Yoriko on a date [*marude Onogi to Yoriko ni natta kibun de dēto shite iru*]."[26] As one critic put it, "thanks to [*okage de*]" these, Jindaiji became a famed "love nest," while Jukai became a famed suicide spot.[27]

Maps that are included in the 2009 *bunkōbon* version of *Nami no tō* conspicuously point to Yoriko's final destination—her death site inside the forest—even when this requires that they depart from the ostensible explanation for their inclusion at that point in the narrative. For example, the first map in the first chapter is strategically oriented to offer a distant bird's-eye view of the entire region, including the forest located ninety-five kilometers to the southeast, even though this means excluding the trajectory of Wakako's first "small trip" (*chiisa na tabi*), from Nagoya to Kami Suwa, that is recounted in detail here in this chapter of that title (1:13).

Another map marks the spot where Yoriko will ultimately stand and take in the vista in the second-to-last chapter. Again, its placement is off, appearing only about one-quarter of the way through the novel ostensibly to delineate a lovers' getaway taken by Onogi and Yoriko to Shinobe hot springs, about thirty-five kilometers west of the forest. It, too, strains the boundaries of the map and the narrative at that juncture. Significantly, however, it is during this trip that Yoriko first

hears about Jukai from Onogi, who traveled there in his student days, who tells her, "There's a sea of trees that spreads across the plains. It's so dense that if you get lost, you'll never get out alive." And moments later, Yoriko dreamily asks him if he will take her there "as if she were still imagining Jukai in her mind's eye" (1:204–5). The tantalizing placement of these maps anticipate the finale that itself edges toward but never arrives at the tantalizing final destination.

In the end, Yoriko's journey disposes of any cartographic representations of the forest in favor of secondhand narrative accounts offered by her various guides and finally Yoriko's own first-person perspective of the forest from its edges. Along the way, she is reminded of the promise/threat of getting lost in the forest, first recalling Onogi's words and then encountering a taxi driver who reiterates this warning (2:379, 389). In an inadvertently self-reflexive moment for the novel, Yoriko encounters a seductive representation in an area guidebook that she discovers at a youth hostel the evening before she travels there: "In Jukai, beech trees, zelkovas, and yews plant their roots deep in the scattered cracks from lava flows and decayed trees stripped of their white bark lay fallen like snakes. Jukai is a primeval dense forest of ancient moss where no human has trod before. If you get lost in here, not even your corpse can be found" (2:394).[28] We are not privy to her response to this eerie depiction of the site, only offered a tantalizing string of ellipses that lead into the next section where she hikes to the forked path leading to the lake or to Jukai.[29]

For Yoriko, who chooses the forest, its allure is its otherworldliness. Gazing at it for the first time, "she felt like a person already living in a different world. … She realized that she had come to a place where Onogi could no longer reach" (2:382). The site removes her from the pressures of her present reality and transports her to a primordial past. The iconic national symbol of Mount Fuji rounds out this vision, which, as the taxi driver opines, resembles "Japan before any humans lived." In this space, Yoriko feels the presence of the dead, recalling "those she knew who had died" (2:388; see also 2:342).

The final and most in-depth description of the forest is from Yoriko's point of view when she stands on the viewing platform on the edge of Lake Sai, a destination foretold by its earlier mapping:

> It's quiet. Standing there and looking out at the lake, the opposite shore is dark brown lava. The forest stands above, spreading out like an endless sea stretching to the mountain plains. The land beyond the forest hardly rose or fell, just spread out level across a vast expanse. This overwhelmed people. If a rainstorm were to hit this giant dense forest, what would happen? The forest would erupt in angry waves and bellows. That primeval image caused Yoriko to hallucinate. The surface of the lake at this moment had not a single wave. Not a single fish, not a single ripple. Yoriko had never seen such a lonely lake as this. Mount Fuji was reflected on the surface, but it was a completely different mountain than the one she was used to seeing. It was instead a volcano just like in ancient times. The brown lava of the rocky shore and the deep olive green of the forest were reflected in the lake's depths. The primeval mountain,

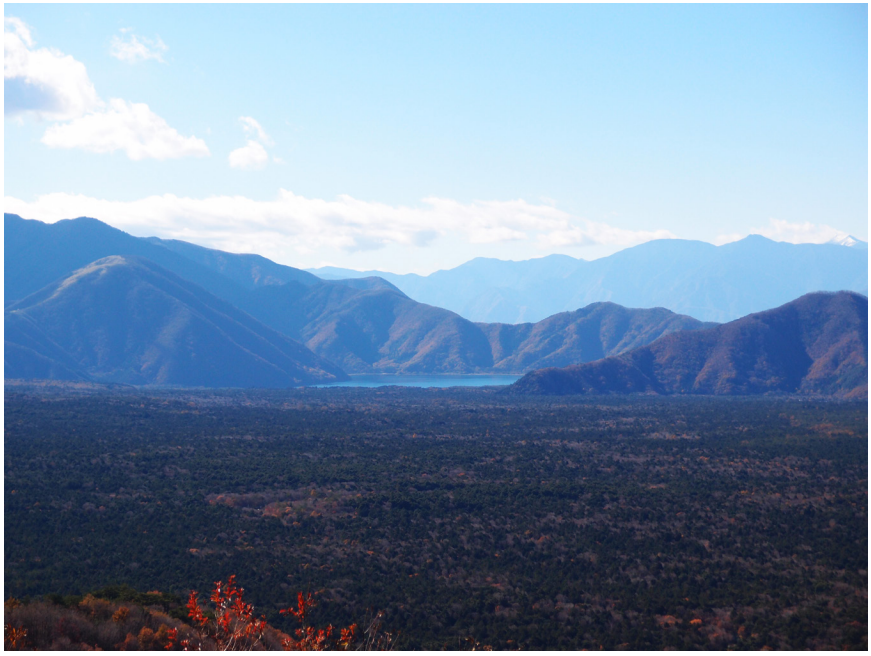

FIGURE 16. Yoriko's distant perspective of Aokigahara. Aokigahara@Sankodai, *Flickr*, November 13, 2013, Wikimedia Commons. Courtesy Guilhem Vellut, Annecy, France.

> the forest, the lake, all were violently pitted against one another. The elements were entirely at odds. (2:387–88; fig. 16)

This extended description offers first-hand confirmation about the power of this place she has not seen before, only heard and read about. In what appears to be a metacommentary on the novel and its far-reaching effects on readers, the virtues of escapist travel are touted repeatedly in this piece of escapist genre fiction. Readers proper read about Yoriko reading about a place into which we, too, are eventually emplaced.

But like Yoriko, our placement in this site is neither assured nor stable. The novel continually shifts perspectives. It oscillates from a bird's-eye distant view of the "sea of trees" with Mount Fuji as its backdrop and secondhand accounts from afar to a first-person perspective of the tangled terrain up close, only to finally land on a third-person external view from the forest's edge. The reader is offered a mixture of subjective and objective views, textual/oral recreations and first-hand experiences, long shots and close-ups. Each perspective offers a varying degree of embodiment in a character, located at various degrees of proximity to the suicide site. While readers are repeatedly invited to imagine the forest, our access is ultimately foreclosed in the final scene that fades to black.

In that final scene, her suicide is not only not depicted; it is also not entirely explicable, even in the highly melodramatic and coincidence-filled world of the novel. Even though we are entirely with Yoriko for the lengthy *michiyuki*-like journey by train and taxi and then by foot as she hikes to the forest's edge, her reasoning for killing herself at this juncture is far from clear, particularly since the love triangle has been resolved. Her husband is now in prison, she has at long last initiated divorce proceedings, and although her lover, Onogi, has lost his job as a prosecutor because of his scandalous affair that caused a conflict of interest, the two lovers would seem to finally be free. Yoriko fails to articulate the reasoning behind her journey to die in the forest, a move that is, in a sense, echoed by the woman who made this book her death pillow. If this young woman left behind a clue, it is far from as legible as many commentators would have us think.

ISHIHARA SHINTARŌ AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTING AOKIGAHARA

Never one to shy away from controversy, the then-governor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintarō, stepped on a political landmine when remaking his 1999 story "Aokigahara" into a film of the same title with his director-friend Shinjō Taku in 2012.[30] Bracketing his 1999–2012 stint as governor, the story heralded the return of Ishihara-the-author, while the film was to mark both his exodus from politics and his brief return to acting. When announcing his cameo appearance in the film (as a player on a golf course with one line), Ishihara joked, "I am a great actor. After all, I've played the whole world already, no? I want to play the role of Ishihara Shintarō. The villain."[31]

The 2012 film caused a much-publicized rift with the Yamanashi governor, who called for "self-restraint" (*jishuku*) in location shooting, worrying that the production would cause "a renewed spark increasing suicides in Jukai, which had at last been on the decline."[32] Although Ishihara was initially conciliatory, he soon turned belligerent. Defending his right to free speech, he claimed that the film "was about respecting human life in this setting of Jukai where myriad life forms reside" and that it was in the interest of suicide prevention for our "contemporary society where annual suicide rates were over 30,000." Alternatively, he claimed that the film would have "no effect on people."[33] The filmmakers were ultimately denied permission to film in the forest after rolling cameras just twice in Yamanashi. Instead, they substituted neighboring Shizuoka prefecture.

While earlier productions, including a 2006 TBS remake of *Tower of Waves*, had attained permission to film in the forest by agreeing to pre- and postproduction censorship by the prefectural authorities, the ban was perhaps inevitable in this case.[34] The film is, after all, titled *Aokigahara*. Like other productions set in the forest, "the leading actor is Jukai."[35] Even Ishihara acknowledged that such films could not help but inconvenience (*meiwaku*) local officials and citizens.[36]

In the midst of the controversy, in September 2012, the Mount Fuji Yamanashi Film Commission established an official policy that disallows filming in the forest for any production deemed to encourage suicide there. The policy is managed by the Tourism and Brand Promotion section, a unit clearly designed to maximize profits by managing its public image. At issue here is the branding of Aokigahara. This same issue is one that the film self-reflexively grapples with in its melodramatic ghost story about suicide and redemption in the forest.

Aokigahara features the doomed love story between Michio, a married man, and Junko, a pregnant woman dying of cancer. Junko's past is equally tragic. Orphaned as a child, sent first to an unsympathetic relative and then to an orphanage, she later suffers a leg injury that leaves her physically disabled. The story begins when her lover appears as a ghost in a yellow rain jacket before the film's protagonist, Matsumura, a well-respected Yamanashi local who reluctantly participates in the annual sweeps for bodies in the forest. Michio's ghost appears in order to lead Matsumura to their bodies so they can be retrieved from the forest and reunited in body and spirit (fig. 17). Her death is not suicide per se but rather the result of parasuicidal behaviors—for example, refusing the chemotherapy treatment that might save her but would harm her baby and undertaking the exhausting journey to the forest alone in her weakened state. His is a prototypical love suicide following his lover in death (*ato-ōi shinjū*).

Through one of the film's many implausible coincidences and ESP moments, Michio miraculously locates Junko inside the tangled forest just before she expires, and he can thereby ensure that she rest in peace. Junko gets a beautiful death, first reunited with her lover and then buried with care, perfectly preserved in an ice cave deep in the forest: "Her white face appeared transparent as if bleached by the cold air, almost as if she would wake again, looking exactly the same."[37] Matsumura, our intrepid detective-like hero, also miraculously manages to locate not just his body but hers, tucked away in this icy cave deep in the dense tangled forest with the help of this friendly if persistent ghost.

Both the film and story versions center on the journey of this local veteran sweeper who is literally and metaphorically haunted by the dead. In the story, Matsumura is in his mid-forties, the same age as the dead man, while in the film, he is an older widow who tends to his wife's spirit at his home Buddhist altar and to this ghost in the yellow raincoat with so much care that his only daughter scolds him at one point, "The dead are not your job. Don't you care about the living?" The film repeatedly stresses the inconvenience (*meiwaku*) and pain caused by the dead to the worlds of the living. As one of Michio's family members puts it, "None of us is resting in peace" (*Watashitachimo, totemo ukabarenai mama ni iru no desu*).[38] This restless ghostly presence is not entirely appreciated by the protagonist, either. "I found his body," he protests. "What more could he want of me?" And the local priest explains, "The dead has something else to ask of you … before he can fully die and attain Nirvana."[39]

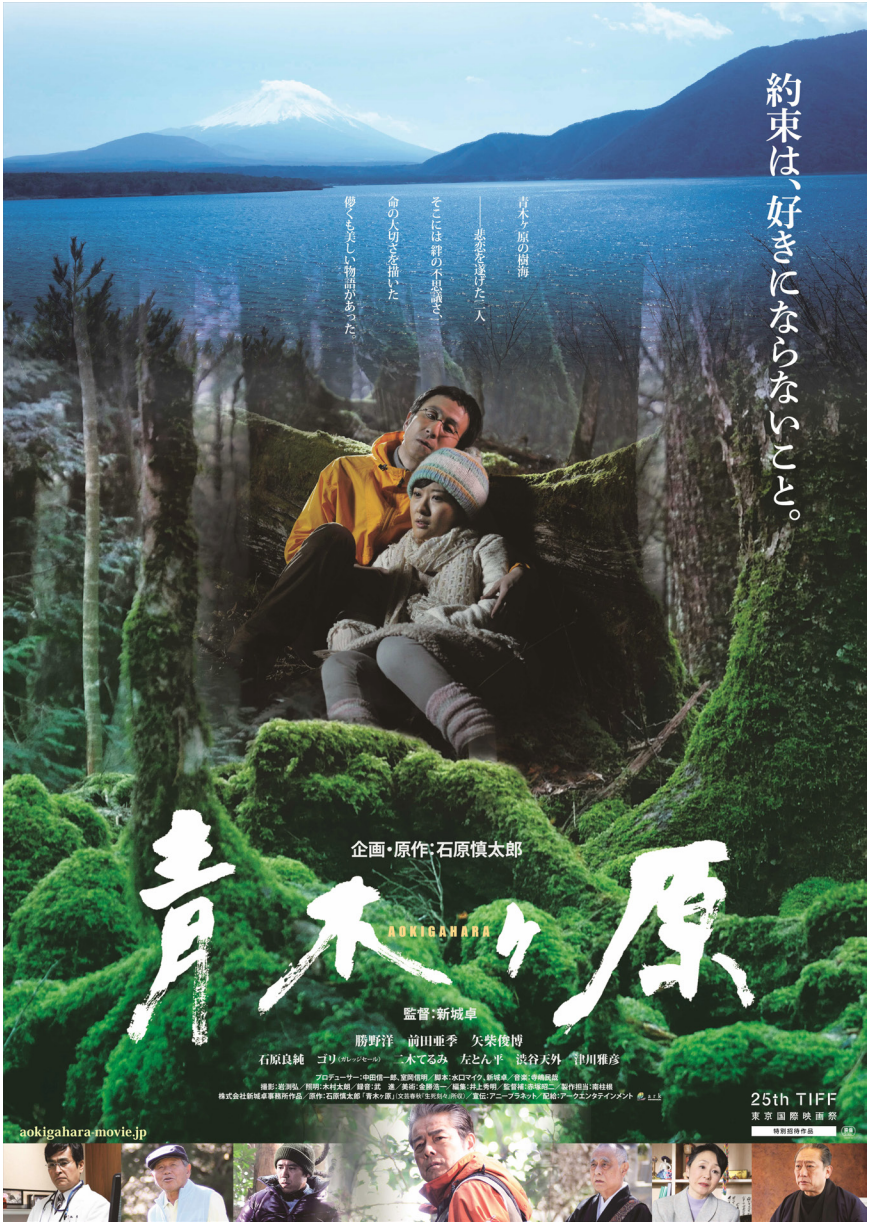

FIGURE 17. Friendly ghosts, veteran sweepers, and doomed lovers in *Aokigahara* (dir. Taku Shinjō, 2012). Courtesy Aokigahara Film Partners.

The role of this wise priest is played by Tsugawa Masahiko, an actor who not coincidentally is something of a serial fixture in adaptations of *Tower of Waves*. He played Onogi in the original 1960 Shōchiku film version (see fig. 15, above) and the cuckolded husband in the 2006 TBS version. Other than this, the film resists making explicit connections to origin stories for the suicide forest that link it to Matsumoto Seichō's novel. Instead, with Junko's pristine death scene set in an ice cave, the film obliquely taps into a lesser-known origin story that dates back to 1340, when a Buddhist monk fasted and prayed in a cave in Jukai in an act of ritual asceticism that resulted in his death.[40]

The story, on the other hand, exploits contemporary lore about Aokigahara to offer overt meta-commentary on the controversial role of texts in propagating the site's popularity. It opens with Matsumura explaining that although he has not read it himself, "a long, long time ago, there was an author who heard about that forest and wrote a novel that staged the protagonist's suicide there, and then it became some kind of strange trend and so people think, well if I'm gonna die anyway, it might as well be there."

Skeptical that reading alone could transform the site into a "sacred ground for suicide," the protagonist turns to a second text that might explain the huge twofold rise in suicides from one year to the next: *The Complete Manual of Suicide*. He then recites the hallmarks of this *meisho*—the failure of compasses and the ease of getting lost in the "primordial forest"—before speculating that another reason for its trendiness is its proximity to Tokyo and also its distance, both geographical and psychological, utterly unlike "Atami, a *jisatsu meisho* from the past that lost popularity after highways and giant hotels" took over.[41]

Both story and film grapple with Aokigahara's stubborn popularity and invoke contemporary debates over whether to continue the practice of conducting annual forest sweeps. In one exchange among the resentful locals, after hearing about the pathetic state of recovered corpses, one man asks an elderly veteran sweeper, "If they know that's how they're gonna end up, why go to all the trouble of traveling all the way here to die?," and the older man replies, "It's the brand, the brand I tell you [*Burando desu. Bu-ra-n-do yo*.] Just like dying in a fancy hospital." If Aokigahara is a brand, its selling points are the solitude and anonymity afforded by this dense forest. As the protagonist notes, it is rare for a suicide in the forest to leave behind a suicide note, and the majority remain unidentifiable.[42] But the film acknowledges this mythology only to dispute it. As our sensitive hero concludes, "Even for those who want to die alone, sure enough, in the end, don't they want to be found by someone? Sure enough, they seem to want to maintain some kind of tie [*nanika no en*] to the world."

If this film attempts in part to disrupt one fantasy about the forest—a beautiful solitary death in a beautiful locale—it perpetrates another even wilder one: the fantasy that those who die in the forest can handpick their saviors, to save them not from dying but from being left alone there forever. In the end, thanks to the tireless efforts of our protagonist, the lover's bodies are recovered and their remains

joined together in a nearby temple for "lost souls" (*muenbutsu*). The film imagines that the living can reunite with the dead and moreover that even the dead can be reunited with their own beloved dead.

This work stresses the responsibilities that each of us has to the dead, even when they have willfully chosen to die and even if you are a person with no ties whatsoever to that person during their lifetime. Responsibility here falls not to the police, whose duty it is to attend to missing person's reports, or to the clergy, whose work begins when the dead have been found. Instead, it falls to the locals, whose land inters their bodies and who retain a stubborn connection (*nanika no en*) with the dead.

The divide between the living and the dead is reestablished in the film's closing scenes. In a reversal of the theme of the persistent ghost who haunts the living, now the living stalks the dead. After reuniting the lovers' remains at the local temple, the hero is magically transported to a field of pampas grass–filled plains that are bathed in the setting sunlight. He spots the dead couple walking hand-in-hand across the field and across the River Styx. Although he calls out to them, "Ō-i!," he receives only a slight bow in acknowledgment from the man before the pair continue on without him. As they walk deeper into the field, the camera pans up and the couple disappears, absorbed into the beautiful landscape with only a silhouetted Mount Fuji remaining in view. This film leaves us with the living who must, in the end, let go of the dead.

DISPLAYING THE DEAD: FROM NON-REPRESENTATIONS TO OVERREPRESENTATIONS

In line with national policies established by Japan's Basic Act for Suicide Prevention in 2006, there have been increasing moves toward proactive mental health counseling and increased patrolling to thwart attempts in Aokigahara. There has also been a move away from the more reactive mode that had been practiced for decades; in 2001, the annual October sweeps for bodies overseen by the prefectural police and conducted by volunteers since 1971 were suspended. The logic was that the sweeps were inadvertently publicizing the locale as a suicide hotspot, and as one of the police officials explained, "To put it bluntly, we want the name of Aokigahara to be forgotten by all the people of this nation for the time being." If this official called for no representations of this place where a complete and total self-erasure is said to be possible, another, the mayor of neighboring village of Narusawa, suggested the exact opposite tact, an overrepresentation: "Maybe it'd be better to hang up a sign that says: 'This is a famous suicide spot. Please, come on in by all means'" (*Koko wa jisatsu no meisho desu. Dōzo gojiyū ni ohairikudasai*).[43]

The refusal to collect the bodies of the dead in Aokigahara offers a striking revival of the Edo period practice of refusing burial for double suicides. As noted above, their bodies were tied up and left exposed under bridges for three days.

One Japanese scholar has discovered that at Sen'nichi Cemetery in Osaka there is a mid-eighteenth century record of a graveyard caretaker writing to shogunal officials to ask for permission to steal the clothes off the backs of those who died from suicide. The shogun's response was an enthusiastic yes: "The punishment *is* to display the bodies gruesomely" (*Migurushiku shite sarasu no ga oshiki to iu mono da*).[44]

Such calls for the overt display of the dead are not limited to the premodern past or to Aokigahara. Serious and satirical calls to expose the desecrated corpse of suicides in order to dissuade would-be followers persist. Above, we saw the 2004 psychiatrists' report on "Suicide Prevention and Place/Space" advocating to educate "people about the injured state of the corpse after death … [to] counter the popularized aesthetic image of suicide."[45] In 2005, a self-declared "citizen of the railways" was inspired to write up a four-part detailed plan to combat the high numbers of train suicides on Japan Railway lines that "inconvenience" commuters and JR alike. Part of the proposed twelve-step plan included creating a "homepage presenting the corpses of leaping suicides [*tobikomi itai shōkai hōmupēji*]" to offer gory photographic evidence of train suicides for all to see.[46]

At Aokigahara, in 2001, eleven suicide prevention call boxes were installed so that suicidal individuals could call for help, and inside these, flyers were posted that "spell out just how horrid dying in Jukai is." Not retrieving the bodies in the forest regularly also helps ensure the ugliness of death there, a point that is repeatedly stressed by officials in the media. A police chief notes that he has "seen any number of bodies rotted away or eaten by wild dogs. There's nothing pretty about it," and a local volunteer asserts that "unlike in the pictures, dying in Jukai offers neither a pretty nor quiet death."[47]

Another version of this lifesaving tactic is being implemented in the United States at its most famed suicide site. In April 2017, San Francisco officials announced that they would install giant safety nets under the Golden Gate Bridge in what is being called a physical "suicide deterrent system (SDS)." As the official website explains, the "SDS Net" is actually "a hard metal platform located two stories below the sidewalk. Jumping into the Net will result in significant bruises, sprains and possibly broken bones." After it was finally installed in November 2023, one official explained the project in no uncertain terms that reveal its punitive intents: "We want the message to be that it's going to hurt, and also jumping off the bridge is illegal" (fig. 18).[48] Logistically, planners admit that the net is not the perfect solution, for it would be possible after falling to leap again into the waters below, but it seems to aim to prevent suicides also by disrupting the fantasy of a swift, painless, and even spectacular leap. Instead of merging with the natural elements, leapers would be suspended, visibly dangling like a fish caught in a net.

Texts set in Aokigahara offer their own means by which to disappear, dangle, or discover the dead. All are potentially suspect, even non-representations. Seichō's novel can be accused of giving people what they "want"—a quiet invisible death that is aestheticized in large part because of its invisibility. At the time, Seichō defended his choice of setting by citing just this attraction: "Suicidal people's psychology is

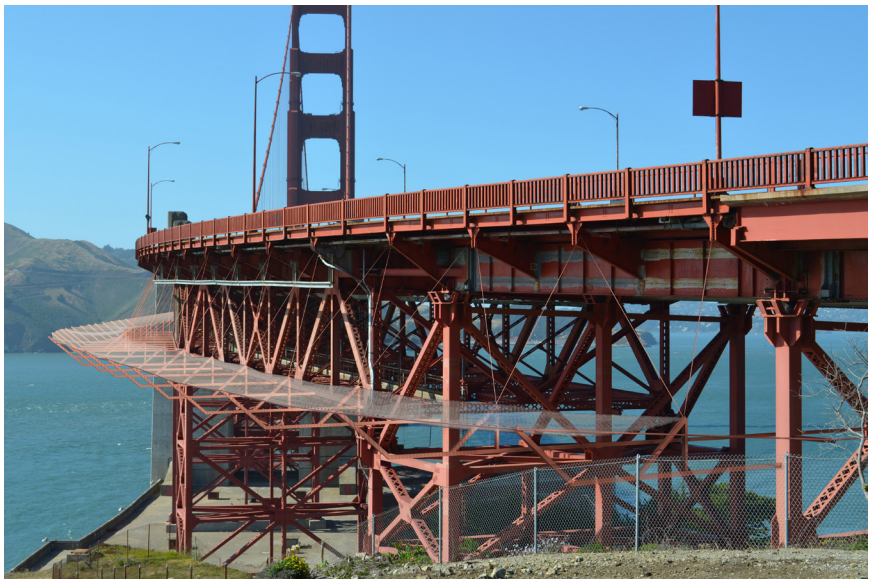

FIGURE 18. Displaying and dangling the dead. Courtesy Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District.

such that they are conscious of not wanting to expose their ugly corpse. Jukai fits a suicide's psychology perfectly as a place where one can rest quietly."[49] As one scholar has astutely charged, it is his failure to represent "the gruesome reality of dying in the middle of a forest [that] makes Yoriko's death much more idealistic. … It is as if she simply disappears into nothing."[50] In other words, it is the non-representation of the suicidal act that is deemed just as, if not more, suspect than overrepresentations.

The battle over representing Aokigahara continues. Prefectural officials aim to rebrand the site with family-friendly events in the "forest that fosters life" and an annual "Yamanashi's Day of Life" (*inochi no hi*) established in March 2016. In August of 2018, the prefecture undertook a public relations campaign that entailed creating a new iconography that would displace any dark image of the suicide forest. A newly designed logo enjoins viewers "Let's discover the real Jukai" in a rosy circular graphic design of flowers, fauna, and Mount Fuji. A color photograph of the lush, green, tree-filled terrain in the foreground with snow-covered Mount Fuji as the distant focal point beneath a perfect blue sky appears with the tagline "I had no clue that it was this beautiful."[51]

The laws of perspective draw our eye past the lakes, past the forest, to the distant promise of Mount Fuji. No human is present. A long shot and slightly overhead view leaves us invisibly hovering over and above, just on the edge of the forest but not in the trees. In other words, it inadvertently replicates the very non-representation of suicide that is said to have started the whole thing.

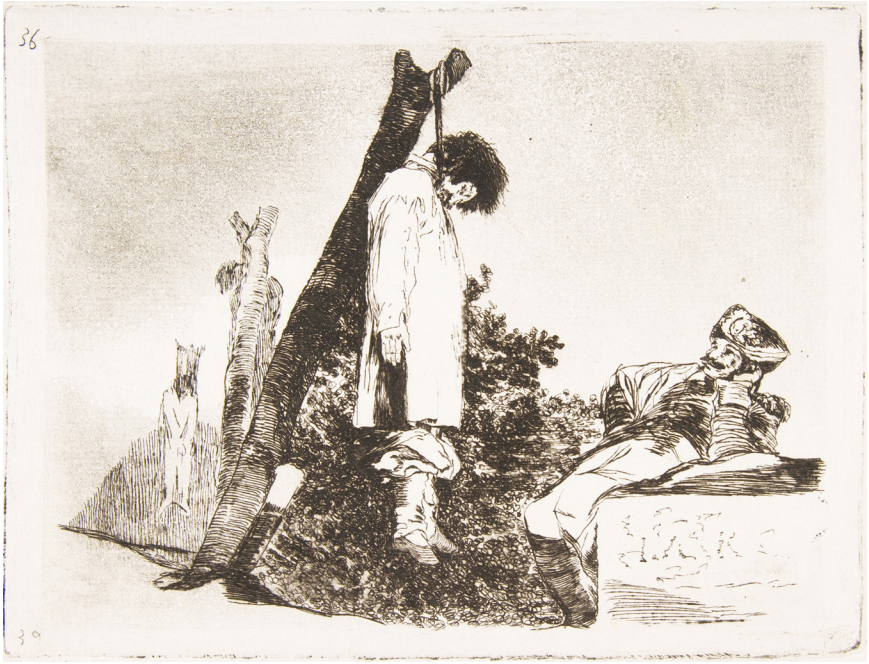

FIGURE 19. Regarding those who regard the suffering of others in Francisco Goya's *Los desastres de la guerra* (1810), Plate 36 'Not in this case either' (Tampoco). Courtesy Penta Springs Limited/Alamy Stock Photo.

REGARDING THE SELF-INFLICTED PAIN OF OTHERS

In her 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag tackles the question of what power, if any, representations of suffering and death possess, especially in our media-saturated world. In a revision of her earlier, more pessimistic conclusions about photography's lack of affective power, she concludes that the potency of any such representations depend on their ability to haunt us. They do so by implicating us as spectators who also envision the violent spectacle from a distanced yet proximate position. They can force us to think about how "intrinsic to the perpetration of this evil is the shamelessness of photographing it. The pictures were taken as souvenirs. … The display of these pictures makes us spectators too." As such, in viewing them, we, too, are forcibly and uncomfortably aligned with both the perpetrator of violence and the one who captured that moment on film. All are enemies of the victim; as Sontag puts it, "To display the dead, after all, is what the enemy does."[52]

Sontag's own choice of book cover is illuminating in this respect: an image of a lynching from Goya's 1810–20 series *Los desastres de la guerra* (The disasters of war, fig. 19). This etching shows the profile of a bearded man hanging from

a tree with his head slumped, hands dangling lifeless at his sides, and his pants pulled down below his knees. Beside him, a mustachioed man in military uniform lounges languidly, gazing squarely and even seductively at the spectacle. Although Sontag touts the powers of narrative to "make us understand" in ways that "harrowing photographs" often cannot, she offers no explanation of this particular image.[53] She does not have to. The insertion of an unattractive spectator into an image that depicts human suffering speaks volumes. It offers a check on our baser rubbernecking impulses, a check on how we look at those who do not, cannot, see or speak for themselves by instead forcing us to look at ourselves looking.

In what follows, I turn to examples of texts that entail an added layer of haunting as ones in which their authors regard (and depict) their own self-inflicted pain and suffering, as well as its end. Similar ethical questions pertain, I argue. These texts, which range from suicide notes (part 2) to multimedia fictional productions (part 3), are filled with complicated hauntings for author and audience alike. They demand that we all must figure and reconfigure our relations to the spectacle of death.