

ON THE FICTIONALITY OF MURAKAMI HARUKI'S "THE ANTEATER IN MUSASHI-SAKAI: KAHO, PART II"

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Abstract

This paper examines Murakami Haruki's short story "The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai: Kaho, Part II (Musashi-Sakai no arikui – Kaho sono 2, hereafter referred to as "The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai")² from the perspectives of spatial theory and suburban studies, focusing on the representation of Musashi-Sakai as a "Tokyo suburb." While Murakami's previous research tends to emphasize the binary oppositions expressed through the narrative structure of the "real world" versus the "other side", this paper explores how as the boundaries separating these two dimensions are deconstructed in "The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai". Through an examination of everyday spaces such as verandas and shopping streets, this paper argues that Musashi-Sakai appears as a stratified space composed of overlapping historical layers and multiple boundaries, in which the extraordinary is embedded within the realities of suburbanization process. Furthermore, by analyzing the narrative's ambiguous temporal representation, this paper demonstrates that the text constructs a composite space in which different stages of Musashi-Sakai coexist, revealing historical processes while reconfiguring them within a fictional framework.

Keywords: Murakami Haruki, Musashi-Sakai, space, boundary, suburb.

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1. Introduction

"The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai" is a short story by Japanese writer Murakami Haruki, published in the May 2025 issue of the Japanese literary magazine *Shinchō*. More precisely, it constitutes the second installment in a four-installment serialized narrative that ran from June 2024 to March 2026. The first installment, "Kaho"³, was published in the June 2024 issue. The third one "Kaho and the Termite Queen (*Kaho to shiroari no jōō*)" was published in the November 2025 issue. The last installment "Kaho, the Man Riding a Motorcycle, and Scarlett Johansson (*Kaho to mōtōsaikuru no otoko, soshite Sukāretto Yohanson*)" was published in the March 2026 issue (the four installments are hereafter collectively referred to as "the Kaho series").

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² All translations from Japanese sources included in this paper belong to the author of this paper unless otherwise stated.

³ Named after the heroine of the story.

Murakami's sustained engagement with urban space constitutes a defining feature of his fiction. As Akins observes, "few of Murakami's urbanite protagonists move away to other parts of Japan or abroad in search of self or friends, but almost all of them return to their urban homes" (Akins, 2012: 94). Accordingly, cities – and Tokyo in particular – have emerged as the main focus in many of Murakami's narratives. Shinjuku, Shibuya, Nakano, Shinagawa: his protagonists traverse the metropolitan landscape of Tokyo while confronting the psychological and existential pressures generated by urban modernity. It is therefore unsurprising that "the Kaho series" likewise begins in Tokyo. The protagonist, Kaho, is a picture-book artist based in urban Tokyo. In the first installment, Kaho recounts her unsettling experience of going on a date with a man who rudely judges her physical appearance – an encounter that becomes a turning point, prompting her to reconsider her identity and sense of self.

In the second installment, "The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai", the narrative shifts spatially and structurally. The story begins when Kaho encounters a female anteater on a Yamanote Line train, who urges her to relocate to Musashi-Sakai – a place described in the text as a "suburb of Tokyo", (Murakami, 2025: 49), yet which her uncle disparagingly calls "the end of civilization" (Murakami, 2025: 11). Following her relocation, Kaho experiences a series of bizarre events – an anteater couple take up residence beneath her house, a local knife sharpener illegally imports and sells termites; and in the climactic scene, Kaho murders the knife sharpener, who is revealed to be a jaguar responsible for the death of the anteater couple's children.

As both the title and the plot of the second installment suggest, the relocation to Musashi-Sakai is not an arbitrary choice but rather a structural and thematic pivot. It initiates a transformation in genre and character construction, shifting the narrative from urban realism toward an intensified mode of fantasy. In particular, the detailed yet internally contradictory depiction of Musashi-Sakai in this installment establishes the groundwork for the shift and for the development of the narrative.

This paper focuses on the second installment, "The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai", with particular attention to the spatial setting in which the narrative is situated and unfolds. By looking at how Murakami's fiction defines, represents, and engages with Tokyo suburban space within the broader discourse on space and suburban studies, in the following I will examine Musashi-Sakai's function as a point of articulation that connects an existing locality with a fictional narrative space.

In the story, Musashi-Sakai refers to "Musashi-Sakai station", an interchange passenger railway station served by the JR East Chūō Main Line / Seibu Tamagawa Line, as well as to the surrounding area located in Musashino City, Tokyo. Situated to the west of central Tokyo, Musashino City forms part of the Tama area, located beyond the Tokyo 23 Special Wards.

Although the story describes Musashi-Sakai as a suburb of Tokyo, it is nowhere explicitly classified as such, as the definitions of suburban areas vary across the disciplines of geography, demography, and sociology. In light of its distance from Tokyo's urban core, its position within the metropolitan spatial structure, and its predominantly residential character, Musashi-Sakai has frequently been understood in urban and literary studies as a near-central suburban space.⁴ Therefore, in this paper, Musashi-Sakai is understood as a suburb in this sense.

2. *The Extraordinariness of Suburban Space in Murakami's Narrative*

Murakami Haruki is widely known for his fantastical approach to space, as protagonists in his works repeatedly venture into uncanny spaces where extraordinary events unfold. Notable examples include the storage facility in *Pinball, 1973* (1980), the villa in *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982), the dry well in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994-1995), the forest in *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) and the cave in *Killing Commendatore* (2017). These spaces have frequently been characterized by scholars as constituting fantastical "other side". It is worth noting here that many of these fantastical "other sides" depicted in his novels are situated outside urban centers, sometimes in suburban settings.

With regard to the interpretations of the "other side," much of the existing scholarship has tended to understand it either as the "underworld"⁵ or as the "unconscious world."⁶ Such interpretations emphasize a binary opposition between two dimensions – namely, life and death, or conscious and unconscious – thereby foregrounding the boundary that separates them. This emphasis on binary opposition and boundaries resonates with the theory of the literary scholar Lotman as he argues that artistic space is made up of oppositional structures, i.e., "an organized, structured interior and an unorganized, unstructured exterior" (Lotman, 1979: 299⁷). A similar framework can be found in cultural anthropologist Yamaguchi's theory of center and periphery, in which the center is associated with order, and the periphery with disorder (Yamaguchi, 1975). Such structures manifest not only spatially, in oppositions such as the urban and the rural, but also socially, in hierarchical binaries such as civilization and barbarism. In the case of Tokyo, a comparable configuration can be observed in the relationship between Shitamachi and Yamanote, which encompasses both spatial and social dimensions.⁸

⁴ See Kawamoto, 2003 and Wakabayashi, 2007.

⁵ Examples of studies that interpret the other world as the "underworld" are Yoshikawa, 1989, Tanaka 1995, and Kawamoto, 1999.

⁶ Examples of studies that interpret the other world as the "unconscious world" are Dil, 2009, Yoshikawa 2010, and Kamo, 2011.

⁷ My quotation is from *Bungaku to bunka kigōron [Literature and cultural semiotics]* (1979), a Japanese selection translated and edited by Isoya Takashi from Lotman's essays and lectures on cultural semiotics and literary theory produced in the late 1960s and 1970s.

⁸ Originally, Yamanote denoted the elevated districts surrounding Edo Castle, whereas

Building on this binary structure, Maeda examines the representation of urban space in modern Japanese literature and highlights the extraordinariness of peripheral spaces such as riverbanks and pleasure quarters. He argues that such extraordinariness is employed to “reveal the absences and omissions that are excluded by the dominant ideologies and cultural systems of a given era” (Maeda, 1992 [1982]: 72).

In this sense, the suburb likewise comes to represent a form of “extraordinariness” in contrast to the city. As sociologist Wakabayashi defines it, the suburb is a newly developed residential area characterized by shallow roots and a lack of historical depth, and is therefore often excluded from the dominant ideologies and cultural systems of the city (Wakabayashi, 2007). Consequently, the suburb has come to be understood as a place imbued with extraordinariness that gives meaning to ideals, values, and social visions through which people imagine and interpret suburban space. In modern Japanese literature, this understanding is reflected in the recurrent representation of the suburb either as “nostalgia for past landscapes” or as a “space of self-formation” (Imahashi, 2004: 386), both of which lie outside the dominant discourse of modernization. This perspective also helps to explain why Murakami adopts suburban spaces as sites where the extraordinary emerges and the “other side” develops, thereby reaffirming the symbolic boundaries between the two.

Thus, it is no surprise that “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai” opens by presenting Musashi-Sakai as a suburban place imbued with extraordinariness. When Kaho informs her uncle of her plan to relocate there, he responds with the following remark: “But it’s really true that as far as I can see, there’s nothing but fields. Musashi-Sakai – just from the name alone, it sounds like it would be in the middle of nowhere. It’s not a place for decent people to live in. No kidding, I doubt Japanese is even understood there” (Murakami, 2025: 12). Here, the uncle constructs Musashi-Sakai area as a peripheral place so far away outside Tokyo that it might not even be considered part of Tokyo or even Japan, portraying it as marked by isolation, disorder, and cultural marginality.

Moreover, as the economist Hiroi points out, places which have historically played important roles as community centers tend to function as points of contact with the outside (Hiroi, 2009). Thus, traditional suburban stations like Musashi-Sakai, as places connecting the urban and suburban area, function as “boundaries” between

Shitamachi referred to the low-lying areas along the riverbanks. As the upland districts were inhabited primarily by the samurai class, Yamanote came to be associated with warrior culture, refined education, and elite cultural capital. By contrast, Shitamachi populated largely by merchants and artisans, developed a distinct urban commoner culture characterized by commercial vitality, vernacular expression, and popular entertainment. Over time, these spatial distinctions evolved into symbolic markers of social hierarchy and cultural identity within Tokyo, extending far beyond their original geographical meanings.

the two. At the same time, as Musashi-Sakai station traces its origins back to the *sakai teishajō* [Sakai stop], which was established by the Kōbu Railway in 1889, with the word *sakai* meaning “boundary” in Japanese. Within the narrative, the station therefore embodies this double sense of marginality, accentuating the opposition between urban Tokyo and Musashi-Sakai.

This boundary function of Musashi-Sakai station is further developed through the episode in which Kaho’s uncle recounts his encounter with a raccoon dog at Musashi-Sakai station: “When I got off the train, there was a raccoon dog in a hat at the gate, acting important and checking tickets” (Murakami, 2025: 12). Wild animals such as raccoon dogs and foxes have long been depicted in Japanese folktales as mythological creatures embodying the powers of deities and as symbols of the supernatural. They are portrayed as able to assume human form or to possess human beings and usually appear at boundaries. Moreover, as Yamaguchi argues about the visibility of boundaries:

In order to render the image of such boundaries vivid and capable of activating the imagination, the most effective strategy is to construct demonic or monstrous figures that appear within this space. These figures are ideally endowed with a properly human form, but also with animalistic elements. (Yamaguchi, 2001: 36)

The presence of a raccoon dog at Musashi-Sakai station – one that checks tickets like a human while remaining an animal – thus functions as a symbolic device that renders the boundary between city and suburb visible.

Overall, in the opening of the narrative, Musashi-Sakai is positioned in sharp opposition to the city and described as a space characterized by emptiness, cultural inadequacy, and a lack of civilization. Musashi-Sakai station, depicted as a boundary between city and suburb in both sociological and literary meanings, is further marked by the appearance of the raccoon dog, which not only reinforces this boundary but also underscores the extraordinariness of the space beyond the station.

3. Blurring the Boundary between the Urban and the Suburban

However, this boundary function of Musashi-Sakai station gradually becomes destabilized as the narrative unfolds. When Kaho visits Musashi-Sakai herself, she encounters a landscape that differs markedly from her uncle’s account. Rather than open fields and desolation, she finds “large, modern station buildings, automated gates, and impressive commercial complexes” (Murakami, 2025: 14) and no trace of raccoon dogs. Musashi-Sakai is no longer “the end of civilization” but part of the modern urban fabric. The visible and stark contrast between city and suburb that her uncle remembered had effectively disappeared.

This transformation is not confined to "The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai". Set against the backdrop of large-scale suburbanization in Japan following World War II, the suburbs depicted in the works of Murakami are likewise in a continual state of transformation. Where older, sparsely populated suburban areas have gradually been replaced by new developments and incoming residents. Seidensticker argues that residents "overflowing from the Yamanote area started to move outward, giving rise to the Shitamachi. Then, the population grew in the Shitamachi, which thus became the new Yamanote" (Seidensticker, 1986: 234). Likewise, the relationship between city and suburb is characterized by constant movement. Through suburbanization, peripheral areas gradually become incorporated into the urban core, while new suburban zones emerge further outward.

With regard to the characteristic of the boundary that underscores the fluid relationship between city and suburb, Kawamoto, drawing on Okui Fukutarō's *An Introduction to Urban Suburb Studies (Toshi kōgairon josetsu)*, further emphasized its shifting nature by dividing Tokyo's suburban development into three periods (Kawamoto, 2003). The first, spanning the Edo to early Meiji period⁹, is characterized by the absence of an explicit boundary between city and suburb. The second extends from the late Meiji to the mid-Taishō period¹⁰, during which Tokyo developed mainly "along and beyond the Yamanote Line" (Kawamoto, 2003: 31). In the third period, suburbanization progressed towards "the boundaries of the Tokyo 23 Special Wards, and in some cases, even further outward" (Kawamoto, 2003: 31). "The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai" reflects exactly this stage: by the time Kaho visits the area, which lies outside to the Tokyo 23 Special Wards, it is far more urban than the semi-rural, semi-fantastical Musashi-Sakai preserved in her uncle's memory.

Both the uncle's remarks and Kaho's own observations demonstrate that the boundary between city and suburb cannot easily be defined by a single station or location but instead exist in a far more complicated configuration. Moreover, the city and the suburb can no longer be understood as two opposing domains. As suburbanization progresses, their images become increasingly intertwined and blurred.

Accordingly, within the narrative, Musashi-Sakai station's role as liminal space becomes destabilized by the shifting relationship between city and suburb. The raccoon dog described by Kaho's uncle no longer functions as a symbol marking the boundary between the two spaces. Rather, it becomes a piece of recollection, shaped by the loss of memories through suburbanization, and also by the imaginative reconstruction of past experience.

⁹ The Edo period began in 1603, marking the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate, while the Meiji period commenced in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration.

¹⁰ The Meiji period came to an end in 1912, and the Taishō period concluded in 1926.

Consequently, Lotman's model of fixed spatial oppositions and Maeda's emphasis on the extraordinary "other side" can no longer adequately account for the complexity and variability of suburban space. Instead, Yamaguchi's concept of boundaries as "sites where multiple, often opposing images overlap – inside and outside, life and death, this world and the next, culture and nature, settlement and movement, cultivation and desolation, abundance and decay" (Yamaguchi, 1975: 81) offers a more productive framework to interpret the dynamic relationship between the suburbs and the city, and the extraordinariness of Musashi-Sakai in "The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai".

4. Stratified Space and Multiple Boundaries in Musashi-Sakai

An examination of the stratified space and multiple boundaries of Musashi-Sakai as a liminal space must begin with its suburbanization process, alongside the development of Musashino City. As mentioned in the preceding section, the Musashi-Sakai station was established by the Kōbu Railway in 1889. This allowed the railway to become a vital artery for the development of both Musashi-Sakai and Musashino Village (which later became Musashino City).

In 1906, the Kōbu Railway was nationalized and subsequently incorporated into Tokyo's suburban railway network. This infrastructural reorganization enhanced regional connectivity and promoted Musashino Village's emergence as a potential suburban residential district. Following the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923, the village received a large influx of residents, including displaced victims, which further accelerated its suburban development. In November 1928, Musashino Village acquired municipal status and became Musashino Town (Musashino City, 2001).

Following World War II, Musashino Town underwent rapid suburbanization as part of Tokyo's expanding commuter belt and was subsequently incorporated as Musashino City in 1947 (Musashino City, 2001). During the 1950s, public housing projects and large residential complexes were constructed, and farmland was progressively converted into housing lots (Musashino City, 2001). As consumption expanded, local shopping streets grew more active, consolidating the area's identity as a suburban residential district. The shopping street visited by Kaho in "The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai" was likely developed during this period.

From the 1970s onward, urban redevelopment and infrastructural improvements further reshaped Musashino City, especially Musashi-Sakai station, as projects such as railway elevation, station plaza construction, and commercial development enhanced accessibility and urban functionality.¹¹ These transformations contributed to the emergence of Musashi-Sakai as a hybrid space combining diverse appearances

¹¹ Source from the Musashino City webpage: https://www.city.musashino.lg.jp/_res/projects/default_project/_page_/001/001/810/musashino114_002-007_toku1_sai.pdf

such as suburban residential neighborhoods – like the one to which Kaho relocates – with urban commercial and service facilities, including the “large, modern station building, automated gates, and impressive commercial complexes” (Murakami, 2025: 14) that Kaho photographs and sends to her uncle.

According to Wakabayashi, just as the diverse appearance of today’s landscape can be understood as a set of “layered strata” (Wakabayashi, 2007: 95) accumulated over time, the suburb may likewise be conceived as a place that possesses multiple of such stratified layers. The very process of suburbanization involves the construction of new residential districts upon older life spaces rooted in earlier modes of living and social practice, a progress often marked by “discontinuities and fault lines” (Wakabayashi, 2007: 95).

Therefore, rather than constituting a single, fixed boundary between city and suburbs, Suzuki argues that suburban space “structurally generates multiple boundaries” (Suzuki, 2021: 98). Within the layered strata identified by Wakabayashi above, boundaries inevitably emerge where older and newer spatial formations overlap, while often remaining invisible at first glance. This conception of multiple boundaries as overlapping and contradictory not only resonates with Yamaguchi’s theory (1975) of the boundary but also reflects the reality of Tokyo’s suburban landscape.

Such boundaries are also evident in “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai”. One example appears in the house to which Kaho moves: “A rather old, single-story detached house” that has “weathered considerable time” (Murakami, 2025: 13). The house is described as follows:

Although the house had clearly aged, it was meticulously maintained even in the smallest details. It looked old, but not especially worn down, and appeared clean overall. Facing south, a narrow and long veranda ran along the building, and there was a modest garden. In the garden stood an old stone lantern, and a single pine tree rose, tall and thin. Along the wooden fence, yellow kerria and azaleas grew in neat, well-shaped clusters. (Murakami, 2025: 13)

The veranda (*engawa*)¹², the old stone lantern, and the tall pine evoke an unmistakably traditional image of Japanese domestic architecture. This contrasts sharply with the lack of historical depth often associated with post-1960s suburban developments and new towns (Wakabayashi, 2007). Rather than a historical “new town,” the house is explicitly presented as a structure bearing time and memory. Moreover, the garden plants – kerria and azaleas – reflect what Kawamoto describes as the Taishō and Shōwa idealization of pastoral greenery (Kawamoto, 2003).

¹² The original Japanese term *engawa* refers to a traditional architectural feature of Japanese houses. It is a narrow, wooden veranda-like corridor that runs along the outer edge of the house, connecting the interior living space with the garden.

Furthermore, according to the real estate agent, the former owner had lived there alone for many years and is “over eighty years old” (Murakami, 2025: 13). This detail further anchors the house within a longer temporal framework and evokes in Kaho a sense of nostalgia: “It was the first time she had seen the house, yet she somehow felt a faint nostalgia, as though it were quietly connected somewhere to an old memory” (Murakami, 2025: 13).

In contrast to the house Kaho chooses to live, the “convenience store” nearby, as well as the “copy machine” and “chain drugstore” in the shopping street farther away, appear as layers belonging to a different period. As such, the house functions as a spatial manifestation of an older world embedded within the suburbanization process – distinct from newly produced residential environments – and can be read as one “boundary” in the layered suburban space.

Another boundary exists between Kaho’s living space and the underfloor area inhabited by the anteaters. While the rooms above are carefully maintained, the underfloor space remains inaccessible and bears traces of neglect, suggested by the “musty smell” that Kaho detects near the ventilation opening. Even as new occupants bring new lifestyles, this subterranean space remains linked to the past.

In this way, multiple boundaries intersect within the house. The veranda, which simultaneously connects interior and exterior, as well as the rooms and the underfloor area, function as the liminal spaces where the two domains intersect. The anteater’s wife, who can sit “properly in *seiza*¹³”, and speaks like a human despite being an animal, does not emerge randomly from the veranda. Rather, as Yamaguchi (1975) argues, monstrous figures render boundaries visible, and thus, the presence of the anteater’s wife in the house – especially on the veranda – can be understood as a narrative device that makes these intersecting borders perceptible.

Another boundary appears in the tool sharpening shop that Kaho visits in order to retrieve imported termites at the anteater’s request. According to the anteater’s wife, the importer’s base is located in the middle of a shopping street near Musashi-Sakai station: “It was located about halfway down the shopping street near Musashi-Sakai station. An old shopping street inevitably on a slow path of decline, pressured by the newly built station building” (Murakami, 2025: 27) Here, it is made obvious that the old shopping street belongs to a different “layer” from the shopping center.

Moreover, when Kaho arrives at the shopping street, she notices that “about one third of the stores had already closed down, their grey shutters pulled down expressionlessly. Even the that remaining stores do not look particularly busy” (Murakami, 2025: 28). The shopping street has not been completely covered by the new layer but is in the process of being enveloped by oblivion. This aging shopping street – gradually disappearing from human attention – appears as a space rooted in

¹³ A traditional Japanese kneeling position.

older modes of life, distinct from the new station building. It is another liminal time-space that lingers in the midst of suburbanization.

Here, too, a nonhuman figure emerges: the owner of the sharpening shop who frightens Kaho, described as having “pointed, large ears” and nostrils “swollen wide”, “like an animal crawling out from deep underground to seek a large supply of fresh air” (Murakami, 2025: 29). He is later revealed to be an evil jaguar. Similarly, the anteater husband – whose presence had previously been felt only through his wife’s messages – appears here in an anthropomorphized form: “standing on two legs”, wearing “black-framed glasses”, and holding a “walnut-wood pipe” (Murakami, 2025: 43) at the corner of his mouth. These figures, including the tool sharpening shop’s owner and the anteater husband, likewise function to illuminate the boundary existing here. For Kaho, relocating to Musashi-Sakai entails not only finding her own place somewhere within these layers, but also inhabiting the boundaries produced by their accumulation and adjacency.

As Maeda suggests, boundaries within textual space are not fixed barriers given in advance. Rather, they are made to “emerge through the actions of characters, which enable various images to become manifest.” (Maeda, 1992 [1982]: 42) In “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai”, it is Kaho’s actions – moving to Musashi-Sakai and retrieving the imported termites from the old shopping street, in other words moving between urban and suburban spaces, but also between real and imaginary ones – is what brings diverse boundaries into visibility.

Although the narrative initially appears to reproduce Murakami’s conventional opposition of two domains and offers the suburb as an extraordinary “other side”, the protagonist Kaho’s experience reveals a more complex structure: a stratified suburban space and the multiple boundaries crisscrossing it. Through her encounters with these layered boundaries, she discovers the extraordinary domain embedded within the realities of Musashi-Sakai’s suburbanization itself.

5. The Rhetoric of Time

In “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai”, the representation of the topos Musashi-Sakai itself is constructed, to a considerable extent, through Kaho’s uncle’s account. For the uncle, Musashi-Sakai is “the end of civilization”, whereas the Musashi-Sakai that Kaho encounters after moving there appears, if anything, to be “far more urban”. Although Kaho attributes this discrepancy to the passage of time – suggesting that her uncle must have visited the area “a very long time ago” (Murakami, 2025: 11) – the narrative itself provides no concrete temporal markers. References to time remain vague: Kaho describes her uncle as being “in his late fifties”, while the uncle refers to his experiences using expressions such as “when I was a student” or “quite a long time ago” (Murakami, 2025: 11). None of these statements specify an actual time period.

Given the reference to the introduction of unmanned IC ticket gates, Kaho's relocation to Musashi-Sakai can be inferred to have taken place after 2001¹⁴. If so, her uncle – described as being “in his late fifties” – would have visited Musashi-Sakai as a student sometime between the 1960s and the 1970s. Yet the imagery of Musashi-Sakai contained in his account contradicts what this time frame would suggest.

For instance, the uncle portrays Musashi-Sakai as a place where “as far as the eye can see there are only open fields”, and characterizes the landscape as “monotonous and boring”. This image better corresponds with historical representations of Musashino¹⁵, from the medieval to early modern periods, when it was “persistently described through the figure of grasslands, as a great expanse on the Musashino Plateau” (Akasaka, 2018: 69).

Although the dominant image of Musashino had shifted from grassland to forest beginning with Kunikida Doppo's “Musashino” (1898 [1968]), this text still suggests that Musashi-Sakai in the middle of the Meiji era was a “*machihazure*”, a “periphery” that greatly overlaps with the uncle's description and still retains traces of the earlier Musashino landscape.

At the same time, when the uncle recalls his past experiences of playing mahjong in Musashi-Sakai, the area is already depicted as having entered the phrase of suburbanization:

[...]it probably hasn't changed that much even now. Back then I was completely addicted to mahjong, and one of my friends lived in Musashi-Sakai, so we'd sometimes play mahjong all night at his place. I'd get on the train, cross from one end of Dai-Tōkyō to the other and go all the way out to Musashi-Sakai just to play mahjong. I really was a strange guy. (Murakami, 2025: 11-12)

As noted in the previous section, Musashi-Sakai station was first established in 1889 as “Sakai stop.” At that time, transportation to and from “Sakai stop” consisted primarily of “horse-drawn carriages” and “steam trains.” Following the nationalization of the Kōbu Railway in 1904, electrification of its railway lines was accelerated. In 1922, electrification reached “Sakai stop”, enabling direct train service from Tokyo City (Musashino City, 2001). Consequently, the uncle's recollections likely refer to a period after 1922, although the precise timeframe remains difficult to determine.

¹⁴ Musashi-Sakai Station became a station equipped with Suica-compatible automatic ticket gates on November 18, 2001, when the Suica IC card system was introduced. Source from the Internet Archive webpage: https://www.jrest.co.jp/press/2001_1/20010904/suica.pdf

¹⁵ A term used in Japanese literature, associated with the beauty of open nature as well as with a sense of melancholy.

Moreover, the term *Dai-Tōkyō* itself is strongly marked by historical specificity. It gained prominence in the Taishō period, following rapid urban expansion and was institutionalized in 1932, when Tokyo City incorporated surrounding municipalities and reorganized them into thirty-five wards under the name “*Dai-Tōkyō shi* [Great city of Tokyo]”¹⁶. The Musashi-Sakai described by the uncle thus appears to belong to this particular historical moment, too.

Another striking image in his account is that of “too many shiny German cars – so dazzling it hurts the eyes” (Murakami, 2025: 12). As Musashino city experienced a boom in private automobile ownership beginning around 1966, driven by rapid economic growth¹⁷, this image also resonates with what Japanese novelist Miura Shūmon describes in his short story “For Generations (*Senzodaidai*)”¹⁸. The story opens with the protagonist, Hisao, reading a newspaper article about the traffic congestion and pollution in Musashi-Sakai, reflecting the broader context of the 1960s, when newspaper campaigns against pollution and car exhaust were at the center of public attention. By this stage, the image of open fields and grasslands in Musashi-Sakai had largely disappeared, and suburbanization was well underway.

Given all the disparate elements that are brought in to describe the location, it is appropriate to say that the “Musashi-Sakai” referred to by the uncle is a composite formed through the layering of multiple historical images from premodern time to the present.

As Karatani has argued, Murakami’s early novels display an “excess of dates” “constantly situating narratives within precise temporal frameworks” (Karatani, 1995: 85). According to Karatani, this practice functions not as a way to deepen historical consciousness but to empty history of meaning. In contrast, “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai” avoids explicit temporal markers, but the images it presents correspond to fragments of Musashi-Sakai from different stages of suburbanization. By erasing temporal distinctions, the narrative paradoxically reveals the historical process of suburban transformation.

While Murakami’s fiction is frequently structured around retrospection, Hidaka notes that this “process of revisiting time” generates “a certain sense of nostalgia” (Hidaka, 2011: 127). Imahashi also observes that literary representations of Tokyo’s suburbs often depict them as nostalgic spaces, not only in Murakami’s particular case (Imahashi, 2004). In “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai”, however, by neutralizing temporal and spatial differences while simultaneously layering them, the uncle’s

¹⁶ Source from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government webpage: https://www.soumu.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/01soumu-archives/07edo_tokyo/0714tokyo_ku

¹⁷ Source from the Musashino City webpage: https://www.city.musashino.lg.jp/shiseijoho/musashino_profile/hyakunenmonogatari/1003322.html

¹⁸ Published in the July 1981 issue of the literary magazine *Bungei*.

narrative does not function merely as reminiscence. Rather, it constitutes an attempt to deconstruct the nostalgic image of the suburb, and, at the same time “rewrite history” – to produce a fictional Musashi-Sakai whose past diverges from historical reality.

It is within this fictionalized Musashi-Sakai that raccoon dogs may check tickets, and anteaters enact vendettas against jaguars with the help of humans. At the same time, conspicuously anachronistic “shiny German cars” also emerge. As Takahashi argues, in Murakami’s work, such luxury vehicles often function as symbols guiding readers toward otherworldly realms (Takahashi, 2023). In this text, they likewise serve to draw readers into a fictionalized Musashi-Sakai.

Through the uncle’s discourse, the real Musashi-Sakai is distorted and transformed into a fantastic space, exactly like the place the anteater wife had described when explaining to Kaho the reason she should relocate to Musashi-Sakai: “[Here,] it is simply that we are unable to clearly distinguish between the future, the present, and the past. They mutually evoke one another, intermingling as they coexist simultaneously within us” (Murakami, 2025: 17).

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the short story “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai” by Murakami Haruki through the perspectives of spatial theory and suburban studies, focusing on the ways in which the text defines, constructs and engages with Tokyo suburb of Musashi-Sakai. By situating it within the historical process of Tokyo’s suburbanization and within existing theoretical discussions of spatial boundaries, the paper has demonstrated that Musashi-Sakai functions not merely as a background setting but as a central mechanism through which the narrative produces meaning.

Murakami’s previous works have shown a long-standing engagement with binary opposition through the narrative structure of the “real world” and the “other side”, as well as an emphasis on the boundaries separating the two dimensions. In these works, suburban spaces frequently serve as sites where the extraordinary emerges and where the “other side” develops. In “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai”, although the narrative initially appears to reproduce this conventional opposition between city and suburb by presenting the suburb as an extraordinary realm, this structure is ultimately deconstructed by situating the story within the historical process of suburbanization.

Drawing on Wakabayashi’s concept of spatial strata (2007) of suburban space and Yamaguchi’s theory of unfixed boundaries (1975), I examined how multiple, fluid boundaries emerge within everyday spaces such as houses, verandas, underfloor spaces and shopping streets. I argue that Musashi-Sakai in Murakami’s story emerges as a stratified topos made up of overlapping historical layers and

crisscrossed by multiple boundaries. The extraordinariness of Musashi-Sakai is not a mere “other world”, but is in effect embedded within the realities of the area’s suburbanization process.

Furthermore, through an analysis of the narrative’s ambiguous temporal representation – especially in the uncle’s account of Musashi-Sakai – I have demonstrated that the text constructs a temporally and spatially composite Musashi-Sakai, in which different stages of suburbanization coexist. This ambiguity allows the narrative to reveal historical processes while simultaneously reconfiguring them within a fictional framework.

Overall, my paper suggests that “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai” does not simply reproduce Murakami’s previous model of the suburb as an extraordinary “other side” in opposition with the urban center. Instead, it presents the suburb as a hybrid, stratified, and historically sedimented space in which boundaries are constantly produced, displaced, and reconfigured. The extraordinary elements in the narrative emerge not from a separation between reality and fantasy, but from the internal contradictions and layered structures of suburban life itself.

By foregrounding the spatial, temporal, and historical complexity of Musashi-Sakai, my paper shows that Murakami’s most recent representation of the suburb reflects broader transformations in the contemporary urban experience. The suburb appears not as a peripheral zone detached from the city, but as a dynamic interface where multiple forms of memory, infrastructure, and social practice converge. In this sense, “The Anteater in Musashi-Sakai” offers a literary model for understanding suburban space as a site of ongoing negotiation between urban and non-urban, past and present, reality and fiction. From this perspective, Murakami’s engagement with suburban space can be understood as a critical response to the changing spatial logic of metropolitan Japan and as an exploration of how everyday environments continue to generate new forms of narrative imagination.

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