

## Article

# A Virtual You: Reading Kurahashi Yumiko's *Kurai Tabi* through Virtuality

Jason M. Beckman 

East Asian Languages and Cultures Department, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, USA;  
jason.beckman@stanford.edu

**Abstract:** Within literary criticism, the second-person narrative is frequently read within the conventions of the modern realistic novel, tackling the narratee/protagonist as a narratological problem. Such an approach, however, overlooks a core component of what second-person fiction aims to do: that is, draw the reader into the narrative and experience the world of the text firsthand. Seeking instead to theorize the ways in which second-person narratives involve the reader in the text and invite the act of perspective-taking, I turn to virtual reality, which is deeply invested in the cognitive mechanisms through which a sense of presence is produced and in questions of how the mediated experience of virtual reality can influence human thought and behavior. Examining Kurahashi Yumiko's *Kurai Tabi* (1961), one of the earliest examples of the literary form in Japanese literature, I consider how the reader can experience presence during moments in the text, and how the text drives the reader's identification with the "you" who is the target of the narration. Analyzing the second-person narrative as a virtuality provides a new avenue for understanding the reader's cognitive engagement and experience of second-person fiction.

**Keywords:** second-person narrative; virtual reality; reading; narratology; presence; virtuality; sense experience; cognition



**Citation:** Beckman, Jason M. 2023. A Virtual You: Reading Kurahashi Yumiko's *Kurai Tabi* through Virtuality. *Literature* 3: 278–295. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature3030019>

Academic Editor: Atsuko Sakaki

Received: 1 January 2023

Revised: 22 May 2023

Accepted: 11 June 2023

Published: 25 June 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Let us begin with a simple question: who are you?

This question sits at the heart of the second-person narrative; or if not the question of who you are, then the question of who "you" is, or better yet, what "you" does and the function it serves in the reader's experience of the text.

The second-person narrative is a peculiar form. It instantiates in its very articulation an uncanny encounter that the reader must navigate and negotiate in the process of settling in, of acclimating to the narrative logic of the text. "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*" (Calvino 1981) reads the famous opening line of one of the exemplars of the second-person narrative, baring its alluring peculiarity from the first. "A slight misfire", as Irene Kacandes (1993, p. 147) so aptly describes this moment in which the reader, encountering a direct address, must confront the novel's simultaneous violation of novelistic convention and obvious flouting of linguistic logic.

The basic premise of the second-person narrative is deceptively simple: a literary form in which the central character is "you". In practice, however, the experience of engaging with the narrative second person is quite complex, as the deictic doubling of a pronoun marker that simultaneously refers to a character inside the world of the text and linguistically appears to address the reader, who exists external to the text, leads to various indeterminacies about the identity of the protagonist, and ultimately raises questions about how we as readers interface across the aesthetic boundary of the text.

Unlike its narrative companions—the narrative first and third, which comprise the vast majority of novelistic fiction—the second occupies a rather thorny position in the genealogy of narrative perspective. The specific constraint at the heart of this narrative form

creates a type of reading experience with genre-like quality, although the content of second-person texts may vary greatly from a generic perspective, as the consistent presence of second-person address establishes a continuity among these texts through the invitation of the reader's participation and even presence in the narrative.

Critical approaches, however, might be best characterized by their resistance to the second-person text's invitations. For the extensive body of critical work that has analyzed and taxonomized the second-person narrative as a literary form in the context of modern novelistic fiction, the dominant strain of analysis mainly treats the second-person narrative as a narratological question that can be resolved into a more typical first or third person. The "you" of a second-person text is almost always a fictional character, one who is decidedly not the reader. However, must this be the case?

Venturing, instead, that the reader's presence and implication in the narrative is at the very core of the second-person narrative—both in terms of why writers elect to make use of this style of writing and also what draws readers to it—I contend that on a fundamental level, the second-person narrative aims to break away from the form of the modern novel entirely, delivering the reader into a new type of experience. In reevaluating how the reader interfaces across the aesthetic boundary of the second-person text, my analysis diverges from the narratological to consider the second-person narrative as a virtual, cognitive experience.

Looking to the medium of virtual reality for its attunement to the sensations of presence and embodiment, the ensuing reexamination of the second-person narrative considers ways of reading that generate a sense of presence, and ultimately how virtuality lends itself to a richer understanding of the motivations and mechanisms of the second-person literary form. It is a view that recognizes in the second-person narrative the author's intent to create a certain kind of cognitive experience for the reader: one that centers on the reader's embodied presence, however fleeting, in the world of the text.

## 2. Situating the Second-Person Narrative

The second-person narrative as a literary form is a relatively new phenomenon in the scheme of literary history. Early instances of second-person fiction<sup>1</sup> date back to the stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Hans Christian Andersen, finding antecedents in the epistolary novels of the eighteenth century and in the free indirect discourse of early twentieth-century novels (Fludernik 1993, p. 218). My particular focus, however, is the postmodern instantiation of second-person fiction that became popular worldwide following Michel Butor's *La Modification* (1957),<sup>2</sup> and that made its debut in Japan with Kurahashi Yumiko's *Kurai Tabi* (Bleak journey 1961) and Tsuzuki Michio's *Yabunirami no Tokei* (The cross-eyed clock 1961), both of which have been linked to Butor's work following its translation into Japanese as *Kokorogawari* (1959) by Shimizu Tōru (Nomura 2005, pp. 3–4). Other notable examples of second-person novels include Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* (1970), Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979), Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), and Tawada Yōko's *Yōgisha no yakō ressha* (Suspect on a night train 2001). The list expands considerably when taking into account second-person fiction in the short story format, spanning languages and national literatures over the course of the past half century.<sup>3</sup>

From a critical perspective, second-person fiction is fairly well delineated. Monika Fludernik's basic definition has remained a standard in literary scholarship over the past three decades and provides an apt starting point: "narrative which uses a pronoun (or term) of address in reference to the main protagonist of a story" (Fludernik 2011, p. 105). This broad definition accommodates a range of different structural configurations that can be encapsulated within a narratological taxonomy of three basic types, which Brian Richardson (2008, pp. 32–33) outlines as follows:

'Standard' second person narration oscillates between third and first person perspectives, with each narrative usually settling toward one or the other, while repeatedly if briefly seeming to include the reader as the object of the discourse. Hypothetical second person texts fuse a heterodiegetic depiction of an ever more

specific individual with an imagined future of the reader, thus merging a third person perspective with a hypothetical 'you' that is the virtual equivalent of 'one'. Autotelic texts have the greatest share of direct address to the actual reader and superimpose this onto a fictional character designated by 'you' that tends to be treated from an external perspective as if in the third person. This intensifies one of the most fascinating features of second person narrative: the way the narrative 'you' is alternately opposed to and fused with the reader—both the constructed and the actual reader.

The prevailing reading of the narrative second person—the “standard” version, as it were—locates the reader squarely outside of the text, as a first- or third-person perspective can safely substitute for the second in any given analysis of the content of the story. The reader's eventual displacement from occupying the position of the narratee is an inevitability in Fludernik's (1994, p. 287) analysis, for “as soon as the protagonist becomes too specific a personality, becomes, that is, a fictional character, the quality of the presumed address to an extradiegetic reader in such texts evaporates”. Any reader's firsthand experience of the second-person narrative thus comes up against a source friction that stymies involvement and precludes a sustained sense of presence: the accumulation of information suggesting that the protagonist's identity in fact diverges from that of the reader.<sup>4</sup>

The timing of the reader's perceptual oscillation—the fusion with and opposition to the narrative “you”—proves to be somewhat of a narratological sticking point. Reading a “standard” second-person narrative, the reader's path irrevocably diverges from that of the protagonist once enough information is amassed to demarcate the difference between the two. The duration of the alignment in a “hypothetical” second-person text is even more tenuous, dissolving once the reader pieces together the linguistic logic that resolves “you” into “the virtual equivalent of ‘one’”, a generalized third person in the guise of the second. Of the three categories, only autotelic texts sustain durations of “direct address to the actual reader” who is concurrently superimposed onto the fictional character. Richardson cites *If on a winter's night a traveler* as a canonical example of the autotelic variety. In the autotelic mode, we finally account for narration that transgresses the aesthetic boundary of the novel, affording a virtual presence for the reader to inhabit—a “you” that is you and not a placeholder for a fictional other.

Yet, this neatly delineated taxonomy of the second-person narrative relies upon two underlying assumptions that contradict the very nature of the second-person form. The first is the assumption of the text as a finished object, and hence the act of reading (and thus of critique) as a process that necessarily follows after the text. The second, which is inextricable from the first, is the assumption that the second-person narrative is contained within the bounds of the modern, realistic novel.

To critically frame the latter, I look to Yi-Ping Ong's artful articulation of the way the novel depends on a specific, normative relationship between the reader and the text. Simply put, in the world of the modern novel, the reader does not exist: “The suspension of an existence beyond the narrative ensures the very possibility of engaging with the imaginative reality of the novel. The existence of the novel depends upon the fiction of the nonexistence of the novel's reader” (Ong 2018, p. 17). Tracing readerly imagination and self-reflection phenomenologically through the experience of reading, Ong exposes a tension between the way we think, as ourselves in our own lives, and the way we think as readers in the act of reading.

The novel provides a space in which to think and imagine, but gives us no authority over the world that comes to fruition through the act of reading. Ong (2018, p. 4) distinguishes “imaginative reflection”, which encapsulates the reader's “imagined point of view” that is constructed to perceive the world of the novel and observe the actions and thoughts of its characters, from “deliberative reflection”, which refers to “the form of self-knowledge that involves deliberation, acknowledgement, and avowal”. When we become immersed in books or film or virtual reality, our self-knowledge drives give way to perception; we observe, we imagine, we take in. We become, in other words, present in the work

as we experience it. Herein lies the tacit singularity of our consciousness—it is difficult, if not impossible, to be present in one’s own unmediated body and simultaneously in an imaginary world.

Thus, when Ong (2018, p. 6) states that the realist novel “cultivates an immersive experience that blurs the aesthetic boundary separating reader from work of art”, she conjures an image of the reader’s bodily self-falling away as the mind is given over to the work of art. The reader is “able to read only when she simultaneously sustains a perspective of imaginative reflection and suspends a standpoint of deliberative reflection upon the characters’ lives” (Ong 2018, p. 4). Deliberative reflection is the cognitive mode of lived experience and cannot be suspended in unmediated reality. The novel, as a medium, requires the body’s stillness, and once situated in a fictional world, the brain’s faculties are diverted to imaginative reflection. Rethinking Ong’s reflection in terms of cognitive work, it seems sensible that when one contemplates the characters and plot of a novel, one’s mind is occupied and cannot concurrently take on the cognitive load of reading and hence perceiving, constructing the fictional world and its denizens in the imagination.

A familiar sensation: my eyes pass over words and through sentences and I turn the page, only to realize that I was too busy wondering about this or that character’s actions, the meaning of a particular image or peculiar turn of phrase, to have any idea about the contents of the passages my eyes have seen but I have not yet successfully read. Perhaps you have experienced something similar. When reading, we can never expect to sustain our imaginative reflection fully or perfectly. A more accurate representation of the experience of reading would be an inconstant oscillation between states of imaginative and deliberative reflection, in which our presence resides within the novel at times but drifts occasionally back into our bodies and the world that surrounds them, the site of our contemplations.<sup>5</sup>

Much like the reader’s presence in the novel itself, this oscillation between imaginative and deliberative reflection is foreclosed by the “standard” reading of the second-person narrative because, in the end, the second-person narratee is not the same as the reader. It is fair to posit, however, that at some point during the process of reading, the reader was in fact the narratee—or at least entertained such an imaginative reflection when immersed in the moment of reading, perceiving the world of the text. In that sense, we might conceive of the second-person narrative as precisely the inverse of how Ong defines the conventional novel, a literary form that *requires* the reader’s presence in the text. To understand how readerly presence is essential to the way the second-person form operates, it is necessary to approach these narratives not after the fact of reading, as static information, but from within the moment of reading, as virtual experiences.

In order to clarify the distinction between these two ways of accessing a second-person text, I offer a reading of Kurahashi Yumiko’s *Kurai Tabi*, examining how it is positioned within the established narratological second-person framework and simultaneously why it resists such classification.

### 3. But First, What Is the Matter with You?

Before delving further into a specific case of the narrative second person from Japanese literature, there are certain complexities regarding the way second-person pronouns typically function in the Japanese language that warrant foregrounding. Most notable is the fact that in everyday spoken Japanese, second-person pronouns such as *anata* or *kimi* are rarely used as a form of direct address and in many circumstances would be considered too direct and thus rude in polite interactions.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it is most common to invoke a person’s surname along with an appropriate honorific (e.g., *-san* or *-sensei*), where in English we would expect to use the word “you”. There are also, however, niche usages of *anata*, such as between spouses or domestic partners, that can lend even an implicit intimacy to the second-person pronoun. These use cases complicate the mode of second-person fiction as it exists in Japanese literature, raising questions of how English-language studies of the form may or may not apply to Japanese texts.

Pronouns *omae* and *kimi* are invoked in different cases of interpersonal communication and can also imply specific levels of intimacy and hierarchy between speaker and receiver. Consequently, using any of these in the incorrect circumstance can come off as quite offensive or otherwise peculiar. From a linguistic standpoint, being directly addressed as *omae* by a monster-narrator in Furukawa Hideo's *TYO Gothic* (2011) may somehow feel less unsettling than the strange intimacy of being addressed as *kimi* by an unfamiliar human narrator in Greg Kheznejat's *Kamo River Runner* (2021)—and on this point, it must be emphasized that the rules governing the use of the second person “you” in fiction are not the same as the linguistic and social norms that govern pronoun use in spoken language.

The principal difference we face between English and Japanese second-person fiction stems from diverging alignments of written and spoken language. With the English second-person story, much of its novelty and ingenuity come from a deictic doubleness, the continuous potential that the text can simultaneously address us and narrate to us, a nearly seamless overlap of conversational language and narration. In Japanese, second-person address and narration simply do not align in the same way. The closest approximation of the second-person narrative's use of *anata* in a standard Japanese linguistic context may in fact be another textual usage: the way *anata* is used on forms and surveys to refer to anonymous or unspecified target, a placeholder that instructs us to fill in the blanks with our own information. *Please write your name. What is your occupation?*

In literary criticism, neither have the oddities of the second-person pronoun in Japanese fiction gone unnoticed. Doug Slaymaker (2007, p. 53), in his analysis of Tawada Yōko's *Yōgisha no yakō ressha*, sorts through the necessarily sticky question of “Now, who is the Anata of this tale?”, capitalizing the word in transliteration to underscore its function demarcating the active character, a move that adds an uncanny layer in translation through the possibility of reading “Anata” as a proper name—although that unusual name would certainly not apply to Tawada's protagonist. There is an indeterminacy that we, as critical readers, must contend with to find our bearings and settle on an identity for the *anata* figure who appears in the text.

We are left at a crossroads. How can we account for the major linguistic difference in second-person pronoun usage across languages when thinking critically and cognitively about the experience of reading second-person narratives? Comparing languages, it is fair to assume second-person narration will not produce an equivalent effect; in Japanese, there is an unnaturalness or an awkwardness to the second person because of its deictic complexity, the unconventionality of the second-person form compounded by its misalignment with spoken language.

Still, when considering conventions of reading and writing and also genre, there is alternatively a quite simple solution to account for the *anata* we find in Japanese second-person narratives: we can read *anata* as a translation of the Portuguese/French/Spanish/Italian *tu* and the English *you* as it is used in literary second-person fiction. This proposition is extensible to other second-person pronouns as well; *kimi* has been similarly employed in Japanese second-person fiction dating back to Tsuzuki's *Yabunirami no Tokei*. In short, I contend that these texts are all written cognizant of the second-person narrative as a literary genre and are playing within the creative potential that the genre, with its linguistic indeterminacy, unlocks for literature in Japanese. Evidence for why this might be the case abounds, not least of which being the fact that, as mentioned earlier, the first instances of second-person fiction in Japanese—Kurahashi's *Kurai Tabi* and Tsuzuki's *Yabunirami no Tokei*—both took inspiration from Butor's *La Modification*. From a literary-historical perspective, it seems plausible that the work widely considered to be the first second-person narrative, as such, would serve as the inspiration for what may be the first second-person narratives in Japanese. However, even stronger than any evidence from literary history is the impression these works leave on the reader, an intuition that Kurahashi and Butor, Calvino and Tawada as writers are linked by the drive to write something of a certain kind, to engage with readers in a certain way that, perhaps, only the second-person form allows.



#### 4. The “Standard” Second-Person Narrative in Japanese

Kurahashi Yumiko’s *Kurai Tabi* (1961) proves an excellent example of how the second-person narrative can initially invite the reader’s identification with the protagonist–narratee, only to later complicate the reader’s position relative to the text. There are many reasons to conclude that *Kurai Tabi* fits squarely in the “standard” category of second-person narrative; foremost, its direct intertextual link to Butor’s *La Modification*, which is widely identified as one of the pioneering works of second-person fiction. Atsuko Sakaki (1999, p. 153) notes that literary critic Etō Jun accused Kurahashi of plagiarism because of the novel’s numerous overt similarities to Butor’s, despite the fact that Butor’s novel places the reader into the position of a male protagonist, on a train from Paris to Rome, on his way to visit his lover in secret.<sup>7</sup> The story of *Kurai Tabi* appears to be the exact inversion of Butor—a woman with a missing husband-to-be, in search of answers—but nevertheless a novel in the spirit of the “roman-puzzle” for which Butor was renowned. Editor John Sturrock (Butor 1971, introduction, p. x) attributes the classification to “vexed critics” responding to the “difficulties which Butor creates for his readers”, requiring “not passive absorption of the text of a novel but an active interpretation of it”, an assessment that seems equally apt for the active readerly involvement Kurahashi invites.

The specifics of the plot and the novel’s characters have not yet been revealed to us, the readers, as the novel opens; instead we encounter the direct address of a striking first line that situates us, and simultaneously the protagonist, within the scene (Kurahashi 1961, p. 7):

It’ll be more than a 15-min wait before the bus to Kōmyō-ji leaves and though you aren’t in any hurry, agitated you pace about, away from bus stop, cutting across plaza before the station.

光明寺行きのバスがでるまで、十五分以上も待たなければならない、急いでゐるわけではないが、あなたはいらいらしながらバス乗り場をはなれて驛前廣場を横切る。

The first sentences of any novel are an orientation of sorts. What is this that I am reading? Whose story is this, and who is doing the telling? These are questions we might ask in the moment when novel reading begins. In its opening line, Kurahashi’s novel answers with a destination and a state of mind, fitting protagonist into situation when the subject—*anata* (you)—appears in the second half of the sentence. We are alone now, in what could be to anyone a familiar circumstance, waiting impatiently for a bus to somewhere. A temple in Kamakura, in this case, although that is not where we (nor the story) are headed. Surprising, however, that to address our query of whose story this is, the novel turns a mirror. It is “your” story, that is to say, it is my story, if I take myself to be the object of narrator’s address. Though my journey is only beginning, this second-person narrative has carried me unceremoniously into a conundrum: now that I know that this is a story about “you”, how am I to settle on an assessment of who this “you” is? If “you” in fact refers to me, the reader, am I still myself, or am I meant to play a role that has been laid out for me? If “you” is “I” (which in this case, given the quotation marks, would necessarily refer to a fictional first-person character), why then is the first-person narrative rendered through the second-person address? The text itself will not answer these queries; the only option is to read on. In the ensuing paragraph, the narrator supplies a series of instructions, directing the bodily motion, gaze, and thoughts of “you” (Kurahashi 1961, p. 7):

On the right is a Seibu Department Store, on the left the Fugetsu-dō where you and he ate bavarois and éclair, and then the shop that had all of the touristy souvenirs lined up . . . to you it’s the all too familiar Kamakura station-front, only now, in the dusty chill of February, Kamakura bares an unfriendly face, suspicious, just like it would greet an aimless traveler, or a stranger with vacant eyes.

右側に西武百貨店、左側にあなたとかれがよくバヴァロアやエクレアを食べたことのある風月堂、そして観光都市らしく土産みやげ物ものを並べた店..... あなたにとってはまったく見慣れた鎌倉の驛前だ、しかしいま鎌倉は二月の埃

つばい寒気のなかであなたによそよそしい顔を見せてゐる、まるで、目的のない旅行者、いかがわしい、空虚な眼をした異邦人でも迎へるやうに。

Even more so than the physical space of the scene it depicts, the narration offers an invitation to inhabit a mood reflected onto the Kamakura February. I, as the reader, may not yet know who I (“you”) am (are), but memories of a familiar place, and a sense of distance in time from those memories, come rushing back to me. They are new to me, though they cannot be, for they are mine. This recollection aligns me with the narratee, as the act of reading simulates that of recalling. Memories begin to shape my image of “you”, of the me I see in the text, and I latch onto details that orient me in fictional space: places, sensations, names, pronouns. While the details employed to orient the reader may be no different than those of first- or third-person narration, the shift in perspective is meaningful. The text asks me to assume the role of protagonist, such that when “you and he” is mentioned in passing, carrying the weight of a shared past, it implies that that intimacy is mine. Given the use of the third-person *kare* (he), it is immediately obvious that this is a romantic relationship. However, due to the second-person narrative configuration, rather than observing the relationship of two characters as an objective outsider, I might pause to ponder “I wonder who ‘he’ is to me”, with a heightened sense of investment in how “our” story will unfold. In time, however, my relationship to “you” will also likely change as the plot develops, the more she comes to occupy a position distinct from my own and I begin to contemplate the book from the position of my own body, outside the text.

Kurahashi’s novel is insistent. Although Japanese sentence structure does not require an explicit subject, the second-person pronoun *anata* appears with striking frequency, to the extent that it has a foreignizing effect. As it turns out, the “substitutability” principle of the standard-type second-person narrative does not translate perfectly into Japanese, at least in this case. Swapping *anata* (you) for *watashi* (I) in each instance would make for an even more peculiar text, as it would be redundant for a narrator to repeatedly reiterate the subject as “I” when grammatically, the context obviates it. Because Japanese is a high-context language, a reader would assume the subject of successive sentences to be “I” after it is first established in the narrative sequence. In this regard, Kurahashi’s use of second person is often doubly deictic, narrating the thoughts and activities of a character but also continuously reminding the reader to take on that character’s perspective. It is always addressing you, you, you. Diverging to illustrate a scene or delve into memories of the narrative past, in clausal succession the sentences pull back into the gravity of *you* (Kurahashi 1961, p. 7):

You only had two choices [ . . . ] You were tempted to go on the trip—no—you, in this sunny midday, didn’t have the courage to return home to a cheery solitary cell of glass and concrete. You boarded the Yokosuka line train. But, why Kamakura? You wouldn’t be able to explain the reason to anyone, nor divulge your objective . . .

あなたの選擇は二つしかなかつたのだ [...]あなたを旅へと誘惑した、いや、あなたはこのよく晴れた眞晝にガラスとコンクリートの明るい独房へと歸つていく勇氣をもたなかつたのだ。あなたは横須賀線の電車に乗つた。だがなぜ鎌倉へ？ あなたはだれにもその理由を説明することができない、あなたの目的をうちあけることもできない.....

The above passage perfectly encapsulates the narrative tension at work in this “standard” second person. A brief sentence, narrating the narratee’s interiority, conveys nonspecific content; “You only had two choices” could describe nearly anyone, in nearly any situation; however, subsequent details particularize the situation, frustrating the reader’s ability to identify with the protagonist–narratee.

Little time passes in *Kurai Tabi* before the mysterious “he” of the opening paragraph begins to take shape, and “you” begins to develop as a fictional character in the orbit of a romantic relationship with an absent other (Kurahashi 1961, p. 9):

The existence, the meaning and weight of which you have come to unremittingly feel at the very word *he*, your fiancé, the he who is your love, who you must find ...

あなたがかれといふことばでその意味と重みをたえずかんじてきた存在、あなたの婚約者、あなたの愛であるかれを、あなたは探さがさなければならない.....

With the revelation of a fiancé who has been missing for over a week, the emotions of distance and alienation from the opening moments of the novel are recontextualized, tethered to the protagonist–narratee’s unfolding dilemma. Markers of identity emerge to characterize “you” as a woman, ostensibly a Japanese one. Only later on, following an exchange with a half-French boy in which you utter *schön*, does it emerge that “you” are in fact half-Japanese, “your mother” from Bonn—each small turn a recalibration brought on by new information, a revision of the presence unfolding within the text and at once of the reader’s relationship to that presence. Evidence amasses until I am finally convinced that “you” is not me at all, not a second, but in fact a third person, a fictional character, a protagonist other.

I can, from the start, perceive “you” as a character and construct a textual other to receive the narration—but there is also the enticing possibility of holding on, of accepting this “you” as me. To accept “you” as me, I must acclimate to the text’s present tense. Nevertheless, I may find myself dwelling in the perspective of the narratee at times and at others returning into myself, “alternating between concentrating on the ‘you’ as a character and recognizing [myself] in the text, in other words, executing literary performatives” (Kacandes 1993, p. 143). It follows that in reading a second-person narrative, I can perceive myself within the fiction as the recipient of narrative action that pertains to “you”, and simultaneously identify “you” as a third-person other, a character whose position I tenuously share. An encounter of dissonance is almost assuredly inevitable, first on a discursive level (a temporal mismatch between narratee and reader) and ultimately on the level of identity. As I progress through a text, I amass details that mark the narratee as other; each time I read “you”, I come to understand it as “character” or “protagonist” or “not me”.

To accede to this divergence of reader and protagonist is to adhere to the rules that govern the reading of a “standard” second-person narrative, as defined by Richardson (2008, p. 20), a construction driven by authorial choice: “These sentences could have been written in the first person, in the third person with a single focalizer, or in free indirect speech. Instead, the second person was chosen, and a different type of narration follows, one which approximates but cannot be reduced to any of these other perspectives”. While Richardson writes about second-person fiction in English and German, his insights are equally applicable to the above Kurahashi passages; it is certainly possible to imagine another version of the novel written about the very same protagonist using first- or third-person narrative perspective.

Evident in scholarship on the second-person narrative (*nininshō shōsetsu*) in Japanese is a similar taxonomizing drive to that which underpins the work of Fludernik and Richardson. Makio Nomura’s (2005) linguistic analysis of the form includes an extensive catalogue of Japanese second-person fiction published from 1961–2004, which he has classified based on the combination of grammatical person that feature in the narration, either in part or across the complete text. Within this schema, *Kurai Tabi* is classified as “second/third person” (*nininshō/sanninshō*), as is *Yabunirami no Tokei*, constructed of narration that can be linguistically identified as either second- or third-person perspective in Japanese.<sup>8</sup>

Comparing these critical approaches to the immersiveness and immediacy of Kurahashi’s prose, their distance from the text is palpable, and their assumptions—that this is a work of modern, realistic fiction and that the reader thus cannot exist within its fictional world—are equally apparent. Indeed, at each turn, Kurahashi’s prose invites the reader’s cognitive involvement, to occupy the space of the “you” that the author has positioned the reader to inhabit, if temporarily. Whereas Nomura (2005, p. 1) defines *ninshō kūkan* (person-space) as the discursive space within which the second-person protagonist is sit-



uated, we might instead conceptualize the space of the second person not as discursively or narratively defined, but as experienced, virtually and cognitively, during the process of reading.

Beyond the text, the author herself offers further reason for reading her work as a departure from the conventional novel. As Atsuko Sakaki ([Kurahashi 1998](#), introduction, p. xiv) has noted, when much postwar literature was still steeped in the aesthetics of the pervasive *shishōsetsu* tradition and “the norms of the time called for a fictional medium of utmost transparency, to highlight, as Kurahashi did, the artifice or constructedness of the literary work was considered deviant”. Kurahashi famously defied novelistic conventions, “giving concrete form to [ . . . ] abstract concepts”, ([Kurahashi 1998](#), introduction, p. xiv), liberally employing the “alchemy” of “pastiche” in summoning “forerunners’ ‘styles’” ([Sakaki 1999](#), p. 158) to craft her own work, and indeed by writing an entire novel using second-person narrative perspective, invoking a literary form that very clearly bares its artifice as an aspect of its core conceit. To quote the oft-cited passage from Kurahashi’s essay “*Shōsetsu no meiro to hiteisei*” (Negativity and the Labyrinth of Fiction 1966), translated by Dennis Keene ([1977](#), p. 247), “I abhor the intrusion of the disorder of ‘facts’ into the world of words I have constructed. [ . . . ] At an uncertain time, in a place that is nowhere, somebody who is no one, for no reason, is about to do something—and in the end does nothing: this is my ideal of the novel”.

Kurahashi’s oppositional stance toward novelistic convention, as well as the concepts of *han-shōsetsu* (anti-novel) and *han-sekai* (anti-world)<sup>9</sup> she devises in essays about her own approach to writing have given way to critical evaluations of the nature and function of the anti-novelistic qualities of her work (see [Sakaki 1992](#); [Cardi 2013](#)). Kurahashi’s decision to write a second-person narrative may itself stem from an anti-novelistic quality inherent to the form. As [Richardson \(2008, p. 20\)](#) explains, “the ‘you’ [ . . . ] threatens the ontological stability of the fictional world insofar as it seems it could be addressing the reader as well as the central character”. We might take this view one step further and look at the second-person narrative as a complete departure from the conventional relationality of novel to novel reader.

Second-person narratives depend on the reader’s existence and the possibility of transgressing the boundary of the text.<sup>10</sup> If we take the second person at its word, its insistence of the presence of *you* in the novel effectively subverts the basic requirement of the reader’s nonexistence to which the modern novel adheres. Within novelistic convention, “The impossibility of the novel—or put differently, its necessity *qua* fiction—consists precisely in its being a narration, a making known, of the fantasy that it might be possible to have knowledge of a life from within it without assuming the unavoidability of existential choice that this knowledge entails” ([Ong 2018, p. 10](#)). The second-person narrative inverts this paradigm, virtualizing a life—your life—and imagining that the owner of this life has limited knowledge of it, without access to its memories or emotion or cognition. Yet, as it manifests a virtual other self for the reader to occupy, the second-person form generates the possibility of radical existential investment in, and perhaps ownership of, the body that exists in text.

By stepping into the second person and thereby reading Kurahashi’s work as she has conceptualized it—as anti-novel—we can begin to see not only the ways in which *Kurai Tabi* departs from novelistic convention, but in fact how Kurahashi may have recognized in the second-person narrative the potential for a different relationship between text and reader—or in today’s terms, a different type of mediation.

To draw out the nature of this relationship, I turn from narrative and discursive methods of interpretation, which distance the reader from the fictional world, to virtual reality, which depends on a degree of immersion in the virtual world and the guiding of principle of the sensation of presence.

## 5. Into Presence: Approaching the Second Person as Virtual

In practice, we can approach the second-person narrative as a virtual experience by suspending the critical drives that remove us from the text and returning to the moment of reading, taking up the position of the protagonist–narratee, becoming attuned to what we sense and perceive when we are present in the world of the text. Doing so requires a critical framework focused on the reader’s cognitive experience and performance of the second-person text. To that end, let us step away from literature for a moment and turn to the field of virtual reality, which is deeply invested in questions of how we cognitively process our experiences of the medium and in exploring their transformative potential.

Differences in our cognitive experience of mediums often stem from how we position ourselves relative to the aesthetic boundary. To reframe the critical conundrum of the second-person narrative as a cross-media comparison, I pose this question: Why is it that I never seem to expect that the “you” I encounter in a literary text is actually me, while I by default assume that I am the character inside of the virtual world as I experience it? To venture an answer to that question, where the literature, for the most part, assumes the nonexistence of the reader in the world of the text, virtual reality demands the presence and active involvement of the “reader”.

This reconsideration of the narrative second person in virtual terms is a marked departure from narratology’s preoccupation with its logical impossibility. For the lineage of discourse that emerges from Fludernik’s “natural” narratology and the “unnatural narrative” framework that Richardson carves out in response,<sup>11</sup> the narratological paradigm consistently centers the mimetic realism of the modern novel as its standard, with the second-person narrative falling in the realm of the “unnatural”. It is only in digital narratives, [Ensslin and Bell \(2021, p. 152\)](#) contend, that the use of “you” reaches a level of ubiquity such that the second-person form becomes “highly conventionalized”, in contrast with the unconventionality of its analog antecedents. Even in Marie-Laure Ryan’s pioneering *Literature as Virtual Reality*, the second person is framed as a “short-lived effect”; once the initial surprise wears off, “the second person is often more an allegory of immersion and a programmatic statement than an intrinsically immersive device” ([Ryan 2001, p. 138](#)).<sup>12</sup>

What I propose, in contrast, is a reevaluation of what we might consider to be “natural” or instinctive in our reading of the second-person narrative, approaching the text as a virtual experience, taking the quite different medial relationship elaborated within contemporary virtual reality theory and studies as my frame of reference. We need not look to instances of the second person in digital literatures to conceptualize it as virtual, so I limit my analysis to the print novel. In fact, the prevalence of second-person address in digital works only heightens the value of an analysis that discerns a nascent virtuality in the non-digital literary form. While Ryan adopts the “immersion” and “interactivity” of virtual reality in service of her theorization of story worlds, I favor the concepts of “presence” and “embodiment”, central within virtual reality scholarship today, in theorizing the individual experience of the reader who is interpellated in the world of a second-person fiction.

When speaking of virtual reality, presence is the one crucial concept that is almost universally invoked across experimental research and theoretical literature alike—*psychological presence*, Jeremy [Bailenson \(2018, p. 19\)](#) asserts, “is the fundamental characteristic of VR. When it happens, your motor and perceptual systems interact with the virtual world in a manner similar to how they do in the physical world”. [Lombard and Ditton’s \(1997\)](#) definition of presence as “the perceptual illusion of nonmediation” speaks to precisely how this phenomenon plays out in human cognition during mediated experiences. It turns, of course, on the “illusion” that a person, cognizant of the fact that they are engaging with media, *perceive* the experience to be non-mediated. This perceptual illusion is so central to the medium of virtual reality that it becomes a heuristic measure of the virtual experience’s effectiveness. In lab studies, participants are frequently asked to evaluate their own level of presence within a virtual experience, with higher levels of presence marking the efficacy of the virtual environment.<sup>13</sup> It stands to reason that we can similarly feel present in the

experience of reading, whether in our own bodies or within the fictional worlds we visit while reading.

Expounding on the concept of presence in its use within social psychology, Mel Slater (2018, p. 432) highlights an important distinction: “presence is not about belief. Of course no one, not even when they are standing by a virtual precipice with their heart racing and feeling great anxiety, ever believes in the reality of what they are perceiving. The whole point of presence is that it is the illusion of being there, notwithstanding that you know for sure that you are not”. In the context of virtual reality, presence becomes a vital contour, something that moves us through the virtual, indicating our relationship to the space we inhabit within it.

Can the same manner of apprehending presence apply to our experience of literature? This is the question that the ensuing analysis will pursue. To carry through with this thought experiment, we must first suspend the critical and narratological assumptions that create frictional barriers to presence by delving into the mechanics of the virtual “you” and its construction. Only then can we carry a *sense* of presence from virtual reality back to our experience of literature. Still, a logical hurdle remains: shifting from a critical to a cognitive approach requires us to confront our critical assumptions about cognition in the context of novel reading.

Virtual reality, similar to literary fiction, affords us the opportunity to be present in other worlds, but the role of the body is reversed. While our thoughts can draw us out of a novel and back into our bodies, an interruption to our sense of presence in the fiction, the body’s involvement is central to generating presence in virtual reality. The immersive quality of computer-generated virtual reality is, in part, achieved through prosthesis; the medium offloads the cognitive work of virtual world construction to a computer processor, which renders an actualized virtual world onto head-mounted-display screens. As a result, the work required on the part of the user of this technology shifts from “imaginative reflection” to perception and interaction. Tracking technologies—sensors that track the body’s movement and software that translates that movement into the motion of a first-person avatar—actualize the body into the virtual space, such that movement itself becomes a form of interactivity. An awareness of the body moving through virtual space, far from drawing us out of the experience, affirms our presence; the correspondence between physical and virtual body movements heightens the sense of ownership of the virtual body as cognition becomes embodied. It is difficult to deny the visual intensity of a virtual reality experience, to conceptualize one’s body in an ordinary room while one’s eyes and body wander elsewhere. The effortlessly sustained sense of presence possible within virtual media is a striking contrast with Ong’s (2018, p. 11) reader, who struggles to suspend her conscious mind and presence in her own body in order to sustain of imaginative reflection—to remain present, as reader, in the space of the novel she holds in her hands.

To account for the body’s assumption or mitigation of presence, depending on the medium, a simple explanation may suffice: virtual reality is primarily a medium of embodied cognition, and literature a medium of cognitive imagination. The former relies heavily on sensory input, whereas the latter simulates sensory input; or from an informational standpoint, the computer processes digital information that the brain receives as sensory input in the case of virtual reality, while literature requires the brain to process textual information as input, and the reader alone determines the resultant output.

In certain capacities a sense of being and in others of being in, presence is often linked with a related phenomenon: immersion. The distinction between the two concepts is meaningful and is often revisited in virtual reality scholarship due to the common misconception that they are interchangeable. Oh et al. (2018, p. 2) offer that in contrast with immersion, “a medium’s technological capacity to generate realistic experiences that can remove people from their physical reality”, presence is “the subjective experience of actually being in the mediated virtual environment”. Note, for a moment, the difference between this formulation and Lombard and Ditton’s framing of presence as “the perceptual illusion of non-mediation”. These definitions are not incompatible; they simply focus on different layers

of sense–experience. The former is an observation of presence from the outside, imagining a person within the mediated environment who feels actually there. The latter, in contrast, centers on the experiential; in order to feel actually there, the illusion must overcome the awareness of the technological interface that delivers us to the mediated space.

Now add to the mix Ryan’s conceptualization of immersion as “the response to a text, whatever its medium, that is able to conjure the presence of a world to the imagination” (Ryan 2015, p. 137). This focus on immersion emphasizes the qualities of the fictional world, the poetics that induce the immersive state—in a sense, the technological qualities of immersive literary media. Presence, on the other hand, turns the critical eye inward, toward perspective and performance, the psychological experience of engaging with a medium. Ryan (2015, p. 52) frames, immersion and presence as “two different but ultimately inseparable aspects of the total effect: *immersion* insists on being *inside* a mass substance, *presence* on being *in front of* a well-delineated entity”. In virtual reality, the manifestations of these two components are obvious; a computer-generated world constitutes the “mass substance”, and the ability to interact with said world—whether merely by looking or walking around, or by manipulating and altering its contents—produces the “well-delineated entity”. Interactivity, for Ryan (2015, p. 52), becomes a core component of any theory of presence, with two distinct modes: “the ability to explore an environment and the ability to change it”.

Crossing back into literature, although “immersion” is a word quite commonly applied to the experience of perceiving fictional worlds while reading, we quickly collide with limitations of “interactivity”. While we are, in a certain sense, able to explore fictional worlds in our imaginations, as readers, we hardly possess the power to change them. Nor, in Ong’s (2018, p. 10) estimation, are we answerable to the self-knowledge that we access from within characters’ interiorities via narration: “being-without-responsibility—or, to borrow a phrase from another Kierkegaardian text, ‘without authority’—is the condition of the novel reader”. Yet, because the virtual entities within literary texts are actualized by the reader’s mind, it is within the reader’s purview to shape the well-delineated entities within a fictional world as the imagination generates a knowing of them.

Existing studies of the second-person narrative have approached the discourse of virtuality, but none have conceptualized reading the second person as virtual. David Herman (1994) invokes Ryan’s virtual–actual paradigm as a discourse model to analyze the “you” of Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place*, but the critical reading mode he proposes—isolating passages from second-person texts for extensive, precise discourse analysis of their double deixis—could not be further from a reading method that seeks a sense of presence in text. We cannot as readers be immersed in the fiction and simultaneously picking apart its levels of discourse; the moment of critical reading—the narratological moment—always exists in deliberative reflection. Closer to presence is Kacandes’s (1993) anything but simple question of “Are you in the text?”, which employs the idea of literary performatives to acknowledge the reader’s active involvement amid challenges that threaten to shatter the presence illusion.

Does critical reading inevitably resign us to a status of nonexistence in the novel, in the case of a “standard” second-person narrative? In proceeding, we might return to the question of whether the “quality of the presumed address”, as Fludernik (1994, p. 287) posits, truly “evaporates” once the narratee can be classified a first- or third-person character, or in other words, once we have identified and logged the text as a “standard” second-person narrative. To approach the second-person narrative as virtuality is to reconstitute the moment of reading, to critically reflect on the text as an embodied experience, taking account of the sensations that occur via the interface of the page, actualized through the mind’s engagement with the narrative.

At that, let us return once again to our *Kurai Tabi*.

## 6. A Virtual You

Having previously identified particularizing information that allows us to conclude that *Kurai Tabi* is a “standard” second-person narrative and consequently that the second-person “you” does not in fact refer to the reader, the question remains of whether the severing of reader from the narratee is absolute and final, or whether we can return again to a sense of presence within the fiction world through reading methods that treat the text as virtual. As we return to Kurahashi’s novel, then, we must resist the critical distance that locates the reader outside of the text, that privileges temporal linearity in the interpretation of narrative, and that treats the novel as a finished, complete thing. Instead, let us approach the text with a sense of critical closeness, immersing ourselves in the moment of reading and what we can experience in it firsthand, accepting the invitation of you the second-person narrative furnishes in its rich and variegated potential as an experience, as a space of play and performance, for meaning making, perspective taking, for conceptual and imaginative work. In other words, we can phenomenologically port our medial expectations and experiences with virtual reality into the act of novel reading.

Beyond the frequent repetition of *anata*, which encourages identification on a discursive level, narrative descriptions in *Kurai Tabi* frequently point to the body and bodily sensations. At times estranging and at times immersing, these moments allow for an embodied presence within the fictional world, providing a body for the reader to inhabit. Take, for example, this moment that follows shortly after the novel’s opening passages (Kurahashi 1961, p. 8):

As you, like an amorphous *protozoan* wrapped in a diamond checker overcoat, were carried to Yokohama, a smiling train conductor came and touched your *carapace*. Showing your commuter pass you said, “to Kamakura”, and at that your form was settled.

ダイヤモンド・チェックの外套に包まれた不定形の原生動物のやうなあなたが横濱まで運ばれてきたとき、にこやかな車掌がやつてきてあなたの偽足にさわった。定期券をみせて、「鎌倉まで」とあなたはいつた、それであなたの形はきまつた。

For a reader present in this narrative moment, the metaphor conveys a feeling, a sense of otherness, imputing the unsettled formlessness of an “amorphous protozoan” onto the reader’s body. Likely the effect on each reader will vary, but the confluence of address and evocative description of bodily form make it difficult to escape turning one’s thoughts to one’s own body, “your carapace”, “your form” that settles into presence on the train. Other moments, however, shift from the sensation of being situated in a textual body to that of being embodied in the fictional world (Kurahashi 1961, p. 9):

The ocean is before you, unexpectedly narrow, low fragments of ocean. Your mouth filled with the bitter broth of despair, that isn’t the ocean . . . no, to take possession of the full picture of the ocean you’d probably have to get even closer . . . you quicken your pace, step down onto the sand, deliberately without looking at the ocean, like a young girl trying not to look into the face of her lover until taken into his arms. You traverse the narrow beach and draw near to the ocean . . .

海はあなたのまえにある、意外に狭くて低い海の断片が。あなたの口に失望の苦い汁があふれる、あれは海ではない……いや、海の全貌を所有するためにはもつと近づかなければならないだろう……あなたは足をはやめ、砂濱におりる、わざと海をみないで、その腕に抱きとられるまでは戀人の顔のみまいとする少女のやうに。あなたは幅の狭い砂濱を横切り海に近づく……

Standing before an ocean, taking it in and drawing nearer to it, this moment infuses a vivid sensory experience with urgency and pain. They may, when considered in the wider context of the novel as a whole, seem to belong to a specific character, a distinct entity, a you that is not me; but as an isolated moment, these physical actions can overlay a reader’s



lived experience. The physicality of feet touching sand, taking in the ocean view and growing nearer to it, all of the associated sights and sounds and sensations captured not in the words of the text, but rendered from memory, with the reader's knowledge and imagination supplementing the details essential for immersion in the scene.

There are insights to be gained in the process of getting to know a work of literature that we miss out on as we stand at the point of having read and thus already knowing a work in the present-perfect tense—who the characters are, how it all turns out. From that viewpoint, the reader's presence as "you" is almost invariably subsumed by knowledge of "you" as a fictional character. After having come to know a work in its various dimensions, suppressing our self-knowledge and focusing on our imaginary perception of moments we spend in the space of the text, we can again gain access to durations of narrative space in which it is possible to settle into presence and identify as the "you" to whom the narration refers.

The process of reconstructing our own experience of the second person and finding a way back to a virtual sense of presence requires a flexible narrative framework that accounts for the second-person narrative's high degree of positional and temporal variability, highly particularized to the situation of the individual reader. In this regard, Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik's conceptualization of second-person narrative as "joint action" resonates, specifically in how she describes the cognition of the reading experience (Rembowska-Pluciennik 2018, p. 165): "the cognitive dynamic of the second-person mode may arise not from a reader's subsequent identification of the 'you' referent, but from the act of managing all the epistemic perspectives at once". Rembowska-Pluciennik's framework deftly accounts for the reader's positionality vis-à-vis the second-person mode as a mutable, fluctuating condition; one that the reader must process and manage through the linguistic complexities of the narrative. Through this processing, "synergistic action emerges within a narrative framework of dyadic 'me-and-you' interdependence", as the "imaginative simulation of 'your' experience ensures the position as actant of both participants within the dyad" (Rembowska-Pluciennik 2018, p. 165).

Imminently applicable to Kurahashi's protagonist, the "unassailable interdependence between the narrative entities" (Rembowska-Pluciennik 2018, p. 164) is evident in the narrative voice who speaks throughout the novel, and the narratee who participates in the narrated action. At the same time that interdependence exists "only as long as the intentional process of telling the story unfolds" (Rembowska-Pluciennik 2018, p. 164), when the narrator and narratee occupy a shared presence on the discursive level of the text. The reader, then, "is invited to share the experience, to join the narrative 'team' involved in in the joint action" (Rembowska-Pluciennik 2018, p. 166). It is an invitation to joint action that does not expire when narrated and readerly identities diverge, and rather can be revisited and simulated each time the telling occurs.

This rich manner of apprehending the interactivity of the second-person narrative is only further enriched by elucidating its intersections with virtuality. Thinking in virtual terms, when Rembowska-Pluciennik (2018, p. 165) calls second-person narration "a very specific means of rendering the consciousness of another being", it would be equally apt to frame it as a means of "virtualizing" the consciousness of another. The main distinction, however, is that while the joint action of Rembowska-Pluciennik's "cognitive 'me-and-you' dyad"—the narrator who often exists only to tell the story of "you", a fictional entity who does not or cannot speak that story in the first person—occurs specifically on a narrative level, the virtual almost necessarily addresses the meta-level of the work. The creator virtualizes an experience in a text, and the reader then acts, accessing the text and actualizing a personal experience of and through it. By extension, the narration itself is thus the virtualization of an experience and the "intentional process of telling the story"—which is only realized through the act of reading—aligns the narratee and reader in process of actualization.

Applying these narrative-based notions of joint action and interactivity to immersive virtual reality texts proves to be an equally intriguing proposition, precisely because

the narrative relationship between the narrator and narratee is frequently rendered indiscernible within the visibility privileged by the virtual reality medium. The virtual “you” is nevertheless present—for instance, within this piece of journalistic storytelling created in virtual reality to capture the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which Jeremy Bailenson describes in *Experience on Demand* (Bailenson 2018, p. 203):

The water is rising. Wind roars through your ears and you can feel the rooftop underneath your feet shake. In every direction you look, the floodwaters are slowly creeping up. Through the driving rain you can see your neighbors, screaming in distress, standing atop their homes, as you are, desperately looking for help.

Bailenson uses second-person narration to simulate for his reader a virtual experience, but in virtual reality, there is no discursive level on which a “narrator” exists, no “telling” for a narrator to enact. Absent a voiceover explaining a scenario (which does frequently occur in virtual reality texts, often invoking second-person address), there is but the “direct” experience of the virtual: observing, moving about, interacting with the rendered space. I would argue, however, that a rigorous narrative analysis is warranted in these cases as well, not least as a defense against the potential “abuse [of] the mutable nature of VR for ideological or sensational ends” (Bailenson 2018, p. 208) as the photorealism of virtual reality technology further evolves. There is an implied narrative level for even purely visual virtual text; the narration can be reconstructed as a written narrative and the relationship between narrator and narratee analyzed in the same manner as a literary text. How the narratee is positioned and the narrative gaze directed are meaningful, but so are questions of authorship and the fashioning of this narrative relationship that the reader steps into, whether through the pages of a book or by means of head-mounted display.

The virtual lens foregrounds the question of intention—the seemingly inevitable question when it comes to second-person fiction of “why write a story in this way?”—and the likely answer is the particular way of actualizing experience that second-person narration affords. “This narrative strategy”, Rembowska-Pluciennik (2018, p. 168) ventures, “challenges the cognitive ability of the reader to empathize and identify with others, especially if another character’s perspective is embedded in the ‘you’ narration”. Not even immersive virtual reality experiences, no matter how interactive or photorealistic, can succeed in delivering a presence sensation that is consistently sustained and uninterrupted for every person, every time. The virtuality of second-person fiction thus is not primarily a measure of the efficacy of its immersion or interactivity, but rather a product of the choice made by a writer to virtualize a perspective, a collection of experiences and sensations—a “you”—and the possibilities of what, in turn, a reader can actualize by engaging with this virtual you.

## 7. Conclusions: The Virtual Text

At the very end of *Kurai Tabi*, in an afterword titled “From the author to you” (*sakusha kara anata ni*), Kurahashi offers her own reading of how the second-person narration functions as a reading experience (Kurahashi 1961, p. 248):

What makes this not a so-called autobiographical novel is not that I have simply added deformations to the facts of my own experience, but that “I” have been replaced by “you”. This might be described as the apparatus by which “you” are remote-controlled. Instead of being narrated to unilaterally by an author, as you have up until now, you are invited into the novel, and so you participate. There you will think many things and take action, as you recall “your” past.

しかしこれがいはいゆる自傳の小説でないのは、たんにわたしの體驗にデフォルマシオンが加へられてゐるからではなく、わたしがあなたにおきかへられてゐるからなのです。これはあなたを遠隔操作するための装置ともいへます。あなたはこれまでのやうに作者から一方的にある物語を語りきかされるかほりに、小説のなかに招待され、参加することになるでせう。そこであなたはいろんなことを考へ、あなたの過去をおもひだしながら行動していくことになります。

In a direct address to the reader after the conclusion of the novel proper, Kurahashi reveals that certain details of the story were taken from her own experience, tempting us to wonder if all along the protagonist was in fact an autofictional entity. Yet, as Kurahashi emphasizes, it is not the alteration of biographical facts that differentiates her work from an “autobiographical novel”, but rather “*watashi ga anata ni okikaerareteiru kara*” (because I have been replaced by you). Her notion of a “remote control” apparatus might even call to mind the medium of virtual reality, which requires active participation and embodied presence, as we in the second-person narration “think” and “take action”, ultimately taking ownership over the past—“*anata no kako*” (your past)—that we “recall” into our minds as we read. Having revisited the “standard” model of the second-person narrative through Kurahashi’s pioneering novel, the potential for a new way of viewing the fictional second person comes into view, one that asks us to close the critical distance and settle into a sense of presence, becoming the fictional *you*.

We can thus read the second-person narrative as not merely fiction or a novel, but as a *virtual text*. To offer a succinct definition, a virtual text is any work, regardless of medium (that is, inclusive of literature, film, game, and virtual reality), that offers the possibility for the reader to experience the sensation of presence, simulating cognitive embodiment in the world that it creates. There is no requirement that the sensation be constant throughout the experience, only that it is perceived in the moment, and that this sense-experience is important to our reading of the text—how we interpret it, what it means to us, and, potentially, how it might change the way we think or feel.

In closing, I offer the hypothesis that every second-person narrative has the potential to be a virtual text, so long we attune our mode of reading to the text’s present tense and let go of our resistance to assuming the role of *you*. At the same time, I must also emphasize that a virtual text can exist in any medium. As media experiences continue to proliferate, cross-media analysis of virtual texts will seek out links and correlations where existing fields of media scholarship have heretofore diverged. By homing in on shared sense-experiences across media, such as the presence we might feel when we curl up with a second-person novel, or when someday we are transported to a fictional world by virtualization technology that does not yet exist, we might begin to discover new narratives that better describe the way we relate to texts and also, through texts, the relationships we forge with each other.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the genealogy of second-person fiction, see Richardson (2008, p. 17).

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Morrisette’s “Narrative ‘You’ in Contemporary Literature”, one of the first studies of second person narrative, cites *La Modification* as the “best-known recent case of excitement provoked in readers and critics by a seemingly new technique of narrative mode” (Morrisette 1965, p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> The form remains a popular, if unconventional, choice for publication in literary magazines and short story collections. Second-person narrative perspective features in stories by Jamaica Kincaid, Margaret Atwood, Charles Yu, Neil Gaiman, Dave Eggers, John Edgar Wideman and Furukawa Hideo. For a list of Japanese second-person fiction published between 1961–2004, see Nomura (2005, p. 4).

<sup>4</sup> So common is the “standard” pattern of second-person fiction that Fludernik (1994, p. 288) elaborates, “second-person texts frequently also have an explicit communicative level on which a narrator (speaker) tells the story of the ‘you’ to (sometimes) the ‘you’ protagonist’s present-day absent or dead, wiser, self”.

- 5 Ong's (2018, p. 11) analysis of Anna Karenina's "rapid passage between six distinct psychic states" as she attempts to read on a train perfectly encapsulates this variability.
- 6 There are many resources in the realm of Japanese linguistics that detail modes of interpersonal address. For a useful primer on the second-person pronoun, see Cipris and Hamano (2002), ch. 7: "Japanese speakers avoid certain pronouns".
- 7 Curiously, Futabatei Shimei's *Ukigumo* (1887) suffered no such accusations as one of the pioneering modern novels in the Japanese literary canon, despite its plot sharing marked similarities with a noted work of Russian literature.
- 8 There seems to be a likely correlation between Nomura's "second/third person" categorization and the "standard" second-person narrative, but my primary interest here is not seeking alignment between the different classification systems.
- 9 Though I will not pursue the idea further here, considering Sakaki's (1999, pp. 159–62) analysis of the *han-sekai* Kurahashi carves out in fiction as a space of resistance and liberation for women within a patriarchal world in relation to the perspective-taking opportunity that the virtuality of the second-person narrative avails to the reader offers a rich avenue for exploring the intersections of gender and virtual texts.
- 10 Certainly, it would be possible to exempt the second person form from this requirement by qualifying it as a postmodern construction, but I find it more productive to carry the implications of this inversion to their logical conclusion.
- 11 Here I motion toward Fludernik's *Toward a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996) and Richardson's *Unnatural Narrative* (2015), as well as to subsequent work that has built from these foundational frameworks, such as Ensslin and Bell's *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural* (2021).
- 12 For all of the developments in immersive virtual reality technology that have made it possible to create photorealistic environments, experts in the field recommend not using virtual reality devices for much longer than twenty minutes before taking a break (see Bailenson 2018, ch. 2). Somewhat ironically, Ryan's comment about the immersiveness of second-person narratives being "short-lived" raises a pertinent question about our expectations regarding immersive experiences. Logically, we expect different things from different media; it may be more feasible, both physically and mentally, to sustain a sensation of imaginative immersion in a story world for long durations than is possible using a head-mounted display in photorealistic VR.
- 13 The questionnaire language used in Herrera et al.'s (2018, p. 11) long-term empathy study nicely illustrates common evaluative verbiage for presence: "Participants received a '1' if they explicitly mentioned that the experience or narrative felt real, was realistic, or immersive, if they felt immersed, 'there', inside the environment, or if they were physically or spatially affected by what they experienced in VR or what they imagined. Participants received a '0' if their response was not related to presence or immersion, and a '-1' if they explicitly mentioned that the experience or narrative was not real or realistic, that they did not feel 'there', immersed, or physically affected by what they experienced in VR or what they imagined".

## References

- Bailenson, Jeremy. 2018. *Experience on Demand*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Butor, Michel. 1971. *La Modification*. London: Methuen Educational.
- Calvino, Italo. 1981. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Translated by William Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Cardi, Luciana. 2013. 'A Fool Will Never Be Happy': Kurahashi Yumiko's Retelling of "Snow White". *Marvels & Tales* 27: 194–204.
- Cipris, Zeljko, and Shoko Hamano. 2002. *Making Sense of Japanese Grammar: A Clear Guide Through Common Problems*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Ensslin, Astrid, and Alice Bell. 2021. *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Fludernik, Monika. 1993. Second Person Fiction: Narrative You as Addressee and/or Protagonist. *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 2: 217–47.
- Fludernik, Monika. 1994. Introduction: Second-Person Narrative and Related Issues. *Style* 28: 281–311.
- Fludernik, Monika. 2011. The Category of 'Person' in Fiction: You and We Narrative-Multiplicity and Indeterminacy of Reference. In *Current Trends in Narratology*. Edited by Greta Olson. Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 101–41.
- Herman, David. 1994. Textual 'You' and double deixis in Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place*. *Style* 28: 378–410.
- Herrera, Fernanda, Jeremy Bailenson, Erika Weisz, Elise Ogle, and Jamil Zaki. 2018. Building long-term empathy: A large-scale comparison of traditional and virtual reality perspective-taking. *PLOS ONE* 13: e0204494. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Kacandes, Irene. 1993. Are you in the text?: The 'literary performative' in postmodernist fiction. *Text and Performance Quarterly* 13: 139–53. [CrossRef]
- Keene, Dennis. 1977. Introduction to Kurahashi Yumiko's "To Die at the Estuary". In *Contemporary Japanese Literature: An Anthology of Fiction, Film, and Other Writing Since 1945*. Edited by Howard Hibbett. New York: Knopf, pp. 247–48.
- Kurahashi, Yumiko. 1961. *Kurai Tabi [Bleak Journey]*. Tokyo: Shinchōsha.
- Kurahashi, Yumiko. 1998. *The Woman with the Flying Head*. Translated by Atsuko Sakaki. New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Lombard, Matthew, and Theresa Ditton. 1997. At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3: JCMC321. [CrossRef]
- Morrisette, Bruce. 1965. Narrative 'You' in Contemporary Literature. *Comparative Literature Studies* 2: 1–24.

- Nomura, Makio. 2005. Nihongo no nininshō shōsetsu ni okeru nininshō kūkan to hyōgen no tokusei [The special characteristics of personal space and expression in the Japanese second-person narrative]. *Joetsu Kyōiku Daigaku Kokugokenkyū* 19: 1–19.
- Oh, Catherine S., Gregory F. Welch, and Jeremy N. Bailenson. 2018. A Systematic Review of Social Presence: Definition, Antecedents, and Implications. *Frontiers in Robotics and AI* 5: 114. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Ong, Yi-Ping. 2018. *The Art of Being: Poetics of the Novel and Existentialist Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rembowska-Pluciennik, Magdalena. 2018. Second-Person Narration as a Joint Action. *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics* 27: 159–75. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Richardson, Brian. 2008. *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2001. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2015. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Sakaki, Atsuko. 1992. The Intertextual Novel and the Interrelational Self: Kurahashi Yumiko, A Japanese Postmodernist. Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada.
- Sakaki, Atsuko. 1999. (Re)canonizing Kurahashi Yumiko: Toward Alternative Perspectives for ‘Modern’ ‘Japanese’ ‘Literature’. In *Ōe and Beyond: Fiction in Contemporary Japan*. Edited by Stephen Snyder and Philip Gabriel. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, pp. 153–76.
- Slater, Mel. 2018. Immersion and the Illusion of Presence in Virtual Reality. *British Journal of Psychology* 109: 431–33. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Slaymaker, Doug. 2007. Writing in the Ravine of Language. In *Yōko Tawada: Voices from Everywhere*. Edited by Doug Slaymaker. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 45–59.

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.