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Home birth, world cinema: Kawase Naomi's films in circulation

Joel Neville Anderson

Visual and Cultural Studies, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

An Asian woman filmmaker whose work is celebrated and financed in Europe yet produced in her hometown of Nara, Japan, Kawase Naomi's creative trajectory is often made to trace an economy of 'world cinema' sketching constructions of gender, race and nation in uneasy relation to actual patterns of reception and production. While her early self-documentary shorts are described according to artistic vision, her later arthouse features are judged for their circulation on the international film festival circuit. Yet these impulses toward aesthetic and institutional analysis are seldom integrated into a critical appreciation of the breadth of Kawase's work. This article examines a transitional period of the director's filmography in which scenes of home birth repeat across her dramatic and documentary work, placing them in context with discourses of self-documentary and personal filmmaking that aestheticize birth and sex to interrogate the act of self-expression, and challenge gendered constructions of the artist and formation of a 'natural' life against a cultural mainstream. While her work is criticized as narcissistically apolitical by a masculinist domestic film culture, approaching Kawase's material and institutional self-inscription reveals a feminist mediation in productive tension with neoliberal globalization's cinema of regional consumption.

KEYWORDS

Personal documentary;
feminist film theory; film
festival studies; Kawase
Naomi

Tarachime (*Birth/Mother*, 2006) begins and ends with the video image of a bloody placenta. Over the course of the short 40-minute work, we learn this organ had connected the director and her first child, Mitsuki, during pregnancy. *Birth/Mother* however, focuses on another relationship, that of Kawase Naomi and her elderly great-aunt, Uno, her adopted mother. The project completed a cycle of short films and videos Kawase made with this woman who raised her, whom she calls 'grandma.' Mixing visual formats of Super-8 mm film and videotape, the work portrays the baby's first years of life: messy meals, singsong first words, playing with toys. We also see confrontational arguments and reflective conversations between Kawase and her great-aunt, shared cancer screenings, the filmmaker's nursing breasts, and Uno's nude bathing body together in a private sphere of women. Finally, during the home birth suggested at the start of the film, Kawase greets her child with camera in hand as the umbilical cord is clipped. *Birth/Mother* interrogates the two women's relationship and the cinematic prosthetics that have connected them.

Born in 1969 and beginning production in the late 1980s, Kawase's personal documentaries interrogate, digest, and display a whole range of life experiences concentrated in the filmmaker's twenties and thirties. Kawase's 1992 short *Ni tsutsumarete* (*Embracing*), produced as she was working as a lecturer at the Osaka School of Photography (where she graduated in 1989¹), earned her first international recognition by winning a Special Mention FIPRESCI Prize at the 1995 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF), as well as an Award for Excellence in the New Asian Currents program for *Katatumori* (1994). By the time she worked in 35 mm with her first feature film, *Moe no Suzaku* (*Suzaku*, 1997), she'd completed sixteen personal documentaries, becoming a key figure in a wave of *jishu seisaku eiga* (*jishu eiga*, 'autonomous films') created in self-financed, non-professional contexts often utilizing small gauge film or consumer video formats (Tezuka 2012, vii–viii) and the form of *serufu dokyumentarii* ('self-documentary'), diaristic works coordinate to the designation of personal or autobiographical documentary (*shiteki dokyumentarii*, less commonly deployed in Japan, Nada 2005).² The expansion of her practice to feature filmmaking led to immediate foreign acclaim when she became the youngest director – and first Japanese – to win the *Caméra d'Or* at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival with *Suzaku*, later receiving the festival's Grand Prix for *Mogari no Mori* (*The Mourning Forest*, 2007), the *Carrosse d'Or* in 2009, and becoming the first Japanese director to sit on the Cannes jury in 2013. In 2010, she co-founded the biennial Nara International Film Festival (NIFF), including the innovative NARative film commissioning program hosting filmmakers from China, Mexico, South Korea, Cuba, and Iran in Japan's old capital. Aaron Gerow summarizes the filmmaker's dual influence in observing that, 'Although it is her fiction films that have made her Japan's most famous woman filmmaker, Kawase's documentaries have come to symbolize personal documentary in Japan since the 1980s' (2013, 481).

This essay focuses on her personal documentaries, specifically *Birth/Mother*, produced between *Suzaku* and *The Mourning Forest* and concerning the birth of her son, as well as her relationship with her great-aunt Uno, who, after Kawase's parents divorced, was entrusted to care for her (Uno's husband passed away when Kawase was only 14, leaving Uno her sole guardian). Taking the film's central event of home birth as starting point, in which Kawase films the process herself, this article critically engages the political and aesthetic dimensions of the director's practice of local production and foreign funding and exhibition, analyzing the formal innovations of Kawase's shorts, features and their domestic reception as well as circulation through international film festivals. Here I extend Karatsu Rie's previous compelling application of feminist theory to Kawase's feature films toward the experimental qualities of her self-documentaries, relating influential works in documentary and avant-garde cinema involving home birth to explore her diverse filmography. I agree that 'Kawase's engagement with simple intimate subject matter, and her amalgamation of fiction and documentary' (2009, 179) challenge schisms in feminist film scholarship between documentation and apparatus as outlined by Teresa De Lauretis (1994). Examining recurring appearances of birth in Kawase's films, I place them in the transnational context of discourses around self-documentary and avant-garde personal filmmaking that aestheticize birth and sex to interrogate the act of self-expression.

Criticism and praise of Kawase's approach hinges on her belief that 'at the depth of the personal there is something universal' (Kawase 1999, 47). Kawase's early films were

measured against the politically committed documentary culture of the 1960s and 70s that preceded her – thought to typify an inward-looking, apolitical subjectivity limited to the domestic, familial sphere. Later exhibiting traditions of her birthplace of Nara for foreign acclaim, like other prominent Asian directors, she received accusations of nationalism or self-Orientalization. Addressing these perspectives – from Japan and abroad – I attempt to historicize local patriarchal media establishments and stereotypical understandings of her work in the wider industry. Ultimately, I argue that the use of materials in Kawase’s personal documentaries such as consumer still and moving image media formats associated with home movies and family photo archives suggests a politics of circulation as yet under-theorized in relation to her body of work.

Birth/Mother

After the film’s calligraphic title appears superimposed on the opening close-up shots of the placenta, Kawase’s voice is heard on the soundtrack asking, ‘Why did you adopt me?’³ Uno’s voice responds, ‘Well, Naomi there was no single reason we took you in. We had no kids ourselves.’ The film cuts to a photo of Uno and her adoptive daughter from their first days together as Uno explains herself, surely not for the first time. The image then cuts to a video frame shamelessly focused on a wrinkled midsection, crouched sitting in a bath. Uno’s body reveals a scar running down from below her bellybutton, her skin parted and falling to either side. Kawase asks, ‘Did you want a child of your own?’ and Uno responds that the thought never came to mind, proceeding to reluctantly explain for the camera the ectopic pregnancy which would leave her and her husband childless.

As with these childhood photographs, still images are similarly interrogated by the camera at the film’s end, which returns to the climactic birth scene gestured to with the opening images of the placenta. Shot from multiple angles, the video camera documents from the moment of Mitsuki’s imminent ejection from Kawase’s body at a vantage point of several feet, beside the midwife easing the baby out. At the point of cutting the umbilical cord, Kawase requests the camera, and the shot promptly reverses direction to present a view of this procedure from her perspective, here symbolically charged as one considers her physical bond to her child and connection to Uno mediated by the camera. This act of cutting is followed by black and white photographs of the delivery, caressed in extreme closeup by the probing video camera. A photo displays a full reverse angle, the video camera tilting down the still image of Kawase reclined with camera in hand, to the cutting of the umbilical cord. As with *Embracing*, the film complicates the notion of ‘family’ photos by incorporating black and white images captured in the same moments of a film’s production, assembled not as a matter of retrospection, but in sequence with the moving images, offering a different way for the film to think through its story. These still images are further complicated by Kawase’s social identity as an artist, as they were taken by her former teacher at the Osaka School of Photography, photographer Dodo Shunji. The photo prints at the film’s end are actually those that appear in his book from the project, *Haha*, or ‘Mother.’⁴ Just as the birth represents the beginning of motherhood and generational legacy, the creation of the film looks back on the non-blood-based familial connection between Kawase and her great-aunt, focusing on the film, video, and photographic media that supported such a relationship, differing from their prior films in that they gesture toward a broader scale of artistic execution.

While this film largely closes the chapter of Kawase's intimate work made with Uno; it was several years later that her great-aunt passed away, on 10 February 2012 at the age of 97.⁵ One of Dodo's photographs that is present in *Birth/Mother* shows Kawase, Uno, and Mitsuki lying together post-delivery. The video camera hovers over the semi-reflective, glossy photographic print, focusing on the image of Uno's wrinkled hand, and tilting upward, we see she holds Mitsuki's tiny fingers reaching up from his body swaddled underneath his mother's arm. The image communicates independence and generational cohesion, yet Kawase continually interrogates such images. Intervening in the visual field of the videotaped photograph, she plays her finger's shadow over the next and last B&W photograph, an image of him nursing at her breast. This dark shadow rubs over the print of Mitsuki's cheek as if cajoling the image into motion, and in a crossfade, the image transitions to her breastfeeding him in color video from the same angle, before again crossfading to the video image of the bloody placenta that began the film. Several quick cuts of Super-8 mm footage from just after the delivery are inserted as the filmmaker's voiceover speaks as if reading from a text, 'The organ that connected me to you, it was a little bloody and had a warm taste,' as chopsticks are seen rising to her mouth for placentophagy. As she begins to chew, the image quickly crossfades to a setting sun through a thin breezy curtain, before finally shifting back to the red placenta in video, where the superimposed credits begin to flash. As *Birth/Mother's* final sequence makes clear, Kawase's conceptual practices using amateur equipment became closely linked to professionally advanced photographic tools without renouncing the former, as a means to accommodate the collaborative elements of an active filmmaker's lifestyle. The hazy image of wind in the window echoes that of wind in trees and grass, recurrent imagery often bookending her features (as with *The Mourning Forest*), placing human stories within the context of natural phenomena, while emphasizing the intervention of the author. The theme of loss and birth or rebirth emerges as a key component in Kawase's works, though it's often communicated symbolically.

Birth/Mother represents a range of quotidian interactions between the filmmaker and her adopted mother from the time of her son's birth in 2004 through his toddler years up to its completion in 2006. Just prior, Kawase had cast herself in her third feature, *Sharasoju* (*Shara*, 2003), as Reiko, the mother of one of its young protagonists. At the film's end, her character is depicted giving birth at home in an emotional scene that produces a catharsis similar to that in *Birth/Mother*. *Shara* tells the story of a teenage boy whose twin disappeared when he was a young child, and the final birth represents a kind of renewal for the family at the same time he begins pursuing his own artistic expression. Later, Kawase produced *Genpin* (2010), taking on a rare observational approach in a documentary about a natural childbirth clinic run by Yoshimura Tadashi in a forest in Okazaki, Aichi Prefecture.⁶ Not only does a focus on conditions of birth extend across this period of Kawase's work, it also provides a concrete link to issues of women's rights and collective care.

Self-documentary, personal filmmaking and feminist mediation

Feminist movements in Japan, under the radical banner of women's liberation (*uman ribu* or *ribu*) has, since its emergence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, enacted a forceful critique of law, labor, domestic life, and media.⁷ The *ribu* movement founded revolutionary,

direct action collectives and a vibrant literary culture, while in the 1980s, *feminizumu* emerged as a concept in fuller dialogue with liberal academic discourse and the institution of women's studies programs, amidst disaffection by the crushing renewal of Anpo, or the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty.⁸

Unfortunately, these movement-based and intellectual *ribu* interventions had limited impact on the dominant strains of Japanese leftist avant-garde and documentary film cultures.⁹ (For instance, Laura Mulvey's famous article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' [1975] was not to be translated in Japanese until 1997). Instead, the cultural context in which Kawase produced her early self-documentaries was dominated by the leftist filmmakers of the generation that was productive and influential from the 1960s and 70s. Her projects did benefit from collaboration with photographers or cinematographers active in this period; for instance, Dodo had photographed the political tumult of the 1960s and 70s (2012), including student movement demonstrations, campus occupations and US military base protests (later serving as cinematographer for some of Kawase's films). Additionally, her DP on *Suzaku*, Tamura Masaki, was a member of Ogawa Shin-suke's documentary collective Ogawa Pro. These associations contributed to the sense that she might carry the mantle of the Japanese left's post-Anpo malaise, and in critical discussion she is often found positioned between a masculinist left discourse and the capitalist film establishment.

At the 1998 edition of the Yamagata International Film Festival, former Ogawa Pro assistant director and filmmaker Iizuka Toshio proposed to Kawase in an onstage conversation that filmmakers of the 1960s and 70s generation had a political commitment that engaged with the world around them in a real way, assuming a subjectivity that was deeply social and embedded in a relationship to their object of filming.¹⁰ However, he accused Kawase's generation of being 'too wrapped up in their own little world,' focusing 'on either themselves or their family without reference to society, without engaging any political position or social stance' (Nornes 2002, 40). Kawase defended her position, and argued that her work, embedded in her relationships with her family, has a similar kind of social resonance claimed by Iizuka; however there remained a significant communication gap, in part satisfying the tone of the festival edition's title, 'The Groping in the Dark: Japanese Documentary in the 1980s and Beyond.'

Kawase explicitly rejects categorizing herself as a feminist, instead drawing from recuperated pre-capitalist traditions of rural life while embracing global exchange in the form of film festivals. This has contributed to many linking her, as Gerow notes, 'with a tendency within personal documentary in Japan that has pursued subjectivity without politically theorizing it' (481). Karatsu identifies this aversion to the political rhetoric of feminism as related to a perception of feminists' tendency to 'persist in a collective identity, and view the problems women face in Japanese society through a rigid ideological filter' (170). With varying perceptions and misperceptions of feminism as a radical movement or imported social concept notwithstanding, none of this should suggest Kawase's work is apolitical.

The primary representative of self-documentary filmmaking from the 1970s era is Hara Kazuo, with his particular brand of 'action documentaries' (*akushon dokyumentarii*), which broach politics according to his motivating justification that by crossing into the private realms of his and his subjects' lives, he accesses one's values and sensory experience that 'contain an institutionalized, and thus self-contradictory, element' and to 'take up my

camera to try to challenge those institutionalized elements, I must aim it at the world of feelings within individuals' (2009, 3).

His second film, *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974*, presents one of the more well-known filmic representations of home birth. It documents his ex-wife Takeda Miyuki, a feminist activist who has moved to Okinawa and calls on Hara to witness her political transformation as she realizes her bisexual identity and becomes impregnated by a Black American GI off the base. She helps organize a daycare commune including the children of sex workers, which provided collective childcare performed outside parental and financial relationships. Setsu Shigematsu emphasizes these *ribu* projects' significant 'ideological work of delinking motherhood from the family system' as a radical break from the state-managed registry of bloodlines and family lineages (Shigematsu 2012, 20).¹¹ The ambitious politics of the *ribu* movement, different from its political predecessors of democratic clubs and housewife associations – some of which were closely associated with the US Occupation and its democracy promotion programs – is critical of the modern nuclear family and the history of Japanese empire, seeking to liberate sex from the confines of birth and heteropatriarchal capitalist production. Hara's film initially approaches sex and birth as primal experiences, then complicates them as bound up with structural modes of oppression and denial. As Jun Okada points out in her analysis of *Extreme Private Eros*, while ostensibly focused on exposing taboos around lesbian and biracial love in the context of Japanese-US relations, it also lays bare the fallacies of Japan's own racial narratives through the involvement of Okinawan women (Okada 2018).

In *Extreme Private Eros*'s infamous scene, Takeda gives birth to her child without assistance, at home. She invited Kobayashi Sachiko, Hara's producer and current wife to join her, and Hara documented the delivery; however his position is utterly frozen. In the moment, he fails to properly adjust the 16 mm camera's lens, rendering out of focus much of the long take in which Takeda kneels and eventually lies on her back delivering the baby entirely unassisted: 'Being nervous is no excuse for my shooting the footage out of focus, but I feel I couldn't have displayed my emotions in a more effective way' (MacDonald 1998, 134). The accidental expressivity of male fascination results in an opposite effect with Stan Brakhage's frantic gaze in *Window Water Baby Moving* (shot 1958, exhibited 1959), which set off paradigmatic debates around gender and perspective in American avant-garde personal filmmaking. Jane Brakhage, who claimed partial authorship of the work, is seen in nearly every frame.¹² In contradistinction to Kawase's filmmaker moment as her son's umbilical cord is cut – her own hands steadily holding the camera – when the physician holds up the Brakhage's newborn daughter Myrrena, the lens rapidly scans her body until (Stan) Brakhage nearly drops the camera as she is prepared for the procedure. For a time hailed as the 'father' of American avant-garde film, Brakhage cited the camera as a necessary tool for him to be able to witness the delivery – an event he insisted on being present for – without fainting. Brakhage's probing gaze intervened on the twentieth century's medicalization of childbirth as a sterile procedure where the physician's objective agency is primary, mothers could be drugged or restrained, and fathers conventionally not present.¹³

As Shira Segal (2011) notes, works created against and in response to *Window Water Baby Moving* extend a dialogical process embedded in ideological shifts in cultural norms and definitions of artistic radicalism. Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (shot and edited between 1964 and 1967) was produced following her and her partner James Tenney's

intimate friendship with Stan and Jane Brakhage – having appeared in *Loving* (1957) and *Cat's Cradle* (1959) – while constituting an alternative approach to mediation.¹⁴ In an act of substitution, offering an alternative to the masculine gaze of the prototypical male filmmaker, the film's opening credits suggest the perspective of their cat, Kitsch. In the self-shot film she makes love with Tenney, Schneemann as subject and filmmaker emphasizing the sites of and reactions to female sexual pleasure in heterosexual lovemaking often denied in normative pornography and sex of the time. Rendered with ravishing hand-painted celluloid that is also scratched, baked, acid-dipped, and dyed, Schneemann writes, 'I wanted to see "the fuck," lovemaking's erotic blinding core apart from maternity/paternity' (James 2005, 83).

While Kawase is averse to comparing her work to others in terms of influence, her early films develop and circulate around and against an environment shaped by *ribu* and Hara's outsider view of the feminist movement; a dialogical process in self-documentaries and the broader environment of *jishu eiga* autonomous films in Japan is comparable to that of the American avant-garde tradition of personal filmmaking. Kawase may resist theorizing her work in the way Hara vociferously elaborates, however each rely on a method of constructing a social situation, before documenting what transpires, whether that be Hara egging on interviewees' physical conflict in *Yuki Yukite Shingun* (*The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*, 1987), or Kawase's method of cohabitation with staff and cast (partially composed of non-professional actors) on set before filming. Further, as anyone can see in *Mangekyo* (*Kaleidoscope*, 1999), Kawase's documentary collaborating with photographer Arimoto Shinya and actresses Ono Machiko (of *Suzaku* and *The Mourning Forest*) and Mifune Mika (daughter of Mifune Toshiro), she is a tremendously critical artist focused on producing an environment for creativity and removing perceived contrivances.

'Domestic' media and export-import strategies

As Gerow notes, Kawase's work 'has always been cognizant of the limitations of representation,' exhibiting a concern for the 'conflicts the camera can create' as well as for the 'inability of this medium of traces to find the source of the trace' (481). This is perhaps most evident in her first mid-length self-documentary *Embracing* (1992). The film documents Kawase's search for her father through conversations with her mother (who significantly remains decentralized in her documentary plots) as well as her great-aunt. A large part of the work is structured according to her father's registered history of past addresses, itself a literal map of patriarchy through the state's management of family lineage. Super-8 mm footage of their surroundings reconstruct the point of view of photographs taken of Kawase as a child, with the original prints inserted into the frames by hand, followed by black and white stills depicting Kawase documenting those locations camera in hand, producing the film the viewer now watches. It departs from Kawase's characteristic juxtapositions of diaristic footage to adopt a repetitive structure situating personal identity and memory on the edges of public space and the private histories she is ambivalently claiming. Her eventual reconnection with her father at the end is left only as a fragment – a mystery solved but not resolved – a thread taken up later in similarly partial and even fictionalized terms in *Kya Ka Ra Ba A* (2001) following news of his death. The gender and formal dimensions of *Embracing* are unique in Kawase's body of work, taking on an investigatory tone. Indeed, the searching in her films often moves effortlessly

between film, photographs and video, perhaps most so in *Birth/Mother* where her Super-8 mm and video cameras (each equipped with sound) are traded during lyrical daytime idylls with Mitsuki.¹⁵

Kawase's work is then also relevant to theorizations of the political status of amateur photography, film and video as a transmedia practice. Richard Chalfen defined an inclusive 'home mode' in which the use of snapshot photo albums and home movies become means of structuring understandings of the world (1987, 6). Patricia Zimmermann intervened to outline how commercial branding around norms of the nuclear family led to the 'domestication of amateur filmmaking as a leisure-time commodity' and 'erased any of its social, political, or economic possibilities' (1995, 113).¹⁶ However such analysis must approach technologies in the complexity of their social circulation, as Zimmermann herself observed concerning the significance of avant-garde personal filmmaking in relation to broader amateur practices, 'displac[ing] expertise with imagination' (1995, 132). The self-inscription of Kawase's self-documentaries, then, exhibits a productive tension between the normative implications of the 'home mode' and the films' unique professional circulation. In fact, as Alexander Zahlten suggests, *jishu eiga* autonomous films, with their local and national distribution networks established since the 1970s, may arguably qualify – during some periods of time – as one of many 'industrial genres' producing audiences and shifting media cultures, however insufficient the attention they receive from prestigious national and international institutions of cinema proper (Zahlten 2017, 7).¹⁷ The appearance of home birth connects Kawase's self-documentary and dramatic feature film work, highlighting the documentary procedures and aesthetics of her narrative films as well as the politics of her self-documentaries' circulation.

Karatsu insightfully proposes that Kawase's documentary and narrative filmmaking registers demonstrate a gap within feminist film discourse privileging either documentary access to identity and self-expression, or formal/ideological interrogation of artifice and narrative, stating that

Kawase's creative vision with its centering of the autobiographical, the intimate and the domestic shares greatly in the general principles of feminist filmmaking. That is to say, her self-expression is recognized as counteracting the distorted representations of women in mainstream cinema and those of Japanese male directors. (2009, 168)

However, that influence largely comes through the re-importation of her films following international festival runs beginning in Europe with Cannes, and back to NIFF (Nara International Film Festival) and theatrical release. Kawase's unique position in what is called 'Japanese cinema' results from the decline of the studio system since the 1960s and collapse in the 1970s and 80s. The 1990s and 2000s served as a transitional period of this post-studio era, as renewed critical enthusiasm for young Japanese auteurs on the international festival circuit spurred economic investment and government interest.¹⁸

This moment of transition created opportunities for new funding mechanisms for 'independent' film based on an export-import strategy. Kawase's first feature, *Suzaku*, was produced through WOWOW satellite television's J-Movie Wars series, running since 1992 by Sento Takenori (Kawase's husband from 1997 to 2000). In 1998, Sento launched the production unit Suncent Cinema Works with WOWOW's backing, and in 1999 Project J-Cine-X, which sought to produce new work by young filmmakers whose reputations had been established internationally, aimed toward festivals abroad

for cachet to be reaped domestically (including Kawase, Kore-eda, and others such as Aoyama Shinji, Riju Go, and Suwa Nobuhiro) (Schilling 1999, 32; Davis 2006, 196). However, low box office figures for the big-budget *Gojo Reisenki: Gojoe* (*Gojoe*, Ishii Sogo, 2000) sunk Suncent, and troubled the rollout of other productions including Kawase's *Hotaru* (*Firefly*, 2000).

Exporting arthouse features to garner foreign acclaim, then re-imported for commercial gain, stresses the important dynamic of regional film connections (Ma 2017) in approaching film festival studies, especially when considering the influence of European international festival networks mediating constructions of nation, region and auteurship (Elsaesser 2005). Such circuits are unequal and based on a Euro- and North American-centric model (Wong 2011), and while regional feedback loops stand to short-circuit this model (Nornes 2014), it's worth considering how a filmmaker such as Kawase maintains her own uneasy international conduit, even as the Japanese production committee system came to predominantly focus on the domestic market from the 2000s onward (Tezuka 2012, 161).¹⁹

Still, exhibiting rural Japanese sites and traditions in feature films screened largely abroad makes Kawase the recipient of accusations of latent nationalism, a sense that she promotes 'a nostalgic valorization of the national past (which never really existed as such) over the Westernized present,' or 'a joyful sadness (dare we say "mono no aware" – the aesthetic pleasure gained from appreciating evanescence) that is soothing and itself nationalistic' (2008, 93). Historically, Kawase is largely disinterested in national cinema, instead drawing from cultural archives more marginal than conventional views of Japan: broken or breaking families and non-blood-based bonds, stories of the aging and the very young, and specific regions in place of the nation.²⁰ Her self-documentaries are almost entirely set in Nara, as well as the features *Suzaku*, *Firefly*, *Shara*, *The Mourning Forest*, *Hanezu no tsuki* (*Hanezu*, 2011), and *Vision* (2018). While she has one feature set internationally, *Nanayomachi* (2008) in Thailand, more of her recent titles do take place across Japan: *Futatsume no Mado* (*Still the Water*, 2014) on Amami Oshima and *An* (*Sweet Bean*, 2014) and *Hikari* (*Radiance*, 2017), each set in Tokyo.²¹ This complicates any charge of self-Orientalism of the sort levied at China's Fifth Generation filmmakers around 'nation and narration' (Lu 1997, 126). However, Tezuka Yoshiharu proposes a more generative spatial model, sketching 'practices of producing and circulating self-othering, self-Orientalist representations' with an aim to enhance 'reputation and marketability in national and regional markets by drawing on their international reputation,' that ultimately 'legitimizes and expands the national category' despite specifics of content (2012, 41). Such focus on structural conditions of commercial exchange and media circulation should contribute to a more effective critique of film culture's perpetuation of racial capitalism.

Despite Kawase's continued export-import exhibition strategies and organizational commitments in NIFF and NARActive, her trajectory is complicated by her recent appointment to direct the official film for the contentious Tokyo 2020 Olympics, a development suggesting how navigation of precarious geopolitical contexts in addition to regional exhibition markets shapes artists' development, and invite fuller understandings of their work. Posing home birth as an element connecting Kawase's self-documentary and dramatic feature films allows analysis of the director's unique career to refract the complex conditions of the areas of production and exhibition she has traversed. Introducing resonant

transcultural modes of personal filmmaking, and proposing concepts of feminist mediation the filmmaker herself might reject, ultimately such a framing of Kawase's work – juxtaposing home birth and the construct of 'world cinema' – allows familiar strategies of material self-inscription in her personal documentary work to be considered alongside her creative agency acting upon the structures of the international film festival, and stir likewise consideration for the power of curation, industrial criticism, and research to create an equitable environment in which cinema is created and shared.

Notes

1. Now Visual Arts College, Osaka.
2. *Jishu eiga* autonomous films can take many forms, whether diaristic self-documentary, community or school group projects, or no-budget dramatic features. While often analyzed in the closed context of their makers' lives, the challenge of *jishu eiga* is also an institutional one, with vibrant organizations tending to its lineage and alums such as PIA Film Festival (PFF), Image Forum, YIDFF, Cineastes Organization Osaka (CO2), or Yubari Film Festival.
3. This rendering of title cards with calligraphy is consistent with most of her features' opening sequences.
4. *Birth/Mother's* original title, *Tarachime*, is itself an archaic word for 'mother,' with connotations of birth and fertility.
5. Some may interpret a *Birth/Mother* scene visiting a family grave to narrativize Uno's future passing – an element of fictionalization Kawase took to an extreme with her 2001 *Kya Ka Ra Ba A* by dramatizing her notion of receiving a tattoo to match that of her absent father.
6. See Nakane (2018) for perceptive analysis of *Genpin*, similarly arguing for a reconsideration of the political potential of Kawase's construction of an 'intimate sphere' through collaboration with other women in her work, here placed in tension with commercial 'public spheres' of the international film festival circuit.
7. This wave of movements is identified with second wave feminism in Europe and North America, and worked in correspondence with Pan-Asian women's movements in anti-colonial struggle.
8. Anpo refers to the US-Japan Security Treaty, renewed in different stages following the end of the US Occupation in 1952. This proved a strategic mechanism of control throughout the Vietnam war, and was a central point of outrage during Japan's student movement along with protesting US bases and construction of Narita airport on villagers' farmland as nodes of militarism and capital exchange.
9. For authoritative studies of *ribu* and *feminizumu*, see Shigematsu (2012), Mackie (2003).
10. As Abé Markus Nornes insightfully recounts, Iizuka said of the 1960s and 70s documentary culture: 'They assumed a subject (*shutai*) that was thoroughly social, one that required visible expression on film and at the same time acknowledged its delicate relationship to the object (*taisho*) of the filming' (2002, 40).
11. One significant *ribu* project is the Tokyo Komu-unu, which appears later in *Extreme Private Eros*, its name a combination of 'birth' and 'commune,' *ko umi* and *komyun*.
12. For extensive discussion of tension between Jane Brakhage as subject, collaborator, and co-author of the film, see Barr (1976).
13. Brakhage's concern for the institutional framing of birth and death is continued in such films as *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971), portraying autopsy procedures in a Pittsburgh morgue.
14. For essential context and analysis of Schneemann's *Fuses*, see Osterweil (2015).
15. Many of Kawase's self-documentaries were shot entirely on Super-8 mm and blown up to 16 mm, transforming film grain into subtler textures.
16. James Moran alternatively theorized how the mirroring capacities of consumer video cameras – placing one's own image in a home television set normally reserved for authorized

images from the outside world – challenged the persistence of, or progression beyond, traditional familial orientations, redefining the ‘home mode as a changing expression of culture rather than a static reflection of false consciousness’ (2002, 36). Analyzing the class, gender, and racial biases physically and culturally programmed into consumer technologies of documentary representation while also theorizing their hijacking as mediums of cultural contestation has produced a tremendous body of scholarship (see Ishizuka and Zimmermann 2007).

17. Zahlten specifically analyzes V-Cinema, Kadokawa Film, and *Pinku Eiga* (Pink Film) as industrial genres mapping the broader development of film and media, noting anime and *jishu eiga* as potential additions.
18. For insightful analysis of this transition, see Wada-Marciano (2012, 12–15). As studios literally sold off their studio properties, they came to rely on a production committee model with large- and small- scale films produced via collaborations between film, television, and other commercial entities and rights holders (adapting existing texts across platforms to dedicated audiences) that spread financial risk. As with other neoliberal film economies operating under post-Fordist models of casualized labor and outsourcing, the production committee leaves the definition of independent (*dokuritsu*) cinema unstable (Zahlten 2017, 15, 8). However, this precarious environment also clarifies *jishu eiga* as an autonomous mode of production.
19. Of the Japanese filmmakers minted auteurs in the 1990s and 2000s, Kitano Takeshi, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Kore-eda Hirokazu, and Kawase are sometimes collapsed into ‘4K’ for defining festival programmers’ current limited perception of ‘Japanese cinema’ (Schilling 2017).
20. Erin Schoneveld proposes Kawase’s methodology articulates ‘a visual language that posits regionalism as a new form of nationalism’ (2019, 2). This generative auteurist formulation might also be convincingly framed as criticism of Kawase’s work and broader regionalist tendencies of 1990s independent cinema.
21. Amami Oshima, an island formerly part of the Ryukyu Kingdom, remains a site of traditions distinct from Japan’s Honshu mainland. Some local shamanic practices are included during important plot points, especially involving death (including graphic animal sacrifice) like *The Mourning Forest*, and point to elements of local culture resistant to homogenizing constructs of Japan as nation.

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Notes on contributor

Joel Neville Anderson is Visiting Assistant Professor of Cinema Studies and Film at Purchase College, State University of New York. He was awarded the Dean’s Dissertation Fellowship for completion of his PhD in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester, examining institutional mediations of self documentary in the neoliberal era. Research and teaching encompass cinema and media studies, personal documentary, community media, experimental filmmaking, environmental justice, film festival studies, and Japanese cinema. Anderson’s writing appears in *Millennium Film Journal*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Afterimage*, *Hyperallergic*, *Senses of Cinema*, *Film on the Faultline*, and *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Cinema*. He has taught theory, history, and studio production courses at the New School and University of Rochester in addition to SUNY Purchase, and workshops at the Museum of the Moving Image, Jacob Burns Film Center, and Downtown Community Television Center (DCTV). He curates JAPAN CUTS: Festival of New Japanese Film at Japan Society in New York, and formerly programmed the avant-garde film series On Film in Rochester. He produces the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* podcast *Aca-Media*, and previously served as Managing

Editor and Editorial Board Member of *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*.

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