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The Spectacle of Woman in Japanese Underground Theatre Posters

The 1960s and 1970s in Japan saw an extraordinary flourishing of avant-garde theatre, performance art, dance and visual arts. [1] These artistic products were created in the period of high economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s which followed Japan's defeat in the Second World War in 1945, the period of Allied Occupation from 1945 to 1952, the program of economic reconstruction which culminated in the 'income doubling' policy of the 1960s, and in parallel with attempts to create a viable left-wing alternative politics. The art works of the period were produced in the shadow of the unresolved history of the Second World War, with a consciousness of Japan's alignment with the forces of liberal capitalism in the East Asian region (Munroe, 1994). The period of activity of the underground theatre is also bisected by the rise of women's liberation and other forms of feminism from the early 1970s. [2]

One of the features of the alternative cultures of the 1960s and 1970s was the emphasis on sexual liberation and a rejection of puritanism and repressiveness. In the popular culture of the time, the use of images of nudity – usually female nudity – was often seen as an indicator of libertarianism and a rejection of puritan values. [3] It was not until the development of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s and the subsequent development of feminist cultural criticism that it became apparent that the doctrines of 'free love,' when seen from a gendered perspective, rather meant that women became available as objects of masculine sexual desires and practices. In the popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s, it was possible for male artists to see the use of representations of the naked female body as an indicator of liberation, while later readings would rather emphasise the objectification of women implied by such imagery. In the avant-garde theatre of 1960s Japan, on-stage nudity was often deployed as a form of transgression. In the case of the *Tenjô Sajiki* group, for example, this also included obese actors, or what were seen as 'freakish' actors (Goodman, 1999: 49). [4]

The naked female body also appears as a theme in the posters advertising the underground theatre movement, not always with a clear connection to the actual content of the performance being advertised. Women appear as kimono-clad women quoted from late nineteenth and early twentieth century Japanese graphic art, as women quoted from European art, as cartoonish figures with exaggerated physical attributes, or as blonde European women in 'soft-porn' poses (Mackie, 2003b: 10).

In the same way that late nineteenth and early twentieth century European painters justified the representation of nudity by placing the figures in a mythological past or by geographically displacing them to the 'Orient,' these posters at times displace the figures of naked women by cartooning, by displacement to Europe, or by placing them in the past. In Yokoo Tadanori's posters for Kara Jûrô's two plays on the theme of John Silver, a white disc floats on a background of gradated colours from red to pale pink to blue. The disc of the sun is the source of light for the silhouette of a naked woman with a traditional Japanese hairstyle. In the 1967 poster the woman is standing, in the 1968 poster she is in an acrobatic pose (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 61). When the bodies of male figures appear, it is as samurai, gangsters or as identifiable figures with associations with hypermasculinity. [5]

Although I mainly focus on underground theatre posters, it should also be remembered that there was significant crossing of genres. The same artist might produce commercial art, posters for underground theatre, posters for *butoh* dance performances, book covers and book designs, cartoons, and other art works. Others crossed from fiction to poetry to playwriting. Practitioners of these various genres also collaborated in various ways.

A significant feature of the theatre and the surrounding visual culture is intertextuality. Many of the plays were adaptations of sources from Japanese history and European dramatic traditions. The posters, too, need to be situated in a web of intertextual references. In the posters of the time we can see a rejection of the clean and geometric lines of the international style of graphic design which had become mainstream. This took the form of a plundering of the history of graphic design, with borrowings from Japanese woodblock prints, handbills for advertising *sumô* wrestling, motifs from Japanese-style playing cards, everyday objects, and elements borrowed from the graphic design of Europe and other countries. This is exemplified in Martin Friedman's description of Yokoo Tadanori's cultural reference points, but such intertextual references also appear in other graphic artists of the time.

Not just the Japanese printmaking tradition but the entire history of Western art soon was his salvage yard, where he foraged freely. Embedded in many a Yokoo poster are such instantly identifiable cameos as a Raphael Madonna, a clutch of Ingres's pink odalisques, a brooding Goya self-portrait, a severely abstracted head, reminiscent of one of Picasso's Algerian women, and – on a more contemporary note – a pair of Jasper Johns's iconic ale cans. (Friedman, 2001: 5)

This may be compared with the use of the Union Jack in fashion and graphic design in 1960s London, or the use of military uniforms as fashion items, divorced from their militaristic connotations.

Yokoo used such elements as the flowers to be found on *hanafuda* (Japanese-style playing cards), a range of calligraphical styles from cursive to textbook styles to the

kinds of lettering found on *sumô* handbills, the roman alphabet and Arabic lettering, stylised graphic representations of waves, mountains and cherry blossoms in the style of the woodblock prints of the late nineteenth century, and versions of the rising sun.

Visual culture in modern Japan has for over a century been integrated into international channels of communication, informed by a range of international conventions. Photography was introduced into Japan in the mid-nineteenth century; socialist artists borrowed from the international language of socialist iconography from the early twentieth century; proletarian artists in the 1930s were well aware of such artists as Diego Rivera; while satirical cartoonists borrowed from George Grosz (Nagata, 1991 [1930]). Although it has been argued that 'Yokoo [Tadanori] is among the first generation of designers to reflect ... globalisation and to use it effectively in his bold designs' (Mount, 1995: 5), I would date Japan's integration into international circles of visual communication to much earlier in the modern period, although the label of 'globalisation' would be anachronistic for the context of artists in earlier generations.

In this essay I will focus on 'the spectacle of woman' in Japanese underground theatre posters according to the following themes: decorative woman, grotesque woman, the forbidden and the fetishised, and the tension between the erotic and the maternal. My methodology is informed by the work of cultural historians who have analysed the politics of visual culture in specific historical contexts, social semioticians who have adapted the methodologies of semiotics to the analysis of visual materials, and feminist art historians who have adapted the methodologies of Foucauldian discourse analysis to the study of photography and other visual arts. [6] My readings of these posters are also, of course, informed by my understanding of the politics, culture, and gender relations of Japan in the 1960s and 1970s.

Decorative Woman

Yokoo Tadanori's 1966 poster for Mishima Yukio's book *Owari no Bigaku* (The Aesthetics of the End) (reproduced in Aidia Henshûbu, 1995: 20) provides an introduction to several themes which recur in the underground theatre posters. In the centre of the top half of the poster is a yellow sun, with rays of light emanating from it, against the backdrop of a blue sky. The photograph in the top left corner is immediately recognisable as a bare-chested Mishima Yukio. His name is shown in Sino-Japanese characters under the picture and in roman letters across the top of the poster. In the top right corner is a drawing of a woman, wearing only underpants, who is expressing milk from one breast. Under this picture is the title of the book in Japanese script. The lower part of the poster shows an old-fashioned steam train, which appears to be travelling through water. The waves are in a stylised form which could well have been borrowed from a woodblock print of the previous century. The steam from the train takes the shape of the Japanese archipelago. In the front of the train is a lotus leaf and lotus flower. Riding on the front of the train is a bikini-clad woman with long blonde hair. A skull peeps out from behind the train.

The train is another recurrent motif in Yokoo's posters of the time. In other posters, such as Yokoo's poster for *butoh* dancer Hijikata Tatsumi's performance 'La Danse en Rose' (1965) it is the bullet train which appears, an obvious symbol of Japan's most recent stage of modernisation. [7] The bullet train, the 1964 Olympics, and the 1970 Osaka exposition were symbols of Japan's 'arrival' in the world economy as an exemplar of high economic growth in the capitalist paradigm. The use of the nostalgic motif of the steam train in the poster for Mishima's book suggests a more ambivalent attitude to this modernity.

There is some motivation for the appearance of the figures in the top left and right corners of the poster. Mishima is there as the author of the book, of course, but also seems to exemplify masculinity, particularly with the muscular body he was able to display in the mid-1960s, after he had been bodybuilding for around a decade (Mackie, 2005: 131–5). There is perhaps some motivation for the inclusion of the female figure in the top right corner. There had been a scene in Mishima's 1956 novel, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, where a woman expresses breast milk into a tea bowl and provides it to a man to drink. As we shall see, this would become a recurring trope of the underground theatre posters, as has also been noticed by David Goodman (1999: 51). The other woman in the poster seems to be there purely for decorative value. Her reduction to a decorative body seems to be more palatable thanks to her blonde hair, which implicitly displaces her from Japanese society.

We thus see the juxtaposition of a series of recurring tropes: the sexualised female body, the maternal female body, and the muscular man. There is a gendered division of roles: the female figures are simply decorative; the male figures are artists. Yokoo's signature appears in the bottom left-hand corner of the poster. This gendered division in the visual arts associated with the underground theatre reproduces the relationship between the usually male directors and critics, and the female actors in the underground theatre troupes (Ikeuchi, 2006). In this poster, the writer, Mishima, and the artist, Yokoo, are named; the female figures are anonymous types.

Grotesque Woman

Terayama Shûji's plays were characterised by the author's sometimes childish delight in breaking taboos. Yokoo Tadanori's poster for the play *Ôyama Debuko no Hanzai* (The Crime of Fatso Ôyama) (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 49) demonstrates the operation of this theme in the underground theatre posters. Ôyama Debuko is a woman who does not meet the standards of beauty of the time. She is obese, and shows her armpit hair. Milk spurts from her exposed breast. The voluptuous white ideographs in the background of the poster spell out the two characters for 'Ô-iri,' meaning a full house for a performance. The poster parodies the red and white design of envelopes used to provide bonuses to performers, when a full house has been achieved (Goodman, 1999: 49). There is a further visual pun in the way that the characters mimic the fleshy curves of the figure of Ôyama. She is also surrounded by nationalist symbols: cherry blossom, Mount Fuji, and two different versions of the rising sun flag, the

contemporary one with a simple red disc on a white background, and the wartime version with red rays emanating from the red disc of the sun (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002). In this, and other posters, we also see the names and logos of the companies which sponsored the shows. In this case, it is the fashion house 'Jun & Ropé.'

In the underground culture of the 1960s there is a fascination with 'poisonous women' who committed crimes. The story of Abe Sada, who killed and mutilated her lover, is a recurrent theme and Abe Sada is generally presented as an abject figure (Ikeuchi, 2006). In Hirano Kôga's poster for Satô Makoto's play *Abe Sada: A Comedy* (1973) (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 31) Abe is shown naked, with a sagging, aging body, the antithesis of the decorative women of the other theatre posters.

Another example of grotesquerie may be seen in Tomita Shin'Ichirô's poster for Betsuyaku Minoru's (1966) play *Mon (Gate)*, where the woman appears to have one leg missing (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 17). In Yokoo Tadanori's poster for Kara Jûrô's play *Yui Shôsetsu* (1968), hybrid winged female figures hover over the scene, hybridity between human and non-human being another form of the grotesque (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 62). Similar gravity-defying figures appear in Yokoo Tadanori's poster for Kara Jûrô's 1966 play *Koshimaki O-sen* (Petticoat O-Sen) (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 60) and Oikawa Masamichi's poster for Terayama Shûji's (1969) work *Sho o Suteyo, Machi ni Deyo* (Out with the Books, Into the Streets) (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 54). Indeed, the crossing of boundaries is a major theme of the plays and the visual art which promoted the plays.

Sometimes, as I will discuss in more detail below, this takes the form of abjection – the breaching of bodily boundaries (Douglas, 1969; Kristeva, 1982; Grosz, 1994). At other times it takes the form of challenging the boundaries between human and non-human, as in the figure of the mythological water sprite, the *kappa*, in Oyobe Katsuhito and Mizuki Shigeru's poster for Kara Jûrô's (1978) play of the same name (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 69).

Occasionally, this involves gender ambiguity, as in Uno Akira's poster for Terayama Shûji's (1969) play *La Marie Vison* which includes various sexually ambiguous figures (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 55).

Kaneko Kuniyoshi's poster for Kara Jûrô's play *John Silver: The Beggar of Love* (1970), seems at first to be simply an example of 'decorative woman.' There are two women, naked except for red and white striped socks, ankle boots, and red bows in their hair. They admire their own beauty with hand-held mirrors. On a closer look, however, they seem to be sitting on toilet seats in the middle of a river. Their beauty is thus uneasily juxtaposed with the theme of abjection (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 64).

In the play itself, the opening scene takes place in a public toilet, and this is one reference in the poster. David Goodman also explains, however, that much of the action of this play takes place in a cabaret whose name is Tuman'gang, a river in Korea.

The Japanised version of this name inspires several puns on a vulgar word for female genitalia (Goodman, 1988: 235). The play makes multiple references to the female body, to excrement, and to abjection, some of which are hinted at in Kaneko's poster. In the play there is an extraordinary chain of signification, which links the toilet, the cabaret, the river, the female genitalia, the unhealed wound of a returned soldier, and the blood of those who died on the Asian mainland (see the translation of the play in Goodman, 1988: 237–282).

Here, as elsewhere, Kara Jûrô is using theatre to comment on Japan's unresolved history as an imperialist power. The use of these tropes of abjection provides an emotional and visceral jolt to the viewer. The Korean woman's memories of having been assaulted by the soldiers refer to the sexual exploitation of women from Korea and other countries by the Japanese military. Her body also, however, stands in a metaphorical and metonymic relationship with the land of Korea – Japan's former colony. [8]

By the end of the 1960s, the abject in the form of the expulsion of bodily fluids would become a recurrent theme, at times being deployed as a metaphor for the industrial pollution which became an increasingly challenging social issue at this stage of Japan's industrialisation. At other times, the abject body is a metaphor for political corruption. [9]

The Forbidden and the Fetishised

The fascination with the possibility of seeing the female genitals is exemplified in Kushida Mitsuhiro's poster for Betsuyaku Minoru's (1967) play *Matchi-uri no Shôjo* (The Little Match Girl) (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 19). In this adaptation of the classic story, the little match girl apparently survives by allowing men to peep at this forbidden sight. The poster dramatises this in a graphically strong composition. The legs of the little match girl are in a lurid pink. Between her legs is an area of blackness and darkness, except for the lighted match which would illuminate the forbidden area. [10] In its use of this particular shade of hot pink, associated with the commercial porn industry, and the trope of the peepshow (Buruma, 1985: 12–13), this poster and play demonstrate the links between the supposed transgressiveness of the underground theatre movement and the commodification of the female body in the commercialised porn industry. For all the libertarian ideologies of the men of the underground theatre movement, their treatment of the actual women who acted in their plays, and the representations of femininity in their art works were uncomfortably close to that of the commercialised sex industry.

The *Little Match Girl* poster is unusual in its frank confrontation with the sight of the female body – or at least the possibility of such a sight. Most other posters are characterised by fetishisation and displacement. The underground theatre posters were produced before the ban on showing or representing pubic hair was lifted. This ban necessitated various graphic solutions to the need to hide the pubic area, and various

metaphorical or fetishised substitutes for the male and female genitals were used (Allison, 2000). In Uno Akira's poster for Terayama Shûji's (1968) play *A Thousand and One Nights in Shinjuku*, the woman's genitalia are obscured by a flock of ribbon bows fluttering through the air (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 51). In Kushida Mitsuhiro's poster for Endô Takurô's (1968) play *Rukureshia no Ryôjoku* (The Violation of Lucretia), the woman's genitalia are covered by a round target (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 41). In Uno Akira's poster for Terayama Shûji and Takenaka Shigeo's (1970) adaptation of *Lysistrata, Baron Burabura*, a toothy smile – the logo for the *Tenjô Sajiki* theatre group – is superimposed on the lower half of a woman's body, thus creating the frightening image of a *vagina dentata* (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 55).

While there is a necessary reticence about the genital area, there is an extraordinary fascination with the portrayal of women with bared breasts. Semi-naked women appear in the posters of the underground movement with monotonous regularity. There is, however, a tension between the breast as the focus of erotic attention, and the lactating breast of the mother.

The Erotic and the Maternal

We have already mentioned Yokoo Tadanori's poster for Mishima's book, which shows a woman expressing milk from her breast. Another example of this trope is in Yokoo's poster for *butoh* dancer Hijikata Tatsumi's (1965) performance 'La Danse en Rose.' This poster includes a quotation from the early modern European painting 'Gabrielle D'Estrees and her Sister.' In this case, however, milk spurts from the breast of one of the women (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 72). Uno Akira's 1968 poster for Terayama Shûji's (1968) play *A Thousand and One Nights in Shinjuku* once again presents the lactating breast, combined with a fetishistic obscuring of the genital area by a whimsical series of flying ribbon bows, as we have seen above.

The recurrent scene of the lactating breast seems to have several meanings. In one sense, the sight of breast milk which is divorced from its usual purpose of nursing a baby seems simply designed to shock. However, the extravagant way in which the milk is expelled from the body also suggests a fascination with the challenging of bodily boundaries, another example of the recurrent theme of abjection. It is also possible, however, that this is a displacement for the expulsion of other bodily fluids which can not easily be portrayed in (relatively) mainstream visual culture [11].

I would also suggest, however, that these representations suggest an ambivalence about the female body, about whether it is to be seen as the focus of erotic or maternal interest. It is perhaps significant that the women are never ever shown suckling an infant. The recurrent scenes of the lactating breast which has been transformed into an almost carnivalesque spectacle, seem to suggest an attempt to resolve this anxiety. The recurrent portrayal of abjected female bodies confirms the hypothesis of an abiding anxiety about the female body and femininity.

This ambivalence is most vividly expressed in the works of Terayama Shûji, and the visual art associated with his theatre group, Tenjô Sajiki. The poster for the play *Shintokumaru* (1970) by Terayama Shûji and J. A. Caesar shows an adolescent boy in school uniform. A maternal figure appears in a different graphic space of the poster, but the two spaces are linked by the obi (sash) of her discarded kimono. The woman is naked but the obi which she has just removed is wrapping itself around the boy's body – an extraordinary visual pun where the sash seems to morph into an umbilical cord, attaching the boy once again to the maternal body. In this case it is a forbidden relationship with a stepmother which is referenced. For English-speaking viewers, a similar effect would have been achieved with the use of apron strings. The boy's school uniform is reminiscent of a military uniform. In Terayama's work, like that of Kara Jûrô, there are continual references to the militarist period of Japanese history. In the case of Terayama, this is often linked to the pathologies of the patriarchal family system, where children are inducted into sexuality, into family loyalties, and ultimately into loyalty to the nation.

Conclusion

The visual culture associated with the underground theatre movement of 1960s Japan consistently displays a fascination with the female body as spectacle. There is a gendered split in these representations, with men being portrayed as artists, auteurs and protagonists, and the figures of women – rarely named – being deployed as decorative elements in many of the posters. There are a few women who are named as famous actresses, such as Kara Jûrô's erstwhile partner, Ri Reisen. However, as discussed by Yasuko Ikeuchi in this issue, they are rarely presented as auteurs. In the visual representations of women, they appear as either decorative or grotesque figures, with a particular fascination with the abject – a fascination which is the focus of abiding anxieties about the female body and femininity, and an ambivalence about the maternal.

These theatrical productions and the associated visual artworks were largely produced in late 1960s and early 1970s Japan, just two decades after Japan's defeat in the Second World War, and following closely on the failure of the left-wing movement to defeat the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960. There was an understandable anxiety about masculinity, for the militarised masculinities of the wartime period no longer had legitimacy, and neither the militant masculinities of the student left activists, nor the necrophilic nationalism of Mishima Yukio could provide a viable alternative (Mackie, 2005: 135–8).

The representations discussed in this essay also, however, suggest an anxiety about femininity. The ambivalence about whether the female body should be viewed as an object of erotic fascination or maternal attachment can be found in many times and places, but I would argue that there are particular nuances attached to the representations of the maternal body in these underground theatre posters.

The carnivalesque representations of the extravagantly lactating breasts in many ways render the maternal body as relatively harmless, a figure of fun and excess rather than danger. The danger of excessive attachment to the maternal body is rarely, however, far from the surface. These dangers are apparent in the evil goddess of the play *Shintokumaru* and the castrating figure of Abe Sada. Is it too much of a leap to suggest that these male auteurs were also rejecting the family system of the recent wartime period, and the mothers that they saw as having contributed to the inculcation of these dangerous forms of nationalist identification?

Notes

[1] This essay draws on papers presented at the Biennial Conference of the Japanese Studies Association of Australia at the University of Adelaide, the Women's Worlds Conference at Ewha University in Seoul, a seminar presented at the School of Media, Film and Theatre at the University of New South Wales, and parts of a public lecture presented at the German Institute of Japanese Studies in Tokyo during 2005. I am indebted to the audiences on those occasions for discussions which helped me to clarify my ideas. I have particularly benefited from discussions with Peter Eckersall, Yasuko Ikeuchi, Sharalyn Orbaugh and Ed Scheer.

[2] This is not to suggest that feminism was discovered in the 1970s. On the contrary, there was a history of feminist activism dating back to the 1870s. However, a particular strand of feminist thought which focused on issues of bodily autonomy, sexuality and reproduction (women's liberation) appeared in the early 1970s, largely in reaction against the masculinism of the New Left which was also one of the strands of thought which contributed to the underground theatre movement (Mackie, 2003a). As we shall see, however, the underground theatre groups seem to have developed without the benefit of the feminist ideas which were developing at the time.

[3] In Anglophone cultural forms, see, for example Martin Sharp's use of images of the naked female body in *Oz* Magazine. Some of Sharp's posters for *Oz* are reproduced in Richard Neville's 1995 memoir of the era, *Hippie Hippie Shake* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1995). In 1967 and 1968, the rock musical *Hair*, which featured on-stage nudity, shocked audiences in New York and London (Marwick, 1998: 357–8).

[4] See, for example, Yokoo Tadanori's poster for Tenjō Sajiki's production of Terayama Shūji's *The Crime of Fatso Ōyama* (1967) (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 49) and the photographs of performances by the *Tenjō Sajiki* theatrical troupe in Ōsawa et al (2000). Several of Yokoo's posters are reproduced at: <<http://w00.middlebury.edu/ID085A/postwar/gallery3.html>>, accessed 13 March 2006.

[5] In addition to the underground theatre posters, see some of the posters for other art forms of the time. See, for example: Yokoo Tadanori's poster for the film, *Shin Abashiri Bangaichi* (1969) (reproduced in Aida Henshūbu, 1995: 31); see also my discussion of visual representations of sixties masculinities (Mackie, 2005: 126–144).

[6] See, inter alia, Hunt (1992), Hunt (1991), Tickner (1987), Pollock (1994), Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) Pollock (1996), Evans and Donald (1999).

[7] The bullet train also makes an appearance in Yokoo Tadanori's poster for the 1965 'Persona' exhibition (reproduced in Aida Henshūbu, 1995: 16).

[8] On the body as national allegory, see Donald (1998), Liu (1994).

[9] See, for example, 'Nihon: Fushoku Rettô' (Japan: Rotten Archipelago), Title Cartoon from special edition of *Asahi Jânaru*, January 1971, where political corruption and industrial pollution are allegorised through the figure of a woman in a sea of putrid liquid, her body excreting fluids from every possible opening. See also Akasegawa Genpei's poster for Kara Jûrô's (1969) play *Shôjo Toshî* (Maiden City), where Tokyo is submerged, with only the tower of the Diet Building appearing above the mass of liquid which covers the city (reproduced in Akasegawa and Otsuji, 1995: 129; and similar scenes on p. 130).

[10] In a possibly humorous detail, the cover of the matchbox at the bottom of the poster is used to advertise a brand of contact lenses. Matches were also deployed in many theatrical performances. In one of Ono Yôko's early happenings, actors and audience were in a darkened theatre, the naked bodies of the actors occasionally illuminated by a lighted match. In Terayama's 1978 play *Nuhikun* (Instructions to Servants), lighted matches are used to punctuate the darkness in a particularly effective scene.

[11] I am indebted to my colleague Jason Karlin who has suggested a connection with Linda Williams' (1989) discussion of the 'money shot' in pornographic movies. The only other bodily fluid to appear regularly in the posters is blood, in similarly extravagant scenes of swordplay or suicide and excessive arterial bleeding from male bodies. See, for example, Yokoo Tadanori's poster for Kara Jûrô's (1968) work *Yui Shôsetsu* (reproduced in Goodman, 1999: 62).

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Editorial Note

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