Defying Fate, Demanding Futurity: Nostalgia, Queerness, and Family in

Ikuhara Kunihiko's *Mawaru Penguindrum*

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Abstract: In discussions of anime director Ikuhara Kunihiko, much emphasis has been placed on the prominence of queerness in his works. *Mawaru Penguindrum* (2011), with its focus on familial belonging and relatively low incidence of explicitly LGBTQ+ characters, is consequently often framed as the most heteronormative of Ikuhara's works. Drawing on the ways in which queerness has deployed in queer theory as a force that pushes against normativity, this paper argues that *Penguindrum* can nonetheless be read as a queer text insofar as it queers the concepts of family and nostalgia. If "family" is at the heart of *Penguindrum*, it is not the heteronormative nuclear family that Lee Edelman critiques as a force of reproductive futurity but families of choice formed in response to exclusion from normative society. Additionally, working with Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia as well as work in memory studies, I read nostalgia in *Penguindrum* as an affect that is queer insofar as it does not seek to replicate or hold onto the past but rather uses past attachment as a generative force for forming new connections. Ultimately, queer nostalgia serves as a crucial link between *Penguindrum*'s two main themes: the idealization of the nuclear family and forms of societal belonging in the wake of the 1995 Tokyo sarin gas attacks.

Keywords: nostalgia, queer studies, memory studies, Aum Shinrikyo, kinship, *Mawaru Penguindrum*

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Placed within director Ikuhara Kunihiko's larger body of work, the 2011 anime series *Mawaru Penguindrum* is both a defining text in his corpus and an outlier to his other work. A family drama exploring the impact of the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attacks in Tokyo, *Penguindrum's* stylistic flourishes—its layered symbolism, magical girl (mahô shôjo) trappings, and complicated, quasi-incestuous familial relationships—are all elements associated with Ikuhara's distinct brand of directing. While such qualities were present in Ikuhara's work as a showrunner on *Sailor Moon*, his reputation for dense, often esoteric work was cemented by *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (*Shôjo Kakumei Utena*). Originally airing from 1997 to 1998, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* is ostensibly a magical girl anime, but it uses the conventions of the genre to raise questions of gender normativity, unhealthy attachment, and cycles of abuse. As a result of the series' dense themes and metafictional sensibility, *Utena* has emerged as a key text in studies of Ikuhara's work.[1] *Penguindrum*, which marked Ikuhara's return to directorial work post-*Utena,* is similarly ambitious in its scope and cryptic in its messages; as such, it is often seen as a text that is quintessentially 'Ikuhara.'[2][3]

At the same time, *Penguindrum* stands out from Ikuhara's larger body of work in one major respect: its representation (or lack thereof) of LGBT+ characters. As a director on *Sailor Moon,* Ikuhara oversaw the introduction of Sailor Neptune and Sailor Uranus, two characters whose recognizability as an archetypal femme/butch couple have made them lesbian icons beloved by both Japanese and international fans of girls' love (yuri) manga and anime.[4] Tenjô Utena, as a character who presents herself as a self-styled cross-dressing prince who aims to save princesses, further cemented Ikuhara's cult status among queer anime fans, especially given *Revolutionary Girl Utena's* focus on Utena's romantic relationship with another girl, Himemiya Anthy

(implicitly romantic in the TV series, explicitly so in the post-series film *Adolescence of Utena*). Similarly, Ikuhara's post-*Penguindrum* series, *Yurikuma Arashi* (2015) and *Sarazanmai* (2019), explored questions of queer desire and societal belonging through characters respectively identified as lesbians and gay men. By contrast, *Mawaru Penguindrum* is sometimes jokingly referred to among fans as "the most 'heterosexual' series of Ikuhara's works."[5] Queer characters and relationships are present in *Mawaru Penguindrum* but are secondary elements. The plot is driven by the efforts of the Takakura brothers, Shôma and Kanba, to discover the magical Penguindrum and thus save their terminally ill sister, Himari. *Penguindrum's* handling of its main queer character, Tokikage Yuri, has been criticized by fans, many of whom see "the jarring invocation of a predatory lesbian trope" in Yuri's morally ambiguous actions.[6] Though Yuri does have a female lover, her primary relationship is with the male character Tabuki Keijo, her childhood friend and current fiancé. Yuri ultimately chooses to stay with Tabuki. Given the basis of Yuri and Tabuki's relationship in shared grief over the loss of a childhood friend for whom both shared romantic feelings, their bond can be viewed as more platonic than romantic or sexual. However, the fact that Yuri remains one of *Penguindrum's* few explicitly queer characters means that her affirmation of Tabuki's 'love' carries uncomfortable implications about the relative value of domestic heterosexuality. Taken alongside the series' larger celebration of familial bonds, *Penguindrum's* resolution of Yuri's storyline can make the series appear startlingly conservative compared to Ikuhara's other work.

Without dismissing criticisms of *Penguindrum's* handling of particular characters and sexual politics, this paper argues that queerness is central to *Penguindrum's* thematic concerns. Working from a definition of queer in which

queerness encompasses not just non-normative gender and sexual identities but also a resistance to normativity at large, *Penguindrum* operates as a text that queers the concepts of family and relationality. Given the frequency with which the sanctity of the nuclear family is invoked to justify queerphobic legislation, it can seem counterintuitive, if not inherently misguided, to think of queerness and family together. At the same time, the popularity of terms such as "found family" and "chosen family" among queer communities speaks to a continued desire for the support provided by kinship structures. Given the increased hardships that come with falling outside the bounds of heteronormativity, the support provided by alternative forms of kinship is arguably all the more vital for queer survival. Following José Esteban Muñoz's engagement with Lee Edelman's theory of reproductivity futurity, this paper reads *Penguindrum's* depiction of multiple familial structures as critiquing the idealization of the nuclear family without dismissing the concept of family altogether. In *Penguindrum*, the nuclear family acts as a mechanism of social exclusion. By contrast, alternative family formations—which can be considered "queer" as they are non-normative—provide vital support systems for those subjects excluded by normativity.

Crucially, *Penguindrum's* investigation of family cannot be separated from the series' commentary on Japanese society. On a narrative level, the two themes are connected through the figures of the now-dead Takakura parents, Kenzan and Chiemi, and the complicated legacy they leave their children. Takakura Kenzan and Chiemi were loving parents, but they were also deeply involved with the Kiga Group, a fictional terrorist organization responsible for a series of train attacks sixteen years before *Penguindrum* began. Though the Kiga Group employs bombs and is technically not a religious organization, it is nonetheless analogous to Aum Shinrikyo, the apocalyptic

cult responsible for a coordinated series of sarin gas attacks on Tokyo trains in 1995. Much like the real-life families of Aum members, the Takakura siblings in *Penguindrum* are judged guilty by association for their parents' crimes, with Himari's illness presented as a cosmic punishment for their family's sins. Though the 1995 attacks are not directly referenced until midway through the series, the specter of Aum haunts *Penguindrum* from its beginning, with the series' opening monologue on the unfairness of fate echoing the words of a former Aum member interviewed by Murakami Haruki.[7] Similarly, one cannot divorce *Penguindrum*'s exploration of family from its reflection on both the Aum incident and subsequent reactions to the attacks. Public and private spheres, often considered separate, are inexorably linked through the common factor of trauma.

In examining trauma as a common link between *Penguindrum's* thematic exploration of familial and societal belonging, Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia serves as a useful framework. Though Freud would later go on to rethink melancholia as a precondition for mourning in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), his original definitions of the terms in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) define melancholia as an unhealthy attachment to a lost object while mourning is a healthy process that works to let go of the object. In *Penguindrum,* Freudian melancholia is portrayed as a precarious position for both remembrance and community formation. However, *Penguindrum*'s status as a deeply nostalgic text complicates Freud's pathologizing distinction between mourning as a healthy detachment and melancholia as an unhealthy attachment. Formally, this nostalgic tendency is reflected in *Penguindrum's* frequent reference to texts such as Miyazawa Kenji's 1927 *Night on the Galactic Railroad,* 1980s Japanese rock band ARB, and Ikuhara's work on *Sailor Moon*; visually, nostalgia renders the Takakura household a collection of knickknacks, lovingly

framed photos, and childhood mementos. Instead of a complete "detachment of the libido" that leaves the ego "free and uninhibited," *Penguindrum's* characters and *Penguindrum* as a series remain deeply attached to and affected by the past.[8] Accordingly, instead of a strict Freudian language of mourning and melancholia, this essay seeks to deploy more recent work on nostalgia and memory studies. Specifically, Marianne Hirsch's notions of rememory and postmemory as well as Svetlana Boym's concepts of restorative versus recuperative nostalgia serve as alternative frameworks for examining remembrance beyond a rigid Freudian distinction between melancholia and mourning. Ultimately, this paper argues that *Penguindrum* advocates a queer relationship towards the past, in which the past is not a static ideal but a source of affective currents that can be channeled into new forms.

Queerness, Queer Identity, and Family

In speaking of queerness, one must contend with the divide in how the term is used among academics versus the general public. In popular usage, 'queer' refers to members of the LGBT+ community, particularly those who exceed or fall outside the boundaries of accepted identity labels. Yet while this definition describes fluidity, it also acts as an individual attribute and an identity category: one speaks of the queer community, queer rights, and queer representation. By contrast, while queer studies continue to foreground resistance to cis-heteronormativity, "queer" as academics have deployed it expands beyond queer identity by challenging the processes by which identity is "normalized and sustained."[9] Rather than acting as an identitarian marker, queerness in this sense destabilizes boundaries and definitions; it is a counter-normative force, one which affects other terms without claiming a stable location for itself.

In using queer theory as a theoretical lens, it is necessary to be attentive to the distance between 'queer' as a verb and as a subject position. Positioning oneself against norms does not necessarily prevent one from adopting homophobic and reactionary attitudes, as so many neoconservative movements readily demonstrate, and scholarly uses of queer as a term should be attendant to structural power dynamics at play. Lisa Duggan's work on homonormativity cautions us to regard how institutional systems can envelop queer subjects without necessarily "contest[ing] dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions."[10] Gay marriage, for example, can be read as queering the concept of marriage, but it can also be read as affirming marriage as an institution. Against the force of queer liberalism and its investment in a neoliberal project of multiculturalism, queer theorists and activists must be necessarily wary of how their work may inadvertently reproduce dominant ideologies and institutions. In analyzing *Penguindrum* through the lens of queer theory, my goal is not to foreclose criticisms of its portrayal of queer characters but rather to extend the concept of queerness beyond romantic relationships. Insofar as the romantic pairings within the show are predominately male/female, *Penguindrum* does invest a certain amount of energy in heteronormativity and can be criticized on those grounds. However, the concept of queerness extends beyond romantic relationships so that scholars can speak of queering temporality or queering knowledge. It is this sense of queerness as destabilization that enables an alternative reading of the series, one in which queerness can be located in *Penguindrum's* depiction of the nuclear family unit.

Like queerness, "family" is another highly contested term, particularly when it intersects with queer studies. Given the long history of homophobic rhetoric that relies on appeals to an idealized nuclear family—such as "family values" and "protecting the

children" from the moral corruption of queerness—many queer theorists are rightfully wary of accounts that celebrate familial intimacy. Chief among these theorists is Lee Edelman, whose work in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* explicitly places queerness in opposition to what Edelman terms reproductive futurism, a vision of futurity centered on and produced for the figure of the Child as an emblem of "the biological fact of heterosexual procreation."[11] However, in positioning the Child as the "perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics," Edelman makes a number of assumptions about who this Child is.[12] While Edelman takes care to separate the figure of the Child from "the lived experiences of any historical children," these lived experiences nonetheless place significant pressure on Edelman's observations of the abstract Child.[13] The abstract Child, as José Esteban Muñoz notes, is an inherently privileged subject; for children who are Black, disabled, queer, or otherwise disavowed by society, the future cannot be taken for granted.[14] To children for whom futurity is never promised, imagining a future continues to be a radical act.

Within *Mawaru Penguindrum,* the Takakura siblings are the characters who most clearly occupy the space of disavowed subjects. As the children of known terrorists, the Takakuras are ostracized in the same way individuals with even tangential relationships to Aum Shinrikyo came to be outsiders to "normal" society in the wake of the sarin attacks. In the post-Aum polarization of society into "'good' versus 'evil,' 'sanity' versus 'madness,' 'health' versus 'disease,'" Japanese media's placement of Aum members, their families, and even victims of the attacks on the side of disease meant that individuals marked by Aum faced significant discrimination in both their professional and personal lives.[15] To be associated with Aum was to be a social nonentity, with potential employers and neighbors often making significant efforts to

avoid contagion with Aum-adjacent individuals. Left orphaned and socially outcast by

their parents' actions, the Takakura siblings feel their exclusion bitterly, Shôma

declaring in *Penguindrum's* opening monologue that "ever since that day, none of us

had a future and the only certain thing was that we wouldn't amount to anything."[16] As

children condemned by "fate" to social nonexistence, the Takakuras are the historical

children who undergird Edelman's abstract Child. Consequently, the siblings' kinship is

less a matter of reproductive futurity than survival, an attempt to create the familial

structures that fate and circumstance have denied them.

Further, while the form of the Takakuras' makeshift family may outwardly model

a nuclear family with the role of father played by the playboy Kanba, mother by house

husband Shôma, and beloved child by cheerful Himari, theirs is a volatile imitation of

conventional domesticity. Kanba and Shôma may act as quasi-parents to Himari, but

Himari's terminal illness precludes them from fulfilling the chief imperative of

reproductive futurism: the survival of the child and, through her, the reproduction of the

extant social order.[17] Moreover, while the siblings provisionally occupy the categories of

mother, father, and child, these roles are not neatly separated but often blurred and in

flux. Himari, for example, may be particularly suited for the role of a vulnerable child,

but she also takes on a more parental role when attempting to keep her brothers in line.

Here, family roles are porous and continent rather than immutable, and nuclear family

structures are performed instead of being inhabited. Though this can be seen as

valorizing normative familial structures through the desire to recuperate them, the fact

that the Takakuras must perform conventional family also works to problematize the a

priori naturalness of the nuclear family. The gaps and slippages between the ideal

nuclear family and the reality of the Takakura family show the 'natural' family unit of

mother, father, and child to be not an innate structure but a constructed ideal, what Judith Butler would call a "regulatory fiction" that conditions normativity.[18]

The performative nature of the Takakura family is further underscored by the bonds that tie the siblings together. Though *Penguindrum* initially presents the Takakuras as siblings raised by the same parents, in the series' last few episodes, it is revealed that Kanba and Himari were adopted into the Takakura family after being mistreated by their biological families. Instead of being tied together by blood as the members of the paradigmatic nuclear family are, the Takakura siblings are a family of choice. To outsiders, the lack of blood relation between the Takakura siblings further invalidates their status as a true family, with a passing journalist describing them as "make-believe siblings."[19] The regulatory fiction of the nuclear family here acts as a regulatory ideal, or "an ideal according to which certain forms of love become possible and others, impossible."[20] The nuclear family is simply one kinship formation among others. However, when elevated as a regulatory ideal, it presents itself as the only viable option, delegitimizing other forms of kinship as 'make-believe' families rather than actual ones. Within *Penguindrum,* the fact that the Takakura siblings come together as a family only after Himari and Kanba's biological families fail to provide for them problematizes the privileged position of the nuclear family. Far from being a site of respite from the world, the nuclear family in *Penguindrum* is a source of trauma—not just for Himari and Kanba, but for nearly all of *Penguindrum's* characters. For example, Yuri is physically abused as a child by her father,[21] and Tabuki is driven to self-harm because of his mother's emotional neglect. Notably, Yuri's father justifies his abuse as an act of love by drawing on the rhetoric of familial love: "Only blood-related family members can be trusted. Family never lies. Pure and beautiful love exist only among

family."[22] Even as her father leaves her with injuries and broken bones, Yuri's conviction that only family can truly love her compels her to remain with him. While *Penguindrum* does not quite deliver a wholesale condemnation of the nuclear family—as a child, Shôma appears to have a healthy relationship with his parents even as their work outside the home leads them to commit acts of terrorism—the series does challenge the elevation of the heteronormative family above other kinship structures. Through depicting birth families that decidedly fail their children, *Penguindrum* asks how investments in the nuclear family can elide or even justify harm.

The tyranny of heteronormative familial structures is further dramatized through the Child Broiler, a quasi-purgatorial space in *Penguindrum* where "unneeded children are gathered" and turned into "invisible entities" that "eventually vanish and cease to exist in the world."[23] Both a metaphor for a psychosocial state of being as well as a physical location, the Child Broiler visually resembles a warehouse with conveyor belts delivering children to the sharp teeth of a machine that tears them into indistinguishable pieces (Fig. 1). In depicting the Child Broiler thus, Ikuhara implies that the cruelty it represents is not an anomaly, but rather a vital feature of society: just as warehouses and factories are infrastructures that allow the smooth functioning of consumer society, so too the mechanisms of exclusion and isolation that the Child Broiler represents are structures undergirding the creation of normative society. Regulatory ideals never recognize the Child Broiler's unneeded children as subjects in the first place, a fact emphasized by their depiction as literal nameless and faceless pictograms, and so they lead lives "sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost."[24] In this way, the nuclear family is haunted by its outliers: the children it fails and those it refuses to accommodate. In *Penguindrum,* Himari and Tabuki are

transported to the Child Broiler as children after their parents abandon them. Rather than resisting, both characters are resigned to their fate, welcoming annihilation as an escape from a world where they are not wanted, and it is only through the intervention of non-family members that they are able to regain a sense of self-worth and leave the Child Broiler. For the unchosen children in *Penguindrum*, alternative kinship formations—adopted siblings, families of choice, affinity with individuals not related by blood—ultimately allow survival in the face of a hostile society. Given the importance of kinship structures to material survival, rather than discounting the concept of family altogether, it is perhaps more useful to argue for an expanded definition of family, one in which there is "no one law of kinship, no one structure of kinship, no one language of kinship, and no one prospect of kinship" but rather multiple forms of belonging over a single heteronormative model.[25] In its criticism of a singular model of belonging, *Penguindrum* can be read as working in the vein of what José Esteban Muñoz terms queer utopianism, a sensibility which Muñoz describes as "one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity."[26] Instead of an insular unit defined by blood ties, *Penguindrum* offers a vision of family as a contingent and expansive structure, open to change and the expansion of who is allowed within its bounds.

Fig. 1: The Child Broiler turns children (represented, as nearly all background characters in *Penguindrum* are, as faceless pictograms) into glass-like shards.

Community and Collective Memory

As previously mentioned, *Penguindrum's* commentary on family cannot be separated from its commentary on Japanese society. Through characters whose personal lives are extensively impacted by the train attacks, *Penguindrum* explores themes of belonging and exclusion that echo the questions raised by Japanese intellectuals in response to the sarin attacks. In the wake of the attacks, Japanese media, by and large, casts Aum followers as deviant individuals brainwashed by guru Asahara Shoko; in doing so, however, they also recreated the isolating social dynamic that led many of Aum's followers to join the cult in the first place. Before joining Aum, most members were not social outcasts but well-educated young people drawn to Aum because they were dissatisfied with postwar Japanese society and "the 'economy-first'

ethos of postwar Japanese life."[27] Though not necessarily societal rejects, these individuals rejected the values of postwar Japanese society and located themselves outside it. However, post-war Japanese society significantly lacked an "effective, normal, subsocial system that can absorb people who cannot function in mainstream society."[28] While not all dissatisfied youths turned to religion, the atmosphere of unaddressed unease helps explain the heightened appeal of Aum's teachings, especially its denouncement of "Japanese society as an oppressive and evil force."[29]

At the same time, Asahara's vision of an Armageddon dividing humanity into saved Aum members and unsaved others recreated the same "them-and-us" dichotomy that Aum's followers found so intolerable in Japanese society.[30] One of the quiet motifs of the Aum affair and its aftermath is the cyclicality of ingroup/outgroup dynamics: Japanese society's inability to accept certain misfits led them to gravitate to Aum, which inverted normative Us/Them dynamics by positioning Aum members as enlightened survivors to the unworthy masses. In the aftermath of the gas attacks, Japanese media once again framed Aum's relation to society in terms of "'good' versus 'evil,' 'sanity' versus 'madness,' 'health' versus 'disease,'" with the members of "normal" society falling on the side of health and sanity and Aum members placed firmly on that of disease and madness.[31] Though a genuine sense of social malaise drove Aum's popularity, neither Asahara's attempt to bring about an apocalypse nor the wholesale rejection of Aum members truly resolved the alienating dynamics of Us and Them. Within *Penguindrum,* the unresolved tensions of the Aum affair resurface in Kanba's decision to join the Kiga Group to pay for Himari's medical treatments. As Himari's condition worsens, Kanba's actions become more extreme until he is manipulated into planning another train attack in the hopes of saving his sister. Here, the Takakuras' punishment for their parents'

crimes—Himari's illness as well as the social exclusion that makes it difficult for her brothers to pay for her treatment—acts not to prevent future tragedy but to further the divide between "Us" and "Them," leading to a deadly return and repetition of the past. Like Murakami, Ikuhara critiques the collective response to the Aum affair and calls for different forms of remembrance.

In *Penguindrum,* Oginome Ringo serves as a central node for examining different forms of attachment to the past. Like the Takakura siblings, Ringo is born on the date of the train attacks and is directly related to a major player in the attacks: her older sister, Momoka, who possessed the ambiguously defined power to transfer fate and who died using that power to protect others. A childhood friend of Yuri and Tabuki, Momoka looms large in their lives even after her death as the girl who used her powers to save them from their abusive situations; as such, Yuri and Tabuki's relationship is one founded less on mutual romantic interest than on shared grief for Momoka, who serves as a lost love object for both. Though she has no real memories of her sister, Ringo views Momoka in a similarly idealized light. In particular, because Momoka's death put considerable stress on her parents' marriage, Ringo associates her older sister with the possibility of an idyllic family life; consequently, to prevent her parents from finalizing their divorce, Ringo attempts to 'become' Momoka by carrying out the events laid out in her sister's diary. Believing that Momoka's diary details a fated connection between her and Tabuki, Ringo relentlessly pursues Tabuki as part of what she calls "Project M," a plan that will culminate in an act of ultimate connection: Tabuki impregnating Ringo. Fully confirmed as Tabuki's "fated person" through sex, Ringo will then be able to fully become Momoka, the rift between Ringo's divorced parents will heal, and Ringo will "marry Tabuki-san, live in a little house, and become a happy family with a puppy and a

baby."[32] Heteronormative marriage, complete with a puppy and baby, becomes a panacea for grief and interpersonal conflict in Ringo's mind.

Beyond illustrating the lengths to which heteronormativity structures ideals of happiness, Ringo's storyline can be read in terms of Freud's paradigmatic account of mourning and melancholia. While both respond to loss, Freud describes melancholia as a state characterized by "an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object."[33] Instead of transferring their attachments to another object, the melancholic takes the lost object inward, thereby preserving it and their attachments to it: "by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction."[34] In Ringo's case, the introjection of her lost sister quite literally translates into an attempt to become Momoka. Further, following Freud's observation, melancholia often involves "a loss of a more ideal kind" with the melancholic perhaps able to "know *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in [them]," Ringo's extreme attachment to Momoka is less tied to who her sister actually was than to the fact that Momoka represents a lost ideal of family.[35] Unable to understand the true nature of her loss, Ringo fervently clings to the figure of her sister in the hopes of being able to restore her family. For Freud, such attachment is characteristic of melancholia, which he defines as a fundamentally pathological state: while mourning involves the gradual detachment of libidinal energies from the lost object, eventually rendering the ego "free and uninhibited" to transfer those energies onto a new object, the melancholic is unable to let go of the lost object.[36] If mourning works towards an end goal, melancholia is a persistent and indefinite state that entraps the afflicted in a static vision of the past.

Stuck in the past, Ringo suffers from a reduced sense of self due to her self-appointed status as Momoka's replacement and significant blocks in her relationships

with others. In holding onto past relationships, Ringo curtails her ability to make future connections: reviving her parents' marriage means excluding the possibility of forming relationships with her father's new girlfriend and her child. In contrast, Ringo's pursuit of Tabuki excludes the possibility of connecting with Yuri, whose memories of Momoka could help Ringo better connect to her sister. Instead of seeing Yuri as a potential ally in grief, Ringo's obsession with restoring the past means that Yuri can only be viewed as an obstacle to be eliminated. A prime example of such exclusionary logic is demonstrated in episode three, in which Ringo breaks into Tabuki's house with a pot of homemade curry to ensure he participates in Curry Day, a monthly Oginome family tradition that commemorates Momoka's favorite food. However, Yuri has already cooked for the occasion, so Ringo's only course of action is to steal Yuri's curry off the stove—burning herself in the process—and replace it with her own. "Curry eaten with people you love tastes like happiness," Ringo tells us. But happiness is a zero-sum game here: it is either Ringo's curry or Yuri's, Ringo or Yuri and never both.[37] While such animosity is a typical element of love triangles, *Penguindrum's* evocation of Aum casts Ringo's attitude in a darker light. The stakes of Ringo's situation may be less dramatic than those of Aum, but her unsettling behavior towards Tabuki, stalking and eventually attempting to coerce him into sex, highlights another demonstration of the harm produced by Ringo's melancholic attachment to the past.

Ultimately, Project M fails, and Ringo escapes her obsession with Tabuki as she relinquishes her attachment to an idealized, heteronormative family. Yet while Freud proclaims that the work of mourning is complete when the ego is detached from the lost object, Ringo continues to hold a lingering affection for her sister even as she builds new relationships with others. Given Momoka's continual relevance to Ringo, Freud's

pathologizing division between mourning and melancholia begins to feel inadequate in describing *Penguindrum's* vision of remembrance. Rather than a strict delineation between melancholia and mourning, Marianne Hirsh offers an alternative framework for imagining forms of mourning that do not fully abandon the lost object. As part of her work on how trauma is transmitted between Holocaust survivors and their children as second-generation survivors, Hirsch develops the categories of rememory and postmemory by extending Freudian concepts to the realm of cultural memory. Like how melancholia leads to an introjection of the lost object, rememory operates through identification with inherited trauma: a second-generation survivor hears her mother's stories of life in the camps and tries to imagine herself in her mother's place. This act of imagining, moreover, is a particularly bodily one, with many second-generation survivors feeling compelled to receive "the parents' bodily experience of trauma," often by unconsciously wounding themselves in the same way their parents were wounded during their time in the camps.[38] Given the physical dangers rememory poses, Hirsch considers it dangerous for much the same reasons that Freud considers melancholia unhealthy. There is a sense of endless repetition in both, with memories "transmitted to be repeated and reenacted, [and] not to be worked through."[39]

In contrast to the repetitive "self-wounding and retraumatization" that characterizes rememory, postmemory is proposed by Hirsch as a less self-destructive form of cultural remembrance.[40] Using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms, Hirsch identifies postmemory with "'allo-identification' or 'identification with'" as opposed to the "auto-identification" or "identification as" that characterizes rememory.[41] Following auto-identification's emphasis on connection based on sameness, rememory attempts to collapse the distance between past and present, self and other. The second-generation

survivor transforms her body to resemble that of her mother; Ringo becomes her sister so that she can restore the past. By contrast, postmemory, following allo-identification's emphasis on connection across constitutive differences, attempts to bridge the gap between individuals while acknowledging that this distance can never be fully conquered. The past can neither be retrieved nor can the distance between self and other be fully conquered, but one can still sympathize with another's experiences even if one cannot fully empathize with them. In this way, postmemory's power lies in its ability to be affiliative, to forge alliances while acknowledging "the irreducibility of the other."[42] As a form of remembrance that honors the past without being beholden to it, postmemory allows Ringo to work through trauma instead of repetitively circling it. She can create new connections instead of desperately clinging to old, fraying ones. The past cannot be retrieved, but even if Ringo's parents never remarry, her affection for her father does not have to disappear. Instead of clinging to the childhood ideal of a nuclear family, she can now forge a new, healthier connection with her father while creating her own new, non-biological family.

In championing the general spirit of the past over its direct restoration, *Penguindrum* can further be viewed as working in the mode of what Svetlana Boym terms reflective nostalgia. In *The Future of Nostalgia,* Boym notes that while collective memories of a shared past can serve as a powerful catalyst for empathy towards others, nostalgia that seeks to return to a lost and idealized homeland has often catalyzed highly exclusionary forms of community building. In "put[ting] emphasis on nostos," or the notion of a lost home, restorative nostalgia can serve as a justification for harming or expelling those who do not properly belong to this vision of home.[43] In *Penguindrum*, Ringo's attempts to preserve her parents' marriage as well as Kanba's determination to

save Himari can be read as efforts born of restorative nostalgia, with both characters resorting to desperate measures in an attempt to forestall loss. While the two characters may operate on different scales—Ringo's actions primarily affect Tabuki while Kanba's involvement with the Kiga Group leads him to commit acts of terrorism—both characters are motivated by a desire for stability: whether the threat is divorce or illness, both seek to protect an idealized familial formation from external dangers. As such, their actions speak to the dangers of restorative nostalgia and the narrowly defined communities it creates.

In contrast to the often-reactionary impulses of restorative nostalgia, Boym proposes reflective nostalgia as another paradigm for remembrance. Rather than seeking a return to an idealized origin, reflective nostalgia "dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance"; as such, it emphasizes "new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis."[44] Described as containing "elements of both mourning and melancholia," reflective nostalgia thus recognizes the irretrievability of the past without necessarily disavowing or completely detaching from the past.[45] While restorative nostalgia characterizes harmful attachments to the past in *Penguindrum,* reflective nostalgia is positioned as a healthier form of cultural remembrance. The distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is perhaps most clearly shown in Ringo's character arc, which can also be read as a transition from restorative to reflective nostalgia. Though Ringo learns to let go of the desire to become Momoka and restore her family to a past perfection, her fondness for her sister does not disappear completely. Instead, Ringo is able to channel her love for Momoka into creating new forms of intimacy: Curry Day now occurs with the Takakuras, who serve as a new family for Ringo (Fig. 2). While it would be understandable for Ringo to resent the Takakuras

for their parents' role in Momoka's death, she instead chooses to embody her sister's spirit of kindness by aiding in the brothers' journey to cure Himari and defending her new friends against judgmental reporters. Momoka is remembered, but rather than fueling anger and resentment, her memory serves to open new forms of connection.

Fig. 2: Though Ringo is adamant Tabuki eats her curry, she ends up sharing dinner with the Takakuras instead. If, as Ringo states, curry is meant to be eaten with people you love, it is chosen family and not heteronormative romance that provides her with community and kinship.

Similarly, *Penguindrum's* ending can be seen as affirming the power of reflective modes of remembrance over restorative ones. Through the combination of Momoka's powers, self-sacrifice on the part of Kanba and Shôma, and the intervention of the mysterious Penguindrum, the Takakura brothers are able to save their beloved sister. However, they do so not through curing Himari's illness but through rewriting reality so that Himari was never ill in the first place. Given that Himari's illness is framed as a

supernatural punishment for the Takakura parents' sins, the newly created reality is one in which she has no relationship with the Takakuras; as such, it is also a world in which the familial bonds between Himari, Kanba, and Shôma never existed. At a glance, one could view this new world as the product of successful mourning: libidinal energies have been thoroughly transferred from a lost object to a new one, with characters no longer conscious of the old world they have lost. Yet traces of the previous world linger—in half-remembered dreams of another world, physical scars left from the process of altering fate, a note from "your brothers" that Himari finds in an old stuffed animal. An only child in this iteration of the universe, Himari is confused but touched by the note's proclamation of love, and without understanding who it is from or why it would be addressed to her, she begins to cry. As tears drip onto the paper, the scene cuts to two boys discussing Miyazawa Kenji's *The Galactic Railroad* as they pass outside the Takakura house. Visually, this scene mirrors a sequence from *Penguindrum's* first episode, except for the boys' hair colors and voices, which mark them as versions of Kanba and Shôma (Figs. 3 and 4).

Fig. 3: In one of the opening scenes of episode 1, two unnamed children pass by the Takakura house while discussing Miyazawa Kenji's *Night on the Galactic Railroad*.

Fig. 4: In the closing scenes of the series, two boys once again walk by the same house while discussing *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, their hair colors identifying them as Kanba and Shôma.

Formally and narratively, a return to origins thus occurs. However, it is a repetition with difference—not a restoration of the past and its relations, but an affectively charged reimaging of the past that aligns with reflective nostalgia's mode of remembrance. Even as the world and memories are rewritten, the force of love remains, and *Penguindrum* ends with Himari declaring: "I will never forget you. Forever and ever."[46] What is restored is not an idealized past, but the possibility of a future—one full of the potential for change and unhappiness, but a future nonetheless—for children who were never meant to survive.

Notes

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[1] Kirstian Lezubski, "The Power to Revolutionize the World, or Absolute Gender Apocalypse?" in *Channeling Wonder: Fairy Tales on Television*, ed. Pauline Greenhill and Jill Terry Rudy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 164-165.

[2] Claire Pak, "A Retrospective on Kunihiko Ikuhara: Revolution, One Kiss at a Time." *Scene + Heard*, November 4, 2019, https://www.sceneandheardnu.com/content/2019/11/4/a-retrospective-on-kunihiro-ikuhara-revolution-one-kiss-at-a-time.

[3] In both fandom and academic spaces, there is a tendency to treat Ikuhara as an anime auteur, a singular creative genius responsible for the achievements of the series he directed. However, it is important to recognize that Ikuhara's successes have often been a result of collaboration with others. *Sailor Moon,* for example, was adapted into an anime by Toei Animation from Takeuchi Naoko's original manga, with Ikuhara, Satô Jun'ichi, and Igarashi Takuya serving as directors for different seasons of the show's 1992-1997 run, while *Revolutionary Girl Utena* was produced by the creative collective Be-Papas, a group which also included famed scriptwriter Enikido Yôji and mangaka Saitô Chiho.

[4] Erica Friedman, "Yuri Anime/Manga: Sailor Moon," Okazu (blog), January 29, 2004, https://okazu.yuricon.com/2004/01/29/yuri-animemanga-sailor-moon/.

[5] Taylor Leong, "Mawaru Penguindrum: Survival Strategy in the Wake of 2020," *The Spirit of the Tomato Box* (blog), January 3, 2023, https://thetomatobox.wordpress.com/2021/01/03/mawaru-penguindrum-survival-strategy-in-the-wake-of-2020/.

[6] Pak, "A Retrospective on Kunihiko Ikuhara."

[7] Murakami Haruki, *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum and Philip Gabriel, (New York: Vintage, 2001), 320. In episode one's opening monologue, Shôma declares:

> I hate the word 'fate'. Birth, encounters, partings, success and failure, fortune and misfortune in life. If everything is already set in stone by birth, why are we even born? There are those who are born wealthy, those born of beautiful mothers, and those born into war or poverty. If everything is caused by fate, then God must be incredibly unfair and cruel. Because, ever since that day, none of us had a future and the only certain thing was that we wouldn't amount to anything.

These words echo one of Murakami's exchanges in *Underground* with an ex-Aum member:

> MURAKAMI: You say the world is unfair, but in what way?
> Well, things like inborn talent, family background. No matter what the situation, bright people are bright, people who can run fast can run fast. And people who are weak never see the light of day. There's an element of fate that I thought was too unfair.

[8] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*, trans. James Stratchey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1957), 245.

[9] David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" in *Social Text* 84-85, vol. 23, nos. 3–4 (2005): 1.

[10] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 50.

[11] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 11.

[12] Edelman, "No Future," 3.

[13] Edelman, "No Future," 11.

[14] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 94.

[15] Murakami, *Underground,* 225.

[16] *Mawaru Penguindum,* episode 1, "The Bell of Fate Shall Ring." Directed by Ikuhara Kunihiko, aired July 2, 2011, DVD, 00:00:43-00:00:51.

[17] Shôma, Kanba, and Himari's attempt at forming a nuclear unit is further complicated because Kanba's feelings for his sister are implied to be at least partially romantic. While the revelation that the siblings are not blood-related technically prevents this relationship from crossing into incest, Ikuhara frequently explores the fine lines between familial and romantic love, especially as both blood ties and heteronormative romance promise unbreakable connections.

[18] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 180.

[19] *Penguindrum,* episode 21, 00:00:30.

[20] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 25.

[21] Because Penguindrum depicts Yuri's abuse through the metaphor of a sculptor chiseling marble into art, the exact nature of her abuse is unclear, though there are hints that it may be sexual in nature. Further, given that her father's goal is to transform Yuri from a child rendered unlovable by association with her "ugly and stupid" mother into a beautiful and thus loveable child, his abuse can be read as not just violence perpetuated under the aegis of normativity, but also violence that is perpetuated in normativity's name. Beauty, acting as an

attribute and standard of normativity, here acts as a violently repressive force, forcibly chiseling

tainted children into idealized subjects.

[22] *Penguindrum,* episode 15, 0:11:59-00:12:05.

[23] *Penguindrum,* episode 18, 00:05:50-00:06:04.

[24] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso Books, 2009), 15.

[25] David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 198.

[26] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 20.

[27] Daniel A. Metraux, *Aum Shinrikyo and Japanese Youth* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 52.

[28] Murakami Haruki, "Taking on the Forces of Black Magic," *Yomiuri Shimbun,* May 17, 1998. Quotations are taken from Metraux's citations of Murakami on page 1 of *Aum Shinrikyo and Japanese Youth*.

[29] Metraux, 20.

[30] Murakami, *Underground,* 225.

[31] Murakami, *Underground,* 225.

[32] *Penguindrum,* episode 11, 00:17:29-00:17:33.

[33] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 249.

[34] Freud, 257.

[35] Freud, 245.

[36] Freud, 245.

[37] *Penguindrum,* episode 3, 00:00:51.

[38] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 81.

[39] Hirsch, 84.

[40] Hirsch, 86.

[41] Hirsch, 85.

[42] Hirsch, 99.

[43] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41.

[44] Boym, 41–49.

[45] Boym, 55.

[46] *Penguindrum,* episode 24, 00:23:35-00:23:40.

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