

Designing the Global Body



Japan's Postwar Modernity in *Death Stranding*

The impact of Asian culture and labor on the global gaming industry is immeasurable, yet representations of Asian bodies are not as prevalent as the various labor forces behind the scenes. This chapter expands on this dissonance between Asian labor and the Asian body through a close read of Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* (2019), a game produced by Japanese labor but with a mostly white cast and set in a fictional United States. My close reading sheds light on its racial doublespeaks, where those who are familiar with the context can easily spot the hidden Japanese discourse and find some level of catharsis while others can enjoy the game for its more universal and hopeful message about finding comfort in unity when facing future precarity. Furthermore, I will interrogate this practice of embodying and conveying Asian discourse and argue that it stunts the progress of direct representations.

After his decade-long tenure at the world-renowned game publisher Kojima, Japanese video game designer Hideo Kojima departed from his beloved *Metal Gear* (1987–2018) series to create *Death Stranding* (2019), a game with spectacular cinematics and a Hollywood cast. Set in the postapocalyptic

United States, *Death Stranding* follows a courier named Sam Porter Bridges (Norman Reedus), who is tasked with transcontinental unification of the broken United States by delivering parcels to surviving communities and reconnecting them via a wireless communications network known as the Chiral Network.

Unlike the *Metal Gear* series, combat and stealth missions are not part of the major gameplay loop (the repetitive activities that a player engages in games) of *Death Stranding*. Instead, players spend most of their time mapping the desolate landscape. Regardless of whether the design choice is intentional, the in-game task of transcontinental unification parallels Chinese migrant workers building the American transcontinental railroad in the middle of the nineteenth century. Sam's white body and Asian coded labor perfectly demonstrate the dissonance between Asian labor and Asian body. Moreover, the game's engagements with nuclear bombs, sublime ruins, and postdisaster bodies resonate with Japan's postwar identity. By representing the United States with an uncanny landscape and removing American cultural signifiers, *Death Stranding* empties the United States to overlay narratives about crisis, trauma, and identity anchored in Japan's postwar discourse. This strategic overlay begins with the prologue, *Porter*, outlining the game's central theme through the juxtaposition between a voice-over narration written by Kojima and a printed quote from Abe Kobo's *Nawa (The Rope)*: "The Rope' and 'The Stick,' together, are one of humankind's oldest 'tools.' 'The Stick' is for keeping evil away; 'The Rope' is for pulling good toward us; these are the first friends the human race invented. Wherever you find humans, 'The Rope' and 'The Stick' also exist." Instead of valorizing the stick as a repellent of evil, *Death Stranding* warns of its danger via a monologue about explosions that appears at the beginning as well as the end of the prologue:

Once there was an explosion, a bang which gave birth to time and space. Once there was an explosion, a bang which set a planet spinning in that space. Once there was an explosion, a bang which gave rise to life as we know it. And then, came the next explosion . . . an explosion that will be our last.¹

This sentiment toward the stick resonates with Yoshikuni Igarashi's "foundational narrative" in which postwar Japan sees its wartime trauma, namely the atomic bombings, as inevitable and necessary for the birth of a new Japan, a complicated sentiment manifested into feelings of isolation and despair.² *Death Stranding* echoes this sentiment and presents the rope as the solution to the problems left by the stick by asking its players to stitch isolated

communities of the broken nation back together. Transposing this discourse onto the emptied-out American landscape, *Death Stranding* works through its ambivalence toward the necessity of the bombs in the foundational narrative while serving an ounce of catharsis for the shattered nation: not Japan but the United States.

It is then imperative to ask, How do white bodies help tell a story about Japan's postwar modernity on the global stage? I will elaborate further through an intimate yet uncanny moment of the game, which takes place in the lavatory of the private rooms. The player can discover private rooms in large cities and later fabricate them in the open world, which all share the same interior layout: a bed, a table, a sink, an interactable map, a glass cabinet, and a lavatory. Setting Sam as the pivot point, the camera in the Private Room rotates around him to reveal a variety of interactable actions. Assuming the position of the camera, the player shares the space with Sam, who sometimes breaks the fourth wall by winking or smiling directly at the camera/player (figure 5.1).³ Norman Reedus shared that Kojima noticed his fidgety

5.1. Sam, played by Norman Reedus, winking at the player in the Private Room in *Death Stranding*.

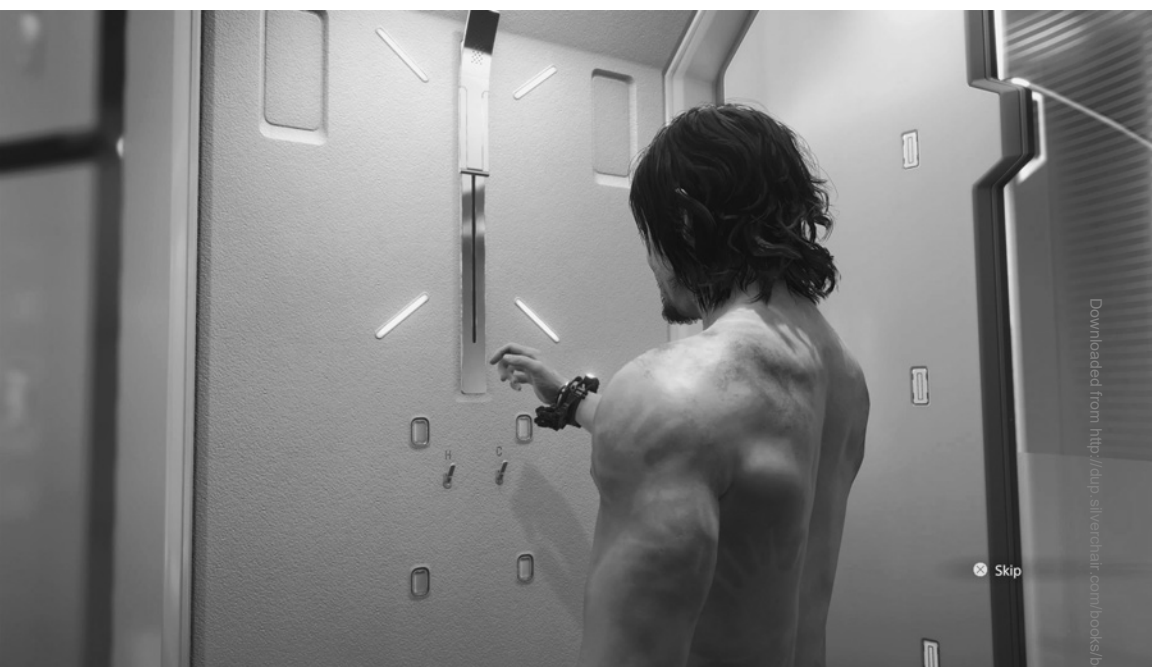


movements in between motion capture and decided to record them.⁴ Reedus explained that Kojima incorporated these movements to add authenticity to Sam with the hope of inciting an intimate relationship between the player and Sam. By having Sam acknowledge the player's gaze, the game forces the player to be aware of their positionality as Sam's controller.

Whenever the player guides Sam to use the lavatory, the player/camera follows him, which triggers an intimate shower sequence. Multiple instances of the sequence exist, but the camera always employs a voyeuristic gaze that moves across Sam's body. The camera first reveals the red bruises on Sam's shoulder and feet, which are visualized evidence of his hard labor. It then moves down to Sam's buttocks and lingers on the ghostly handprints tattooed on his smooth, muscular, and masculine body. These handprints testify to Sam's past trauma: he gains a handprint every time he returns to life, or *repatriates*. Repatriation is Sam's unique ability to resurrect himself whenever he dies in the game. Sam, like most video game characters, can die from a variety of causes. However, thanks to his special ability, the player can resurrect Sam by guiding his soul back to his body. This mechanic makes in-game deaths diegetic, while enhancing the relationship between Sam and the player (figure 5.2).⁵

The shower sequence accentuates the red bruises and the ghostly handprints, evidence of hard labor and trauma, which efficiently frames Sam's body as a site of discourse. The body is further complicated through another dimension of objectification. The game encourages the player to trigger these provocative cutscenes by giving them valuable items called EX Grenades that can be used to repel enemies. These grenades are manufactured with Sam's sweat, urine, and feces, collected when Sam uses the lavatory. This function objectifies Sam's body as a mechanical marvel in addition to the psychosexual nature of the camera.

In this chapter, I will situate Sam's body as a site of postwar discourse. The Japanese body as a site of postwar discourse is at the heart of Yoshikuni Igarashi's *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945–1970*. *Bodies of Memory* explores Japan's postwar nationhood through Japanese popular culture, in which Igarashi maintains that the postwar Japanese bodies “not only were the site of Japan's reinvention” but also created a gendered relationship that reflected the power dynamic between the United States and Japan.⁶ Igarashi notes that Japan assumed the dominant masculine role in its relations to its colonies during wartime.



5.2. Sam steps into the shower in *Death Stranding*, and the camera follows.

However, Japan's later defeat and occupation recast the postwar Japan in the feminine role, with the United States as the powerful masculine role.⁷ Igarashi expands on this imagined masculine ideal through his analysis of Akiyuki Nosaka's novel *American Hijiki* (1967). He highlights the power dynamic that the Japanese protagonist, Toshio, perceives between him and an American soldier. When gazing on the muscular physique of the American soldier, Toshio links Japan's defeat to the overwhelming power demonstrated by the GI's body.⁸ In his narration, Toshio defines civilization through the white soldier's muscular arms, big hips, wide chest, and impressive buttocks, while finding himself in the smaller Asian bodies surrounding the GI. Igarashi dwells on this homoerotic gaze to frame the white masculine body as the "material evidence of civilization" in the eyes of the postwar Japanese subject.⁹ Aesthetically, the white masculine body is to be feared and desired. The white man's muscle as a metaphor for civilization can be traced back to the early days of Hollywood. Richard Dyer employs films

such as *La Battaglia di Maratona* (1959) to identify the built white body as a product of discipline.¹⁰ Dyer maintains that the white male body mirrors the imperial/colonial enterprise that frames the colonized bodies as inferior and in need of discipline.¹¹

Here I will highlight the similarity between the camera in *Death Stranding*'s shower sequence and Toshio's homoerotic gaze. The difference here is that *Death Stranding* complicates the white masculine body by texturing it with allegorical Japanese historic trauma and asks the player to simultaneously identify with and objectify the body. Sam's body is metaphorical because it represents an "elevated" or "apolitical" Japanese body, exorcised of Asian characteristics but bearing the discourse of postwar Japan. It is also strategic to use a white body as the vehicle of Asian discourse so that it appears innocuous to the world yet feels somewhat cathartic to those who are still working through the legacy of white supremacy. This strategy is a form of selective self-erasure in which the Asian body is deracialized so the story can remain compelling and universal. I want to contemplate this affordance of the white body and further ponder the lack of Asian representation in games by first establishing the unquestionable Japanese/Asian discourse in *Death Stranding* and then proposing the unintended consequence of such as a practice.

Asian Labor and the White Body

The story of *Death Stranding* progresses as Sam conducts transcontinental unification. Besides delivering parcels, Sam can also fabricate tools, vehicles, and infrastructure. Through these mundane acts of transportation, delivery, and construction, *Death Stranding* provides unity as the salvation to alienation and despair. I interpret this as the game's response to postwar Japan's complex feelings toward the foundational narrative of Japan. By reclaiming control over the hazardous environment through building infrastructure and the constant self-discipline and maintenance of Sam's body, the game presents a productive and caring masculine figure as the ideal subject, which mirrors the gentle and caring postwar Japanese masculine subject.

Sam as the conduit of the *rope* is demonstrated through the interrogation of his body as a cyborg. The game establishes this element in the prologue through Sam's interaction with a baby in a yellow container, which remains one of the most compelling moments. In the cutscene, the camera zooms in

on the device to reveal its contents: a floating fetus whose altered umbilical cord is attached to the operator (figure 5.3).¹²

The baby in the yellow container, called a *Bridge Baby* or simply *B.B.*, is the foremost uncanny element of the game, which has been heavily featured in *Death Stranding*'s promotional materials. B.B. as a tool is well established in the prologue, where Sam's caravan is attacked by ghostly beings known as the *Beached Things* or *B.T.s*, deceased people whose souls have found their way back into the world of the living. B.T.s can trigger a devastating explosion known as a *Voidout* that leaves nothing but a crater behind. They are invisible to the naked human eyes, and their existence can only be deduced by the presence of the toxic rain known as Timefall, which rapidly deteriorates anything it contacts. To counter B.T.s, scientists create B.B.s through human experiments. By attaching themselves to a B.B., the operator can see the B.T.s around them and navigate the world with ease.

The shot of the B.B. suspended in the container establishes the game's critical entanglement with the body as a site of discourse. The eerie fetus

5.3. The reveal of B.B. in *Death Stranding*'s prologue.



floating in the pod, objectified as a tool, is linked to another human via a half-mechanical and half-organic umbilical cord. This motif evokes Donna Haraway's cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."¹³ Haraway is concerned with socialist feminism when she conceptualizes the metaphoric function of the cyborg, and here we see a man performing the conventional feminine duty, but the baby is framed as a useful object, and childcare is situated as equipment maintenance. Thus, I want to employ the cyborg metaphor to pinpoint the social reality allegorically re-created in *Death Stranding*. In this vein, this chapter considers how the game makes use of the body's materiality, labor, and aesthetics to interrogate elements of Japan's postwar modernity while focusing on the interplay between Asian labor and white bodies. Since *Death Stranding* features a Hollywood cast, characters of the games are modeled after well-known actors such as Norman Reedus, Lindsay Wagner, Mads Mikkelsen, and Léa Seydoux. Directors Kojima admires, such as Guillermo Del Toro and Nicolas Winding Refn, also make special appearances. It is easy to see that with such a cast, this Japanese video game neither reserves many speaking roles for Asian actors nor features Asian characters in prominent ways. That said, it does remind the audience of the Asian labor behind the scenes through credits. Credits of Japanese names appear during the prologue and epilogue, where they fade in and out alongside the gameplay. The Japanese names appearing alongside the Hollywood cast elicits a sense of uncanniness at the racial dimension and raises the question, Why does a Japanese game decide to tell a story about America?

To answer this, we must visit the intersection between Asian labor, Asian identity, and Asian bodies. Lisa Nakamura examines racial discourse surrounding Asian identity in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMO) *World of Warcraft* by thinking through the anti-Asian sentiment against Chinese "farmers," whom she calls the player workers.¹⁴ Nakamura frames the anti-Asian rhetoric as racism rather than players' justified concern over player workers manipulating the in-game market, and points out that once an Asian player's racial identity is identified by a white player, their play is immediately framed as labor and a threat to the white player's leisure.¹⁵ Though *Death Stranding* does have a multiplayer aspect where random players' fabrications can be seen and used by other players, they do not have any direct means to interact with others. Because players' racial identities are not visible to others, their labor (fabrications) is not racialized. Even so, *Death Stranding* encodes Sam, the player's in-game avatar,

with Asian discourse through his labor of constructing a transcontinental network from the East to the West, which parallels Chinese migrant workers connecting America in the nineteenth century. Asian bodies, remembered for their labor and for yellow peril racism in American history,¹⁶ are relational to the more civilized power of whiteness, a relation that has become techno-orientalist in the popular imagination of the West as Asia's technology growth has become a concern.¹⁷ In these techno-orientalist fantasies, Asian bodies are imagined as automatons that mindlessly carry out tasks. The game turns this techno-oriental fantasy on the United States by designating a white body to carry out the seemingly mechanical labor of transcontinental unification. Unlike the techno-orientalist approach to Asian bodies, the game persuades the player to see Sam as more than a machine, despite the constant disciplining and management of his body. The player comes to understand the importance of human connections through Sam's labor, a subversion of the techno-orientalist trope where Asian bodies are treated as emotionless automatons. *Death Stranding's* strategic employment of the body as a persuading agent can also be found in Kojima's earlier works. Noting the racially ambiguous design of the *MGS* series' protagonist Snake, Hutchinson argues that the white-passing body welcomes Western players to empathize with its message.¹⁸ Keita C. Moore, on the other hand, argues that Snake's racial ambiguity, what he calls his biraciality, allows Kojima to flatten "the real politics of Japan's place in and apart from global conflict" and to abstract a generalized and unidimensional message about "antiwar, anti-nuclear weapons" from Japan's postwar metabolizations of war memories.¹⁹ Thinking through Hutchinson's and Moore's perspectives, we could argue that Kojima's strategy of using racial ambiguity to cater to both the Japanese and the Western audience permits him to embody Japaneseness without any historical baggage.

A similar argument about *Death Stranding* is that the game is produced with a double awareness of the internal (Japanese) and external (US) gazes. Kojima shared on Twitter that his initial script was translated into English for facial and motion capture.²⁰ Then, for the Japanese release, Kojima had the translated English script modified so that the Japanese voice actors could lip-sync with the American actors. Bodies are used interchangeably as well. A promotional trailer shows the early concept of the scene where one of the woman protagonists, Fragile, meets Sam: Kojima Productions' Japanese staff acted out the scene, and all the elements in the previsualizations were then translated into the game with white bodies.²¹ The strategic replacement of

Asian bodies with white bodies underscores what the game thinks is more globally acceptable.

Koichi Iwabuchi suggests that the lack of Japanese signifiers in Japanese popular media is an intentional strategy. Iwabuchi famously coins the phrase “cultural odor” to describe the acute awareness of one’s cultural origin and the desire to disassociate from it.²² Such an odor is “closely associated with racial and bodily images of a country of origin.”²³ Reading these design choices through Iwabuchi’s odorlessness, it would appear that the game erased the cultural odor of the Asian body so that the white canvas (body) can remain convincing and persuasive. That said, the Japanese names of the production team remind the audience of the Asian labor. The mixture of Asian labor and white bodies creates an ambiguous racial and political awareness. Tzarina Prater and Catherine Fung argue that for the Asian body’s labor to be recognized, it must be converted from “the foreign threat to the assimilated model minority.”²⁴ Though the model minority discourse and the postwar Japanese discourse have different ontologies, they share a common complicity in upholding whiteness as the standard. The universalizing effect of whiteness helps *Death Stranding* bring Japanese discourse to the global stage without historical baggage. In contrast, the very same whiteness becomes a totalizing agent that dictates the desired mode of storytelling in the Asian American context.

In 2017, Japanese animation director Oshii Mamoru’s *Ghost in the Shell* was adapted into an American live-action film. When Scarlett Johansson was revealed as Hollywood’s choice to play the role of Major Kusanagi Motoko, the casting of the US adaptation quickly attracted criticism for its whitewashing.²⁵ When confronted with the concern of representation in an interview, Oshii rejected the whitewashing allegation by insisting that the film cast the best actors for the job.²⁶ Stating that he held no political agenda, Oshii first underscored his desire to create art free of politics to distance himself from the racial discourse.²⁷ He further defended the casting decision by adding that since *Ghost in the Shell*’s protagonist is a cyborg, she can be represented without racial concern.²⁸ In the same interview, however, Oshii stated his disappointment in not being a part of the Hollywood adaptation.²⁹ Hollywood interpreted what Oshii imagined as a neutral body as a white body and then stripped Asian bodies and labor from its primary cast and production team. What happened to *Ghost in the Shell* outlines the core issue of Asian representation: the dissonance between Asian representation and the globalization of Asian culture. Oshii’s desire to create “apolitical” art using racially ambiguous or empty characters highlights the danger of self-erasure.

Oshii sees the cyborg as an entity free from racial politics, but Donna Haraway's cyborg repudiates such an assumed apolitical nature. *Death Stranding's* Sam is a cyborg whose body is mobilized to reflect the social realities of postwar Japan. Yet whose body gets to bear whose stories and how they are interpreted are two questions at the heart of representation.

Hidden Japanese Discourse and *Mukokuseki* America

Though Japanese popular media, especially video games such as *Pokémon*, are well received globally, it seems that not many of them feature obvious Japanese signifiers. There seems to be an unspoken agreement about what makes a body globally acceptable. I suggest viewing “the global” as a stage where a subject becomes intensely aware of their body as a medium of their performance and a bearer of external gazes. What makes the performance compelling relies on the body, and what makes a body globally acceptable hinges on the negotiation between the internal and external gazes. In short, the global body is a construct that is persuasive, without distraction, and spectacular. Considering Japan's double positions as both the victim and victimizer during and after World War II, it is easy to see how the desire for a new Japan that can rise (and be divorced) from the ashes of wartime trauma helped to shape Japan's postwar media. In the case of media production, the erasure of Japanese cultural odor helps to make them globally acceptable, a process Iwabuchi labels *mukokuseki*.³⁰ Christine Yano builds on Iwabuchi's work and thinks through what she calls the commodity “whiteface” of Hello Kitty.³¹ Remarking on Japanese companies' desires to create globally compatible consumer products in the 1970s by mimicking Euro-American standards, Yano underscores the ambiguity of the international appeal of Hello Kitty, especially her cute white face.³² Yano links *mukokuseki* to modernity, whiteness, and global acceptance and adeptly points out the Japanese companies' willingness to self-erase for the sake of global marketability.³³

That said, it is vital not to see Japanese media as a monolith or treat any media artifact that engages *mukokuseki* as a manifestation of Japanese postwar anxiety. *Mukokuseki* should only work as a framework for contextualizing neutral seeming artifacts. Rachael Hutchinson proposes understanding Japanese video games' transnational and global influence through a postcolonial perspective in her *Japanese Culture through Videogames*, where she frames games as a medium through which historic trauma is represented

and metabolized. This is most evident in her analysis of the nuclear discourse in the *Final Fantasy* series and the *Metal Gear Solid* (*MGS*) series. By examining allegories of ethical and environmental concerns over nuclear energy in the *Final Fantasy* series, Hutchinson links the nuclear discourse to Japan's postwar modernity.³⁴ Notably, she highlights that Kojima delivers his antiwar message through gameplay mechanics.³⁵ For instance, while the player can craft nuclear weapons in the online multiplayer spinoff of the *MGS* series *Metal Gear Online*, nuclear weapons can be used only for deterrence. Kojima even openly engaged players with the "Disarmament Event" in 2015 by asking them to disarm their in-game nuclear weapons, which led to a sharp decrease of in-game nuclear arms in a short period.³⁶ These mechanics allow the players from all over the world to critically engage with real-life nuclear discourse, which is at the crux of Japan's postwar modernity.³⁷

Igarashi identifies the "foundational narrative" that rationalized Japan's wartime and postwar trauma as the foundation of the new Japan.³⁸ What crystallized this narrative are the numerous retellings of August 1945, which frame the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as inevitable and necessary.³⁹ The foundational narrative, which frames trauma as the onset of identity, is reflected and problematized in the game's prologue, which opens with shots of landscapes that evoke a sensibility that exists between magical realism and uncanniness: open fields with floating objects, raining clouds over an upside-down rainbow, and mossy planes with sprouting hand-shaped crystals. The sublime landscape warns of the danger lurking underneath the beauty. Theorizing the landscape in *MGS: The Phantom Pain*, Soraya Murray highlights Kojima's configuring of Afghanistan "in need of intervention, through its affective connection to representations of actual events and settings."⁴⁰ Murray emphasizes the persuasiveness of the game space to highlight the ideology of the game world and the designer.⁴¹ *Death Stranding* moves away from historical realism to prioritize a different relationship between the player and the game world. Though the game uses US geography as the blueprint for the fictional landscape, it removes all obvious American cultural signifiers—or, in other words, renders the United States *mukokuseki*.

Death Stranding textures this emptied-out America with explosions, ruins, and craters—sublime spectacles that seek to overwhelm and overawe the beholder's senses. Calum Lister Matheson identifies the sublime as "what beckons beyond our unreliable means of mediation to a *Real* we cannot translate perfectly."⁴² Motifs such as radioactive waste and nuclear craters are sublime because they "decenter humanity and disrupt the subject by revealing

the vastness of the inhuman.”⁴³ Michael J. Shapiro expands on the political and affective affordance of sublimity by detailing how the sublime resists official event-closing narrativization of collective trauma.⁴⁴ The sublime serves to “create conditions of possibility for the divided modes of political comprehension that emerge from oppositional communities of sense.”⁴⁵ Putting Matheson’s framework and Shapiro’s argument together and applying them to the Japanese context, I argue that *Death Stranding* mobilizes the sublime to visualize Japan’s postwar condition and meditate on the postwar trauma or the consequences of the war or the stick. The game imprints reminders of wartime trauma using ruins and craters to illustrate the destructive and corrupting power of the stick. Overlays of historic trauma find their way into the game, making the sublime more overwhelming because they allude to real historical atrocities.

In *Death Stranding*, Kojima illustrates all explosions as a white screen, which can be interpreted as a means to deny the allure of the mushroom cloud and to avoid reencountering wartime trauma. Instead, Kojima works more closely with the sublime aftermath of the explosion. He establishes this through the traumatized body and landscape of the game and specifically through a fictional depiction of atomic bombings in the postapocalyptic United States. When Sam arrives at the biggest map of the game, Central America, the player learns the history of the thermonuclear bombings. *Death Stranding*’s main antagonist, Higgs Monaghan (Troy Baker), smuggles a thermonuclear bomb into Middle Knot City via a private delivery company known as Fragile Express. The bomb kills most residents, and their dead bodies attract B.T.s. Upon consuming the corpses, B.T.s trigger numerous Void-outs that effectively wipe out the remaining population. The ruins of Middle Knot City remain as a reminder of the attack and its lingering effect. The ruin is constantly showered in Timefall, which renders the space hazardous for the parcel-delivering player. While the player can fabricate tools to make their environment less dangerous, they cannot reclaim the ruins or create an infrastructure that would obscure them. As unmetabolized reminders of the past, these sublime ruins lay siege to any unifying narrative of the collective trauma. Identifying the sublime in images surrounding earthquake ruins in Japan, Gennifer Weisenfeld argues that “reconstruction would wipe away the conflicted memories embodied in ruins and replace them with a coherent commemorative narrative of the tragedy.”⁴⁶ Similarly, *Death Stranding* treats the traumatic landscape of the ruins as a productive site for alternative memories that also destabilizes the foundational narrative of postwar Japan, where

the bomb is the precursor of modernity. Instead, the game transposes these reflections of Japan's postwar modernity onto the *American* landscape. This practice, I argue, serves both as a form of catharsis (of inflicting pain onto the victimizer) and an avoidance toward a direct articulation of painful history.

The game furthers its contemplation of the nuclear bomb through the story of the owner of Fragile Express (played by Léa Seydoux), one of the game's main nonplayable characters. Fragile's backstory is a trauma narrative. Realizing Higgs's plan, Fragile decides to prevent the next attack by taking the bomb far away from the next target—South Knot City. Fragile's unique ability allows her to teleport. Familiar with Fragile's ability and her plan to save the city, Higgs captures Fragile and offers her a choice: she can either teleport to safety alone or throw the bomb into a black tar pit to save the city. Higgs strips Fragile to her underwear and tells her that she must run in the toxic rain. Determined to save the city, Fragile cradles the thermonuclear bomb and begins to run. A series of shots follow Fragile running and falling to the ground as her body deteriorates in the rain. The last frame freezes on her determined eyes as she stands up to resume running (figure 5.4).⁴⁷

In this sequence, Fragile's body becomes a site of nuclear discourse. Her rapidly aged body caused by the rain becomes visual evidence of trauma. Instead of letting the second nuclear explosion occur, her body becomes the stand-in for the symbolic second atomic bombing in August 1945. The last freeze-frame on her eyes uncannily utters the feminized postwar Japan's virtue—rebuilding through endurance and perseverance. Fragile's deteriorated body functions similarly to the sublime ruins as a vehicle of postwar discourse. Fragile's body, covered with bruises and a helmet, is the perfect example of the global body where a deracialized body is employed to elevate a racially and culturally coded story.

Death Stranding is a work of complex contemplations of collective memory, trauma, and identity, which engender antihegemonic narratives about collective trauma, all woven into a story about a traumatized white man rebuilding the broken United States. While the work is effective in its critical engagement with postwar trauma, the unfortunate and uncomfortable truth is that the hidden Japanese discourse might serve to tell stories of white nationalism. This is also where the danger of postwar Japanese discourse and model minority mindset intersects—complicity toward whiteness. In an age where video games are increasingly becoming vehicles of cultural discourse, it is vital to think about the racial aspect of the Asian discourse. Keita Moore also thinks through this question in his essay in this volume,



5.4. Fragile's body deteriorates in the rain as she tries to save the city in *Death Stranding*.

“Playable Deniability: Biracial Representation and the Politics of Play in *Metal Gear Solid*,” where he notes that biraciality in video games “can open new zones of inquiry around the relation of play and politics because racialization opens itself to critical thought as a process in gamic media.”⁴⁸ What Asian artists perceive as a globally acceptable body must be interrogated. Only in this way can the Asian body be racialized and visualized to destabilize the default whiteness of the global body.

Notes

- 1 Kojima, *Death Stranding*.
- 2 Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 48.
- 3 Kojima, *Death Stranding*. Screen capture by Yasheng She.
- 4 Team Coco, “Norman Reedus and Conan.”
- 5 Kojima, *Death Stranding*, 2019. Screen capture by Yasheng She.
- 6 Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 14.
- 7 Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 36.
- 8 Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 171.
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- 10 Dyer, *White*, 164.
- 11 Dyer, *White*, 165.
- 12 Santosx07, “*Death Stranding*—Prologue All Cutscenes.”
- 13 Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 5.
- 14 Nakamura, “Don’t Hate the Player,” 130.
- 15 Nakamura, “Don’t Hate the Player,” 130.
- 16 Roh, Huang, and Niu, *Techno-Orientalism*, 11.
- 17 Roh, Huang, and Niu, *Techno-Orientalism*, 198.
- 18 Roh, Huang, and Niu, *Techno-Orientalism*, 214.
- 19 Moore, “Playable Deniability,” this volume.
- 20 Garrett, “Hideo Kojima.”
- 21 NeoGamer, “Behind the Scenes.”
- 22 Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 28.
- 23 Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 28.
- 24 Roh, Huang, and Niu, *Techno-Orientalism*, 199.
- 25 Berman, “A Comprehensive Guide.”
- 26 Osborn, “An Interview with Dir. Mamoru Oshii.”
- 27 Osborn, “An Interview with Dir. Mamoru Oshii.”
- 28 Osborn, “An Interview with Dir. Mamoru Oshii.”
- 29 Osborn, “An Interview with Dir. Mamoru Oshii.”
- 30 Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 28.
- 31 Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 15–16.

- 32 Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 16.
- 33 Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 16.
- 34 Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Videogames*, 132.
- 35 Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Videogames*, 229.
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- 37 Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Videogames*, 229.
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- 39 Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 48.
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- 41 S. Murray, "Landscapes of Empire," 198.
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- 47 Kojima, *Death Stranding*. Screen capture by Yasheng She.
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