The aim of this paper is to provide a short analysis of the literary representation of the Japantown that evolved in Seattle toward the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, as portrayed by Japanese writer Nagai Kafū. I will concentrate on Kafū’s Amerika monogatari, translated into English as “American Stories,” a brilliant collection of short stories and autobiographical sketches based upon the author’s experience as an observant traveler and observer in the United States. In these stories, written in the first years of the twentieth century, his description and narration of the buildings and the life and people of the Japantown can be taken into consideration as a vivid and realistic set of images, that give us a detailed idea of the constitution of and the socio-historical realities present in the area of the United States where the first Japanese immigrants arrived and settled.

As pointed out by Rachael Hutchinson, Kafū’s primary task in this collection is to use the description of Japantown as a literary metaphor to express the problematic duality between East and West. Although this was not his only artistic

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1 For the autobiographical vocation of the stories in Amerika monogatari, and its related discussion, see Follaco 249-50.
intention, since the text deals with a wide range of themes such as labour conditions of the immigrants and life in America, nevertheless on a second and perhaps more extended level of interpretation, we can also read these urban descriptions as adding to our knowledge of the constitution and the reality of Seattle's Japantown of the time. In fact, as its English translator, Mitsuko Iriye, points out:

... *Amerika monogatari*, described by Donald Keene as “Kafū’s first masterpiece,” is worth reading both as one Japanese writer’s attempt to come to grips with Western literature, art, and music at the turn of the twentieth century and as a unique observation of American life in various parts of the country. Few Japanese, or for that matter writers from any country, have produced more intimate, sensitive depictions of America. The American stories are therefore of interest not just to students of modern Japanese literature but also to historians of American culture and society. (Iriye xxv)

As the first son of a high-ranking Japanese Samurai bureaucrat, Kafū pursued an intellectual career and became interested in Western literature and culture, specifically French, longing to spend some time in France to complete his studies. But his father decided to send him to the United States, a country which at that time was one of the main commercial and political partners of Japan. During this trip, which lasted from 1903 to 1907, he stayed mainly in Tacoma and Seattle, but spent some time in New York. Kafū registered his observations about American culture, landscape and lifestyle in several beautiful pieces of literature that, after his return to Japan, were collected and edited with the title of *Amerika monogatari* and provided Japanese readers with a description of the United States.

Among his numerous sketches about American culture, Kafū reserved some space in order to provide an accurate description of the condition of Japanese immigrant workers within their work environment. Kafū in fact describes very precisely both the environment—for example the Japantown of Seattle—and the social condition of Japanese immigrants, a unique document that is of interest, as Iriye underlined, not only to Asian studies scholars, but also to American studies specialists.

As many critics note (see for example Whitworth), the city has occupied a prominent place in literary works since the second half of the nineteenth century, as it is the place where signs of modernization can be seen at their highest concentration. It comes as no surprise that a writer such as Kafū who was born and started his writing career in a country like Japan—which had experienced a very intense and problematic process of modernization and reshaping of social and political structures—concentrates part of his analysis on urban landscape (see Maeda; Lippit).

Kafū’s description of the urban space and the life in Seattle’s Japantown provides an accurate historical and cultural description of both the social condition and the culture of the first wave of Japanese immigrants in America and, on a deeper level, a textual metaphor questioning the possibilities and the limits of modernity and its impact on various civilizations.
I will focus attention on two stories of *Amerika monogatari* that I find significant, because they offer a highly detailed description of Seattle’s Japantown and its urban landscape: “Shyatorukō no ichiya” (“A Night at Seattle Harbor”) and “Akuyū” (“Bad Company”). The first, “A Night at Seattle Harbor,” tells the story of a stroll taken one night to visit Japantown in Seattle for the first time. The first person narrator, who we can reasonably suppose is the author himself, is taking a long stroll around Seattle. He walks down from Second Avenue reaching the crowded and glamorous First Avenue and then continues on to a street that he says was called Jackson. Kafū provides quite a precise topographical account of his itinerary, and even today we can trace it on a map of Seattle and follow his exact path. For this reason, I think it is correct to assume that the subsequent description of Japantown mirrors this degree of reality, and we can reasonably expect to find an accurate description in the story. In fact as Bienati (86) reminds us, it is Kafū himself, in one of his later stories *Bokutō kitan* (*A Strange Tale from East of the River*, 1936), who claimed that:

> The things that most interest me when I write a novel are the choice and description of background. I have from time to time fallen into the error of emphasizing background at the expense of characterization. (Seidensticker 286)

Again, we can infer from this that Kafū is a reliable narrator and hence it is reasonable to expect that he will provide a trustworthy representation of the Japantown of the time.

In fact, the contrast between the Western lifestyle and the lifestyle lead in the Japanese area is strongly stressed by an accurate description of the urban environment. The Anglo-American part of Seattle is depicted as a vibrant, modern city illuminated by electric boards, full of people and traffic:

> This is the most thriving part of Seattle, and although is generally considered as a newly developed city, the Ginza is no match for the way tall shops of stone and signboards are electrically illuminated in beautiful colors here. Besides, this is the early evening on a Saturday when many people come to take a walk, and innumerable men and women pass one another, rubbing shoulders and laughing under brilliant lights. At the intersections, a large number of streetcars full of passengers crisscross each other, while carriages thread their way through them. It’s enough to dazzle you. (Kafū 228)

When the narrator turns left onto Jackson Street, the atmosphere gradually changes, as he enters one of the most depressed areas of the city, which constitutes the beginning of Japantown. Now the urban environment is connoted by an air of dilapidation and neglect:

> 2 Although in all Kafū’s work the sudden shift from one character to another which makes it possible to give voice to a multitude of different characters that come from a variety of social classes, in this specific story it would seem that the author and the first person narrator are the same.
The street was still wide, but there were fewer and fewer shops, and on the pavement covered with boards horse dung was piled high here and there, while an acute stench coming from sooty smoke somewhere was filling the air, naturally making it quite difficult to breathe. Those impressed with the bustle of First and Second Avenues must be even more startled at the drastic contrast of this gloomy dark street. (228-29)

Although this is not Japantown proper, it is significant that there is a drastic change in the description of the environment. Whereas the Anglo-American part is rendered through a visual and auditory description, this area is described mostly by olfactory elements that convey to the reader a profound sense of disgust. Kafū provides us with a sensory depiction of the urban space (Hutchinson 334), he does not confine himself only to the visual elements.

As the narrator finally leaves the outskirts of the area and enters the central part of Japantown, the city landscape changes once again:

Coming closer, I found that the buildings on both sides were far different from those on prosperous First Avenue; they were all low, wood-frame ones, as it is usually the case in poorer quarters. I happened to look up at the window of one of the two-story houses and noticed hanging there a lamp with some Japanese words, so I ran toward it and read the words, RESTAURANT, JAPAN HOUSE. I had heard about this place, but actually encountering it aroused a queer sensation in me, and I just stood there for a while, gazing at the sign for no particular reason. Soon I began hearing a sound of shamisen coming from the second-floor window. As it was a Western-style building with windows shut, I could barely make out the dim noise that was seeping through, but surely it was a woman singing a tune. It was a kind I had never heard in Tokyo, so I stood there, struck with a sense of amusing incongruity as if I were traveling in the countryside and listening to some comic songs in a distant post town in Japan . . . (Kafū 229-30)

Back to a predominance of the visual element, the reader is provided with some sketches of the urban environment, that is radically different from the one depicted in the first description. Here in fact, it seems to recall the atmosphere of traditional buildings in Japan: houses are low, have wooden frames and the voice of the woman singing brings his mind back to Tokyo.

As the narrator penetrates into the the heart of Japantown, the focus of his attention changes from its urban architecture, which is low, dark and made of wood, to the many signs written in Japanese which partially recreate the landscapes of Japanese city centers.

By now, all the signs that I noticed were in Japanese characters. It was exactly as I had heard on the ship; everything from tofu makers and shiruko restaurants to sushi bars and noodle shops, was as one would find in a town in Japan, so that for a while I could only look around restlessly, in a state of shock. (Kafū 230)

Nevertheless, the atmosphere is permeated by a feeling of strangeness conveyed by this recreation of the Japanese urban space in a foreign country. As Rachel
Hutchinson (326) points out, in fact there are various elements in the description of Japantown that convey a mood of strangeness: the partial recreation of original space of the city in pre-modern Japan by immigrants, faraway from their homeland, among western buildings, evokes a “queer sensation”; a sensation that after few lines becomes a “shock” to the narrator, who experiences a feeling of “amusing incongruity.”

Not only does Kafū in this story provide the audience with a vivid and detailed description of the urban landscape and spatial organization of Seattle’s Japantown, but he also describes the people inhabiting this space:

Three Japanese were talking and looking up at the second floor. They all wore homburgs and dark suits, but their long torsos and short and, moreover, bowed legs must look quite funny to white people, I thought . . .

More people were crowding into the area, but most of them were my bow-legged and long-torsoed compatriots . . . (230)

The feeling of incongruity is thus also mirrored in the description of the bodies of his compatriots. In the text above, Kafū describes the three Japanese men as not physically suited to wear western-style clothing, thus reinforcing the sensation of strangeness and incompatibility that was already conveyed in the depiction of the urban environment.

Akuyū, translated into English as “Bad Company” starts with an accurate historical reference to the very delicate socio-historical background that saw Japan and the United States opposed in political tension, because of the expulsion of Japanese children from American schools.3 Building upon this background, the story uses a refined narrative device that helps Kafū to keep a distance from the matter and to avoid expressing a strong opinion. In the story, the narrative voice shifts from an unnamed first person narrator which seems to be Kafū himself, to a fictional character named Mr. Shimazaki who narrates the story of his own first days in the United States, which he spent in Seattle wandering around Japantown.

The story elaborates themes of “One Night in Seattle Harbor” and a strong parallel can be discerned in the description of the urban environment of Japantown:

We got on a train for Japanese quarter. We ended up at a dingy wooden inn at the corner.

It is no wonder that Japanese are misunderstood in that part of the country. The inn is located in an area that is at the extreme point of the city where the bustling streets lined with stores are gradually deserted, just as though people are falling upon bad times. The only buildings around there are shipping companies, communal stables, and such, and the streets, which are covered with horse dung, are monopolized by carts and laborers.

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3 Kafū is certainly referring to the regulation passed in 1906 by the California Board of Education, whereby the children of Japanese descent should attend separate, racially specific schools. The situation of diplomatic tension that derived from this act brought to the stipulation in 1907 of the so-called “Gentlemen’s Agreement” between Japan and United States.
Sticking my head out of the inn to which we had been taken, I was able to see the backs of the city’s buildings far away and, closer, a tall, dark and huge gas tank. The street became suddenly narrower near that area, cramped with dirty, wood-frame little houses, through which a thin alley penetrated and then disappeared. This alley, these squalid wood-framed houses, these made up the den of the Japanese and the Chinese, the Oriental colony, and also the place where unemployed Western laborers and poor, oppressed Negroes found shelter. (83-84)

The narrator, as is clear from the very first sentence, re-reads the urban space of Japantown as the key by which his people are understood (or rather, misunderstood) in that part of the foreign country. The impression that the narrator conveys about the Japantown in Seattle is one of a dirty place. Nevertheless, with its old-fashioned wooden buildings, it’s a space that has been built by Japanese immigrants in an attempt to recreate the buildings and the traditional urban architecture of Tōkyō. The streets are narrower than in other parts on the city, which suggests a desire to imitate the topographies and the spatial distribution of Japanese cities. But here the wooden, or wood-framed, houses are described as squalid and dirty, nothing to compare to the residential quarters of the Japanese imperial capital.

It comes as no surprise to the narrator that Japanese people are held in extremely low regard, considering the area and the urban decay in which they live. For these reasons, this space has become a shelter for a variety of marginal and unwanted members of society, such as “unemployed Western laborers and poor, oppressed Negroes.” This is noted in fact by Rachael Hutchinson:

> The population of this “colony of Orientals” . . . is thus supplemented by the unwanted of American society. Japantown occupies a marginal, liminal space, as befitting a place suspended halfway between “Japan” and “America.” (337)

Japantown is a marginal part of society, a place where all kinds of people come to take refuge from the gaze of the wealthy areas of the city.

As Hutchinson points out (338), this spatial duality in the representation of the wealth of the Anglo-American part of Seattle and the poverty of Japantown is used by the author to signify the opposition between Japan and the United States as part of a broader set of polarities that were prominent in those years: East vs. West, Orient vs. Occident, Asian vs. Euro-American countries. In fact, not only does Kafū provide a trustworthy image of the conditions in which his compatriots lived their lives as immigrants, but in his description of the urban space he makes extensive use of textual strategies to represent the polarity between East and West; an opposition understood to be between civilized and uncivilized worlds, between colonizers and colonies. For instance, all the people and all the situations in Japantown are described as belonging to the rural part of the country. This creates incongruity and a feeling of strangeness to the observer who belongs to the Japanese upper class. We must not forget that the narrator, who perceives these feelings of strangeness, is a very well-educated and intellectual
Japanese man. It is natural that he is able to understand differences in the accents, customs and traditions of his people; immediately being able to acknowledge that they are from the rural parts of the country, as opposed to Japanese people like himself from the city, and therefore feeling removed from them. The opposition between country and city within the Japantown of Seattle is thus personified by the polarity established between the inhabitants of Japantown and the narrator, who belongs to the Japanese urban upper class.

As we have seen in the examples discussed above, Kafū provides a detailed and accurate description of the urban environment, the architecture and also the people of the Japantown where the two stories are settled. The urban space of Japantown in Amerika monogatari is a relevant narrative element because it serves a dual function. On the one hand, it faithfully and historically represents the life of Japanese migrant workers in twentieth-century America. It is an accurate description of a reality that, in the case of modern day Seattle’s Japantown, does not exist anymore. On the other hand, as pointed out by Rachael Hutchinson, urban space becomes a metaphor for an opposition that embraces a global context; that is to say the reflection on colonialism and on the opposition between East and West, from the point of view of an Asian intellectual.

All these concepts converge and coexist in the narrative of Amerika Monogatari, a unique piece of literature that functions within many poetic dimensions and as that, as may be seen from the examples above, can be used as an essential piece of the jigsaw in the historical and anthropological inquiry into the reality of Seattle’s Japantown at the beginning of the twentieth century. It not only provides details about that area of Seattle and the life in it, but it also describes the appearances and habits of its inhabitants.

In this case, literature offers not only pleasant moments of amusement but also accurate and valuable description of socio-historical elements—here, Seattle’s Japantown’s urban space and its inhabitants. As Iriye suggested, Amerika monogatari deserves attention not only as a beautiful piece of Japanese literature but also as a reliable and articulated document that provides both historical facts on the situation of Japanese workers in the United States as well as many critical reflections on a much wider topic: the intellectual background of modernity as structured by the opposition between East and West.

In the global dimension of the literature of today’s cultural panorama, cooperation between different disciplines such as Japanese literature and American literature can therefore reveal interesting perspectives in both American and Japanese studies.
WORKS CITED


