

PROPERTIES OF VISIBILITY PART 2: HOLLOW CENTER

Takahiro Yamamoto

October, 2019

Made available for a public discussion event *Properties of Visibility* at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, WA.

This event was in conjunction with a performance *Property of Opaqueness* at Velocity Dance Center in collaboration with the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, WA.

Japanese psychotherapist Hayao Kawai (河合隼雄) introduced his idea of the *Hollow Center* (中空構造) in the 1980s and 90s through his study of Japanese mythology.¹ In relationship to his training in Europe and the US that centers on a Jungian approach, his interest and research specifically on Japanese myth is to “understand the deep structure of Japanese mind.”²

Kawai points to the fact that myths described in *Kojiki* (古事記)³ and other Japanese historical literature sometimes introduce three mythological figures simultaneously. For example, there are three holy children: Amaterasu (天照大御神, goddess of sun), Tsukuyomi (月読命, god of moon), Susanoō (須佐之男命, god of turbulent storm). The heroic and sometimes moralistic ideas/details of only two of those figures (Amaterasu and Susanoō) have been told more in detail; however, there is always this one figure (Tsukuyomi, god of moon) whose details are not so clear. The interesting aspect of this is that, as Kawai points out, the imagery and concept of moon has been referred a lot in Japanese culture more than the sun or ocean despite the lack of description of Tsukuyomi. Moon has always been ingrained in the Japanese social awareness. In a way, this third figure is absent and present at the same time. By using the term *Hollow Center*, Kawai uses this fact as a starting point to identify a culturally- and socially-valued tendency in the structure of the Japanese mind, which prioritizes the logic of balance as opposed to logic of integration.⁴

...rather than there being some principle situated at their center, a number of principles circle around the center without one ever really occupying it. In other words, the structure can be envisioned as one in which the recurrence of similar phenomena in slightly varying forms revolve around the hollow center; the revolutions are endless and the center point can never be reached.... The hollow-centeredness makes the judgement of good and evil or right and wrong relative. In

¹ He is smiling in most of the photos that I could find. In his lecture, he not only continues to smile but also makes numerous jokes with his kansai accent.

² Kawai, Hayao, “The Hollow Center in the Mythology of *Kojiki*.” *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, Vol.1. No.1 (October 1986), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42800067> (accessed October 26, 2018).

³ *Kojiki* is one of the oldest chronicles in Japan, dating from the early 8th century.

⁴ Maybe this focus on the balance explains how and why Japanese society values the consideration of others (other's feelings, emotions, opinions, and status). It is not an erasure of individuality. I believe it is rather a relation-oriented idea of identity.

order to bring about integration, principles or power are necessary, and the absolute authority. When hollowness occupies the center; however, that final conflict which determines who should play the central role in this integration can be avoided. This model permits the coexistence of opposing forces.⁵

This *Hollow Center* analogy sparks an image of a rough and yet aesthetically pleasing spherical and ever-evolving diagram as a shape of mind.⁶ I visualize this as a similar dynamic to the solar system: all the things are moving at potentially different speeds and different concentric pathways. And yet, in the *Hollow Center* model, each pathway and its speed is mutable and susceptible depending on the conditions of internal and external influences and pressure. Sometimes things hover aerodynamically without traveling, then go back into movement. The center is cleared out, yet full of potential and substantial air. It is unlike the sun, which enlivens and distributes energy unconditionally. It is unlike the black hole, which unconditionally swallows things whole.

Following this metaphor of the solar system, gravity is what propels all the planets to revolve around the sun. In the *Hollow Center* theory, what represents this gravitational energy that propels these orbiting movements and this balancing act of hovering? Maybe it is life itself. It is the collective gathering or society, its negotiation between and within people on this earth. By using our physical body as a microcosm of this metaphor, it is the core, the area around the pelvic floor where digestive and sexual organs gather. This is where the faculty of moving around the space (lower body: hips, legs, foot) meets the faculty of thinking, perceiving and acquiring (upper body: brain, face, arms, torso). It is where we sense the world, where we sit on the surface, where we gather strength from top to bottom. The core holds the gravity that drives life. The core situates the society that facilitates the combustion of human coexistence.

Kawai's *Hollow Center* suggests coexistence of multiple ideas/deities/elements/values as they are always moving, always changing, always swaying. At the same time, the *Hollow Center* is human-made and, therefore, extremely delicate. It requires check-in, awareness, and maintenance. Of course, the speed of the circular movement would change from time to time. Breakage of this balance is inevitable from time to time.

The susceptibility of *Hollow Center* is evident in Japanese history especially when it lost its silent and invisible substance in the center of the collective mind. Again, *Hollow* does not mean empty in the same way that the negative space we can move and walk around is full of air, the crucial element for our living body to exist in the world. When the space loses air, it creates pressure, desperately sucking in its surroundings. On the cultural and social level, this "desperation" takes a form of fear and blindness, often in the color of self-serving pride. The prime example of this is *Yamato-damashii* (大和魂, Japanese spirit). The idea always makes me cringe. I suppose many folks growing up in Japan would feel similarly. Sometimes associated with kamikaze (神風),

⁵ Kawai, "The Hollow Center." 76

⁶ As nebulous and ever-incomprehensible as our mind is, it is nice to put a shape to it, even if only for a moment. This imagery is actually helpful for my practice since I often attempt to manifest shapeless things (concept, theory, question, wonderment, curiosity) into reality (artwork).

this willful blindness for the sake of country, bloodline, and heritage has the power to wash out and erase the individual self with the disguise of patriarchy and patriotism. Social and political pressure, cultural value of diligence, and drilling of righteous propaganda have further supported this mental state under the militaristic regime of Imperial Japan. Obviously, during that time period, the center was occupied with this nationalistic cultural-supremacy sentiment, praising and honoring the emperor.

After the war in the latter half of 20th century, this sentiment, emblemized with *Yamato-damashii*, has shifted out of the center, and the country focused on the balancing act, oscillating between foreign (mostly US) influences and maintenance of tradition, between implementation of new technology and persistence of the tradition, and between capitalistic drive for a better economy and the insistence of natural preservation. And yet, the remnant of this imperial history was still present in the early 90s with the framed black & white photo of Emperor family on the ledge near the ceiling in each household. I still remember seeing those photos at both of my grandparents' houses when I was a child.

So what do we do when the center becomes occupied with strong collective conviction? It seems like Kawai was hinting us to check in with the seeming status quo, constantly questioning mono-belief, dogma, and order while not erasing where the sentiment comes from, or in other words, while not dismissing how the center got emptied out. Suspicion with compassion. The persistent attempts and consideration of its coexistence get to question one-sided predominance. Yes, coexistence takes energy to maintain.

