In his variegated fiction, Japanese author Kazushige Abe is attentive to controversial subjects, social and psychological crises that make up the so-called “dark Japan”, ranging from pedophilia to youth reclusion. Exploring the tropes associated with these manifestations, his literature allows to reflect on common constructions of social categories that may be considered anti-social or pathological, and how they may be used to interrogate and further the understanding of these phenomena related with youth mental health and social functioning. The talk will discuss how these seemingly pathological identities are represented and deconstructed across Abe’s fiction, focusing on the novel Nipponia Nippon (2001). This prime case study is the story of the teenage recluse Haruo Tōya preparing meticulously for his mission to infiltrate an endangered species facility in northern Japan to break out specimens of crested ibis, the symbol of the Japanese government’s selfish nationalistic policies.

Due to the protagonist’s isolated life style, the novel can be associated with hikikomori literature — namely presenting a young recluse who does not engage in society — yet a closer analysis reveals that it stages a delicate interplay with issues and expectations that are usually related to otaku (passionate fans of pop culture) such as obsessive interests and the supposed lack of a purpose in life, but also with pathologies related to the dependence for others’ recognition and acceptance (which have been highlighted for example in studies by psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki). By playing with and deconstructing social stereotypes and tropes in such individual crises associated with contemporary Japanese youth, Nipponia Nippon offers a powerful literary reflection on the relevance of the role played by general perceptions in the construction of “pathological” identities in contemporary Japan. In doing so, it contributes to the broader field of medical humanities by expanding the understanding of representations of youth’s psychology through Abe’s interplay with images of post-bubble Japanese society, and the engagement with the readers to highlight the issues’ interdependence and reflect on their truth.