



Gender in Japanese Popular Culture Rethinking Masculinities and Femininities

Edited by
Sirpa Salenius

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Introduction: Destabilizing Gender

Sirpa Salenius

1 INTRODUCTION

The departure from the idea of gender as an essentialist binary construct has provoked questions about definitions. “What is gender, how is it produced and reproduced, what are its possibilities?” asks gender theorist Judith Butler in the preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (p. xxiii). Butler is known for drawing attention to the separation of biological sex from gender and for proposing the idea of gender performativity. As Butler (1999) theorizes, gender “proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (p. 33). In other words, gender is the result of socially and culturally constructed discourse and learning trajectory; we are taught to accept what gender should be, how to “do” it, and to assume that the ways in which we perform gender are natural. Referring to social scientists Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman’s article “Doing Gender”

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(1987), sociologist Sally Hines (2018) observes how “the need to ‘do’ gender correctly in relation to society’s expectations of what is appropriate gendered behaviour weighs heavily in all activities” (p. 68). And yet, gendering often goes unnoticed as it permeates nearly all aspects of everyday life. Understanding gendered constructs means recognizing their organization within systems of asymmetrical power. The oppositional constructions of gender binary (male–female, man–woman) in particular imply power structures, rendering the “gendered nature of power” resistant to change (Mostow 2003a, p. 8). The deconstruction of conventional ideas about gender, and such associated notions as biological sex, sexuality, masculinity and femininity, has long received increasing attention in many fields, including Japanese popular culture where the concepts have been studied in connection with cross-dressing, cosplay (costume role playing), manga (comics), anime (animated film), advertisement industry, theater, music, television, and social media.

Although the following chapters examine gender in Japan—in cosplay, manga, anime, advertisements, and so on—I wish to emphasize that this collection of essays is not aiming to create a comprehensive study of Japanese popular culture as that has already been successfully done by others.¹ Instead, by using case studies from Japanese popular culture, which is loosely taken to include advertisements and social media,

¹ Jason Karlin, Patrick W. Galbraith, and Shunsuke Nozawa, eds. 2020. *Japanese Media and Popular Culture* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, open access): the entries are short introductions to terminology and concepts that dominate Japanese media and popular culture; Jennifer Coates, Lucy Fraser, and Mark Pendleton, eds. 2019. *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Popular Culture* (London: Routledge): the essays in this comprehensive volume examine gender in connection to home, marriage, workplace, law, language, and in popular culture (music, manga, anime), and the collection includes a discussion of masculinity studies in Japan; Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, eds. 2017. *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture* (London: Routledge), which is a textbook offering an overview of media forms. It has essays on fashion, video games, and music; Dolores Martinez, ed. 2008. *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures (Contemporary Japanese Society)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): this essay collection by international scholars from Europe and North America offers an anthropological perspective on gender in Japanese popular culture, examining the topic in such fields as sumo, karaoke, vampires, soccer, morning television; Timothy J. Craig, ed. 2000. *Japan Pop! Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge): the essays discuss Japanese music, television and film, and Japanese popular culture abroad; John Whittier Treat, ed. 1996. *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture* (Richmond: Curzon Press): Japan and its popular culture are explored through music, literature, film and television; Richard Gid Powers and Hidetoshi Kato, eds. 1989. *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture* (New York: Greenwood Press): the handbook focuses

the following chapters challenge us to think about gender, sexuality, masculinities, and femininities in new ways. Rejecting the seemingly stabilizing gender polarity constructed as oppositional means recognizing the complexities and range of gendered identities and numerous ways in which masculinities and femininities can be manifested.

Hines (2018) observes that “The idea of gender fluidity suggests that gender is not fixed by biology, but shifts according to social, cultural and individual preference” (p. 9). Such fluidity and change may be signaled through external gender markers like clothing, hair, make-up, colors. If the traditional practice, by now outdated, was to think that girls wear dresses, boys wear pants, girls like pink, boys like blue, girls play with dolls, boys with cars, girls grow into women who wear skirts, high heels, and make-up, then what happens when men do as well (and women no longer may not)? When women first started to wear pants, or “bloomers,” they were fiercely attacked—verbally, emotionally, physically—but by now, it is a common sight to see women wearing what for a time was considered male attire. It would follow, then, that men in dresses and high heels should similarly be destigmatized. At present, instead, as Emerald King observes in Chapter 8 quoting the East Asian studies scholar Rachel Leng: “it takes a real man to dress like a 10-year-old girl” (Leng 2013, p. 89). As one reads through the chapters, it becomes apparent that a much larger revolt and refusal of traditions seem to be operating, even beyond gender, as is also testified in Sharon Kinsella’s recent collaborative film, *Josō* (2021). The stereotypical gendered roles and responsibilities, typified in the Japanese salary-man, no longer appear attractive, neither to men nor to women.

It is only rather recently that gender has more widely been recognized as a dynamic, fluid, even as a rapidly changing concept. However, even conventional ideas of gender polarity prove to be evasive, or in continuous flux: although the traditional socio-culturally constructed gender (man-woman) has been differentiated from biological sex (male-female), both term pairs tend to be used interchangeably. Official forms often ask one’s *gender* identification, which is labeled male/female (rather than man-woman), now also “non-binary” or “other.” And scholars tend to talk about same-sex relations, thus evoking biological differences but then refer to women-loving-women (or men-loving-men) rather than using

on defining popular culture in relation to architecture, religion, performing arts, film, and television.

the labels female-male. Such confusing overlapping, as scholar Thomas F. Strychacz reminds us in *Dangerous Masculinities* (2008), derives from the fact that “there is no natural and absolute relationship between the sexed body and gendered identities” (p. 20). If so, does the separation of sex and gender then serve a purpose? Scholars have pondered, indeed, why the emphasis is placed on the few bodily differences when there are so many body parts people have in common. Procreation no longer seems a valid argument for underscoring differences between men and women (or males and females) as that commonly is not the main scope of sexual relations and many cannot or prefer not to have children. Moreover, the tendency seems to be to move toward sex/gender-neutral educational institutions, workplaces, mixed-gender armies, perhaps also prisons—and even public bathrooms.

The destabilization of gender polarity has been accomplished to a great extent by (re)labeling, with a naming process that ranges from non-binary, gender-queer, agender, transgender, intersexual, cisgender, pansexual, and so on, to one’s identification as gender fluid (see, for example, Hines 2018, pp. 10–11, 38–39). The term “x-gender” (*x-jendaa*) is used in Japan where it has been identified as “a form of anti-identity” (Johnson 2020, p. 124). Although labels and categories can be used to normalize gender that is neither male nor female, such classifications are extremely fluid, interwoven, and evasive of any fixed definition, with naming practices that may constantly change. The existence of various alternatives for self-definition can be liberating but also confusing, especially if one’s identification changes over time. Perhaps term-borrowing could prove to be useful in this context: the Japanese term “sei” could be introduced in transnational conversation about gender and sex since, as Michelle H. S. Ho notes in Chapter 2, it can be defined as “either sex, gender, or both” and thus would be useful for contemporary discourse on non-normative, non-binary, agender, or gender fluid identifications, simplifying seemingly rather jumbled labeling.

Similarly, English-language speakers refer to “he,” “she,” and now “they” as those who do not identify with such labels as male–female sex/gender, but since the plural form tends to create more confusion than clarity, perhaps a new term should be invented, something that would be more in line with “he” and “she,” for example, borrowing the Japanese term “*ji*” (pronounced “gee”), which means “the autonomy of the self” (Ho footnote 19), which could be anglicized with a similar sounding term, such as “zhee.” Similar processes have been adopted in Sweden

where a gender-neutral “hen” has been added to “hon” (she) and “han” (he); the Finnish language, instead, uses one gender-neutral “hän” for all genders. Gender-neutral pronouns would be ideal for term-borrowing. In other words, linguistic choices work toward naturalizing gender that is neither-nor or may be both, male–female.

Gender has been analyzed through inter- and multidisciplinary approaches in which the cross-pollination between such fields as linguistics, popular culture, social studies, history, anthropology, ethnography, Black studies, literature, body studies, masculinity studies, queer and LGBTQ+ studies, to name a few, contribute to the ways in which gender can be analyzed and articulated, at times intersecting with such categories as race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and so forth.² The oppositional positioning of men vs. women is commonly associated with such binary notions as male vs. female (referring to biological sex), masculinity vs. femininity or linked to sexuality, again perceived as forming a contrast between hetero- vs. homosexuality, or, as often has been the case, between “normal” and “deviant.” When examining the meaning of gender, biological sex, sexuality or masculinities/femininities, it is important to recognize that modern societies tend to be divided into something that has been labeled as the dominant or mainstream society, culture, and their representatives who assume positions of authority and those who differ from these, such as representatives of other gender(s) and non-heterosexuals, often perceived as “others” who tend to be labeled as “deviant” from the “norm” and thus are marginalized; it implies a hierarchy that involves control by one group over another. The pressure to conform to normativity reflects individuals’ need for social approval and acceptance. Therefore, it is important to shift such center-marginal positionings and question what is “normal” and “natural” or “deviant” by introducing more varied expressions of gender into the mainstream, as already is occurring in various parts of the world.

Without delving into the (“Western”) history of gender, sex, and sexuality, which already has brilliantly been done by numerous scholars,³ a

² Scholars working in various fields tend to acknowledge the pioneering work done on sex, gender, and queer studies by such theorists as Gayle Rubin, Esther Newton, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others.

³ See for example, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1978); Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality* (1986), *Making Sexual History* (2000), and *What is Sexual History* (2016); Alison Shaw and Shirley Ardener, eds. *Changing Sex and Bending Gender* (2005);

few examples will suffice to point to the arbitrary nature of the concepts. For instance, Hines (2018, p. 31) reminds us about sexual historian Thomas Laqueur's findings about ancient Greece, where men and women represented "one sex"; it is only in the eighteenth century, according to Laqueur, that the shift to a "two-sex" model occurred in Western Europe. At that time, such philosophers as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) proposed that the public sphere suited men better than women whose nature was deemed more nurturing, thus more inclined to taking care of children and domestic chores. Certain character traits were deemed typical of women/females (perceived as feminine, weak, and emotional), who authoritarian voices positioned in contrast to men/males (constructed as courageous, rational, intellectual) (Hines 2018, pp. 35–36). The simplification of gender into more stabilized hierarchical opposites occurred in tandem with the categorization and labeling of sexuality in the nineteenth century. Prior to that, the male–female or hetero-homosexual polarizations seem to have not existed, at least not presented as essentialist concepts. With the birth of sexology, sexuality was not only approached in terms of religious morality but of pseudo-scientific inquiry.⁴

What is thus presented as "normal" is actually the result of arbitrary articulations that through repetition become internalized. The general acceptance and assumption concerning heterosexuality as natural has been contested by such scholars as Jonathan Ned Katz (1995/2007) who explains that when the term first was used in the United States in Dr. James G. Kiernan's article published in a medical journal in 1892, it was equated with perversion. In the article, which also introduced the word "homosexual," "heterosexuals" referred to those who desired two different sexes, not those attracted to a different sex (Katz 2007, pp. 19–20). A year later, in 1893 (according to some 1892), both terms appeared in sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, in which "hetero-sexuals" were presented as desiring one different sex, now signifying normality although associated with fetishism and perversity; "homo-sexuals" were pathologized because non-reproductive. In

Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (2007); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (2008); Sally Hines and Yvette Taylor, *Sexualities: Past Reflections, Future Directions (Genders and Sexualities in the Social Sciences)* (2012); Sally Hines, *Is Gender Fluid? A Primer for the 21st Century* (2018); and others.

⁴ For terminology and more recent theorizations of gender, sex, and sexuality, see, for example Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (1995/2007).

the same publication, males and females were presented as “opposite” (Katz 2007, pp. 22–23, 30). The normalizing process of one over the other gradually started to occur in conjunction with the separative categorization and labeling of sex and sexuality. Moreover, as Hines (2018) observes: “Rather than being something we did, sexuality became a key facet of who we are” (p. 85).

This idea of oppositional sexuality, together with the understanding of gender as polarity, has been challenged widely. Already in 1948, the American sexologist Alfred Kinsey (1894–1956) perceived sexuality as a continuum, a concept that others, such as the American feminist poet Adrienne Rich and historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg subsequently adapted, the latter referring to it also as spectrum; others, such as Butler and Gilbert Herdt theorized about the concept of “third gender” and “third sex” to refer to the existence of more than two options for gender identification (Butler 1986; Katz 2007; Lewin and Leap 2002); and before Butler (2004), the French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1997) and the Black American author James Baldwin (1985/2012) promoted the idea that masculinity pertains to women as well as men, like femininity may characterize both men and women, and consequently, femininity and masculinity are not traits of differently sexed bodies. Baldwin called it androgyny, arguing that “we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male” (p. 698). Whether he meant this to be taken literally or to merely indicate human interconnectivity, he, nonetheless, suggests that the differentiation between male and female may not be so straightforward.

The idea of gender being something more complex than the simplified male–female construct has existed in various countries for centuries, including many Asian countries. In India, for example, at birth the *bijra* are assigned male status but subsequently they identify and live as female (Hines 2018, p. 79). Another example of gender intermixing, among many others, are Thailand’s *kathoey* (or “ladyboys”) as well as Thailand’s masculine-feminine female couples *Tom-Dees*. The labels that have been used to describe *kathoey*—briefly (and superficially) defined as biological men with feminine traits—include transsexual, transvestite, drag-queen, hermaphrodite; and they have variously been understood to identify as homo-, hetero-, or bisexual. Gender, biological sex, and sexual practices

are thus intermixed in an effort to provide labels to what appear as non-conforming identity positions. The important aspect is that both *kathoey* and Tom-Dees have existed openly for hundreds of years and seem to be part of national gender identity. It is only more recently that the *kathoey* have started to be stigmatized as many of them have become entertainers, more precisely sex-workers, catering in particular to men from Western countries. Consequently, their social position and image have greatly changed during time. The latter, Tom-Dees, or couples of (biological) women who some label “lesbians” because the “Toms” are mannish women, sometimes perceived as resembling *kathoey*, but who wear men’s clothing and refer to themselves with masculine pronouns; their partners, “Dees,” instead, appear as more feminine females. Although they may appear similar to Western ideas of butch-femme couples, Toms in Tom-Dee couples are closer to transgender men. However, as historian Peter A. Jackson (2016) observes, the representatives of non-binary genders (which in itself is a problematic term as it recognizes gender as a binary construct, male–female) need to be understood in the context of their uniqueness, in their pertinence to a certain place and time, in this case, acknowledging their long history in Thailand. More importantly, as Jackson (2016) points out, the term “queer,” which is often used in Western discourse, is not employed in Thailand where another term, *phet* (meaning “eroticized gender”) is being used (p. 203). Hence, Jackson reminds us that we should refrain from using the contemporary “Western” framework and remember that any definition of gender fluctuates according to the explanatory attributes attached to it or used to describe it, and gender diversity has its unique manifestations at different time periods, in various countries and locations. As Butler (1999) suggests: “gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” (p. 6). Thus, recognizing the existence of these gender transforming cultures contributes to the destigmatization of what is presently understood as “non-normative” gender(s).

It is worth noting that when examining various manifestations of gendered realities, for instance in the Asian context, it is important to avoid generalizations that would reduce complex subjectivities into flat, homogenized stereotypes. Paradoxically, or perhaps *because of* the firmly rooted, traditionally accentuated, rigid gender roles, rules, and hierarchies in Japanese society, on the one hand, subcultures have flourished in Japanese popular culture that offer playful as well as more serious channels for expressing and experimenting with an extensive variety of

gender manifestations, on the other hand. Japan, then, seems fertile ground for exploring gender(s), providing various contexts and case studies. After all, Japan tends to be a trendsetter, especially in youth culture. As Lucy Glasspool observes in Chapter 9: “Japanese pop culture (unlike Japanese mainstream society) abounds with gender-ambivalent characters” (see Chapter 9, p. 254). The prevalent traditional expectations concerning gender are dramatically contrasted with a certain liberty to express non-conforming masculinities and femininities. Consequently, many of the chapters that follow recognize the polyphonic nature of gender, posing questions rather than providing answers, questioning conventional assumptions about gender, pushing us to rethink such concepts as femininity and masculinity, or the multiple ways in which femininities and masculinities (in the plural) can be expressed. At times the concepts merge, collapsing into each other. It would seem possible to talk about a certain type of a collage or *mélange* of culturally codified signs of masculinities and femininities that could be referred to as *masculofemininity* (male-femininity) and/or *femimascularity* (female-masculinity)—that is, if we wish to distinguish between female and male femininity and masculinity.

The question, however, remains: how should gender be defined—is it biological, emotional, cultural, or social construction, or a combination of these? And what exactly is gender? I would like to suggest that rather than referring to gender as continuum or spectrum, it might more accurately be defined a kaleidoscope which is within all of us: we all have (what has been identified as) maleness/masculinities and femaleness/femininities that we manifest in various degrees, in different circumstances, in a similar way as our sexualities may find expression through various forms. Perhaps we are all kaleidoscopic, perhaps identifying more strongly with one gender in particular but acknowledging the existence of both within us. A similar idea is expressed by some of the participants in *josō* (male-to-female cross-dressing) contests organized at Japanese universities, interviewed by Ayuma Miyazaki (Chapter 3).

Although moving backwards in time—to recognize that gender, sexuality, masculinities/femininities, maleness/womanliness are all constructs, interpreted differently in various locations at various times—and removing categorizations, classifications, and labels are far from easy, the arbitrary nature and invented labels mean that they can be deconstructed. The chapters here brought together provide alternative readings for definitions of gender, sexuality, masculinities and femininities, at times encouraging

us to consider that man/masculinity and woman/femininity could pertain to either sex and all genders.

Many of the case studies discussed in the chapters challenge conventional assumptions associated not only with gender but also normativity, ultimately deconstructing the assumed nature of the concept itself. Although the chapters focus on Japan, the subject matter and topics addressed do not pertain to Japan alone; the discussion on gender takes part in an already initiated examination of what gender is, how masculinities and femininities may be understood and performed. Taken together, these chapters use examples from Japanese popular culture to generate new transnational conversations about gender that move beyond any national or geographic specificity.

2 GENDER DIVERSITY IN JAPAN

Scholar Maia Tsurumi (2000) argues that “in Japan, society’s standards of what is male and what is female are defined by men,” suggesting that many feminists, or perhaps *particularly* feminists, would agree with this statement (p. 178). Gender in Japan has traditionally been constructed through emphasizing distinct gender roles for men and women, the geisha and samurai being historical examples of such, but there also is, and has been, a strong presence of gender ambiguous figures. In addition, cross-dressing has been a prominent feature in Noh Theater since the fourteenth century and in Kabuki performances of the sixteenth century. The actors can be perceived as truly “performing” their gender, in particular the *onnagata* (men acting as women), similarly to the enigmatic geisha, a subject of many books, films, paintings, and prints, in which she embodies the aesthetics of eroticism (Pandey 2009). Such eroticism is also found in the artistic expression of Japanese poetry and narrative. During Edo period, portraits of beautiful boys appeared in literary works by such famous authors as Saikaku Ihara (*Great Mirror of Male Love*, 1687) and even earlier, in one of Japan’s most well-known tales dating back to the eleventh century: *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) written by Murasaki Shikibu. The story continues to fascinate readers and art lovers as testified by a recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York dedicated to Murasaki Shikibu and Genji in 2019 (“The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated”) (Fig. 1).

The Japanese woodblock prints, *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world), that appeared during the samurai rule in Edo period (1603–1868)



Fig. 1 Toyokuni 3rd, Genji and beauties in a villa with moonlit garden, triptych (1854). Copyright Private Collection

when the Kabuki Theater emerged, feature images inspired by *Genji monogatari* (ukiyo-*ē* and Kabuki can perhaps be seen as representing Edo period's popular culture). Other ukiyo-*ē* prints portray actors, courtesans, geishas, beauties, *chonin* belles, or men in daily life. In particular, the prints from the second half of the eighteenth century depict a connection between the world of theater and pleasure quarters. Important for the society at the end of the eighteenth century was the refined aesthetic presentation of sensual experience.

The sensual is explicitly depicted in Japanese erotic woodblock prints (*shunga*) that were consumed by both men and women in the eighteenth century (Monden 2018; Screech 2009, p. 93; Miller 2006, p. 155). Cultural studies scholar Masafumi Monden (2018) quotes art historian Timon Screech (2009, p. 97), the publisher of “the first critical study of *shunga* in any language” (Mostow 2003a), who has argued that rather than operating along sexual binaries, these sexual images placed emphasis on age and the associated options of passive (young) and active (older) roles that were assumed. Gender, moreover, was coded through

the way in which the assimilation of the two bodies made social gender-coding through dress or hairstyle commensurately more important. If a person dressed her or himself in the clothes of a certain gender, they became a true representative of that gender (Screech 2009, p. 104; qtd. in Monden 2018, pp. 68–69).

Similarly, art historian Joshua S. Mostow (2003a, b) emphasizes that gender and sexuality in late seventeenth-century Edo had little in common with how we perceive them today; hence, we should avoid applying such terminology as, for instance, “gay” to Japanese homoerotic practices since “sexual passion for males” was quite different from what is meant by the term “homosexual” (Mostow 2003a, b). Art historians, as Mostow (2003a) explains, have considered the early modern period art “as accurate records of an age now past and as keys to a realm of sexual and aesthetic pleasure untainted by the foreign, religiously inspired pathologies of the nineteenth century” (p. 6). They offer a glimpse into the intimacy of sexual relations, simultaneously documenting gender. These images have fascinated scholars and art enthusiasts: the so-called “*shunga* boom” of the 1990s followed a more general “Edo boom” that started in Japan and abroad in the 1980s (Mostow 2003a, p. 5).

In some of the ukiyo-*ē* prints, it is possible to identify the presence of the androgynous *wakashu* (beautiful youth), whose gender was determined by biological sex, age, and physical features, all particularly pertinent to this time period. Their external identification markers included dress and hairstyle; these visual codes are recognizable in some ukiyo-*ē* prints.

3 THE ANDROGYNOUS AND BEAUTIFUL YOUTH

The *wakashu* youth are immortalized in ukiyo-*ē* similarly to the famous Kabuki actors who excelled in female roles, the *onnagata*. These young males called *wakashu* were the “third gender”: they resembled women in their outer appearance and, to some extent, in their behavior, but they could be recognized by their particular hairstyle (a slightly shaven crown covered with flocks, which appeared very similar to women’s hairstyle). Their roles and responsibilities may appear to us as ambiguous as their physical characteristics. As Claire Voon (2017, n.p.) explains:

wakashu comprised a gender of their own, as defined by biological sex, age, outward appearance, and their role in an established sexual hierarchy, that was unique to this period. These young males were not only depicted as sexually ambiguous in art but were also, in the real world, objects of desire to both adult men and women.

However, we again should avoid applying certain vocabulary: *wakashu* should not be confused with the “Western” idea of a bisexual male (Mostow 2003a, b). Perhaps the most important aspect of the *wakashu* was the intensity of their feelings, the degree of affections and devotion, but significant was also their age, which generally varied between eleven and twenty-three (Mostow 2003b). I wish to point out that the aim here is not so much to create a history of gender(s) than to recognize that the varied expressions of masculinities/femininities and a range of genders are not recent phenomena. What is important to note in this context is the existence of more than two genders and the femininization of young males, both resonating with gendering practices found in present-day Japanese popular culture.

Age, as pointed out above, played a significant role in the gendering, sexualizing, and characterization processes of *wakashu*. It was in the mid-Edo period, from circa 1716, that children (*kodomo*) were differentiated

from youth, from the adolescent girl (*shōjo*) and adolescent boy (*shōnen*), who were situated in a temporary, liminal state between child- and adulthood. Although they have been treated as being characterized by separate aesthetics and expectations, some *shōnen* images are similar to *shōjo*/girls' culture, which was associated with the poetic, romantic, lyrical, and sentimental (Monden 2018, p. 75). The contemporary cute and boyish look of male beauty (*bishōnen*, beautiful boy) seems to find its roots in these Edo-period images. The contemporary cute boys started to perform on television in the 1960s, their image flourished in the 1970s, and in the 1980s they were embodied by the cute male *aidoru* (idol) performers, known as *bishōnen* (Monden 2018, p. 71). As Monden (2018) explains:

bishōnen is contrariwise slender, boyish, and predominantly *kawaii* (cute). This *kawaii* masculinity is omnipresent in contemporary Japanese culture, from advertising to television programs, from magazines to fashion media, exerting influence upon the self-image of contemporary Japanese men. The term *bishōnen* has been used extensively in its literal sense—any beautiful young man. Yet, [...] the term is much more than just a genre label; in studies of the aesthetic imagination of Japanese boyhood, it denotes a critical concept and an imagined figure of the boy. (p. 65)

The term *kawaii*, indeed, may be translated as “cute” although, as Kinsella (1995) suggests, central in *kawaii* aesthetics is youthfulness, the pretty and delicate childlikeness (p. 229). One is here reminded of the young Genji, “the shining one” “of such beauty that he hardly seemed meant for this world.” He is further described as a sensitive youth, a young man who excelled in everything, writing poetry and playing koto so that he made “the heavens echo” (Shikibu 1000/1992, pp. 17–20). Perhaps this Heian-period beautiful youth could be identified as a forefather of *kawaii* aesthetics.

The beautiful boys and effeminate men represent a form of masculinity that differs from what is commonly perceived as conventional maleness; in Japan (and elsewhere) maleness is often associated with aggression, even violence. The effeminate figures contribute to the “feminization of masculinity” that according to Yumiko Iida (2005) “often implies a fear and anxiety on the part of patriarchy over the boundary-crossing practice that seriously challenges the stability of gendered cultural hegemony” (p. 56). However, such redefinition of masculinity is also part of what Iida sees as “the increasing presence of gender ambiguous identities” (p. 57).

Feminization of masculinity, thus, plays a significant role in contemporary Japanese society in which many women continue to struggle under the social pressure to follow traditional gendered paths of getting married and giving up their careers. Marriage in Japan, at the moment, is the privilege of heterosexual couples alone; same-gender partners wishing to marry need to travel abroad to exchange their vows. What is more, sociologist and cultural historian Mark J. McLelland (2000) argues that “Japanese society maintains a strict double standard regarding the sexual expression of men and women,” which limits women’s alternatives and stigmatizes those women who appear more open about their sexuality (McLelland 2000, pp. 14–15). And here, sexuality refers to sexuality in general. This, in part, explains women’s attraction to androgynous beautiful young boys who materialize in manga.⁵ Their youthful physical beauty provides both aesthetic pleasure and sexual attraction (Monden 2018).

Consequently, the presence of cross-dressing and beautiful boys that now appear in contemporary manga has a long tradition and history. The boys’ love narratives depict androgynous beautiful boy characters who are attracted to other beautiful boys who, however, are neither purely male nor female. The love stories between adolescent boys cater not only to male but also to female readers whose sexuality often is culturally suppressed. Despite the love and sexual interest between young male characters, these manga then appeal to women who may fantasize of romance and sexuality with the beautiful boy protagonists. These androgynous boys, who may be perceived as resembling girls, thus blur the boundaries of binary constructs of both gender and sexuality. As gender and sexuality studies scholar James Welker (2006) notes, the 1970s “boys’ love” (*shōnen ai*) manga, which is a subgenre of girls’ comics, “illustrates how visual and cultural borrowing helped to liberate writers and readers to work within and against the local heteronormative paradigm in the exploration of alternatives” (p. 841). The genre that captivates readers of all genders provides them a liberatory outlet for experimenting with sexuality, even if only in imagination.

In many manga, the female and male characters are drawn to physically resemble each other, with the only distinguishing elements being their hair, certain facial features, and height, which furthers cross-gender identification (Tsurumi 2000, p. 180). Not only manga but also anime, cosplay,

⁵ In Chapter 7, Emiko Nozawa provides a chronological overview of the development of manga genres.

and cross-dressing contests allow “people to project their own ideas onto the images” (Izawa 2000, p. 140). In addition to physical and emotional attraction, sex and even violence can safely be explored in an imagined, fictitious world removed from reality; and not only ideas but also desires, dreams, fantasies, and fears can be channeled through such popular culture genres as animated films, manga, or cosplay for personal catharsis, for finding release from mundane pressures, or overcoming limitations and expressing identities that are not always compatible with mainstream acceptability. At the same time, though, popular culture can provide a stage for powerful statements about gender, sexuality, and normativity, influencing mainstream attitudes. As Tsurumi (2000) suggests: “the idea that manga reflect and may even influence reality is one that is widely accepted by manga fans and critics and by academic scholars” (p. 184).

4 GENDER IN JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

In his “Introduction” to *Japan Pop: Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture* (2000), Timothy J. Craig locates the roots of today’s Japanese popular culture in “the vibrant bourgeois culture, born of the common people and aimed at the new urban middle class, which developed and flourished during Japan’s Edo period (1603–1868)” (p. 7). As he points out, “Japanese popular culture has become a transnational phenomenon, evolving at home as well as abroad: Japanese animation and comics have built a huge global following, and their Japanese names, *anime and manga*, have entered the international lexicon” (Craig 2000, p. 4). Several of these trends specific to Japanese popular culture, including anime, manga, video-gaming, and cosplay, flourished in the late 1980s and early 1990s. To quote Miyuki Hashimoto (2007): “Since the beginning of the 90’s, Japanese popular culture such as anime (cartoons), manga (comics), computer games and pop music have become increasingly popular among young people on an international scale, owing to the widespread use of new information technologies” (p. 87). Gender and sexuality are centralized in the music scene, cosplay, and particularly in manga and anime that have been recognized as “sexually hybrid” as they allow, and even encourage, cross-gender identification (Mostow 2003a, p. 13).

But not only has Japanese popular culture become internationally acclaimed but so has particularly Japanese fan culture (*otakism*) been adopted abroad. As Hashimoto (2007) explains: “Otaku, as members of

this fan culture are called, usually invest substantial amounts of personal resources into consuming and (re)creating Japanese popular culture. As an essential element, Japanese Otaku also have a special bond with a character of their choice taken from Japanese popular culture; such a bond is often of a sexual nature and also shows a distinctive fetishistic tendency” (p. 87). This fandom is particularly accentuated in J-rock, whose band members have drawn inspiration from gothic, punk, and glam rock, in particular, in the way they dress. Their make-up and clothing are imitated by their fans, whose behavior can be seen as fetishistic. Both the bands and their fans emphasize visual expression, therefore, the popular culture genre has been labeled “visual-kei” (Hashimoto 2007, p. 87).

Visual *kei* (style) of the music scene with its elaborate gender-crossing emerged in the late 1980s, taking its inspiration from anime, manga, and games but also American and British hard rock, punk, heavy metal, and glam rock bands. For the most part, visual kei musicians tend to be men, as Ken McLeod (2013) suggests, “who either cross-dress as women or adopt flamboyant androgynous personae,” performing to predominantly female audiences (p. 310). Like Western bands of the 1980s, their outfits may include corsets, high heel boots, wigs, heavy make-up; inspiration is drawn from such artists and groups as David Bowie, New York Dolls, The Cure, Bauhaus, Hanoi Rocks, and many others.

Fan culture in this context is significant, pressuring band members to engage in such “fan service” as cross-dress same-sex physical demonstration of intimacy through kissing and hugging; fans themselves identify with their favorite artist, dressing and acting in imitation of them (McLeod 2013, p. 314). Visual kei and otaku fandom underscore the instability of gender.

Japanese fandom has its own subcultures, for instance, a genre called *Yaoi*, meaning “no climax, no point and no meaning,” which is significant among visual kei but also in the female Otaku culture. As Hashimoto (2007) explains, it

originated in the world of fanzines and is strongly influenced by the works of several early female comic artists such as Keiko Takemiya, Moto Hagio, Yumiko Ooshima and Ryoko Yamagishi. These comic artists were born around 1950 and became comic artists during the 70’s. This generation began to question traditional female stereotypes and therefore drew stories in which the main characters oftentimes were androgynous boys with whom girls could easily identify, thus offering a new self-image for

girls [...] for Yaoi sexual description is primarily essential. Many works of this genre could be described, even pornography.” (Hashimoto 2007, p. 91)

It seems quite evident, then, that although conventional gendered roles and expectations continue to be sustained in mainstream Japanese society, they no longer seem appealing, neither to men nor to women. New gender tropes that substitute the traditional “active male” and “passive female” include figures labeled the “herbivore-type man” (docile, non-aggressive man) and “carnivore-type woman” (proactive, voracious woman); the latter, it seems, often are determined to find a boyfriend, a potential husband (Endo 2019, p. 168, 173; for more about these terms and their use, see, for example, Endo 174–75). The type of men that most seem to attract (Japanese) women include sensitive men, *kawaii* and cool (*kakkoii*) men, in addition to the beautiful boys who are the protagonists of *shōnen* manga (boys’ comics) that became popular among female audiences. Examining these male figures and the “deliberately androgynous or ‘genderless’ *kei* (modes), where young men appear and dress in conventionally feminine ways,” Monden (2018) suggests, “is vital to form an accurate picture of male identity and gender as it is more broadly imagined in contemporary Japanese culture” (p. 72). In these instances, men can maintain their gender status while simultaneously embracing their femininity. The effeminate men can be perceived as non-threatening. Traditionally (in stereotypes) such attributes are associated with gay men, but heterosexual ciswomen, it seems, find such “effeminate,” non-aggressive men attractive and even sexually arousing.

Indeed, according to anthropologist Laura Miller (2006), Japanese women find a certain “boyishness” in men appealing (pp. 155–56). Moreover, the defenselessness and a sort of innocence associated with youth and cuteness seem to fascinate both men and women, who no longer appear willing to renounce their own sensitivity and vulnerability. When men and women dress as little girls, it seems to express a desire to remain children, a resistance to becoming adults, a refusal to assume the responsibilities of grown-ups, and perhaps a yearning for being taken care of and protected. The society that is dramatically changing in regard to employment, which no longer stands for a lifetime dedication to a career in one particular company, in particular, causes insecurity. As Monden (2018) suggests: “This uncertainty arguably makes it more and more difficult for

young men to be defined by such conventionally masculine characteristics as the maturity of the salaryman in contemporary Japan” (p. 84).

The following chapters problematize gender by examining what it means to be “genderless” or “gender free” (*jendau furii*)⁶ or for biological males to adopt female-coded clothing and gestures, as are done by *jōso* (male-to-female cross-dressing) and *onmagata* (assuming a woman’s form). Talking about gender diversity means breaking down gender binary; this can be seen as a normalizing process that eventually, and hopefully, will lead to a more general acceptance of those presently perceived as deviating from the “norm” and who thus find themselves marginalized. Perhaps, the gender-polar structure as it is presently constructed and understood will eventually entirely collapse.

5 ON GENDER, DISCRIMINATION, MASCULINITIES, AND FEMININITIES

Scholars tend to agree that there are various ways to express masculinities that have become the focus of a scholarly field of inquiry labeled Masculinity studies. The same principal applies to femininities, as testified by the following chapters in which femininities are explored as a male-related concept. Masculinities and maleness, furthermore, can intertwine with femininities and femaleness resulting in an androgynous gender identity that is particularly fluid and even transitional, as Michelle Ho points out in her chapter on *dansō* (female-to-male cross-dressing) and genderless *joshi* (girls). In Chapter 2, Ho investigates the potential of *dansō* and genderless for “generating new meanings,” encouraging us to rethink the stability of gender binary. Ho suggests that it could be replaced by, for example, with the concept of spectrum. The terms “genderless,” which would imply no gender, and “androgynous,” which stands for indeterminate sex are alternatives often used to replace identification with “male” or “female.” Potentially both “genderless” and “androgynous” contest gender understood in terms of hierarchy.

Rakugo theater performances, which are dominated by men, become sites of struggle and contestation where, however, discrimination of women continues. This means that often women are forced to work

⁶ “Gender free” has been defined as one to use “contrasting gendered symbols and signs within a single persona” that allows certain freedom from gender roles and norms (Johnson 2020, p. 121).

harder than their male peers, which is particularly true in situations where women somehow appear to be challenging existing gender ideologies, as Sarah Stark demonstrates in Chapter 3, discussing the misogyny of audiences and producers, and androcentricity of the *rakugo* story lines, performance conventions, and the community itself. Stark explains that in *rakugo*, gender difference is signaled by voice, gestures, and linguistic choices. The female characters in these performances seem to reflect mainstream expectations of what a woman should be: either elegant and sexy, associated with the pleasure quarters, which means that their task would be to please men aesthetically and sexually, or they are presented as desexualized mothers and daughters. Paradoxically, women portraying female characters tend to be criticized for appearing unnatural, as Stark observes. Such criticism evidently serves to discriminate against women who wish to enter a field that historically has been male-dominated.

Although progressive gender positions like those that Ho examines in her chapter are gradually moving into mainstream culture, conventional ideas about gender continue to resist such change. In Chapter 4, Yuko Itatsu looks at not only how femininity may be constructed but also what are the many challenges women still face in Japanese society. Itatsu analyzes Nike commercials, particularly their message-driven content series, treating them “as a microcosm among the debate on whether or not Japan is ready for a dialogue on diversity and inclusion.” Itatsu, whose study material includes “femvertising” (neologism for feminism and advertising), explores gender (in)equality, the cultural silencing of women, their fears, and “the stigma, discrimination and disadvantages a woman may experience in contemporary Japan.” She notes how in some of Nike’s advertisements, women’s femininity is constructed through depicting them as “delicate, elegant, feminine, gentle, modest, reserved, and submissive (see Chapter 4, pp. 100, 107, 110). However, young women are starting to contest these expectations, presenting themselves as sportive, working on their muscles, conducting their interviews in gyms rather than in spaces that could more easily be gendered female.

Ayumi Miyazaki (Chapter 5) continues this line of inquiry into how femininities and masculinities may be articulated by analyzing Japanese university *josō* (male-to-female cross-dressing) contests. At these events, as Miyazaki notes, participants “negotiate multitudes of masculinities and femininities through different gendered perceptions and ideologies” (see Chapter 5, p. 126). She underscores the problematic nature of terminology that is being used as it undermines non-binary gender

constructs while simultaneously relying on the distinctiveness of male from female. In these contests, the impetus of *josō* practitioners vary, some of them clearly being motivated by their desire to fully express their femininities and masculinities. In many of the examples Miyazaki analyzes, it seems that what constitutes femininities is often taken for granted. Old-fashioned, conventional, stereotypical elements such as skirts, long hair, make-up, cuteness, beauty but also carefree fun and happiness are identified as easily recognizable signs of femininity. Women's objectification and the false impression of their lack of responsibilities, women's idealized child-like innocence, non-violence, and lack of competitiveness seem to permeate many of the discourses circulating around what it means to be a woman or being feminine. This would seem to imply a certain homogenization and simplification concerning femininities that, one would assume, can be manifested in more complex ways, similarly to masculinities. For example, short hair can be very feminine or large pants resembling the Japanese "hakama" can be mistaken for a skirt. These could be perceived as a *mélange* of masculinity and femininity codes that are intertwined so they become inseparable, impossible to distinguish one from the other. Should they then be defined as signals for masculinity or femininity or identified as masculinity codes that have become feminized or are they examples of femimasculinities (female-masculinities)? Or perhaps, there is no need to identify short hair or large skirt-like pants as signs of either femininity or masculinity; they can be neither or both.

Motherhood is one of those concepts associated with women but paradoxically not necessarily considered an expression of femininity. In dominant discourse, one of gender polarity's aims has been to consolidate heterosexuality, which then would promote procreation, securing the formation of traditional family units. Presently, this seems a rather outdated idea. The idea of women's natural tendency toward motherhood is widely contested as men choose to stay home with children while their spouses continue investing in their careers or as gay couples become the nurturing parents of adopted children. Gavin Furukawa, in Chapter 6, demonstrates the difficulties young Japanese men face when their life styles or desires fail to conform with conventional traditions. Furukawa's chapter analyzes Japanese queer men's coming out videos produced by vloggers. It becomes clear how traditional expectations concerning Japanese family structure, especially its continuation, appear to be more important than a person's sexual preferences. Furukawa explores the importance of language, the process of naming and labeling,

of pushing against tradition and conventionality. Coming out to one's family is a sensitive issue, as Furukawa argues and as Emiko Nozawa points out in Chapter 7, recognizing it as one of the main topics of "Boys' Love" (BL) manga in the 2000s-2010s.

In stereotypical images, queer men have often been perceived as crossing the line from emphasizing their masculinities to embodying, even overdoing, femininities. As pointed out earlier, effeminate men appeal to Japanese women who seem attracted to their sensitivities, as explained by Nozawa in the chapter that looks at Japanese manga. Scholars, as Nozawa notes, have argued that the effeminate beautiful boys who are the protagonists in Boys' Love manga (BL) represent a third gender. This specific type of manga objectifies men and sexuality, but at the same time readers, who for the most part are ciswomen, are drawn to the male-male couples not only because of their effeminate appearance but also because their relationships are based on relatively equal power relations, something that Japanese women rarely experience in heterosexual relations, or in society at large, as also Itatsu argues in Chapter 4. And yet, as Nozawa explains, both men and women can be trapped in the oppression of patriarchy. Manga, and other popular media, serve to highlight the struggles of both genders. At the same time, they can function as social criticism and can push for change, for instance, by raising awareness of the discrimination in the existing legal system that fails to recognize same-sex marriage. Popular culture, in this case manga, can contribute to envisioning more progressive solutions, as Nozawa points out. Moreover, removing such labels as LGBT or BL, as is done by the movie director Isao Yukisada, contributes to the normalization of love stories as universal rather than related to specific gender relations. Thus, although the tendency is to search for definitions and label them, it is worth acknowledging that at the same time labels put us in cages or may cancel one's individuality as the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard famously argued in 1849: "Once you label me you negate me."

Nozawa's discussion about effeminate men and their appeal to (Japanese) ciswomen is thought-provoking as it contests general assumptions concerning gender, sexuality, and physical as well as emotional attraction. In the following Chapter 8, Emerald King explores how gendering may be conflated into hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity. King's analyses focus on the ways in which cosplay costumes are created and what makes them hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine. In this context, King is less concerned with the inventories and scales that scholars have

invented to identify, for instance, a “macho” masculinity, which includes “a callous sexual attitude towards women, a belief that violence is manly, and the experience of danger as exciting” (Mosher and Sirkin 1984); she rather focuses on the “hyper” character of masculinities and femininities that, according to King, in cosplay refers to “an idealized body type where, in most cases, hyper feminine bodies have slender limbs, small waists, and large breasts, and hyper masculine bodies have large muscles, square jawlines, and narrow hips” (see Chapter 8, p. 216). The stereotypical attributes become exaggerated in the cosplay costumes.

The sexualization of women dominates also in sexy cosplay that Lucy Glasspool examines in Chapter 9. Glasspool observes how the professional cosplayer Jessica Nigri demonstrates that eroticism sells. But dressing in the clothing of the opposite gender of one’s biological sex can also become a parody (especially in male-to-female cross-dressing), or it may provide a sense of liberty, or may entail identity-based meaning-making, as Glasspool points out. In this chapter, she looks at cosplay’s subgenres, such as cross-play, or what she calls “trans” cosplay, which “involves cosplay by fans who identify as transgender (though some fan definitions also include non-binary and other gender minority cosplayers).” The chapter elaborates on Glasspool’s argument that “cosplay can incorporate the deliberate politicizing of identity performance in a way that is intricately involved with social signification and meaning-making, and also be the site of affect-based, playful pleasures that have little to do with engaging with essentialist gender and sexual norms.” Glasspool notes that there are very few “macho” characters being performed but rather, cross-players seem to be drawn to “androgynous” or “tall and beautiful” male characters. The androgynous beauty seems appealing, and as Glasspool points out, “In many countries, including Japan, it is still considered more ‘deviant’ or ‘transgressive’ for men to cross the dominant gender binary by crossdressing (outside a comedy context) than for women” (see Chapter 9, pp. 243, 244, 248). As pointed out earlier, men with long hair, wearing make-up and high heels or (mini)skirts tend to become objects of curiosity in a way women in shorts or pants no longer are.

The chapters brought here together examine stigmatization, normativity, acceptability, and challenge dominant ideas about gender. The authors continue the already initiated conversation on gender-defying practices, stimulating contestation of gender discrimination. As the chapters point out, dressing up as man may include wearing a tie, suit, hat,

suspenders, but male body parts are rarely exaggerated or such gender codes as clothing used for sexualization the same way as they are when dressing as women. Then attention is drawn to the bodies that become sexualized with lingerie (corsets, garters, stockings, bras) or body parts (enormous breasts, long hair) or with long nails, exaggerated make-up, and false eyelashes. Often women, indeed, seem to be reduced to big breasts and long nails.

Considering the discrimination against women and their (sexualized) objectification, it would seem counterintuitive for a man to desire to be a woman. What appears to attract men to such gender change are aspects related to what is perceived as (exaggerated) femininity: coyness, cuteness, innocence, vulnerability—and sexuality. What is at play here is hyper-feminization, the production of effeminized (male) bodies with highly exaggerated gendering of body parts. In contrast, in some other Japanese popular culture genres, such as manga, where sexuality may be centralized, more significant still seems to be an evident attraction to and idealization of “gender-neutral” youth. The young androgynous bodies that are not fully developed yet, with bodies of both male and female teenagers still without body hair, without fully developed breasts and hips, appear attractive, perhaps because they are perceived as less threatening. The following chapters address some paradoxes and controversies circulating around gendering practices, and tend to challenge the dominant gender polarity as well as ideas of norms and normativity as their authors instigate new conversations about gender, biological sex, and not only Japanese but also universal conceptualizations of masculinities and femininities.

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From *Dansō* to Genderless: Mediating Queer Styles and Androgynous Bodies in Japan

Michelle H. S. Ho

1 INTRODUCTION: MEDIATING *DANSŌ* AND GENDERLESS

In “*Dansō* Cross-Dressing,” a YouTube video released in 2013 by VICE Japan, Tajima Yūsuke, chief editor of *KERA*, a women’s street fashion magazine targeted at teenagers, was interviewed.¹ Tajima thought Akira, a well-known twenty-five-year-old *dansō* (female-to-male crossdressing)

¹ All Japanese names follow the convention of surname first; Tajima Yūsuke, not Yūsuke Tajima. *KERA* moved online in 2017 after 19 years of print publication.

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model and artiste, appealed to *KERA*'s readers because they wear clothing that expresses their individuality (*koseiteki na fashon*) in their day-to-day life.² The camera cuts to Akira, who has followed such a "fashion" since high school. Decked in a loose printed white T-shirt, cream hoodie, and black sarouel (also sirwal) pants, Akira sported a trendy asymmetrical hairstyle with parts of it dyed blond (Fig. 1).³ Akira reminisced how it all started out as a form of "play" (*asobi*): they would put on a wig and wear men's clothing (*otoko no ko no kakkō*) to enjoy "boyish style." Akira paused in mid-sentence at the word "*dansō*" before saying, "I guess it is *dansō* (*dansō desune*)." The camera cuts back to Tajima, who explained that *dansō* originally stemmed from Japanese history, such as the Takarazuka Revue, an all-women theater group. Tajima compared Takarazuka fans to *KERA* readers and pointed out that the majority of consumers were women and a small minority were men. These fans and readers, he added, tended to appreciate *dansō* individuals for their esthetic value.

This short documentary feature by VICE Japan, the Japanese arm of youth-focused digital media company VICE, introduces *dansō* through a series of interviews with Akira, their fans, and the people who work with them. The rest of the video frames *dansō* primarily in terms of beauty, fashion, performance, and historical tradition. In fact, any discussion of Akira's gender identity and sexual orientation is assiduously avoided, which is surprising considering how VICE's investigative journalism typically focuses on controversial topics. However, this lack of an explicitly "queer" discourse does not necessarily mean that it is absent in *dansō*. Here, I locate "queer" in a range of plural, excessive, and overlapping gender and sexually variant desires, practices, and subjectivities (Sedgwick 1994; McLelland, Sukanuma, and Welker 2007). Moreover, Tajima's and Akira's attempts at defining "*dansō*" not only indicate how it means different things to different people, but also reflect the nonlinear flows

² All translations are the author's except otherwise noted. I use the gender-neutral first-person pronouns "they" and "them" because Akira expressed in "*Dansō Cross-Dressing*" that they would like to do away with gender boundaries and dislikes concepts of "*otoko*" (man) and "*onna*" (woman) (VICE Japan 2013). Moreover, other individuals appearing in the video variously referred to Akira as "*kare*" (he/him) and "*kanojo*" (she/her), which suggests there is no agreement on which pronouns to use.

³ Sarouel pants are a type of baggy trousers similar in style to harem pants. They are now worn as a unisex fashion item but originally derived from bottoms worn by men in Muslim countries.



Fig. 1 Screenshot of Akira from “*Dansō* Cross-Dressing” (VICE Japan 2013)

of media that transform its meanings. The latter is what Nick Couldry has called “mediation,” expanding on Roger Silverstone’s (2002, 762) definition as the “fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication [...] are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life.” For Couldry (2008, 380), mediation more broadly refers to how bidirectional—or, more accurately, multidirectional—flows of “production, circulation, interpretation or reception, and recirculation” of a specific aspect of culture or society in turn shape culture, society, and future iterations of media. As someone who does not himself practice *dansō*, Tajima draws on his knowledge of women’s fashion and Japanese theatrical tradition to characterize *dansō* as an esthetic form. For Akira, however, the practice began organically as an experimentation with appearance and evolved into something else before they consciously thought of it as “*dansō*,” taking this label from its mediation. Akira’s engagement with *dansō* renders Tajima’s apparently linear narrative more complex, opening it up for the viewer’s interpretation.

This chapter explores the mediation of androgynous bodies and styles in contemporary Japan by mapping the relationship between *dansō* and “genderless style” (*jendāresu-kei*). *Dansō* refers to gender-crossing practices usually by individuals who are assigned female at birth, whereas genderless is a mode of fashion emerging in 2010 which theoretically denotes styles that do not distinguish between genders but is not

necessarily gender-neutral or without gender (*musei* or agender). *Dansō* and genderless are distinct but related formations of androgyny, which can be broadly defined as the intermingling of male/masculine and female/feminine, both contesting and maintaining (if in part) these physical and psychological states of being (Bem 1975; Singer 1976; Robertson 1998; Monden 2014). Such gender mixing is often uneven, contradictory, and even transitional, making it notoriously difficult to pin down but at the same time, full of potential for generating new meanings—something I am interested in mining. Specifically, I investigate how *dansō* individuals and genderless *joshi* (girls) have negotiated *dansō* and genderless by tracing their nonlinear media flows since the 2010s and analyzing how these categories might be meaningful for young individuals in their twenties living in urban Tokyo.

Much scholarship and media coverage have focused largely on *josō* (male-to-female crossdressing) and genderless *danshi* (boys) as compared to *dansō* and genderless *joshi*.⁴ Of this literature, scholars have examined *josō* individuals in terms of transgender identity and *dansō* individuals as embodying “queer” subjectivity (Mitsuhashi 2006, 2007, 2008; Fanasca 2019a). In more recent news articles, critics and the genderless *danshi* featured have repudiated any connections between their practices and emasculation and homosexuality (Rich 2017; Robertson 2017, 2018). For instance, in a *New York Times* article, Japanese fashion scholar Masafumi Monden remarks that “how people look and their sexual identities can be separated to a certain extent” in Japanese culture, even as genderless *danshi* model Toman Sasaki claims his appearance initially invited questions on whether he was gay (Rich 2017). This suggests there can be multiple permutations of genders and sexualities where for one individual, gender presentation might be connected to fashion, whereas for another, their gender expression may be more closely intertwined with sexual orientation. This raises the questions: What permutations do genderless *joshi*—who are absent from such discourses—elicit? What do “*dansō*” and “genderless” index and how might they still be useful as labels for certain individuals?

Drawing on media analysis and ethnographic research, I argue that *dansō* individuals and genderless *joshi* embraced genderbending practices before retrospectively being named as “doing” *dansō* or genderless.

⁴ That said, recent works on *dansō* cafe-and-bars and escort services have emerged. See Fanasca (2019a, 2019b); Ho (2020).

In these media, they are often presented as fronting the *dansō* label or jumping on the bandwagon of the genderless trend. However, I want to take a different stance: these individuals first engage in their practices, construct their alternative identities and ways of being, and only subsequently become interpellated by other people as “*dansō*” and “genderless.” This hailing of *dansō* and genderless individuals through ideology by the media and the discourses they propagate accords them subjectivity (Althusser [1971] 2014). That is, they gain recognition in society precisely through their acceptance of these labels, which they are encouraged to take on and in turn propagate through mediation.

This resonates with Dick Hebdige’s work on youth subcultures, where he argues that mods, punks, and rockers resist hegemonic norms through style which, while initially subversive, eventually becomes incorporated into mainstream culture through labeling and mass consumption ([1979] 2002). Although *dansō* and genderless are arguably not subcultural *per se*, following this line of thought, these practices become perceived as contained and no longer threatening to the dominant ideology because they are normalized by consumers. Yet, as Hebdige also points out, it is hard to draw clear lines between stylistic innovation and “commercial exploitation” of subcultures ([1979] 2002, 94). Like subcultures, central to *dansō* and genderless are style and consumption, which are highly visible elements often highlighted in the media. As the mediation of *dansō* and genderless is a nonlinear and multidirectional process, I would argue that individuals also capitalize on these labels as a means of sustaining their practices and attach different meanings to them than those intended by the media and other people.

By tracing how certain individuals become designated as and eventually claim *dansō* and genderless as their own labels, I am also interested in the relation between style and queer and transgender subjectivity. Fashion theorists have long observed that clothing is a highly productive site, from which new identities are constructed and embodied, genders and sexualities emerge, and evolving notions of femininities and masculinities surface, but also for the wearer to express their “way of being in the world” (Barthes [1962] 2013; Wilson [1985] 2003; Calefato 1997, 76; Entwistle [2000] 2015). Except for a few recent works (Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Steele 2013; Moore 2018; Reilly and Barry 2020), little has yet to be written on queer style, not to mention transgender fashion or that in non-Euro-American contexts. I wish to queer style by bridging

the connections between fashion and gender and sexually diverse ways of being and by locating them in the Japanese context.

I contend that returning to the moment of pre-categorization allows us to rethink the potential for *dansō* and genderless to add to, if not transform, “queer” and “transgender” as critical terms of analysis. Peter Jackson’s notions of “pre-gay” and “post-queer” might be useful to consider here, which he formulates to refer to Asian erotic cultures and categories that predate the globalization of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) and “exist outside Eurocentric understandings of sexual and gender difference” respectively (2001, 7). Drawing on this, we might say that *dansō* is pre-gay for having had a long history in Japan, dating from practices usually by warriors and members of the royal family in the eighth century (Saeki 2009, 118). At the same time, *dansō* practices by young individuals in twenty-first century Japan—what I have elsewhere called “contemporary *dansō* culture” (Ho 2020)—are also post-queer for deviating from Euro-American models of queer. Yet, informed by market processes, these local gender and sex cultures also differ from premodern eroticisms (Jackson 2009). Extending beyond pre-gay and post-queer, *dansō* presents a nonlinear temporality, enabled by and fracturing from historical traditions but simultaneously subject to capitalist modes of production.

Placing *dansō* and genderless on a spectrum of androgynous bodies, I further suggest that genderless emerged as a modern iteration of *dansō* in the fashion world, both drawing on and departing from *dansō* tradition and contemporary *dansō* culture through the processes of mediation. Here, we might understand androgyny as an analytic. Roland Barthes’s theory of the dandy not just as an “ethos,” but more so as a “technique,” is useful to rethink androgyny ([1962] 2013, 62). As an analytical tool, the dandy’s embodiment of a distinctive style of clothing subtly reveals his non-normative ways of being (Vänskä 2014). Like the dandy, *dansō* and genderless individuals exhibit their distance and difference through their outward appearance from queer and transgender frameworks, which have emerged following the mid-1990s queer studies movement in Japan.

This is evident in the fashion industry, where designers and experts have embraced terms such as androgyny, “unisex,” “gender fluid,” “gender-free,” and genderless to describe clothing collections and garment styles. Since the mid-1980s, the terms “*andorojenui*” (androgyny), “*ryōsei*” (both sexes/genders), and “*chūsei*” (middle sex/gender) have been used in the Japanese media to discuss clothing

styles that feminize men and masculinize women (Robertson 1998).⁵ However, fashion scholars have posited that androgynous styles are not limited to “feminine” clothes for men and “masculine” garments for women, but are instead open to the mixing and blurring of genders (Monden 2014; Akdemir 2018). This unevenness of femininities and masculinities in the same body might be useful for rethinking the gender binary, particularly in queer theory and the growing field of transgender studies in a transnational context. Instead of beginning with trans or queer, returning to the moment of pre-categorization and the doing of *dansō* and genderless situated in a specific cultural and geographical context challenges the presumed linearity of Euro-American trans and queer studies.

Employing discourse analysis, I examined YouTube videos on *dansō* during the 2010s boom and on genderless *joshi*, such as “*Dansō* Cross-Dressing” and “i-D Meets: Tokyo’s Genderless Youth,” and their coverage in English- and Japanese-language magazines and newspapers, notably *KERA BOKU*, *Garçon Girls*, and *The Japan Times*. Covering the genderless phenomenon, “i-D Meets” was released in 2017 by *i-D*, a UK-based online magazine concerned primarily with street style and youth culture.⁶ “KERA BOKU” is the name given to three special issues on *dansō* fashion released by *KERA* in 2011, 2012, and 2013, whereas *Garçon Girls* is a *dansō*-themed single-issue magazine published on the heels of *KERA BOKU* in October 2013. *Japan Times* is a major English-language newspaper based in Japan since 1897. My analysis of these media is supplemented by 14 months of long-term ethnographic research at a *dansō* café-and-bar called “Garçon” (pseudonym) in Tokyo between 2015 and 2017. Located in Akihabara, a haven for fans of anime, manga, and video games, Garçon employs individuals mainly in their twenties who practice *dansō* in their everyday lives and attend to patrons as waitstaff and bartenders.⁷ My fieldwork involved interviews with and participant observation of Garçon’s employees and customers.

In the rest of the chapter, I first offer a brief historical background of androgyny in the Japanese context, focusing on cultural translations of

⁵ I will discuss the cultural translations of these terms in the next section.

⁶ *i-D* was acquired by VICE in 2012.

⁷ This space is distinct from the *dansō* escorts business that Fanasca discusses, in terms of the labor and services employees provide. *Dansō* escorts mainly offer non-sexual romantic dates with cisgender female customers (Fanasca 2019a, 34).

“*dansō*,” “genderless,” and other terms used for describing androgynous bodies in the media. Next, I discuss the mediation of *dansō* and genderless in the Japanese media as youth fashion and the potential of such styles for generating pleasure and new identities. Subsequently, I trace how mediating *dansō* and genderless provides meaning for young urban individuals as a way of doing, and how this contributes to critical frameworks of queer and transgender. Finally, I conclude by proposing new directions in research on queer style.

2 CONTEXTUALIZING ANDROGYNY IN JAPAN

Androgyny in the form of *dansō* has had a long history in Japan, dating from practices in the eighth century—usually by warriors and members of the royal family—religious rituals, to literary and theatrical representations (Leupp 1995; Robertson 1998; Saeki 2009). Although the Japanese word “*dansō*” means dressing as men or wearing men’s clothes, it is mostly used today to refer to female-to-male crossdressing. This usage of “*dansō*,” and subsequent coinage of “*ryōsei*,” “*chūsei*,” and other terms as labels to describe individuals with assemblages, dissonance, or negation of feminine and masculine behaviors and appearances, came about because of mediation and medicalization since the Meiji period (1868–1912). It is also important to note that “queer” and “transgender”—transliterated into Japanese as “*kuia*” and “*toransujendā*”, respectively—as analytic did not emerge until the queer studies movement in Japan in 1996. Even so, as specific concepts rooted in the West, especially in the U.S., “queer” and “transgender” were taken up predominantly by writers and academics, but not so much in people’s everyday lives (Dale 2012). Tracing androgyny in Japan therefore requires a knowledge of its multiple, at times conflicting, localized terms for expressing individuals’ identities, practices, and demeanors.

With the 1872 ban on *josō* and *dansō* except in the theater, newspapers started to carry stories of individuals who either violated or were arrested for breaking the law (Pflugfelder 2007; Mitsuhashi 2008). Although this prohibition did not last long, *josō* and *dansō* remain stigmatized in the media. During the prewar period, the sexology (*seigaku*) boom, influenced by Euro-American sexologists, helped to propagate the vocabulary of androgyny in medical terms in the early 1920s (Frühstück 2003). Physicians and medical researchers published widely on *hentai seiyoku* (perverse sexual desire), which included issues concerning homosexuals

(*dōseiaisha*) and crossdressers (*iseisōsha*), in various sexological journals and contributed articles to newspapers and magazines, such as *Popular Medicine*, *Asahi Shimbun*, and *Fujin Kōron* (Frühstück 2003; Mitsuhashi 2008). They coined the terms “*ryōsei*” to refer to “someone with both female and male genitalia”—that is, an intersex person—or “someone with both feminine and masculine characteristics” in terms of behavior, and “*chūsei*” to describe a person who is “feeling not quite female/male, but somewhere in-between” (Robertson 1998, 50; Dale 2012, para 4).⁸ Based on recent usage by online communities, S.P.F. Dale (2012, para 4) posits that we should also consider the word “*musei*” (no sex/gender), which might be defined as “neutral” sex/gender⁹ and “a complete rejection of being gendered.”

From the mid-1930s, “*dansō no reijin*” (female-to-male crossdressing beauties) became a popular term to refer to masculine women and *otokoyaku* (male roles in Takarazuka) after Muramatsu Shōfu serially published his novel *Dansō no reijin* in the women’s magazine *Fujin Kōron* in 1932 (Robertson 1998; Muramatsu).¹⁰ Scholars have discussed the problematic expressions of “*dansō no reijin*” and “*otokoyaku*” which, although describing individuals as “manly,” “masculine,” or playing the “ideal man” (*risō no otoko*), reinforce their status as “beautiful women” (*reijin*) and do not become or emulate “real men” (*jissai no dansei*) (Robertson 1998, 59; Oshiyama 2007, 33). These individuals do not transcend the gender binary but negotiate both femininities and masculinities in their appearance. For instance, observing Kikoshi, a now-defunct “Miss Dandy” (*misu dandī*) club catering to Takarazuka fans and “stereotypically feminine” women in the late 1980s, Jennifer Robertson (1998, 144) describes its employees as “offstage *otokoyaku* who live their daily lives as men.” This describes gender-crossing employees and their customers in quasi-heterosexual terms, reinforcing the gender binary and blurring the boundaries between gender-crossing as performance and

⁸ It might be interesting to note that of all the terms, “*chūsei*” gets translated into “androgynous” in English the most.

⁹ The Japanese word “*sei*” might be defined as either sex, gender, or both, which renders an uneasy translation of these terms into English where sex and gender are perceived as distinct.

¹⁰ Muramatsu’s novel is based on the life of Kawashima Yoshiko (1907–1948), an imperial member of China’s Qing dynasty who passed as a man and served in the Japanese army as a spy before the Second World War.

everyday practice. Furthermore, scholars have also argued for us to think of *otokoyaku* as “asexual” and “agendered,” that is, not having any kind of sexual feelings and suspending the connections between the performers and sex, gender, and sexuality (Aochi 1954; Nakamura and Matsuo 2003).

During the postwar period, terms such as “*dansōsha*” (female-to-male crossdressers), “*rezubian*” (lesbian), “*onabe*” (shallow pot),¹¹ “*dansō no reijin*,” and “Miss Dandy” proliferated and circulated in the media to describe androgynous individuals in the entertainment world. This was congruous with the appearance of *rezubian* spaces and groups in the 1960s and *ūman ribu*, the women’s liberation movement in Japan in the 1970s. The mainstream media started using “*rezubian*” as a catch-all term to refer to all women-loving women and *dansō* bartenders, or masculinized women who work in bars dressed up in suits and ties (Sugiura 2007). This conflated *rezubian* with *onabe*, individuals who identify as “non-female,” engage in female-to-male crossdressing, and are sexually attracted to women, including transgender women (Maree 2003, para 2). During the 1970s, “*onabe*” became widespread in the media and embraced by individuals as an identity, especially for those working in the entertainment industry, such as bars and clubs.¹² “Miss Dandy” also became a popular moniker for “*onabe*” in the mass media between the mid-1980s and early 1990s (Maree 2003; Sugiura 2007).

Although *onabe* did not completely replace previous terms, such as *dansōsha* and *dansō no reijin*, the media used all three terms interchangeably to refer to lesbians, crossdressing bartenders, and same-sex relationships between women.¹³ For example, in “Patterns of nights woven by *dansō no reijin*,” an article in *Asahi Geinō*—a tabloid magazine known for its sensational stories—Yōji and Kōji, two “*otokoyaku toshite no onna*” (women in male roles), were interviewed about their experiences working in an *onabe* bar, their *dansō* practices, and their love lives

¹¹ “*Onabe*” (shallow pan) was coined as a parallel to “*okama*” (deep pot), a familiar, albeit derogatory, term to mean gay or effeminate men. Many scholars have stressed the lack of recognition given to *onabe* as compared to *okama* in Japanese society. See Valentine (1997); Lunsing and Maree (2004).

¹² While Jennifer Robertson attributes the emergence of “*onabe*” to the early 1900s, the term first appeared in the media in 1967 and was subsequently used in common parlance in the 1970s (Robertson 1992; Toyama 1999; Sugiura 2007).

¹³ See Robertson (1999); McLelland (2005); Welker (2008).

with women (Sangoku 1973). Spinx Konatsu, the bar where Yōji and Kōji worked, later turned into an *onabe* and *okama* (deep pot)¹⁴ “mix bar” and their customers were both men and women. When asked why men would patronize the bar, Yōji explained that since they were “women on the inside” (*onaka wa onna*), they could entertain customers as either gender, depending on what the situation called for (Sangoku 1973, 66).¹⁵ Yōji’s answer seems to suggest that as an *onabe*, they could be fluid in terms of negotiating femininities and masculinities, which references *ryōsei* and *chūsei* individuals.

In the contemporary period, terms for androgynous bodies, practices, and identities, such as “*seidōitsuseishōgai*” (Gender Identity Disorder; henceforth GID), “*toransujendā*” (transgender), and “*ekkusujendā*” (x-gender), emerged in the mid to late 1990s. GID originated as a medical term for individuals who believe they belong to and can “physically and socially conform with the opposite sex” and has been diagnosed by two or more doctors (Taniguchi 2013, 109). Subsequently, with the legalization of sex/gender reassignment surgery (SGRS) in 1996 and the televisionization of a female-to-male (FTM) transgender character in the popular drama, *3nen Bgumi Kinpachi-sensei* (Mr Kinpachi, 3rd year B group; henceforth *Kinpachi-sensei*), in 2001, GID entered public discourse (Taniguchi 2006; Yuen 2011). In 2003, the Act on Special Cases in Handling Gender Status for Persons with Gender Identity Disorder, or GID Act, was passed, cementing the importance of GID in the Japanese social imagination.¹⁶ As compared to “*toransujendā*”—referring to individuals whose gender is different from that assigned at birth—GID is more readily embraced by Japanese people as an identity while also being a medical diagnosis, regardless of their intention to undergo SGRS.¹⁷ While this

¹⁴ See note 11 for a definition of “*okama*.”

¹⁵ The article indicates that Yōji and Kōji still have breasts and female genitalia, but both claim to have not used them in a long time (Sangoku 1973).

¹⁶ The GID Act allows individuals medically diagnosed with GID to legally change their gender in the family registry after fulfilling many conditions, such as being over 20 years old, unmarried, have undergone “full” SRS, and have no existing or future children (Taniguchi 2013, 109).

¹⁷ While contentious in the U.S., where GID has recently been reclassified as “gender dysphoria,” it is acceptable in Japan for individuals to self-identify as GID. In fact, many individuals may feel more familiar or comfortable with using the term “GID” than “transgender” to describe themselves.

accords visibility to GID and trans people, it has also resulted in marginalizing individuals who do not see themselves as “sick” or wish to undergo SGRS (McLelland 2004; Lunsing 2005).

In the late 1990s, “x-gender” surfaced among individuals living in the urban areas of Kansai and in printed, visual, and online media, referring to “a gender that is neither male nor female, or, depending on the definition, both” (Dale 2012, para 1). In rejecting the gender binary, x-gender might be thought of perhaps as a more modern interpretation of *musei*, without completely excluding *ryōsei* and *chūsei*. Mostly used in the local Japanese context but framed within a global transgender discourse, “x-gender” can be considered a sub-category of “transgender” and a parallel for “genderqueer” or “gender bender,” which have become prevalent in other cultural contexts (Dale 2014, 270–271).

More recently, in the 2010s, “genderless style” (*jendāresu kei*) came into use in the fashion world to depict the merging of feminine and masculine styles to form an androgynous look. This was likely inspired by U.S. and Europe-based leaders of a global fashion industry. Scholars have observed how in the contemporary history of fashion, certain androgynous figures such as the (black) dandy have been significant as sites for crossing and shaping gender boundaries because they embody queer, racial, class, gender, and feminist politics in the “lived experience of dress and appearance” (Barthes [1962] 2013; Wilson [1985] 2003; Miller 2009; Geczy and Karaminas 2013; Paulicelli and Wissinger 2013, 14–15; Vänskä 2014; Akdemir 2018). In the Japanese context, Monden (2014) argues that Lolita fashion can be subversive for transforming fixed ideas of what an androgynous appearance looks like—that is, one often based on men’s clothes.¹⁸ Although androgyny indexes a combination of femininities and masculinities, men’s garments are usually privileged in the fashion industry, revealing inherent gender inequalities. This is more apparent for genderless *joshi* (girls), who sport short hairstyles and loose fit pants, but perhaps less so for genderless *danshi* (boys), who wear makeup and skirts. Despite the moniker, genderless individuals do not engage equally on the fashion “playing field” (Negrin 2008, 147). By depicting genderless *danshi* as heralding the fashion trend, the media have created the impression that “genderless” refers only to genderless *danshi*. This invisibility informs my focus on the mediation of female-to-male embodiments in Japan.

¹⁸ Lolita fashion is a clothing style characterized by “hyper-girlish femininity,” typically embodied by cisgender women in response to “an anxiety about adult female sexuality” (Mackie 2009, para 24; Monden 2014, 132).

3 FASHIONING GENDERLESS

In the YouTube video “i-D Meets,” Nakayama Satsuki, a genderless *joshi* model, declared “Ever since I started dressing this way, I have a lot more fun (*tanoshii*), and I feel a lot more free (*jiyū*).” The nineteen-year-old, who sported a short cropped black hair with a long fringe, was clad entirely in black in an oversized top, Adidas hoodie, and three-quarter culottes with matching black sneakers (Fig. 2).¹⁹ Nakayama also wore minimalist accessories, such as black ear studs, a large gold-plated chain with a triangular steel pendant, and a silicone ring with a triangle cutout, which an extreme close-up was careful to show. Nakayama explained that what inspired her to adopt genderless fashion was an androgynous South Korean model whom she admired for the latter’s cool (*kakkoii*) appearance.²⁰ It was only later that she realized this model was a woman. The camera cuts to a video of Nakayama on the runway and cuts back to her browsing what appears to be unisex clothing on a rack. Nakayama maintained she did not dislike being called “genderless *joshi*” by other people. The camera cuts to three photographs of her as a model, one in a black suit, one in a pinstripe suit, and the last in a casual outfit of oversized long sleeve top and striped culottes. Nakayama reiterated that she felt happy to be labeled as genderless *joshi* but what surprised her was how quickly she was categorized as one.

This five-minute video showcases genderless fashion through a series of interviews with several genderless *danshi*, apart from Nakayama. As the sole genderless *joshi* to be featured, Nakayama stands out in the video. She also appeared wary about embracing the genderless label as compared to the genderless *danshi*, who seemed much more positive about what being genderless could do for them. Her response reveals the tension between wanting to creatively construct her own style and being categorized by other people as “genderless.” It was one thing for Nakayama to embrace practices of intermingling masculinities and femininities, but another thing entirely for others—complete strangers and outsiders—to label her as “doing” genderless. From the video, the notion

¹⁹ Culottes are wide-legged pants that resemble a split or divided skirt. In the Japanese context, they may have also been inspired by the hakama, or pleated pants developed during the Heian period (Slade 2009).

²⁰ I follow media articles referring to Nakayama as “she,” “her,” and “*kanojo*” (she/her) (Hernon 2017; Kinuwa 2018).

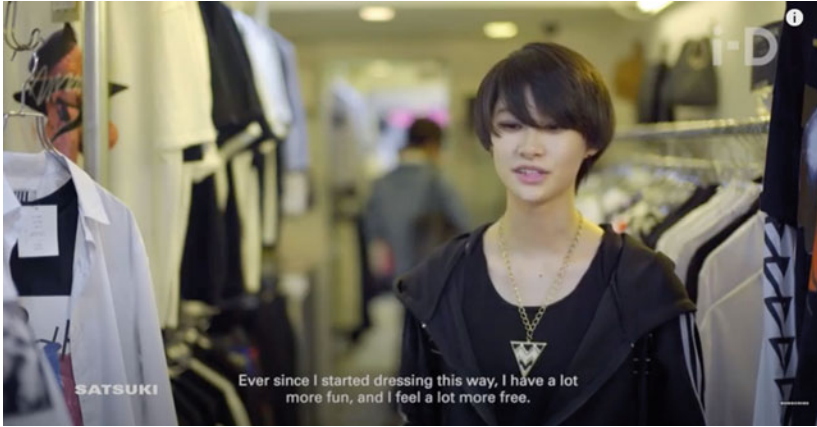


Fig. 2 Screenshot of Nakayama Satsuki from “i-D Meets: Tokyo’s Genderless Youth” (Kimura 2017)

of feeling “*jiyū*,” or having one’s own way, seemed to be an important contributing factor to Nakayama’s positive experiences of adopting androgynous styles.²¹ For other people to intervene therefore contradicts meanings of individual freedom and perhaps also resistance embedded in such styles, particularly in Nakayama’s development of her apparently non-normative identity.

Similar to *dansō* individuals, in practice, the doing of genderless comes before the naming. Like Akira, only retrospectively did Nakayama self-identify as genderless, which came about as an androgynous body esthetic through mediation, or nonlinear flows of media, culture, and society. Toward the end of the scene, although Nakayama claims to be fine with the label, her reiteration of this statement demonstrates that she still has mixed feelings about embodying it. In addition to her reluctance for other people to determine her own identity and way of being, this may also be due to her desire not to fit into any category.

Nakayama’s explicit reference to an androgynous Korean model, who is later revealed to be Kite, as the key inspiration for her genderless practices is interesting. Instead of drawing on influences from within

²¹ The character “*ji*” means “the autonomy of the self” and “*yū*” refers to “way” or “means.” The Japanese word “*jiyū*” was translated from the English word “liberty” in the late nineteenth century using the Chinese-character expression for “*jiyū*,” which was defined as “following one’s intentions, without restrictions” (Howland 2001, 167).

Japan—such as *dansō*—as her starting point, Nakayama curiously turns to those outside of Japan, namely fashion. In a recent interview with *Oricon News*, an entertainment news portal, Nakayama cites “genderless” models and artistes who are active in Europe and the U.S. but rare in Japan as influences (Kinuwa 2018). That Nakayama relies on international examples rather than local ones calls for a transnational analysis of genderless. This would entail not just looking at the historical context of androgyny in Japan, but also how the modern production of genderless relates to a different history of crossdressing and queer style in Euro-American contexts.

Similar to *dansō*, crossdressing in Euro-American contexts is mainly established in performance and entertainment (Ferris 1993; Clark and Sponsler 1997; Sedinger 1997; Rackin 2003; Flanagan 2008). At the same time, queer and feminist scholars have done ethnographic studies of crossdressing as identity and practice, particularly drag, camp, transgender, and homosexuality (Newton 1979; Garber 1992; Halberstam 1998; Rupp and Taylor 2003; Jacob and Cerny 2004; Suthrell 2004; Sears 2015).²² Queer style might be defined as a “subset of grotesque forms of release” and “perturbation of social moral order,” but also involves LGBT individuals in fashion as models, leaders of street styles, and creators of “transgressive esthetic styles” (Geczy and Karaminas 2013, 22; Steele 2013, 9–11). In 1960s and 1970s U.S., lesbians embraced “anti-style”—an androgynous appearance that rejected both normative femininity and butch-femme roles—as a part of their feminist politics, which made waves in the fashion world at the time (Geczy and Karaminas 2013, 34–35). Building on these works, genderless is potentially powerful for transforming queer and trans critical terms of analysis through the embodiment of anti-style.

In a *Japan Times* article, which portrays Nakayama as “cashing in” on the androgynous trend, her self-identification as genderless appears to come from the impetus of “finding your own style rather than following trends” (Hernon 2017, para 16). Nakayama emphasizes the importance of fashion as a way of etching one’s personal style instead of imitating

²² “Drag” refers to a theatrical performance of gender(s) that has specific resonances in Euro-American culture. Broadly defined, “camp” refers to a “certain mode of estheticism,” which emphasizes a particular kind of style or taste that is self-consciously artificial, extravagant, and exaggerated for the purposes of humor and enjoyment (Sontag 1964, para 8).

or taking into account what other people are doing. Nakayama's anti-style can be said to be a rejection of normative styles—that is, what is fashionable at the moment—for the sake of fitting in. Indeed, in the same article, Nakayama clarifies that genderless fashion is meaningful for her not only because she enjoys wearing clothes in this particular style, but also because she feels comfortable in her own skin (Hernon 2017). While this can be read as Nakayama's sense of confidence as the article claims, I would argue that her genderless practices are a powerful means of asserting an alternative, often non-normative position. Instead of her passively riding the genderless wave, it might be more accurate to say that she almost singlehandedly led the fashion trend and paved the way for other genderless *joshi*. In this sense, genderless is transformative as an analytic in perhaps similar ways that “queer” and “trans” might have for other people, cleaving to and from local and transnational forms of androgyny and moving across and in between genders through embodiment.²³ While genderless cannot be completely cut off from *dansō* and the historical contexts of androgyny both within and beyond Japan, it remains a powerful intervention for individuals, such as Nakayama, who embrace its subversive style, identity, and practice.

Having said that, we might wonder why Nakayama chooses to use a new label (genderless) instead of an already established category (*dansō*). This is compounded by the fact that at first glance, Akira and Nakayama appear physically similar. In the two YouTube videos I have discussed, Akira and Nakayama, who were both tall, slender, and fair-skinned, wore loose-fitting T-shirts and pants in monochrome tones with minimalist accessories and fashionable short hairstyles. Yet, Akira and Nakayama—and by extension, *dansō* and genderless—differ from each other through the “detail,” what Barthes refers to as the “‘next-to-nothing’, the ‘je ne sais quoi’, the ‘manner’” ([1962] 2013, 61). For instance, Akira wore sarouel pants, which are a unisex style of loose fit trousers and a popular clothing item among many *dansō* individuals and rock band members and their fans (Fig. 3). Sarouel pants were heavily promoted in *KERA BOKU*, featuring Akira as their model on the cover of all three issues.

²³ I take this use of “cleaving” from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993, 4), in which the queer impulse involves both an attachment and detachment to “the childhood scene of shame.”



Fig. 3 Screenshot of Akira in rock style from “*Dansō* Cross-Dressing” (VICE Japan 2013)

Indeed, Pikachu, a twenty-seven-year-old employee at Garçon I interviewed, told me they often wore sarouel pants with a black V-neck T-shirt in their everyday life.²⁴

Nakayama, on the other hand, wore dapper suits and three-quarter culottes, which unlike the rock style of Akira is relatively sharper and more clean-cut (Fig. 4). For Barthes, the dandy’s detail, which includes his taste, attitude, and “discreet signs,” exhibits class distinction, singularity, indefinite “otherness,” and, some might even argue, homosexuality (Barthes [1962] 2013, 61–62; Vänskä 2014, 451). For Akira and Nakayama, the detail of androgyny not only expresses power and autonomy in a male-dominated Japanese society, but also the uneven mixing of femininities and masculinities. This can be seen in their reworking of dapper suits and sarouel pants—which originated as men’s wear and sites of hegemonic masculinity—into popular unisex clothing items in youth fashion culture. More importantly, the individual meanings Akira and Nakayama attach to their stylistic innovations not only distinguish them from each other, but also from those promoted in the media for mass consumption.

²⁴ I follow each interviewee’s choice of pronouns.



Fig. 4 Screenshot of Nakayama in a dapper suit from “i-D Meets: Tokyo’s Genderless Youth” (Kimura 2017)

To further investigate these meanings, we might examine Nakayama’s and Akira’s expressions of genderless and *dansō* as “*tanoshii*” (enjoyable; pleasurable) and “*asobi*” (play), respectively, in the two YouTube videos. In “i-D Meets,” Nakayama’s use of “*tanoshii*” seems innocuous. As illustrated in the close-ups and extreme close-ups, Nakayama can be seen to take pleasure in wearing her favorite clothes and dressing in a certain style. This is closely related to Akira’s adoption of “*asobi*” in “*Dansō Cross-Dressing*” to explain how they got started with androgynous fashion that would later become known as “*dansō*.” Yet, “*asobi*” can also be a means, especially in its transgressive forms, for individuals to challenge certain social and cultural norms (Hendry [2002] 2005). For both Akira and Nakayama, this transgression entails prioritizing their “*kosei*” (individuality) over a collective consciousness to fit in with a patriarchal Japanese society. Play and pleasure are strong forces that drive androgyny as an analytic. Akira and Nakayama contest norms by playing with and deriving pleasure from different gender styles, which offer alternative identities and new ways of being and are sustained through mediation.

Originally deriving from their desire to experiment with “boyish styles,” Akira’s practices became couched as “*dansō*” six months after they first appeared in KERA in late 2009. For Akira, it was not until 2010 that contemporary *dansō* culture took off in mainstream circles,

such as through fashion magazines, *dansō* idol groups, and *dansō* cafe-and-bars. Nakayama, on the other hand, became inspired by Kite to adopt a different look when the former was in junior high school in the early 2010s. As Nakayama's appearance sharply contrasted the *kawaii* (cute) styles of other Japanese models, she became labeled as "*chūsei*" or "genderless" and began fronting the genderless fashion scene as the sole genderless *joshi* around the mid-2010s. While Akira's and Nakayama's experiences seem to fit into the subculture-to-mainstream paradigm, the emergence of *dansō* and genderless in these uneven and multidirectional flows of media and culture is also significant to note. As *dansō* and genderless both draw on earlier signs of non-normative dress and influence current and future formations of androgyny, these networks are more complex than they appear. The next section will attempt to map out these (dis)connections between *dansō* and genderless.

4 *DANSŌ* AS WAYS OF "DOING"

In a *Garçon Girls* article titled, "True intentions (*bonne*) of *dansō joshi*," a group of six individuals were interviewed on how they started practicing *dansō*. Their reasons varied as such: Ren, who had grown up wearing boys' clothes and playing with their elder and younger brothers, remembered crying in kindergarten because they hated wearing a skirt.²⁵ Similarly, Kazuya had always "felt out of place" (*iwakan ga atta*) in skirts and began wearing exclusively pants in their everyday life, which later became recognized as "*dansō*." Mizuki did not consciously set out to do *dansō* but simply liked men's wear. After cutting their hair short in elementary school, ASM began adopting "boyish clothing" (*bōishū na fukusō*). For Yūto, interest in *dansō* started out with their older sister's *dansō* cosplay (dressing as a fictional character). This developed more fully when Yūto went to all-girls junior high and high schools and a friend remarked they would look "cool" (*kakkoi*) as a man. While cosplay was also Aoi's "impetus" (*kikkake*) to practicing *dansō*, he found female anime characters too "high-strung" (*kyabikyabishita*) for their liking and cosplayed as male characters instead. Moreover, after working at a *dansō* café, Aoi embraced a more "manly" (*danseiteki*) appearance and personality. Finally, ASM modeled themselves after the male protagonist in the

²⁵ I have translated the gender-neutral pronouns "*watashi*" or "*jibun*" as "they" and "them," and masculine pronoun "*boku*" as "he" and "him."

shōjo (girls') manga *NANA*, whereas Ren was inspired by the FTM character in the television drama *Kinpachi-sensei*. In particular, the “shocking” (*shōgekiteki*) discovery of transgender individuals deeply resonated with Ren.

By gathering these six individuals for an interview, *Garçon Girls* aimed to discover the “thoughts” (*kangae*), “real voices” (*riaru na koe*), and “true intentions” (*bonne*) of those who practice *dansō*. Presumably, the article is pitched at readers who know little to nothing about *dansō* and might be curious to learn more about the lives of *dansō* individuals. Styled as a “*dansō* culture magazine” (*dansō karuchā shi*), *Garçon Girls* was published in October 2013 with talks of a second issue, which did not eventually materialize. The rest of the magazine predominantly covers *dansō* fashion, supplemented by features on and interviews with *dansō* cafés, *dansō joshi* (girls), FTM individuals, *dansō* idol groups like Fudan-juku, and SECRET GUYZ, a popular “*onabe*” or FTM unit. The article foregrounds each *dansō* individual’s response with seemingly scant narrativizing, in a way that appears to capture the truth about them. This question-and-answer format is similar to the YouTube video interviews with Akira and Nakayama.

Instead of one-to-one interviews, however, *Garçon Girls*’s group interview generates an interesting dynamic whereby the six interviewees tap into and feed off on one another’s experiences in an uneven process that shapes each person’s practices and meanings of *dansō*. On the one hand, Ren, Kazuya, and Mizuki describe their practices and clothing styles as a natural progression toward *dansō*. On the other hand, ASM, Yūto, and Aoi cite popular culture and the opinions of their peers as strong influences on their *dansō* practices. Despite their diverse understandings, these individuals have embraced *dansō* as an identity or way of being but perhaps more accurately, as a way of “doing.” Building on the mediation of *dansō* and genderless in Japanese media, this section explores androgyny as an analytic by looking at *dansō* and genderless as ways of doing.

For the six individuals interviewed in *Garçon Girls*, *dansō* might be understood less as one way of being and more as ways of doing. This impetus is similar to how scholars have argued for the use of “queer” as a verb and “deconstructive practice” for contesting normative terms and identities, such as white, Western, and colonial gender and sexual categories, and generating “a range of transgressive possibilities that encompass and surpass LGBT” (Blackwood 2008, 483; Hunt and

Holmes 2015, 156). As ways of doing, *dansō* and by extension genderless are firstly located in individuals' practices, which later become constructed as ways of being. To express how they got started doing *dansō*, individuals drew on style: clothing and hairstyles as everyday indicators. For instance, Ren and Kazuya harbored feelings of unbelonging and even hatred toward skirts and what they represent, whereas ASM cut their hair short and Mizuki had a penchant for men's wear, which eventually led them to *dansō* as ways of being.

Yet, although they embraced the label "*dansō*," which entails meanings of men's clothes and dressing like a man, ASM and Mizuki did not feel the need to "become masculine" (*otokorashikuyōni*) or consciously "act like a man" (*danseirashikuyōni*). As Mizuki explains, because *dansō* is a natural part of their appearance, they do not feel the need to go out of the way to be manly. Put another way, for Mizuki, *dansō* is not about embracing masculinity nor wanting to transition. Instead, their way of doing lies in uneven gender mixing, which is often couched by other people in terms of masculinity by default because it deviates from femininity. Later in the interview, ASM clarifies their aim as wanting to be "neither man nor woman" but "*chūsei*" and in this sense, they have no qualms about wearing both men's and women's clothing. Perhaps like other scholars have argued, the label "*dansō*" is in itself problematic because it does not break out of the gender binary (Robertson 1998; Oshiyama 2007).

Here, I want to take a different perspective: seeing individuals like ASM and Mizuki as actively constructing ways of being through their practices instead of trying to fit into a certain label or jump on the bandwagon of a particular trend. ASM and Mizuki assert their own positions by rejecting popular assumptions of *dansō* individuals as imitating or desiring to become men, which is similar to Nakayama's adoption of "genderless" as wanting to carve out a different space for herself. In Nakayama's case, however, this is motivated by a refusal of "*dansō*." In the *Oricon News* interview, Nakayama said she felt uncomfortable about being labeled as "*dansō*," which she did not identify with, nor did she want to be grouped together with Fudanjuku, the popular *dansō* idol group (Kinuwa 2018). For Nakayama, although genderless and *dansō* share a close relationship, they remain distinct categories. This (dis)connection from previous iterations of androgynous practices and subjectivities, including *dansō*, is important, I argue, because individuals are able to assert a different position for themselves. We might say that Nakayama resists *dansō*, which may for her be normalized in the media, and goes on to identify as genderless.

I would further contend that Nakayama's genderless practices display her queer style. Unlike Akira and other *dansō* public figures, Nakayama does not shun issues of gender identity and sexual orientation. Even the six *dansō* individuals interviewed in *Garçon Girls* did not explicitly discuss such issues, whereas Nakayama faced questions of gender and sexuality head-on. Having played a minor role as a female bartender in the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) drama *Chūgakuseinikki* (Junior high school diary), which aired in late 2018, Nakayama mentioned that there may be those who are questioning or troubled about their "*seibetsu*" (sex/gender/sexuality) (Kinuwa 2018). In the drama, Nakayama's character, Aoyama Sarasa, shares an onscreen kiss with a bisexual "career woman" (*kyariaūman*) character, which was well received by viewers on social networking sites and was the basis of the *Oricon News* interview. Citing her own experience as an example, Nakayama urged other individuals who are like her to forge their own position. By exhibiting a queer sensibility, Nakayama's rejection of *dansō* and traditional forms of androgyny in Japan in favor of genderless as a way of doing and being informs androgyny as an analytic.

Unlike Nakayama who came to identify as genderless, ASM and Mizuki retained the *dansō* label. This raises the question: Instead of other categories such as "GID," "x-gender," and "genderless," why might "*dansō*" still be useful for individuals like ASM and Mizuki? Likely in the context of the interview and *Garçon Girls*, a magazine covering *dansō* culture, ASM and Mizuki felt compelled to use "*dansō*" to describe their lived experience. Moreover, that "*dansō*" instead of other categories has currency in Japan, due partly to its long history of mass entertainment and consumption, may have encouraged them to describe gender-nonconforming individuals who are assigned female at birth as *dansō*. To take one example, the same article mentions that Aoi and Mizuki work at Garçon to issho which, as Aoi describes, is a *dansō* café located in Akihabara. When I dropped by Garçon to issho in late 2015, I found out that Garçon to issho—now renamed "W's Collection"—was not a café as reported in *Garçon Girls*, but a *dansō* escort service.²⁶ As a result, I was turned away as the service required a reservation for a specific *dansō* escort prior to visiting. Nevertheless, Garçon to issho/W's Collection remains

²⁶ Indeed, it would seem that Garçon to issho, which offers primarily women walking dates for a fee, opened in 2007 as a *dansō* escort service and was never a café to begin with (Iino 2016).

an establishment where employees are required to practice *dansō* for the job. Unlike Mizuki, who regarded *dansō* as a non-conscious practice, Aoi perceived working at Garçon to *issho* as instrumental for shaping their masculine demeanor and character. That is, Aoi's labor as a *dansō* employee plays a large role in using "*dansō*" as a label for their way of doing. The job extends Aoi's self-recognition as well as other people's interpellation of them as "*dansō*."

This was true for Yu, an employee at Garçon who described himself as "not consciously practicing *dansō*" (*dansō ishiki shiteinai*). The twenty-one year old, who wore black full-rim eyeglasses and their undyed black hair in a short crop, reminded me of a South Korean boy band member. For Yu, practicing *dansō* as a non-conscious act meant that he ordinarily dressed in his favorite clothes—usually pants and a shirt—and kept his hair short on a daily basis. Although like Mizuki, Yu's practices were non-conscious, he was simultaneously interpellated by everyone around him—society, his colleagues, and Garçon's customers—as "*dansō*." This would mean that even if Yu and Mizuki never thought of their practices as "*dansō*" before, they could not escape being interpellated by those surrounding them as such. Yu told me that only after working at Garçon did he begin to think of himself as a *dansō* individual.

In addition to peer pressure, I would argue that adopting the label "*dansō*" allows Yu to enter a certain discourse that many in Japanese society already understood, while attaching individual—often different—meanings to it. This has certain advantages, such as being able to quickly explain his androgynous body esthetic to strangers that lesser-known identity-based categories like "GID" and "x-gender," not to mention "trans" and "queer," might not have. As compared to "GID" and "x-gender," which are embraced by a niche group of individuals, or "trans" and "queer," which are taken up mainly by activists and academics, "*dansō*" still has critical purchase for people at the everyday level. This is evident in contemporary *dansō* culture, or the fracturing of *dansō* tradition since the 2010s to proliferate as fashion, idol groups, and in café-and-bars (Ho 2020). Moreover, precisely because *dansō* has been popularized by both young amateurs and professionals in mainstream entertainment and popular culture, Yu is able to capitalize on the label to sustain their practices. It is unsurprising then that Aoi, Yūto, and ASM found no conflict in modeling themselves after male anime and manga characters.

Curiously, Aoi and Kazuya were the only ones who discussed the “coming out” (*kamingu auto*) of *dansō* individuals, which references gay and lesbian identity politics and a specific discourse of the closet that is situated in Euro-American contexts. Responding to a question in the *Garçon Girls* interview about whether they wear men’s or women’s clothing, Aoi explained that although they typically dressed in men’s wear, some *dansō* individuals may wear feminine-like clothing in front of their parents because they have yet to come out. Kazuya, on the other hand, described how they had once come out to their father, crying out the words, “I can never live as a normal woman (*futsū no onnanoko*).” In both cases, coming out is simultaneously a confession and articulation of one’s nonconformity, but also one step further toward embracing *dansō* as an alternative identity or way of being, perhaps even to the point of institutionalizing *dansō*. Coming out constructs a dichotomy between *dansō* individuals, who are perceived as not “normal” for wearing men’s clothes, and a specific kind of woman who is normatively feminine by Japanese beauty standards.

In Japanese society, gay and lesbian individuals are generally reluctant to come out due to fears of discrimination and perceptions of sexuality and sexual orientation as a private issue, even to family and friends (Aoki 1998; McLelland 2000). While this is no different for *dansō* individuals, Aoi’s and Kazuya’s discussions of coming out reveal that *dansō* as ways of doing don’t necessarily translate into specific identities, which are interpellated as “trans” or “queer” and resonant with Japanese gay and lesbian communities. However, this doesn’t mean that *dansō* has no potentiality as an analytic. As we have seen in the case of Nakayama, genderless is powerful precisely for constructing an identity or way of being through style, which is (dis)connected from *dansō* and traditional forms of androgyny in Japan. Similarly, in enabling *dansō* individuals like Aoi and Kazuya to carve out a different space for themselves on the non-normative spectrum, their ways of doing intervene in trans and queer politics, particularly a specific brand of politics based on coming out.

5 CONCLUSION: QUEER STYLES

Examining examples of *dansō* and genderless in the media, this chapter has explored androgynous bodies, fashions, and practices in twenty-first-century Japan. I have argued that *dansō* and genderless transform and contribute to queer and transgender frameworks because of their

emphases on style and ways of doing. Instead of coming out, or one's explicit articulation of gender identity and sexual orientation, style is an important, if overlooked, lens for examining non-normative identities or ways of being. Queer style is embedded in individuals' conscious practices of wearing (usually distinctive and innovative) clothing that challenges heteronormativity. For instance, *dansō* individuals don men's apparel, whereas genderless *joshi*'s accouterment stresses a contradictory mixture of masculine and feminine styles. I also contended that *dansō* individuals and genderless *joshi* embraced such queer styles before constructing their alternative identities or ways of being and become subsequently labeled as doing "*dansō*" and "genderless." Shaped by nonlinear and multidirectional flows of media, these organic and transgressive practices of *dansō* individuals and genderless *joshi* eventually become incorporated as street fashion and normalized as a commodity for popular consumption, thereby changing their meanings over time. This isn't to say that we should take androgynous fashion like *dansō* and genderless less seriously. Building on Barthes who perceives the dandy as an analytical tool, we might think of androgyny as an analytic. Through style, particularly its tasteful embodiment through clothing, androgyny reconfigures femininity and masculinity by redrawing the lines demarcating the gender binary. In this sense, androgyny as an analytic generates new understandings and ways of looking at fluid genders and sexualities, especially those not yet contained by LGBT and queer frames of analysis.

New directions in research include better contextualization of queer style, especially as it relates to trans style both in the professional fashion world and street styles. Although there have been recent forays into discussing queer style, less has been written on trans fashion. Scholars might also focus on how queer and trans styles emerge and develop in transnational contexts. This is particularly significant for intervening in the global fashion industry's Euro-American dominance and cultural imperialism. By moving away from Euro-American contexts and influences in queer and trans styles, we might be able to glean important insights into the diversity of such styles. Lastly, drawing on theories of transnational feminism and sexualities, it would be interesting for scholars to trace the cross-border, cultural, and historical flows of queer and trans styles. Notably, comparative studies of queer and trans styles would inform not only fashion studies and queer theory, but also transnational studies of fashion and sexual cultures.

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“I’ll Create My Own Precedents”: Female *Rakugo* Performers on Tokyo’s *Yose* Stages

Sarah Stark

Books or websites introducing traditional Japanese stage arts to people from other cultures often include photos or videos of kabuki actors in gorgeous kimono, masked noh performers sliding along a cedar floor or the bunraku puppeteers together with the musicians accompanying them. While women do perform in these arts (see Coaldrake 1997; Kano 2001; Edelson 2009; Geilhorn 2011), the performers shown are generally men. This is also true for *rakugo*, a simple stage art, where one performer kneels on stage and enacts stories. Usually, though, *rakugo* is not introduced in monographies on Japanese stage arts. Within the National Theater complex, however, *rakugo* has its own stage—the National Engei Hall. It is performed there as well as in various privately run theaters which specialize in *rakugo*, called *yose*, and are located in Ueno, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro and Asakusa in Tokyo. It can be performed anywhere with an elevation, even just a table or a few beer crates; thus *rakugo* shows

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are on in countless smaller venues around the city. And female *rakugoka*¹ have taken hold.

By 2021, women made up 5% of Tokyo's *rakugoka* (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021) and no doubt, more will have started their *zenza* training by the time these sentences are printed. In *yose* line-ups and *rakugo* shows, the number of female performers has increased and female performers have become more prominent and popular in the last decade.² One woman, Ryūtei Komichi, made it into a list of twenty performers with the most *yose* engagements in 2020 (Gokurakurakugo 2021). Her solo shows regularly fill the 300-seat auditorium of the National Engei Hall.

In this chapter, I will analyze the obstacles which female performers face over the course of their career and during performances—and the various strategies they take in order to overcome these.

I INTRODUCTION TO RAKUGO

Throughout the Edo period (1603–1867), *rakugo* never had the same support of the ruling class or aristocracy that other arts had. It was the entertainment of ordinary people: Edo's male population, mainly tradesmen and artisans (*chōnin*) (Nagai 1971; Teruoka 1979) spent their evenings at the *yose* after a hard day of work. About 200 performers were estimated to perform in these venues in the Bunka-Bunsei years (1804–1830: Yushima de rakugo no kai 2017, p. 9). According to Katō (1971, p. 266), there are sources which count as many as 700 *yose* in Edo. Quoting the Ōedo Tokai Aramashi Nichiyō Kanjō (likely authored around 1854–1860), Katō states that each of the 400 *yose* had 100 visitors per day on average. The *yose* was an “extension of home in an era when most families had minimal living space” (Brau 2008, p. 65). The audience members knew each other, as they all lived within walking distance from the venue.

¹ *Rakugoka* themselves refer to their profession as *hanashika*, emphasizing the character of their performance: stories (*hanashi*). In order to make the connection to the art called *rakugo* more comprehensive, I have chosen to refer to the profession and performers as *rakugoka*.

² In addition to Tokyo, the Kansai region has a very rich *rakugo* tradition with a slightly different training system and different approaches regarding commercial shows (Shores 2021a).

Up until the early Shōwa period, performers were held in contempt by the general public, but in the 1950s critics elevated *rakugo* to a traditional performing art to improve its standing. Prefixes such as *koten* (traditional repertoire) and *dentō* (tradition) were added to give it more dignity. Today, with a total of 859 performers in all of Japan, of which 594 reside in Tokyo (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021), there are more performers than ever in the history of the art. The annual number of shows held in Tokyo has nearly tripled from 4,907 in 2005 to 11,137 in 2015 (Morishige 2016).

The appeal of the art, both for audiences and performers, possibly lies in the fact that at any given time, there is only one performer on stage. *Rakugo* is often introduced in English as “story-telling,” as *rakugoka* act out their stories (*hanashi*) mainly through dialogues between characters. The performance never follows any standardized scripts, scenarios or patterns, nor does it shy away from scatological jokes and indecent topics. A rapid dialogue unfolds between the protagonists and there is no time to change costumes or pick up props. Kneeling on a cushion, a *rakugoka* wears the same kimono during the entire performance and only uses a handkerchief-like cloth called *tennugui* and a folding fan for props. *Rakugoka* show that they are switching characters by turning their head left and right and by using vocal and physical attributes such as changes in posture, gesture or dialect/sociolect and linguistic registers or by employing role language (*yakuwarigo*). A samurai is shown with straight posture, talking in the sociolect of the samurai class; a young boy is portrayed with shoulders dropped and fiddling hands, face slightly looking up to the adults of the *hanashi*. While the number of repertoire pieces in traditional *rakugo* is limited, performances vary greatly depending on numerous factors, ranging from the performer’s career, stage experience, portfolio, interpretation and make-up to time restrictions, gender, age and experience of audience members, the season and position within the line-up (Stark 2017).

Much like fans of classical music do not tire of listening to the same Beethoven sonata many times, even if performed by the same pianist, *rakugo* audiences enjoy listening to the same *hanashi* many times, even if performed by the same *rakugoka*. It is perhaps this freedom left to the interpreter that appeals to audiences and *rakugoka* alike. While a sonata has a score to be followed, *rakugo* is much freer and performers can arrange the *hanashi* as they see fit. This space for self-expression and individuality creates an incentive for performers to create a strong *Kunstfigur*.

Many fans today follow specific performers rather than going to a specific venue (Weingärtner 2021).

While this description of *rakugo* seems to offer many opportunities for female performers, they face a number of obstacles. *Koten rakugo*'s stories were created by men and performed by men for male audiences, depicting a world of men (*otoko no sekai*). Many stories revolve around the “three pleasures” (*sandōraku*), literally “drinking, gambling, whoring” (*nomu, utsu, kau*). And yet, the number of professional female performers³ is steadily increasing.

2 WOMEN ON RAKUGO STAGES

Female *rakugoka* have not always performed on Tokyo's *yose* stages. There was opposition to women performing *rakugo*, so they appeared on stage but as *iromono*, in arts such as juggling, magic and *manzai* (funny dialogues)⁴ that would not spawn much tension or strain audiences' listening capabilities. There had been women who started training or performed at the *yose* as *rakugoka*, but none reached master status. Women had been banned from public performances since 1629. The ban drove women “into alternative private performance venues and radically affected not only the involvement of women in music and dance but also the character of the Japanese theater” (Foreman 2005, p. 40). Only the rich could afford female stage performers, asking geisha to give private evening performances (*zashiki*). This ban was never officially lifted, but the mention of female performers in early police statistics (Keishichō ed. 1912–1926) shows an (at least tacit) approval. Some entries in Uemura (1965) and Yamamoto and Kokuritsu Gekijō Chōsa Ikusei-bu's (2015) lists of historic performers and their relations are marked as *onna*

³ In this chapter, *professional* female performers are defined as members of one of Tokyo's four associations, the Rakugo Kyōkai, the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai, the Godaime Enraku Ichimonkai and Rakugo Tatekawa-ryū. Female performers, some active in university *rakugo* clubs (*ochiken*), amateur *rakugo* clubs or listed as *furī no engeika* (freelance artists) in Tōkyō Kawaraban (2021), are excluded from this analysis.

Gender is not listed as a category in Tōkyō Kawaraban (2021), and the categorization as “female *rakugoka*” in this chapter is based on the performer's legal name and the gender they identify with in interviews.

⁴ In the Meiji period, this included *gidayū* (narrative performances) *rōkyoku* (melodic and narrative recitations); and after post-war focused on *tejina* (magic), *mandan* (funny monologues), *manzai* (funny dialogues).

(woman/female), but it is not clear whether these were female *rakugoka*. It is highly likely that they were *onna dōraku*, i.e., female performers who played *shamisen* and drums on stage alone or with other women.

The first printed reference to female *rakugoka* is in a transcribed discussion between *rakugoka* Kosan IV, Saraku V, Konan I,⁵ journalist Ōtei Kinshō, critics Imamura and Iketani in 1947. The five men reminisce about female *yose* performers from the Meiji period and Imamura refers to Yajirōbei and Iroyakko as *rakugoka* (Ōtei Kinshō et al. 1947, p. 17). Both women, however, quickly seem to have disappeared from the stage: Yajirōbei became a *geisha* and Iroyakko married En’yū I (ibid). Female *rakugoka* appeared again in the Taishō period (Tabe/Tanabe 1966), but there are no records mentioning their names.

In the 1950s and 1960s, two women caught the attention of Japan’s mass media. Shunpūtei Shōkyō was 17 when she started training under Ryūkyō VI in May 1952 (Fujin Kurabu 1957; Yomiuri Shinbun 1957). Nine years later, she married fellow *rakugoka* Baikyō (Shūkan Myōjō 1961) to become a mother and a homemaker (Shūkan Heibon 1969). In 1964, a young woman with the stage name Momono Hanayo started training under Momotarō III (Shūkan Yomiuri 1966). However, no information can be found on her after 1969. There are a few sources mentioning other female *rakugoka*, leading to the conclusion that these did not train in the profession very long (Yanagiya Tsubame V 2009 [1967], p. 39; Kōriyama 1999, p. 147).

Although the above-quoted newspaper and magazine articles about Shōkyō and Hanayo were positive and enthusiastic, audiences and performers did not see women fit to perform the art: Blogger Hangan published mimeograph prints on their blog—likely dated 1965–1969. These show audience survey responses to watching the professional female *rakugoka* Hanayo performing *Sutokuin*, a *hanashi* created around the beginning of the nineteenth century, about a servant walking around Edo trying to find the girl his master’s son fell in love with, using only a poem as a clue in his search. Feedback on Hanayo’s performance ranged from: “[She] is destroying the beauty of the original *Sutokuin*” to “It’s embarrassing to watch a woman play female characters” (Hangan 2011).

⁵ Japanese performing artists are referred to by their personal names rather than their family names. 90% of *rakugoka* have either San’yūtei, Yanagiya, Kokontei or Shunpūtei as “surname.” As only very few family names are in use (Stark 2022), sources are cited here with their full names in Japanese order.

By post-World War II, the number of *yose* had decreased dramatically and *rakugo* was no longer available in Tokyo neighborhoods as part of everyday life. Why audiences and male performers did not see women as fit to perform *rakugo* was perhaps due to the fact that by then, many *rakugoka* did not improvise and almost all did the same version of *hanashi* (Yanagiya Tsubame V 2009 [1967], pp. 38–42; Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], pp. 51–54). Only in 1993, San'yūtei Karuta and Kokontei Kikuchiyo became the first two female performers promoted to “*shin'uchi*” master status (Tōkyō Kawaraban 1993). During her *zenza* training, Karuta had to endure spectators jeering and heckling “Get off stage! This is no place for a woman!” (*Mainichi Shinbun* 2016). Still in 2010, when Tokyo's *yose* stages were already home to approximately 20 female *rakugoka*, Shinkyō claimed that “the female voice lacked the capacity to impersonate the protagonists portrayed in *rakugo*” and “therefore, women in general were not capable of performing *rakugo* well” (Sahin 2021, p. 5).

Male *rakugoka* also claim that one of the reasons why women cannot be adept at performing *rakugo* is because representation of women in *rakugo* is based on kabuki techniques (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], pp. 52–53), including the use of voice. However, female characters in kabuki are very diverse (Leiter 1999–2000), and male-kabuki actors of female characters (*onnagata*) have constructed “an ideal fiction of ‘female-likeness’” (Mezur 2005, p. 1), a feminine beauty which has “little to do with the anatomical body of the actor” (Kano 2001, p. 31). As the *onnagata*'s use of voice is often quite different from the one used to depict women on *yose* stages, and only very few female characters in the *rakugo* world show a similar idealized image of women, this argument is fallacious. Moreover, Balkenhol (1972) showed that the voice pitch of male *rakugoka* portraying female characters did not vary greatly from the one employed for male characters.

3 DIFFICULTIES

There are a number of obstacles for women choosing a career as *rakugoka*. Let us follow a fictional woman called Sakura, born in 2001, on her journey to become a professional *rakugoka*. In March 2023, Sakura would graduate from university where she had been a member of the *rakugo* club (*ochiken*). By performing herself and attending shows of female *rakugo* masters like Ryūtei Komichi and Benzaiten Izumi, Sakura would be well aware of the many obstacles facing her.

Portraying Female Characters

Sakura would know that long-time audience members have for most of their life only seen male performers, so with older spectators in particular, female performers portraying female characters “do not seem right.” In portraying female characters, male performers use gestures (folding hands, picking their kimono’s collar) and linguistic features associated with women, but they do not raise their pitch (Balkenhol 1972). Even though these conventions can be adapted by female performers, women portraying female roles are criticized. For example: “I can’t believe you are a woman and so bad at acting women” (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 1987); “It was extremely unnatural” (Shimazaki 1995, p. 54); “[She] is destroying the beauty of the original” (Hangan 2011).

Sitting in the audience and reading fans’ comments on Twitter, Sakura knows that a major obstacle for female performers was and is the linguistic expectations of audiences. In *rakugo*, a conversation between the characters is played by the same performer. With the exception of *ninjōbanashi* (emotional stories depicting certain traits of human nature), many dialogues do not have a narrative arc, or it is secondary. A performance of Chōtan (the long-fused and the short-fused) can last over 20 minutes, built around a dialogue between a patient man trying to tell his impatient friend his kimono caught fire. *Oyakozake* (below) consists mostly of a man trying to convince his wife to give him more alcohol. Audiences are captivated by the unfolding dialogue, which depends greatly on the performer’s skill in depicting the characters. The focus on the dialogue also means focusing on language. Japanese speakers use a variety of nuanced gendered first-person singular pronouns in order to indicate power or position. This means that in conversations between male protagonists—who make up the majority of *hanashi* dialogue—*rakugoka* make frequent use of male language and male-gendered pronouns.

As Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith (2004) and Nakamura (2014) have shown, the notion of masculine and feminine language is a social construct. The desired femininity in linguistic behavior reflects self-control, modesty and deference (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019) and although for female *rakugoka*, the use of male language is not a performance of a linguistic self but merely of a character, it is often not seen as such. This is possibly one of the reasons why audiences initially rejected female *rakugoka* and why female *rakugoka* are still under

more scrutiny than their male peers: their language was deemed unbecoming. Kokontei Engiku, who raised Kikuchiyo, the second woman to ever become *shin'uchi*, recounts that when initially teaching her a story, he changed the main characters into more politely talking female characters as he did “not like women talking crudely” (Zorozoro 1993, p. 5).

Navigating Androcentricity and Misogyny

We can imagine Sakura thinking long whether she should become a *rakugoka*. She would be well aware of the androcentricity of the *rakugo* community and its *hanashi* and also know about the audiences' and producers' misogyny. As the stories unfold in the audience's imagination, as Beichō states, “the slightest reluctance or resistance would become an issue” (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], p. 53). Without any background and no variety in costumes, make-up and props, *rakugo* audiences rely on the performer's appearance, visual expressions, gestures and voices. On stage, *rakugoka* often cite good-looks as an obstacle for they may potentially distract audiences.

Similarly, women performing *hanashi* written for men can potentially distract audiences. The *rakugo* repertoire has been created over centuries by men for mainly male audiences, the story lines and performance conventions are thus androcentric, and somewhat misogynistic: *Jisankin*, for example, centers around a man who agrees to marry an ugly and pregnant maid he has never met in return for having his debts paid; *Bunshichi Mottoi* tells the story of a plasterer who sells his daughter to the pleasure quarters for 50 *ryō*—with the promise to take her back still a virgin a year later upon repayment—only to give away the very same money to a young man in order to prevent him from committing suicide. Many male *rakugoka* do not shy away from bragging about their sexual or romantic conquests, even when they pay for that sexual activity.

Sakura would also be well aware that in many *hanashi*, female characters are absent, have few lines or are flat characters, and only a few characters in general are called by names. Many *hanashi* in Tokyo *rakugo*, for example, feature carpenter Kuma/Kumagorō, his craftsman friend Hattsan/Hachigorō or the carefree simpleton Yotarō. Others are simply identified by their profession or status: the landlord (*ōya*), the old retiree (*goinkyō*), the merchant house master (*danna*) and his son (*wakadanna*), a number of craftsmen/artisans, *daimyō* and nameless samurai. With

the exception of women in *ninjōbanashi*,⁶ female characters are mostly defined through their relation to male characters in the story: there are Kumagorō and Hachigorō’s wives, the merchant house master’s wife, an artisan’s or craftsman’s wife or daughter, the old woman living next door and a samurai’s daughter or a Yoshiwara prostitute. If a female character bears a name, it is usually to help understand the dialogue, as in the case when she is called to do something.⁷

Many of the popular (i.e., often performed) *hanashi* do not have one single female character, or when one appears, her lines are usually very few or reduced through a technique called *denwa-ma* (“telephone pause”). This technique stresses the perspective of the main character: the audience only hears one half of the conversation as in a phone conversation. The performer adds brief pauses after each line leaving time for the audience to imagine an answer or reaction.

Female characters are often expressed as *denwa-ma* in a conversation, i.e., an incision during which the performer ceases to talk and in which the audience imagines the other character’s (often female character’s) lines (Balkenhol 1972, p. 217; Welch 1998, p. 26). As a result, the percentage of lines for the female characters can drastically decline, as is shown in the scene below where a man is trying to trick his wife into allowing him to drink more alcohol—even though he has promised his family that he would stop drinking.

What? We don’t have any more alcohol?
 You say this is enough?
 No way can this be enough.
 Bring more. What? What are you saying?
 I’m drunk?
 Who, me?
 You must be kidding. I am not drunk. Look at me, this isn’t drunk!

⁶ Emotional stories depicting certain traits of human nature in order to express these in a way for the audience to be deeply moved by a story, female characters play a big role in the unfolding of a *hanashi*, and in return also receive a name.

⁷ Morioka and Sasaki (1990, p. 43) list a number of female names, but these are rarely heard in contemporary *rakugo*. Irifunetei Sentatsu (2022) stated that a large number of female names might be mentioned in a row in order to evoke the presence of many maids and in turn imply the wealth of a household.

I have only started drinking.

Don't be ridiculous.

Seriously, I am not drunk. I am fine. (Yanagiya Kosan 1966, p. 90)⁸

Performers can choose to leave out the wife's lines as her opposition may easily be imagined by the audience. This might be because the performer decides to focus on the description of the main character, i.e., the drunken husband, or because the performer is not too confident portraying women or simply due to time constraints. From the performing perspective, fewer characters are easier to perform—and from the audience's point of view—easier to understand.

Rakugo's female characters are not as differentiated as for example in kabuki. The women who appear in *hanashi* are almost all fictional (Horii 2009, p. 92) and can be grouped in roughly two categories: portrayed as elegant and sexy such as the ones in Edo's pleasure quarters, or as daughters and wives of respectable craftsmen, affluent merchants or noble samurai families. The latter “absolutely must not be portrayed as sexy or elegant” (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], p. 51). Exaggerating female traits in the former is easy, and will leave lasting impressions with the audiences, especially if a skilled male performer is sturdy, stout or below average beauty standards. Women not working in the pleasure quarters are considered more difficult to perform. Here, femininity is often portrayed through posture (giving the impression of heavy head accessories in the character's top knot or a broad obi restricting movement), gestures (folding hands to make them look smaller) (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], p. 52), looking down or bending one's head slightly to the side (Tatekawa Danshun and Yanagiya Sanza 2012, p. 10) as well as using linguistic registers.

Who to Imitate?

In Sakura's *rakugo* club, there probably would have been a number of female students—but when it came to the actual art, all students

⁸ The version chosen here is indeed from 1966. 2022 interpretations do not differ much.

would be learning *hanashi* from recordings or transcriptions of professional male *rakugoka*. The *rakugo* way of life is learned by imitating senior performers—and for women, there are currently few female *rakugoka* they can observe and learn from. The limited number of female performers thus turns out to be another obstacle.

Sakura would start out her *rakugoka* career as *zenza*. The word *zenza* is a compound of the logographs 前 “before” and 座 “stage,” i.e., “before the main act,” as *zenza* opens the show. Tokyo’s *yose* theaters do not have dedicated backstage staff; shows are run by *zenza*. Once Sakura has been accepted by a master, she and her *zenza* peers would do everything from dressing senior performers and pouring them tea to performing part of the background music. Even though they are given this responsibility, they are not yet considered full members of the *rakugo* community. Even though *hanashi* are taught in one-on-one sessions, delivery techniques such as pacing, dynamics, diction, timing, emphasis and pauses, the different variants and patterns of a *hanashi* are not actively taught, but in literal translation are to “stick to the body” (*mi ni tsuku*), i.e., are acquired through immersion (Inada and Morita 2010, p. 69). *Rakugoka* in training intently listen and observe differences in delivery, thus learning how to read and react to audiences. This type of learning, however, becomes an obstacle for female trainees who are not exposed to the performances of senior performers of their own sex. Female *rakugoka* learn from their own (in the majority of cases male) *shishō* (master) or from male peers in their *mon*, the socio-artistic family of *rakugoka* under the same *shishō*.

That Voice of Yours Is Gross

Although *rakugo* was developed around the timbre and pitch of the male voice, characters are not differentiated by changing voices the same way an adult might read differently the grandmother’s and wolf’s lines in a fairy tale such as “Little Red Riding Hood.” The lines of female characters in *rakugo* are not reproduced at a high pitch (Horii 2009, p. 115; Balkenhol 1972, pp. 117–20). Instead, a higher pitch is foremost reserved for situations when characters get excited (Horii 2009, p. 116).

However, as audiences are used to hearing male *rakugoka*, and because the female vocal range is higher than the male (Traunmüller and Eriksson

1995), the higher vocal range of females was long considered a problem, especially with *hanashi* whose *protagonists* are mainly men; female *rakugoka* often were told their voices were “gross” (*kimochi warui*) (Kanno 2018). Sakura would know well that audience members may have such prejudice against female *rakugoka* and would then avoid shows with a female line-up.

Training

Another hurdle to Sakura’s career as *rakugoka* would be finding a *shishō*, a master to raise her. Without a *shishō* to vouch for her education, she cannot start training. For the first years of their career, Sakura and her *zenza* peers would always be paying attention to what is happening on stage, despite being extremely occupied with miscellaneous backstage chores such as pouring tea, folding kimono, storing away and putting out shoes, playing the taiko and opening and closing the curtains. Since the outcome of a performance depends on audience reaction and interaction, *zenza* acquire and improve their skills by observing both the audience and the ways in which senior performers steer around mishaps and difficult audiences.

At the *yose*, *zenza* encounter a wide variety of *hanashi* of differing complexity levels⁹ and naturally remember storylines and different interpretations, variants and patterns including pacing, timing, emphasis and pauses of a *hanashi*. This experience “naturally cultivates the understanding of *hanashi*” (Hirose 2016, p. 168; see also Yanagiya Tsubame V 2009 [1967], p. 90) and is “not implemented to learn how to do *rakugo*, but to learn how to become a *rakugoka*” (Inada and Morita 2010, p. 125). Since knowledge and skills are expected to be absorbed, senior performers rarely give direct advice to their younger apprentices, and newcomers might not even receive any feedback from their masters, be it negative or positive (San’yūtei Enjō et al. 1986, p. 131).

Zenza training is often described as very hard, as *zenza* are to obey any senior performer no matter what they are told. Although training at the

⁹ The same ten to fifteen *geinin* (artists) perform at the *yose* per *shibai* (here: performance event); eight to ten out of these are *rakugoka*. A *zenza*, if only working one *yose* shift per day, can be exposed to as many as hundred different *hanashi* over the course of this ten-day run. However, many stories, especially seasonal stories, may be repeated in the run of a 10-day *shibai* (Nagai 2003).

yose and exposure to the art is considered to be of utmost importance, the first female *rakugoka* in the 1950s to 1970s were not given the opportunity to train there. They were taken into their masters’ households to learn good manners (*gyōgi minarai*) until they were eventually allowed to perform as *futatsume* (Yanagiya Tsubame V 2009 [1967], p. 39). The fact that the generation of Shōkyō and Hanayo missed out on the training made them miss the chance to become a member of the *yose* community and also denied them the opportunity to cultivate their understanding of *hanashi*. This is possibly one reason why audiences and peers alike did not consider them full-fledged performers. When Karuta was taken in by Enka in 1981, she insisted on going through the same *zenza* training as her male peers and she declined to be promoted to *futatsume* early. Since then, all *rakugoka* have undergone the same *zenza* training at the *yose*. Comparing the length of training of female performers to that of their male peers who started training at the same time, we can say that in general, it does not differ much (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021). Assuming that Sakura could start *yose* training right away, her training would take approximately 14 years. During their career, *rakugoka* also learn *hanashi* from senior performers outside their *mon*—this approach to the art strengthens the bonds forged among peers, no matter their gender.

In 1993, when Karuta and Kikuchiyo were promoted to *shin’uchi* status (though not necessarily for their artistic accomplishments) (Brau 2008, p. 144), audiences had become less interested in *rakugo* (Hirose 2020, pp. 14–36). The promotion was an attempt to catch the audience’s waning attention and attract more female spectators (Asahi Shinbun 1993; Mainichi Shinbun 2005). Female performers are still differentiated as *josei (no) rakugoka* and *joryū rakugoka*—female *rakugoka* and lady *rakugoka*, respectively—by media, audiences and producers although the distinction of the official title was abolished by the Rakugo Kyōkai in 2000 (Asahi Shinbun 2011). The use of prefix is significant as it implies that *rakugo* performers are male; and female *rakugoka* are a deviation from the male standard (see also Kano 2001, p. 32). Some young female *rakugoka* reject the genderizing prefix (Hirose 2016, p. 218) but eventually seem to care more about audiences appreciating their art (Ryūtei Komichi 2021; Benzaitze Izumi and Shunpūtei Ichihana 2021).

Whatever the prefix, the fact that they were promoted ahead of their peers (Zorozoro 1993) due to their gender caused ill feelings toward Karuta and Kikuchiyo (Asahi Shinbun 1991; Brau 2008, p. 144). Today, both men and women go through the same length of *zenza* training.



Fig. 1 Tachibana Renji tweet showing male performers inside the green rooms of venues and yose theaters (Tachibana Renji 2021)

Both are promoted to *shin'uchi* once they have completed approximately 14 years of training (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021). The fact that all *rakugoka* are going through exactly the same training (Hirose 2016, p. 218), has likely also increased the acceptance of female performers among their peers and audiences alike.

Backstage, Sakura and her *zenza* peers of both genders learn how to exercise *kizukai*: they acquire the skills of recognizing people's needs which are not communicated in a direct way and learn to act accordingly,

either by serving or by self-restraint: for example, as part of her training, Sakura would be expected to carry the bags of any senior performer she accompanies. For outsiders, however, it looks like an old man is making a young petite girl carry his heavy bags, putting him into an uncomfortable position; she might even be mistaken for his girlfriend or mistress (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019).

As can be seen in the photos of the tweet quoted above (Fig. 1), *yose* theaters and venues usually have only one place, called the green room, where all performers stay before and after their performances and change from street clothes into their kimono. If physically possible, some male performers leave the room in order to give female performers some privacy when changing their stage clothing (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019). This means that their mere presence already inconveniences (male) senior performers, i.e., makes them feel uncomfortable due to their gender.

Harassment and Abuse of Power

Reading *rakugoka* biographies and interviews, Sakura would know well that, while the *yose* could not be run without *zenza*, they are not yet considered full-fledged members of the *rakugo* community. They are “trained to endure contradictions” (*mujun ni taeru shugyō*) (Inada and Morita 2010, p. 156)—even if asked to undress and dance naked, *rakugoka* in training obey (Yanagiya Kaeru 1973, pp. 43–44). It is also not unheard of that *shishō* resort to corporal punishment (Kokontei Shinchō Ichimon 2006, p. 19; San’yūtei Enka and San’yūtei Karuta 1994, p. 134). It is easy to imagine that male performers might take advantage of their female peers and especially *zenza*, the lowest in the hierarchy. As the *shishō*’s authority is absolute, if she would resist his sexual harassment, he could excommunicate (*hamon*) her, which would mean the end of her *rakugo* career (Kawayanagi Tsukushi 2010, p. 14).

There are no interviews in which a female *rakugoka* stated to have been a victim of sexual harassment. As female performers are still a minority, few are willing to speak out or take action. For instance, in an interview upon their *shim’uchi* promotion, Karuta and Kikuchiyo downplayed sexual harassment:

There was no vicious sexual harassment, it was more like something between a lingering touch and a brush. [...] After all, it was us who

choose to join this world. So, we shouldn't be surprised at this [...] There are women, who want to be touched but aren't, so we are actually lucky. (Zorozoro 1993, p. 4)

The above quote is from an interview conducted by the interviewees' male seniors published in a magazine edited and self-published by the Rakugo Kyōkai, to which both interviewers and interviewees belong. Under such circumstances, it is unlikely that the two young women would have openly said how they truly felt. Close to thirty years later, female interviewees tend to perpetuate male views: "There really is no world without sexual harassment"; "A little sexual harassment puts the ladies in a good mood. That's how we women are."

The survey "Hyōgen no genba harasumento hakusho 2021" [2021 White Paper on Harassment in the Field of the Arts] interviewed artists of all genders from contemporary art to musicians, actors and anime creators regarding harassment at their workplace. Since the *rakugo* community is even more male-centered than contemporary arts, design and anime/manga/photography mentioned in the survey in which 80% responded to having experienced sexual harassment in some capacity (Hyōgen no genba chōsa-dan 2021), it is highly likely that female *rakugoka* also have experienced sexual harassment, even from their own *shishō*—who are supposed to protect their *deshi*. While Enka claims that some male peers refrained from molesting Karuta, he also openly admits to having groped Karuta himself:

It's not that I do not touch her myself. I'm not afraid to say something like, 'Let me touch you.' It would be rude for her master not to touch her when other masters are freely touching her. (laughs) (San'yūtei Enka and San'yūtei Karuta 1994, p. 134)

With the publication of the 2021 survey, sexual harassment has become a focus of the media. In summer 2021, a female *rakugoka* in Osaka filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against a male peer, stating that he had made her drink alcohol and then had committed an "indecent act" (*waisetsu na kōi*) against her in December 2017 and harassed her repeatedly between 2018 and 2019 (Chūnichi Shinbun 2021). Power harassment also is an issue likely to be discussed further, as San'yūtei Tenka filed a lawsuit against his own *shishō* seeking 3 million yen in compensation for abusive language and violent behavior (Yahoo Japan news 2023). While these

cases might be an extreme, it can be assumed that female performers have found ways to ward off unwanted remarks and sexual advances. In her interview, Komichi asserted: “If you want to harass me, I’m going to turn tables and harass the harasser.”

4 STRATEGIES FOR FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

While men are put in categories of *shinsaku* (own stories)/*koten* (old repertoire), *wakate* (young performers)/*kanban* (old and popular performers), media and fans are likely to categorize women only by their sex—as *josei/joryū* (women/female). But there are a number of strategies female *rakugoka* can implement to overcome the above-mentioned obstacles.

Choosing Your Own Portfolio

You have to find stories that only *you* can do. [...] In a line-up of 12 performers, you do not want the audience to think: ‘Oh, is that all women have to offer?’ (*onna no hito, konna mon ka*) (Ryūtei Komichi 2021)

Rakugo imposes comparatively few limitations on its performers compared to its sister arts of *jōruri* (narrative ballads accompanied by *shamisen*), *kōdan* (recitations of military or historic tales) and *naniwabushi/rōkyoku* (melodic and narrative recitations accompanied by *shamisen* born in the early twentieth century). Performers “speak with an everyday voice, use everyday tone (*kuchō*) and everyday language” (Yano 2016, p. 21). Any *rakugoka* has the choice to perform either traditional *koten* or *shinsaku rakugo*. *Koten hanashi* are set in the Edo, Meiji or Taishō period and are well-known, to the point that experienced audience members can correctly guess the *hanashi* just by listening to the first lines or the free-talk section before the *hanashi* starts (*makura*). *Koten hanashi* are androcentric, but many of their other characteristics have clear merits which female *rakugoka* can use to their advantage. For instance, *hanashi* do not have a copyright and there is no original script or scenario which performers must adhere to. Character names are more of an in-group code shared with the audience (Horii 2009, p. 22), i.e., not all character types are meant to be the same in all version of one and the same *hanashi*: in one version the main character can be married, in another the character

of the same name is a teenage apprentice living with relatives. Only the characters' personalities are static: a hothead is always a hothead; a stingy person is always stingy; there are few dynamic characters, which make *hanashi* easy to perform.

Once performance permission (*age no keiko*) has been given, the cues which indicate different characters of a *hanashi*, may be freely modified and adapted to fit the performer. *Rakugoka* may also add characters to a *hanashi*, like a main character's partner or child, or a character who comments on the storyline. If they feel that a character is not adding meaning to their interpretation or is difficult to perform (see *denwa-ma*), or that the performance must be shorter than usual, *rakugoka* may cut side-characters or reduce their lines. In stories that are set in the Edo period, they may choose to let a character comment on current affairs. The fact that any *rakugoka* may perform any *hanashi* and enjoys "flexibility in terms of how to present the material" (Shores 2021b, p. 464), works in favor of female *rakugoka*.

Not all stories are *koten rakugo*, i.e., created and set in the chronotopic frame of Edo-period Japan, with its characters codified to belong in that period through behavior, narration techniques and linguistic registers. There is also the possibility of doing *shinsaku*: new *hanashi* which have been created by the performer herself. They can be set in any time period. With popular *rakugoka*, these *hanashi* have become somewhat like their performers' trademark.

While most female performers start their training with the goal of performing *koten*, some end up finding a niche performing *shinsaku*. Benzaitēi Izumi, for example, initially started out with *koten*, but when her *shinsaku* were well received both by audiences and senior performers, and when producers offered her stage opportunities, she gradually became a *shinsaku*-only performer (Benzaitēi Izumi and Shunpūtei Ichihana 2021). Kawayanagi Tsukushi was taken in by her master under the condition she exclusively performed *shinsaku* (Kawayanagi Tsukushi 2010, p. 10).

Role Models: Master and Peers

Picking the right master is as difficult as picking the right life partner. (Sumiyoshi 2022)

In order to become a *rakugoka*, young men and women have to be taken in by a performer of *shin’uchi* rank. Doing so, they join his *mon*, the socio-artistic family of *rakugoka* under the same *shishō*. The formerly mentioned associations are mainly administrative units arranging, for example, stage opportunities at the *yose* theaters (Horii 2009, p. 173), functioning as a point of contact for media outlets but they cannot prevent a *shishō* from taking in a *deshi*. It is the *shishō* himself, and often also his family who decides whether he accepts to train somebody. However, even though male *rakugoka* have known female peers or senior performers since the mid-1980s and do not condemn female participation on the *yose* stage, many declare that they do not take in female *deshi*. They feel the same as Beichō, who stated in 1975 that he did not have the confidence to train them properly: “It is about as difficult as creating a new performing art” (*sore ha atarashii gei o hitotsu tsukuriageru gurai muzukashii na no desu*) (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], p. 54).

There may also be personal reasons as in the case of Maruko, whose wife was opposed to him taking in a female *deshi* (Tatekawa Koshira et al. 2018). Another male *rakugoka* stated in a private conversation that he would not trust himself enough to make sure not to molest (*te o dasu*) her under the influence of alcohol or when traveling to remote venues and spending the night at the same hotel, even though in different rooms. Apprentices spend hours every day with their *shishō*.

Thus, performers with a career of under five years often sound like carbon copies of their masters. With female *deshi*, this is different. For example, Karuta, who had nobody to imitate, tried out a number of approaches such as changing male protagonists into women or using a lower-pitched voice, observing what worked with audiences (Mainichi Shinbun 2005). Even today, with 91% of female performers receiving training under a male master (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021), we can assume that they have difficulties finding role models and that imitating their own masters might not be a good choice. Karuta, who was aware of these difficulties, repaid her own *shishō*’s kindness (*ongaeshi*) by raising female *rakugoka* (Mainichi Shinbun 2005)¹⁰ and to date, two of her own female *deshi* have been promoted to *shin’uchi*.

Rakugoka always stress that the *shishō* is imperative for success. Indeed, if someone’s *shishō* is popular, or his fellow *deshi* under the same *shishō* do

¹⁰ At times, male peers consult female performers on how they see specific *hanashi* from a female point of view (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019).

not have any *deshi* of their own, a young *rakugoka* is likely to receive many stage opportunities, even at the *yose*. Here they can connect to peers, both with similar or longer careers, which in turn may create new stage offers and/or new fans. *Rakugoka* educated in the Rakugo Kyōkai and Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai learn their craft at the *yose* where they are constantly exposed to other performers' *hanashi*. These associations, however, in 2021 had only eight and six female *shin'uchi* respectively (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021). Of these, Komichi is the only woman to receive regular *yose* engagements.

The *yose* line-up is arranged to provide maximum diversity for the audience's enjoyment. *Iromono* arts are included in between *rakugo* and *kōdan* for diversity. On the *rakugo* side, there are usually a junior followed by senior *rakugoka*, one known for funny stories followed by a performer known for quiet stories, a *rakugoka* known for their *shinsaku* followed by one known for their *koten* interpretations. For any *rakugoka*, it is important to differentiate themselves enough to catch the attention of *yose* directors and be regularly cast for the ten-day run (*shibai*).

Audiences also demand diversity. Performers only decide the *hanashi* they will perform while on stage (Shores 2021b; Stark 2017): one featuring thieves may be followed by a quarreling couple, then a samurai followed by a *hanashi* about a drunkard. Ideally, there should be no two *hanashi* about the same topic. A young female performer in this context provides for variation in the line-up. A look at current programs, however, reveals that usually only one female performer can be found in a twelve-to-twenty-person line-up.¹¹

Voice Production

The first female *rakugoka*, with no role models to imitate, tried out many different approaches from falsetto voices (*uragoe*) to depicting women in their own natural voices (*jigoe*) (Shimazaki 1995, p. 54) or in a low-pitched voice (Mainichi Shinbun 2005) to depict multiple male characters. In 2009, cultural critic Horii stated that their high vocal range would be an obstacle for women: if they forced themselves to produce lower pitches for male characters, this would “be a burden for the spectators and probably also a burden for the performer” (Horii 2009,

¹¹ This excludes female *zenza* and the rare occasion when a female *shin'uchi*'s female *deshi* is promoted to master rank.

pp. 120–121). But with more and more female performers, it is possible that Horii has become used to listening to female voices on *rakugo* stages or female performers have become more skilled in their interpretations as a consequence of an increasing number of role models. When Kamigata’s Katsura Niyō became the first female performer to win the prestigious NHK award for *rakugo* newcomers in 2021, Horii commented to the NYT: “I have never seen anything as good as her version of the story she performed” (Rich and Hida 2021). Katsura Niyō had received full marks from all jury members.

Rather than the pitch, it is a *rakugoka*’s ability to create a melodic line which grabs the audience’s attention and a rhythm and pace which moves the storyline forward in a way that is easy and comfortable to listen to. Performers of both genders mostly only use unexpectedly high-pitched voices to draw the audience’s attention.

Appearance on Stage

Unlike other Japanese stage artists, whose plays are announced to the audiences in advance, *rakugoka* decide which *hanashi* to give on the spot (Horii 2009, p. 64; Shores 2021b; Stark 2017). *Rakugoka* do not wear costumes to match their roles but use one single kimono per *hanashi*, in which they perform all characters—from little boy to old woman. Most performers, though, have a number of kimono to match the season and/or the different *hanashi* they perform: *rakugoka* who create *shin-saku*, might for example choose to wear a bright red kimono for a *hanashi* set on Christmas Eve. If a samurai is the main character of a *hanashi*, a *rakugoka* is likely to wear *hakama* pants over his kimono. In a story with a *wakadanna* (a merchant house son), he might choose to wear elegant stripes (Yanai 2018, p. 23).

In everyday life, different kimono are worn for different occasions. Kimono have different levels of formality, only visible to the informed. The same way we can choose to wear jeans or an evening gown to the opera, a kimono wearer selects their kimono by cloth, dye, color and pattern. A *tsumugi* kimono, for example, is considered casual, the equivalent of denim. Its thread is first dyed and then woven and sewn. Kimono with the artistic family crest on the textile, *kuromontsuki* (black), *irromontsuki* (non-black) are worn for formal occasions such as weddings. While in the past, most *rakugoka* chose *kuromontsuki*, today many choose

to wear tones of blue, green, gray and brown or to combine these with accents of another color (Yanai 2018, p. 23).

As a rule, the color of a kimono should not distract the audience. Therefore, the majority of performers choose to wear a single color and for the most formal occasions, such as *shin'uchi* promotion shows, *kuromontsuki*. A *rakugoka* might wear *tsumugi* for the intro at their own show, but would never wear *tsumugi* in a guest appearance with a senior performer. For most performances, male *rakugoka* would wear *somemono* or *orimono*.¹² The choice of kimono can also depend on the performer's position in the line-up. A younger *rakugoka* should not wear an expensive kimono of high-level formality, but the kimono's formality should match his own ranking. Younger performers might even confer with senior performers in the same show about what they intend to wear, so as not to end up with similar color combinations (Yanai 2018, p. 35) (Figs. 2 and 3).

With all the above choices, female performers have the possibility to make one more choice: to wear either men's or women's kimono. While patterns for both seem similar, the latter have side-slits below the armpit called *miyatsukuchi*. These openings help to adjust the hem and with it the layer around the waist (*obashori*) to adjust for a female wearer's bust as shown in Fig. 4. Another visible difference is the *obi*. The women's *obi*-sash sits right under the breast and is about 34 cm wide. Male *rakugoka* use *kaku-obi*, a stiff cloth about 10 cm wide, which sits very low, just below the navel. This location makes moving both on stage and backstage easier (Satō and Tamura 2014). Certain stories cannot be performed if a *rakugoka* wears a women's kimono. For example, gestures to indicate that a character is looking for their *tenugui* cloth inside the kimono are difficult, if not impossible, to portray wearing women's kimono because of the *obi* width. Performers who decide to wear men's kimono need to dress with under-kimono first (*nagajuban*), wear a collar-pin (*eridome*), *shitajime*, *obi*, *hadagi* undershirt, *tabi* socks and *zōri* sandals. Wearers of the women's kimono require at least *kimono*, *nagajuban* (or alternatively *hanjuban* undershirt and *susoyoke* underskirt), *koshihimo* string belt, *datejime* (fabric belt worn between kimono and *obi* to secure kimono

¹² *Somemono* are kimono first woven using white thread with the resulting cloth dyed, whereas *orimono* are kimono made of pre-dyed threads which are woven into a pattern.



Fig. 2 Miyatsukuchi as shown in Komichi’s kimono

and *nagajuban*), *obi* (tied in *taiko-musubi* style),¹³ *obijime*, *obiage* sash, *obimakura* (pad to make obi look fuller), *obiita*-plate, *hadagi*, *tabi* and *zōri*.¹⁴ With fewer items, the men’s kimono makes it easier and quicker to dress and undress. As *zenza* move around the *gakuya* (green room) all day and most are inexperienced *kimono* wearers, female *zenza* today wear men’s kimono. Upon promotion to *futatsume*, they may choose to wear women’s kimono.

¹³ Female *rakugoka* who wear women’s kimono usually choose between *fukuro-obi* (pocket obi) or *Nagoya-obi*.

¹⁴ *Zenza* of either gender are not allowed to wear *haori*, they dress casually (*kinagashi*, i.e., without *hakama* and *haori*). For *futatsume* and *shin’uchi*, *haori* and *haoribimo* may be added as per the performer’s decision.



Fig. 3 Women's (left) and men's (right) kimono as worn by Komichi (left) and Ichihana (right) in comparison, showing the position of obi, haorihimo and mon

In modern Japanese society, women wearing a women's kimono are usually seen as the embodiment of Japaneseness and femininity (Goldstein-Gidoni 1999). And some female *rakugoka* are thus advised to do so by their own *shishō*, such as Komichi:

When I started training, my master told me to train in a woman's kimono. 'If you wear a man's kimono, you will show that *rakugo* is a man's art. Don't pretend you are a man [*otoko no kawa o kaburu na*]. When you go up on stage and appear in front of the audience, it's you, Komichi, a woman, who plays the role of *goinkyō*, it's Komichi, a woman who plays the role of Hattsan. There is no way to hide the fact that you are a woman, whether in the green room or on stage. (Ryūtei Komichi 2021)

The choice, what to wear, like the choice between *koten* and *shinsaku*, is personal and each performer decides herself what is easiest to perform in and what signal she wants to send to her audiences.

Another such signal is hair and make-up. The majority of male *rakugoka* chooses between short-back-and-sides, crew cut or buzz cut. If the



Fig. 4 Ichihana demonstrating gestures of stowing away a tenugui inside the kimono

forehead and ears are shown, audiences can easily imagine male characters in the Edo period when men shaved their pate and tied up their long back-hair into a topknot onto the top of their head; if a performer wore their long hair down and unconsciously flicked it away from their face, audiences would imagine a samurai wearing his long hair down. If a performer decided to go on stage with glasses, beard, earrings or eyeshadow, audiences would imagine a samurai with glasses, beard, earrings or eyeshadow. Just like their male peers, many female *rakugoka* wear their hair short; some wear their hair so boyish that elder performers mistake them for boys (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019). If they have longer hair, they tie it up so that there is no hair that can get in the way of their hands or the audience’s imagination.

As for make-up, gestures touching the face or sweat under stage light might smear the make-up (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019) or it

might rub-off on the *haori* or kimono sleeves and ruin the expensive silk garment. Therefore, many female *rakugoka* refrain or reduce make-up to an absolute minimum.

Stage Persona: Playing with Femininity

Rakugoka of either gender have the choice to accept/refuse professional stage engagement offers or produce their own shows. Small-scale organizers usually receive a head-shot or stage photo from the performer to be used in advertising, but for self-produced shows, the photos used on fliers are often curated specifically for the show. With 594 performers (Tōkyō Kwaraban 2021) competing for the attention of approximately 10,000 audience members in Greater Tokyo¹⁵ and about 44 shows staged every day in pre-pandemic days (Tōkyō Kwaraban 2020), fliers need to stand out visually to catch the audience's attention. Some female *rakugoka* play with femininity or adopt *aidoru* imagery. One of the photos used for fliers for Kingentei Nonoka (Kokontei Yūsuke since February 2022) showed her posing in a kimono reminiscent of a high-ranking courtesan (Kingentei Yonosuke 2020). Chōkarō Momoka's fliers of her early *futatsume* days (when she was still named Pikkari) often were very feminine, like Fig. 5. showing her in a bridal dress.

However, finding the right balance of appealing to a diverse fan-base without deterring existing fans is difficult. Since the majority of Tokyo's *rakugo*-fan-population regardless of the performer's gender is male, the atmosphere of an all-male audience might deter potential spectators. Some male fans see female performers as potential girlfriends or partners—as attested by *rakugoka* Ichihana: “When I got married most hardcore-fans disappeared” (Benzaitai and Shunpūtei 2021).

5 CONCLUSION

There are a number of factors which possibly have helped women's acceptance on the *yose* stage. Unlike kabuki, *noh* and *bunraku*, *rakugo* is in general not passed down through family lines.¹⁶ *Rakugo* also does

¹⁵ Tōkyō Kwaraban, the monthly magazine listing all *rakugo* shows in Greater Tokyo, issues 10,000 copies each month of which 5,000 are read by subscribers.

¹⁶ There are a number of *rakugo* who followed in their father's or uncle's footsteps, but their number is less than the number of female performers.

not apply the *iemoto* (headmaster)-system.¹⁷ Since the Meiji period, women have performed in *yose* shows in other arts such as *gidayū* (narrative performances), *rōkyoku* (melodic and narrative recitations), *manzai* (funny dialogues), *shamisen-mandan* (funny monologues accompanied by *shamisen*-music) and also *kōdan* (recitations of military or historic tales). Furthermore, the Asakusa Opera and Revues (musical theater including opera, operetta and dance; cf Yamanashi 2019) and later on the cinemas (Sheruman/Schermann 2019) were located in the same (*shitamachi*) areas of Tokyo and the same people attended as audiences, i.e., were both geographically and demographically close to the *yose*. All these factors possibly increased acceptance of women on stage.

As *rakugoka* perform on their own, strains on relationships among the artists as Allmendinger and Hackman (1999) have seen with orchestra musicians with women entering previously male-exclusive institutions, seem unlikely within the *rakugo* world. Rather than the *rakugo* world accommodating female perspectives in conjunction with female participation and visibility increasing, it seems that female *rakugoka* themselves will adapt and change further. *Rakugo* is an art created in cooperation with the audience: *rakugoka* achieve recognition mostly from audiences that provide performers with an external motivation to improve and excel. It also means that acceptance of a performer and their style depends on the audience. In addition, societal changes have influenced the acceptance of female *rakugoka*. When Shōkyō and Hanayo trained in the 1950s and 1960s, the ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife and wise mother)—the idea that while men were advancing the nation in public, women had to “create a pleasant home environment to help nurture the family and protect the nation” (Stalker 2018, p. 105)—was still strongly present, but attitudes have changed since then. The last entry on Hanayo is found in 1969—a year when less than half of women aged 25–29 were in employment (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism 2012). More than fifty years later, in 2021, 83.2% of women aged 25–34 were in employment (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2022). When society expects women to take care of their husbands and children, working as a freelance artist is still difficult. In 1981, when Karuta started training with Enka II, he made her promise to never get married as he

¹⁷ In the *iemoto*-system, disciples pay to be taught by their master and are limited to practice only what they have been taught within their own school, their own master or senior disciples.

had already seen many female *geinin* quit upon marriage (Iwagami and Iwakami 2004, p. 14; Asahi Shinbun 2011). Osaka’s Ayame got married, but could not meet the expectations of her husband, who wanted her to return home before him in the evenings and cook; he eventually started to beat her (Shimazaki 1995, p. 55).

As society changes, so do audiences’ approaches and attitudes as well as performers’ opportunities and lifestyles. Komichi, who started her training 22 years after Karuta, admitted that her *shishō* was sad when she moved further away due to her marriage. She also stated that her getting married was never an issue: “My *shishō* and his *shishō* are both married, there is no way I would not be allowed to get married myself” (Ryūtei Komichi 2021). More recently, in 2008, a single mother (Harusameya Fūko n.d.) and in 2017 a married woman with two children (San’yūtei Arama n.d.) joined the ranks of the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai.

Although Shōkyō and Hanayo were not allowed to train as *zenza* at the *yose*, today all *rakugoka*, no matter their gender, are trained there. The fact that all go through the same training process, for the same amount of time, has strengthened female *rakugoka*’s acceptance. They may still hold back in criticizing or admonishing male junior performers or still have the feeling of requiring male performers’ “approval to be here” (*irete moratte iru*) (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019), but this might change in the future.

The number of female performers is currently still small and there is usually only one female *rakugoka* in a *yose* line-up of twelve to twenty *rakugoka*. As female *rakugoka* are still a minority, neither their associations, the *yose* directors nor male peers feel the need to take action to accommodate female perspectives or preferences. Even in 2022, *yose* events staged to exclusively feature female *rakugoka* do not end with a *hanashi* but an *ōgiri*-improv-quiz or a dance (Daigo rakkyō redīzu tadaima sanjō! 2022). That said, organizational progress with a possibility to advance female perspectives has also occurred: in 2010, Karuta became a director (*riji*) of the Rakugo Kyōkai board (Asahi Shinbun 2011). Today, she proactively looks after female juniors and raises her own female *deshi*, both now are *shin’uchi* themselves. During the last decade, Tokyo’s *rakugo* world has become a space that welcomes female participants. Women no longer require considerable resolve (*kakugo*) when deciding to pursue a *rakugo* career (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019). Male *shishō* seek out the advice of female performers and ask them to help their female *deshi*. Female *zenza* now have a wider variety of role

models, some doing *koten*, some *shinsaku*, some changing *koten*, some not, some stressing femininity, some sporting a masculine look.

This chapter has only briefly analyzed different strategies female *rakugoka* currently follow. They all warrant thorough examination and analysis: language use of female *rakugoka* in comparison to male peers; strategies regarding performance (*hanashi*) and appearance on stage—both during and after completing *zenza* training; changes in perception and acceptance among audiences and male peers and so forth. At present, while Komichi is very successfully carving out her position at the *yose*, there is not yet a position of a “woman who can fit any line-up” (Ryūtei Komichi 2021). As the number of female *rakugoka* increases, each will have to find her own brand and stage persona in order to be cast for the *yose* line-up. In 2021, 61% of the female *rakugoka* noted in Tōkyō Kawaraban (2021) were not yet *shin’uchi*, i.e., they are still in a period of training (*zenza*) or are *futatsume*, a period in which they (no matter their gender) are still trying to find their own style, and where both audiences and producers still allow them to experiment and “mess up” (Hirose 2016, p. 192).

Although 2020 and 2021 likely experienced a dent in *deshi*-intake due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Di Francesco 2023), *rakugo* is as popular as ever. With female *rakugoka* of the second generation, such as Komichi and Izumi, popular on Tokyo’s stages, female participation is likely to increase further. Male *shin’uchi* seem to be less reluctant to take in female *deshi* and eventually audiences will no longer see performers such as Komichi and Izumi as performing “from the female perspective” (*josei no mesen*) but as from the “Komichi-perspective” and the “Izumi-perspective.”

Rakugo critic Hirose lauds *shin’uchi* Komichi as a “model case” of women who do “straight *koten*” (Hirose 2020, p. 337) as she does “not let [audiences] feel any unnaturalness of women performing *rakugo*” (p. 338), stressing how her approaches may be suggestions, pointers and inspiration for future female *rakugoka* (p. 339). Indeed, Komichi seems to have become the first female *rakugoka* to succeed if measured in terms of the number of *yose* engagements (Gokurakurakugo 2021). As Beichō predicted in the 1970s: once the number of spectators who have seen skilled female performers increases and the existence of female *rakugoka* is no longer considered an oddity, the audience’s sense of discomfort should disappear (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], pp. 53–54).

Komichi stated that she creates her own precedents (*zenrei ha jibun de tsukuru* (Ryūtei Komichi 2021)). If it hasn’t been done yet, she will be the first to do so. Let us dare hope that many others will follow, creating their own precedents.

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Not Quite There: Nike's Diversity and Inclusion Agenda and Japan's Readiness

Yuko Itatsu

1 INTRODUCTION

While traditional gender norms are being challenged in Japanese youth culture, in particular in anime, manga, cosplay, and so forth, the Japanese advertisement industry continues to rely on more conventional constructs of binary gender, even in their efforts to promote female empowerment. Sports brand Nike Japan can be cited as a company engaging in strategic media campaigns that raise awareness of gender-related issues. Nike Japan, for example, released an advertisement video called “They can’t stop us” in November 2020. The two-minute commercial featured several teenage girls in Japan being bullied for their racial or ethnic heritage, but then showed them empowered, having found themselves through the power of sports. It is worth noting that the portrayed ‘victims’ of bullying in this video were those conventionally identified as the weakest members of society, not only because of their gender but in some cases also because of their race or ethnicity. This advertisement garnered much attention and was viewed more than 14 million times on YouTube alone in the first

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48 hours of its release. While the commercial was well received among those who agreed with the sporting brand's progressive message to tackle xenophobia and bullying in Japanese society, there was a sizable backlash from domestic viewers who criticized it as an anti-Japan campaign. According to one media outlet, there were 46,000 favorable reactions and 29,000 negative reactions on social media in the first four days; this was also accompanied by angry calls to instigate a boycott movement against Nike products (Joongang Ilbo 2020). The backlash was reported in both domestic and international media (Denyer and Kashiwagi 2020; Fickenscher 2020; Mizuno 2020; Mori and Ohno 2020; Reuters 2020). This particular advertisement has garnered some interest among scholars, particularly in the context of continued oppression of the *zainichi* (permanent Korean residents of Japan) and the rejection of "superficial multiculturalism" pushed by multinational corporations (Oh and Wan 2021).

This chapter investigates recent Nike ad campaigns in comparison to other sports brand commercials as a window into the discussion on diversity and inclusion in contemporary Japanese society. More specifically, this chapter explores the representation of female athletes and the message of female empowerment in sports brand advertising in Japan, focusing on a series of Nike advertisements on YouTube over the last few years from 2020 to 2022. By examining the advertisements in chronological order, particularly against the backdrop of Black Lives Matter and the increasing drive to ensure diversity and inclusion in society, we take a close look at the rhetorical vicissitude expressed by these sports goods manufacturers. In particular, this chapter will address the following questions: What was the global marketing strategy that influenced Nike Japan's controversial advertisement? What did Nike Japan do in their subsequent video advertisements after the controversy? How can these subsequent videos be interpreted when read through a feminist lens? What are we able to extrapolate about the appetite for diversity and inclusion in Japan based on the trajectory of Nike Japan's message strategy since 2020? In this chapter, the commercial is analyzed as a microcosm among the debate on whether or not Japan is ready for a dialogue on diversity and inclusion.

2 ADVERTISING FOR SOCIAL GOOD

There are currently many global companies emphasizing social good in their advertisements. According to a 2018 survey on consumer attitudes,

66% of Japanese consumers responded that global brands can play a powerful role for good in the world (McCann, n.d.).¹ In another survey, 55% of Japanese consumers said they would choose, avoid, or boycott products based on the brands' attitude toward social issues (Matsuura et al. 2020, p. 8).

One key feature of the new wave of social agenda-driven advertisements is the representation of women. These campaigns employ linguistic and visual rhetoric to celebrate female empowerment. Coined "femvertising," this neologism combines feminism and advertising (Kapoor and Munjal 2017). A critical analysis of femvertising delves into "issues of lack of authenticity, dilution of feminist discourse, interconnection with social movements as well as linkages to increase representation of women in advertising" (Varghese and Kumar 2020). This chapter thus takes cue from Varghese and Kumar to offer a critical examination of femvertising by sports brands in Japan.

As many may know, Nike is an American multinational corporation that was founded in 1964 and was renamed to its current appellation in 1971. It was in 1987 that Nike aired its first advertisement directed at female consumers. Prior to that year, there was no Nike ad geared specifically at female consumers because the sportswear maker believed it "would compromise Nike's authentic and serious sports image" (Helstein 2003). Michelle T. Helstein (2003) analyzes the historical context which led Nike to the idea of female empowerment, or what Helstein considers emancipation, as a key strategic concept in their marketing. She points to the influx of women and girls gaining access to sports after the passage of Title IX in the U.S., the federal civil rights law that prohibits sex discrimination in education programs and activities. Secondly, she argues that neoconservatism in the 1980s allowed the percolation of blame to any socioeconomic issue as rooted in individual inadequacies. These ideas led to the notion that people can change their material realities as long as they put the effort in (Helstein 2003). In addition to the hope of emancipation, Nike's global advertising has been about excellence as well. Helstein analyzes the nature of the two concepts as follows:

Excellence is an elitist paradigm in which all but one person (or team) is produced as the loser. In opposition, emancipation is a democratic force

¹ Japan's 66% is actually significantly lower compared to their global counterparts, 81% of whom gave an affirmative response.

in which all people (or teams) are free to achieve. This pairing works within the discourse of Nike because both excellence and emancipation are vacated of substantive meaning so that the rhetorical value of both overcomes the illogical nature of the pairing. (Helstein 2003, p. 283)

Arguably, this paradoxical relationship between excellence and emancipation is precisely what gives room for advertising agencies to play with the calibration of these two concepts.

More so than other sports brands, Nike is known for centering its advertisements on ideological concepts rather than advertising its products. Such a strategy applied with strong messages, though, begs the question of why Nike continues with this strategy regardless of the high risk of inviting a divisive response and losing customers. Some may argue Nike has proven to itself that risk-taking has worked well over the years. For instance, Nike ran the “Dream Crazy” campaign in 2018, commemorating their brand’s 30-year anniversary. They featured Colin Kaepernick, who became infamous for taking a knee during the National Anthem at an NFL game. Although the campaign triggered a boycott movement and led to the company’s stock falling dramatically following this ad, the brand subsequently regained stronger loyalty because of their bold stance to risk it all in order to follow their convictions (Matsuura et al. 2020, p. 6). Consequently, this particular ad campaign ended up being an enormous success, receiving global recognition such as winning an Emmy Award and the Grand Prix at Cannes Lions, an international festival for advertising, creativity, and marketing. One can see how this kind of success in the U.S. emboldened Nike Japan to follow the mothership’s brand strategy.

It is not that Nike has not made any marketing faux pas in the past. For instance, the company launched a campaign in 2019 for its trail running shoes with a tagline “Lost Cause.” Historians such as Amy Kohout took to Twitter to inform Nike that this was a slogan employed by confederates echoing the embracement of slavery and nostalgia for the Southern way of life before the Civil War. And that since then, white supremacists had used it to justify their cause. Nike quickly pulled this ad within 6 hours and their social media fodder disappeared in a day. Nike also pulled a 2012 campaign for sneakers called the “Black and Tan,” which was a historical term used for the British troops that antagonized the Irish in the 1920s. Nike apologized for this advertisement as well (Nelson 2019). While these were more cultural gaffes than intentional risk-taking, the

sports brand has gone through this kind of crisis management over the years, making them adept at dealing with controversy.

Nike is one of the companies that has leaned heavily on their social campaigns in the last two decades. Arguably this has been a particularly strategic move attempting to compensate for the allegations of human rights abuse claiming oppressive work environments in their manufacturing factories in Asia. These allegations by an international group of individuals and organizations caused a media splash in the 1990s making Nike a posterchild for the ill treatment of laborers driven by the globalizing labor market and corporate greed.² Indeed, Nike does not make their shoes in the U.S. but almost everything has been outsourced to manufacturers in East Asia, including Korea, Taiwan, and China. Consequently, Nike has put a great amount of effort into changing that narrative and removing their association with sweatshop factories.

After the brutal murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in August 2020, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement forced companies to show a stance. Some corporations were quick to put out a statement supporting the BLM movement, whether it was offering donations to causes, promising immediate change to their corporate organization, or committing to conduct in-house training for their employees. Other companies were boycotted for not taking a stance immediately. These include corporations such as Amazon, which tweeted a message of support for the BLM movement a whole week after the incident. Amazon received harsh criticism from consumers saying a tweet was insufficient without a charitable donation, and was merely lip service for a company their size. While Amazon donated to charitable causes three days after this tweet, Matsuura et al. argue that Amazon was a case where appropriate action was met with backlash due to the following three characteristics it shares with other corporations that suffered a similar fate. These included a sense of indifference for not responding immediately, the brand's statement or mission followed by no action, and overall slowness in reacting to societal movements (Matsuura et al. 2020, pp. 6–7).

² David Lamb, Job opportunity or exploitation? *Los Angeles Times* April 18, 1999. C1+. American network CBS aired two-hour long programs about the Nike Factories in 1993 and 1996. ESPN ran an hour-long documentary about the abusive working conditions in the Vietnam Nike factories. Information on the televisual programs from Sage (1999, p. 216).

Negative flare-ups of public relations in Japan are recognized to such an extent that it has acquired its own terminology. *Enjo* commercials are now considered a genre or at least a type of recognized reaction which occurs after a campaign failure. *Enjo* literally means to “flare up” in Japanese, and is used in social media or advertising context to indicate how a post has gone viral garnering negative attention and controversy. Corporations are typically scared of *Enjo* and try hard to avoid such negative publicity. There are many reasons for a campaign or social media output to flare up, including problematic representations of race, ethnicity, gender, and disabilities. Gender studies’ scholar Kaku Sechiyama categorizes the types of reasons for why an ad may flare up for gender-related issues. The categories are as follows:

- a. advertisements believed to have fixed ideas about gender roles or perceived as strengthening such fixed ideas
- b. advertisements depicting a person’s appearance which is interpretable as gender discrimination
- c. advertisements that include sexualized messages which are interpreted as representing male desire
- d. advertisements depicting fixed ideas on *male* gender roles which are then criticized for strengthening male stereotypes. (Sechiyama 2021, pp. 13–14)

Japanese corporations in recent years have tried to avoid these flare-ups to varying degrees of success. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics brought a catalytic moment as the promotion of diversity and inclusion was set as a key target of the games. As the slogan of diversity and inclusion permeated society, stakes became higher for corporations to avert faux pas in their marketing strategy (Takemoto 2021; Daibashitii 2020).

When avoiding controversy, varying cultural sensitivities pose an added layer of complexity to the marketing strategy. Japanese corporations have often relied on Western advertising agencies to develop campaigns. Sports sociologist Koji Kobayashi argues that “in contrast to American advertising agencies (which) developed hand in hand with American transnational corporations as their global market expanded, the giants among major Japanese advertising agencies, such as Dentsu and Hakuhodo, often faced communication barriers deriving from the particularity of Japanese language and business orientations. As a result, they tended to focus on

the domestic market” and were not able to take up the opportunity of becoming a global marketing agency (Kobayashi et al. 2019, p. 160). This explains the discord and tension often seen in the portrayal of Japanese products in global marketing campaigns. For example, in a case study on Asics and its sub-brand Onitsuka Tiger, Koji Kobayashi, Steven Jackson, and Michael Sam (2019) point out that the global advertising campaign for these athletic shoes was developed by a European subsidiary of an advertising agency rather than the Japan global headquarters. Kobayashi et al. also suggest that “this mode of creative alliance between Japanese transnational corporations and western subsidiaries/advertising agencies is best framed as ‘self-orientalization’ through which a Japanese transnational corporation accommodates, albeit through negotiation, European representations of Japanese authenticity and coolness as ‘the spectacle of the “Other”’ (Kobayashi et al. 2019, p. 158). In other words, there is a complex set of politics at play when social messages are conveyed in advertising for Japanese brands, especially as social messages play out in culturally specific ways.

In the following section, we will examine three recent campaigns by Nike Japan and how they have grappled with advancing their social message in the local context.

Case 1: You can't Stop Us

The Japanese subsidiary of sports brand Nike released a two-minute advertisement video (mentioned above) called “You can't stop us” in November 2020.³ It showcases several teenage girls in Japan being empowered by sports after first being bullied. The video focuses on three specific girls: one is bullied for her mixed heritage, her afro hair and complexion; another student is ostracized for being a permanent Korean resident wearing traditional Korean attire; and another student is isolated in school. The copy is delivered as a voice over narration by these three main characters:

Girl 1: Sometimes I wonder who I am. Are there things I can accomplish?
Am I a disappointment? Am I not normal? Can I accept this as normal?

³ This video is no longer available on the Nike Japan YouTube channel but can be found in other places, such as on Femi 2020.

[A girl looking at her smart phone. On the screen it says “Recurring column: Analyzing the Korean resident problem today. Another girl looking at her social media feed about Naomi Osaka which reads, “Is she American or Japanese?” A third girl reading comments about her social media post “Does she think this is cute?”]

Girl 2: I wish I could ignore it all. Do I stand out? Should I blend in more? Can’t I belong here?

[Teacher’s voice over: “Attention everyone. We have a new transfer student.”]

I need to be liked by everyone. I need to pretend. I need to look like I’m not fazed by this.

[Quarreling with her mother, “Stop comparing me with others!”]

Girl 3: It’s always been like this. I kept saying to myself this was normal. But maybe it doesn’t have to be the case. Nope. No. Definitely not.

Some day everyone will be able to live as they like? I can’t be waiting around for that.

[tagline] You can’t stop sport. You can’t stop us. (Nike 2020)⁴

This video quickly became social media fodder as people both praised and criticized the advertisement. Computational social scientist Fujio Toriumi conducted a statistical analysis of the Twitter responses to this Nike Japan advertisement in 2020. Toriumi based his analysis on 300,000 tweets he collected about the Nike ad including those with hashtags such as #Youcantstopus, #nikejapan, and #Nikeboycott. By doing so, he discovered that the tweets formed mainly three clusters. The first cluster consisted of positive responses to the ad. The second contained criticism about Nike as a company, including comments that referenced the allegation of Nike exploiting laborers. And the third cluster was about negative responses to the allegation of Japan being a racist country (Toriumi 2020). Some of the Twitter comments pointed out Nike’s hypocrisy remembering the allegations of worker exploitation in Asia. Others pointed out Nike’s hypocrisy citing a controversy where Nike alongside Shibuya Ward in Tokyo had forcefully removed homeless people from Miyashita Park (Isono 2021).

In 2021, Nike Japan continued with the diversity and inclusion message releasing a new video, this time promoting gender equality (New Girl 2021). This video illustrated the apprehension of having a baby girl in Japan today. The expectant parents initially smile as they are told the

⁴ This and all subsequent translations are the author’s. Emphases are also by author.

sex of their new baby, but it is followed by a montage of the stigma, discrimination, and disadvantages a woman may experience in contemporary Japan: a woman not allowed to speak at a company meeting; a young woman looking scared as she walks down a dark alley. During the baby shower scene, there is a voice over that mentions the 43.7% income gap between men and women in Japan. As the expecting mother is driven to hospital after expressing anger about the discrimination, it leads to another set of montage images where women are empowered: a young female athlete playing baseball; women represented in corporate meetings; a female sumo wrestler; a female rugby player; professional tennis player Naomi Osaka; and an imaginary press conference by a female prime minister. Some are portrayals of real achievements, and other achievements appear still fictitious and ideal. It ends on a positive note implying that women can do anything, as the mother asks the newborn, “What do you want to be?”.

This video has been viewed 11.5 million times since May 2021 (as of April 2022). While this was another direct commentary from Nike Japan about gender disparity in Japan, there was not as much criticism by the public. Some criticized the naivete of announcing that “women can do anything” when there are clear examples of female discrimination in Japanese society, such as where female applicants were systemically penalized for their gender in medical school admissions until recently. Freelance writer Sumire Yukishiro (2021) posited that society should first ensure gender equality before telling women that they can be anything they want to become. When compared to other videos that Nike Global ran on female empowerment such as “What are girls made of?” this New Girl campaign demonstrates that diversity and inclusion campaigns have to be “Japanified” to be acceptable—and that seems to be the lesson that Nike Japan learned based on their subsequent videos releases (Nike Women 2017). The undercurrent of cultural conservatism and societal norms remain overwhelming for one company like Nike Japan to take on. Through the cases included in this chapter, we will see how sports brands including Nike grapple with conversations on gender issues in Japan.

Case 2: Minding My Own Business

In 2021, Nike Japan launched a new YouTube video series called “Own the Floor.” In this series, three female dancers who excel in hip hop

and break dancing are featured. All three dance regularly in international competitions and are highly regarded in the field. While their regular performances do not seem particularly feminine or gendered, their portrayal in the Nike videos are highly feminized and gendered. The voice-over narration by the dancers themselves shows traits of typical Japanese womanhood as seen below (emphasis added):

Kyoka

Hip hop dancing is perceived as something intense and vigorous; it's often considered scary. But I want to remove that bad image, that there's softness in the strength, and that it can have various elements. That's what I'd like to express. *My grandmother was a grand master of koto, and so I got to see up close how she uses her fingers, how she wears her kimonos.* I've always felt that was cool. And *these elements make up the suppleness that is unique to Japanese people. I want to honor the wabi sabi spirit and express it in my dance.* Hip hop has many genres, it puts your heart on fire and makes your heart dance; it's freeing. Listening to your favorite music, moving in your favorite dance style, dancing as one wants to. That is the beauty of dance.

[Final tag line; With your own style, make everyone single person check you out]. (Kyoka 2021)

Kotori

I like big movements and smooth movements. I pay attention to the groove and flow of my dance moves. The key is to showcase my own style as I feel the place and time and music vibe, I pay attention to that. I loved showing my dance from when I was in primary school. I wanted to show who I was, but I was bad at communicating with people. But I loved dancing, and what I wanted to show about myself is somehow connected with showing my dance. In the future, *I want to create dance opportunities in my home town or in areas where there aren't a lot of dancers, so they can have a better dance environment.* I want people to know how great and wonderful dance is, especially to people who've never danced. I want to be influential like that. I think dance is communication. With dance, we can connect. (Kotori 2021)

Ayane

I started dancing because I liked things that were cool rather than cute. That's why I started doing breakdancing. The great thing about my dance

style is that it's got strength and speed, and *I want to break the barriers between B-boy and B-girl styles*. I incorporate a lot of moves that B-boys tend to do. At a dance battle, one of the judges told me to dance like a girl more. *I couldn't understand what "dancing like a girl" meant; besides that's not what I'm looking for*. That exchange made me realize this was my style. Breaking is a genre that seeks originality; *you're looking to create something no one else has ever done, and then to make it your own*. Using that move as a weapon to win against others is the great thing about break dancing. I just want to leave an impression with as many people as possible. I want people to go home saying, "Today's Ayane was awesome. Ayane was the best today." I dance hard every second so people will think that of me. (Ayane 2021)

There are a few characteristics to note. First of all, the soft-spoken voices and mild manners represent a typical feminine existence that allow them to be acceptable to mainstream Japanese society. Nike Japan makes sure these three dancers seem malleable to Japanese society, still able to adhere to societal norms and are not meant to be disruptive forces. In fact, Nike's overcompensation is rather conspicuous as they attempt to overturn the stereotype of breakdancing as a delinquent activity. The selection of three dancers seem rather calculated as their coolness appeals to the younger generation, but at the same time their mindfulness of their "place in society" will not alienate the older consumer population. Particularly contrived is Kyoka referring to her grandmother who is a *koto* grand master and intimating that her hip hop dance has lineage and inspiration stemming from Japanese *wabi sabi* (beauty of ephemeral imperfection) esthetics. It is a rather obvious self-orientalizing comment highlighting the uniqueness of Japanese culture, evoking the *Nihonjinron* (an essentialist claim about the uniqueness of Japanese national and cultural identity) argument. Kotori's dreams of wanting to create spaces for young people in rural areas also speak to the depletion of young energy in many parts of Japan. This dream may sound rather wholesome and inward looking, especially when she could just as easily discuss dreams of conquering the global dance scene. Even Ayane's criticism of gender norms is not too harsh, given her soft-spoken mannerisms. Noteworthy is that Ayane does not criticize the societal norms per se, all she desires is a space to be herself.

Comparing the Nike video with other YouTube videos in which these three hip hop dancers appear (most of which are of competitions), Nike

Japan's representation of these dancers has a clear remit: to emphasize their femininity and ensure the portrayal of subservience as young Japanese women ("Kyoka" 2020; "b-girl Ayane" 2017; "Kotori" 2019). In fact, many of the feminine traits that Ford et al. (1998) extracted from the Japanese magazine advertisements in the 1990s still remains true in these Nike ads. Female protagonists must be delicate, elegant, feminine, gentle, modest, reserved, and submissive. All three of these dancers have been given make-up and a manicured look. Both Kyoka and Kotori are wearing form-fitting Nike clothes, compared to their normal form-hiding oversized cargo-style hip hop clothes.

In order to understand Nike Japan's strategy in its regional context, one also needs to look at what their brand competitors are doing. A quick search of YouTube reveals that many of Nike Japan's domestic competitors do not conduct social message campaigns. Neither Puma Japan, Asics Japan, nor Yonex Japan have content related to female empowerment. (The *Global* YouTube Channels for Puma and Asics have female empowerment videos, but these are beyond the scope of this study.). New Balance Japan relies on consumer-generated content and does not produce its own content. Mizuno Japan has sites for just their golf and baseball products. Arena also only has videos on their swimwear products on their YouTube channel. Onitsuka Tiger has a channel but represents itself as a high-fashion brand rather than a sports brand and is therefore omitted from this study.⁵

Worthy of comparison are Under Armour Japan, Adidas Japan, and Canterbury Japan, which will be explored briefly here.⁶ In a 2020 campaign for Under Armour Japan, break dancer Nao Uochi was featured

⁵ While Reebok has a Japanese YouTube channel, it was omitted from this study since the Japanese content in which female athletes appear are training videos. These training videos are distinguished from the message-driven content series "Life is not a spectator sport," which does not include Japanese athlete representation, and are therefore omitted. However, these Japanese training videos featuring both female and male athletes invite a separate discussion on gender representation. Arguably these videos show ultimate inclusion by demonstrating only athletic excellence and not meddling the video with unnecessary narrative.

⁶ As far as viewership of the YouTube channels are concerned, Nike Japan has had 48 million views since 2012; Under Armour Japan has had 45 million views since 2010. Since Adidas Japan generates content for Adidas Headquarters, they have no separate regional statistics. The Adidas global channel has had 314 million views since 2005. Canterbury Japan has had 460,000 views since its 2016 launch.

in a two-minute video series entitled “We don’t all have to be the same.” In the interview clip, she says:

I’m often told that I’m very different when I’m dancing and when I’m not [...] Not a lot of dancers do just power moves, especially if they’re girls. I was born with broader shoulders and stronger muscles than the typical person. I used to envy girls who were quite willowy. But now, rather than taking it as an inferior complex, I’ve started muscle training. In high school I used to be told that my dance was impressive but not cool. When I heard that, I thought that it’s people who are dedicated to their craft that look cool. And I’m not that dedicated yet, so I’m not cool. If I work harder, I think I can look cool. (Uochi 2020)

There is a humility or lack of confidence that is communicated in this message, which is perhaps an effort to avoid sounding too confident or arrogant. This kind of underselling of her worth and talent is in drastic contrast to the sharp dance movements seen on the videos. This drastic gap between the soft-spoken voice and sharp dance moves are similar to those of the hip hop dancers created by Nike Japan. A minor difference, however, from the Nike videos is that Uochi is not in make-up and the video takes a more documentary style approach, conducting the interview in the gym.

Another similar message of individuals overcoming hardship is shared in another campaign by Under Armour Japan. This series called “The only way is through” features five female athletes speaking about the stigma that they must overcome to play their sports. This was uploaded as part of the company’s celebrations of Women’s History Month in 2021. These women talk about the obstacles they face, but the final message is about progressing in their own individual way. The accompanying website shows greater detail of the life stories of these female athletes, whether they are a yoga instructor getting their body back in shape after giving birth, professional basketball player coming back from a serious injury, a rugby player overcoming gender-oriented stigma, lifestyle model/yoga instructor, or alpine skier competing internationally during the pandemic. It is told as a personal story of women dictating their own path. This is an individualistic story about addressing challenges in a way that is good for you personally, and encourages the viewer not to judge themselves in comparison with others. The series epitomizes a message that these athletes are interested in carving out a place for themselves to fulfill their

goals, rather than being socially conscious or trying to create a better future for younger people. This resonates with the brand of neoliberal feminism that Helstein described.

Compared to Nike Japan or Under Armour Japan, Adidas has just one global channel, and it is not organized according to region. Interestingly Adidas uses one unified marketing strategy and applies it to all markets around the world. There is still regional content made, as some Japanese athletes are featured with Japanese descriptions and Japanese language audio, clearly meant to be consumed by Japanese consumers, but the overall theme remains the same across national borders. The latest campaign “Stay Ready” features athletes from around the world. This campaign includes Japanese athletes such as skateboarder Momiji Nishiya, judoist Uta Abe, Taekwondo Paralympian Shoko Ota, and sport climber Miho Nonaka. Interestingly Nishiya’s video has an English narration, whereas the rest have Japanese narration. In contrast to Nike Japan or Under Armour Japan, these videos are not edited to depict these female athletes as delicate, gentle, or elegant as characterized by Ford et al. (1998). Adidas do not seem to be pandering to the Japanese patriarchal views of women.

For example, in Abe’s case, she discusses how she pushes herself to the limit:

I imagine a situation where I’m at a disadvantage. Or when I’m in a tough spot. That’s what I think of when I’m training. It’s at the end of the match, or when my muscles are fatigued when I feel the actual match is just starting. That’s what I am always thinking when I train. (Abe 2021)

Nonaka also discusses how she trains for excellence:

I create situations where I can only make one mistake. I imagine these to be real situations in competition, and I pay attention to that one move. If I have even one thing that I’m unsure of, I won’t be able to give it 100%. I prepare to create a miracle at the right moment. (Nonaka 2020)

These videos show the Japanese female athletes as professionals at the top of their game. The rhetoric they use is no different from their male counterparts as they talk about the seriousness of pushing themselves to the limit and striving for excellence at the highest level. In this manner, this

Adidas campaign allows itself to be more progressive by circumventing the local market politics and directly placing the female athletes amidst other professional athletes, regardless of their gender.

Perhaps even more on the offense is the Canterbury Japan video that directly tries to exemplify what gender equality can look like in the Japanese market. In this rugby goods manufacturer's video "Be independent," Japanese female rugby player Ano Kuwai is featured alongside Edward Quirk and James Moore, both Australian rugby players who play for Japanese teams as well as the Japanese actor Gordon Maeda ('Be independent' 2020). The female player does not speak about being a gendered minority, nor is she depicted as one. Emphasis is added on Kuwai's utterance:

Maeda: Open yourself. Tackle one by one. Learn from losing. Want to give dreams.

Quirk: Take care of your team. Respect differences. Look straight ahead. Believe in your future.

Kuwai: *Believe in the hard work that you put in. Convert the many voices of support to one's ability. I can grow because I am needed. I can become stronger because I am needed.*

Moore: Be positive during hard times. Give your all in every game. Help each other. Be the best at what you do. Overcome adversity.

The juxtaposition of these four (and the conspicuous absence of a Japanese male rugby player) speaks volumes of the conscious choices the advertising team made to get their message across. Given the relative success and popularity of the men's National Rugby Team, it would actually make sense for Canterbury to showcase the male rugby players, particularly as they are the official sponsors; however, this rugby kit manufacturer seems keen to disrupt long-standing assumptions. As a sports brand, Canterbury of New Zealand's market share is smaller as they only offer rugby-related products and their advertising impact is indeed less significant. In addition, the Japanese market is relatively small for Canterbury compared to other markets, where rugby is a mainstream popular sport. However, the smaller market in Japan may mean they are able to take greater risks. While the Adidas series represents just as progressive an imagery by not making the female athletes look coy, they have avoided engaging directly in a discussion about gender issues in Japan.

Compared with these domestic competitors, Nike Japan's "Own the floor" series seems rather regressive when it comes to advancing the

social agenda of gender equality and representing female athletes. While the dancers' movements articulate strength and excellence, the personas portrayed through their speech, soft-spoken voice, and cosmetic appearance create stark incongruence. This is even significantly different from the equally first-person narration seen in the Adidas "Stay Ready" series.

Case 3 Nike Playing Safe

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought strong interest in maintaining good health while restrictions on social activities have impeded group sports. This has led to trends in doing yoga and other exercises at home (Aono 2020). But the overall decrease in exercise opportunities is a problem not just for the mental and physical health of the public but also for sports brands who are concerned about long-term impact of a shrinking population engaged in sports. In 2022, the second full year of mask-wearing, Nike Japan launched a series of YouTube videos to ensure that exercise stayed relevant even amidst social-distancing guidelines.

In this new series, they offer practical online instructions for doing light exercises at home (Nike *Juku* series 2022). They use the metaphor of a *juku* (cram school) to encourage young people, particularly secondary school students, to exercise during their study breaks. These Nike videos have a different tone. The pop esthetic and funky hip hop music indicate that the aim is to appeal to the youth, sending them a message about exercise being a cool activity. There are a range of personalities that are supposed to guide the viewer: four female dancers wearing typical Japanese school sailor uniforms, a comedienne, and teenage models. The representation seen in this series evokes the typical Japanese gender stereotypes that account for Japan being 120th in the gender gap rankings according to the 2021 World Economic Forum report. Here Nike reverts to old gender stereotypes, particularly about *bukatsu* (school club activities) and high school students. Teenage models Haruto Ikeda and Rika Tachibana are the personalities for one of the videos. They perform exercises using backpacks as their weights or using classroom items to stretch and train their muscles. What is rather shocking here is that the male student explains all the exercises, while the female student is the obedient learner. She models subservience, letting the male student be the authority figure in this video, even though they are both students.

3 DISCUSSION

Having canvassed recent YouTube videos by sports brands, there are a few things to note about the representation of female athletes and the state of diversity and inclusion in Japan. With the 2020 “You can’t stop us” campaign, Nike Japan tried to make a forward move, tackling sexism and xenophobia directly. Nike’s critique about xenophobia in Japan was met with harsh criticism arguably because the discussion was presented as a *thesis* rather than the *lived experiences* of real people. Adidas and Under Armour Japan steered away from making sweeping statements about social change, and focused rather on the individual female athletes and their actual lived experience of handling stigma or other forms of unconscious bias. Criticisms are stifled when real athletes discuss real experiences. Nike Japan made themselves vulnerable to negative reactions by posing the argument as a general societal problem. The subsequent “New Girl” video received less criticism arguably because it was less aggressive in tone with a concluding message that girls can do what they want, leaving vague the necessity for societal change. In the “Own your floor” and “Nike *juku*” series, Nike Japan seems to have overcorrected their stance and shown further regression in their representation of the role women can play in athletics.

While femvertising has taken root in Japanese sports brand marketing, the effectiveness of this kind of advertising seems to be limited. Although this feminist advertising style is meant to “accentuate women’s talents, spread a pro-woman message and decimate stereotyping of women,” the Japanese outposts of major sports brands such as Adidas and Under Armour are falling short of meeting these goals (Varghese and Kumar 2020, p. 1). Nike Japan’s call for action through the “You can’t stop us” video was on the mark as far as global sentiments were concerned, but it was several steps too advanced for the local public discourse. Perhaps that was Nike’s strategy, perhaps it was their miscalculation, or perhaps they were playing the long game. It did indeed rally people who believe in the progressive agenda, so perhaps it can be said that it completely hit the mark for some.

Questions posed by Varghese and Kumar remain whether consumers can differentiate between genuine and faux feminism, that is whether consumers are able to tell when feminist agendas are genuinely pursued or are exploited for profit. This study did not attempt to investigate whether consumers are able to tell this difference. Instead, what this

study shows is how regional advertisements sometimes attempt a genuine kind of feminism and other times negotiate with the semiotic space that they are afforded. Using the words of Varghese and Kumar (2020, p. 3), perhaps one can argue that Nike Japan's "You can't stop us" was in fact a "genuine" corporate investment in femvertising, whereas the subsequent YouTube series have reverted back to the faux feminism that is driven by patriarchal consumer culture.

Media scholar Tohko Tanaka argues that web advertisement has become a site for public discourse, but citing French cultural theorist Paul Virilio she reminds us that speed condenses time in media, and that while communication through media may travel instantaneously, the space that this communication occupies can evaporate just as quickly (Tanaka 2017). The civic discussion that happens on YouTube may be ephemeral, but the accumulation and cross fertilization of such discussion between manufacturers, marketers, and consumers will hopefully culminate in substantial improvement. It is in this manner that Nike Japan's recent advertisement addressing diversity and inclusion offers insight into the discussion on Japan's societal change.

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Hybrid Masculinities? Reflexive Accounts of Japanese Youth at University *Josō* Contests

Ayumi Miyazaki

1 INTRODUCTION

On a decorated stage at a university cultural festival stood students in varieties of meticulously dressed *josō* (male-to-female cross-dressing) characters, such as a prim and proper shy woman in pink attire, a cute maid with a white ruffled apron, a high-school girl in a sailor-style uniform,

Josō, male-to-female cross-dressing, was not always a preferred term among *josō* practitioners for different reasons. One interviewee in our research project explained that cross-dressing (*iseisō*) might be a better term than *josō* in some cases because for some people, *josō* is not just about dressing but about becoming a woman. Another point of view is expressed by Gin_sym, a *josō* idol and YouTuber with 180,000 followers on Twitter, who rejects the idea of *josō*, explaining that he does not try to do “*josō*” and become a woman, but he just wants to be cute. I realize that *josō* is not always the best term because it presumes an unwavering gender identity and a clear boundary between men and women. This paper nonetheless uses the term *josō* because the university contests where much of my fieldwork took place were called *josō* contests, while acknowledging the problematic nature of this term on account of the complexity of gender-non-binarity, the very topic this paper is dealing with.

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a serious female student on a school ethics committee, and a *bangyaru*, an avid fan of *visual kei* bands.¹ The excited audience included not only friends, family, and supporters of the *josō* practitioners who helped to create this high-level *josō* make-up and clothing, but also many fans of *josō*, with whom the contestants had communicated through social media for weeks before the contest. Together they made up one of the largest of all crowds in this two-day long university festival. The student hosts skillfully facilitated this event, posing questions to the contestants who were serious about performing the female persona they had taken on. The event got lively with the contestants' performances, such as singing, dancing, and even binge drinking. The winner, determined by both votes from the audience and the event's Twitter site, received a prize at the end. *Josō* contests such as this one have recently become a central attraction at university and high school festivals all over Japan.

This chapter explores the diverse discourses and performances of *josō* in contemporary Japanese society, in particular, at university *josō* contests, known as *josō kontesuto*, but often abbreviated as *josōkon* or *josokon*. While *josō* in Japan has a long history and cultural meanings of its own (Mihashi 2008), today the culture of *josō* circulates widely through contemporary media, such as social media, TV programs, and magazines, and its visible influence on popular and youth subcultures can be observed in various corners of society, from *josō* cafés in Akihabara, the fashion of *sukāto danshi* (men wearing skirts), to cute *otokonoko* (boy daughter) characters in manga and cosplay. Kinsella (2019) observes that this new mode of *josō* sprang from Japanese cultural history, such as *moe* animation, the aesthetic of *kawaii* (cute), and *otaku* subcultures, among others, and became popular in minor genres and leading boys' manga magazines from the turn of the century through the 2000s. By the mid-2010s, as Kinsella points out, *josō* was no longer a niche or *otaku* subtrend but a widespread theme in both social and mainstream media. Popular male idols started to appear on TV in *josō* dress as a matter of course, and manga, advertisement, and live events became filled with *josō* themes. This is also the period when a number of *josō* beauty contests at universities and high schools sprang up and became the most powerful attraction at school festivals.

¹ This example is a combination of different university festivals the author and her co-researchers observed.

Today, *josō* practices are even more prevalent in the lives of young Japanese people. Thousands of *josō*-related blogs, Twitter and Instagram accounts, and YouTube videos show how to improve *josō* make-up, how to choose *josō* attire, and how to lead a fun *josō* life. Numerous *josō* salons help men from all streams of society experience *josō*. These salons are equipped with professional make-up artists and all kinds of wigs, shoes, and clothing for *josō*, ranging from high school uniforms, OL (office lady) style clothing, Gothic Lolita outfits, maid uniforms, wedding dresses, kimono, and to wherever else your imagination may take you. There are even *sabrusuku* (subscription services) for a mail-order set of clothing, make-up, wigs, and instruction booklets for doing *josō* for men who live in places without access to *josō* salons. Although there is still a persistent stigma for *josō* practitioners, it has become a concrete option for men who would like to dress as women. This mode of new *josō*, which is different from the earlier gay and *nyū-hāfu* (transgender) tradition, and which is not clearly related to sexual orientation, has become a new norm among young generations (Kinsella 2019).

Although this transformation of *josō* is highly visible, little research has been done (with exceptions such as Miyata and Ishii 2020) on this new gender and sexual construction in Japan. Some scholars had examined the meanings of *josō* practices, but the research was largely conducted before this transformation occurred. Miyata and Ishii (2020) point out that most of the studies on cross-dressers were done before the mid-2000s. Watanabe (1987), for instance, interpreted the act of *josō* as a coping mechanism of Japanese men who were under much pressure to conform to societal gender norms. As another example, Mihashi (2002) documented *josō* practitioners' accounts of the commercialized space of *josō* that provided a safe haven for these practitioners to find one another and to express their identities together. The Japanese *josō* scene has since been largely transformed. *Josō* practitioners in Miyata's and Ishii's recent study (2020) on commercial facilities for *josō* in Osaka seem to exhibit features similar to those of the new wave of *josō* that Kinsella (2019) described. *Josō* for these practitioners is no longer a practice tied only to sexual minority identities but often a tool to express the fluidity of identities and to go back and forth between men and women, and femininities and masculinities.

Continuing with this critical project on the new wave of *josō*, this chapter, based on ethnographic research that I conducted with a sociolinguist, Gavin Furukawa, and a linguistic anthropologist, Shunsuke

Nozawa, analyzes this new wave of *josō* through reflexive accounts provided by contestants at university *josōkon*.² Our research aims to find answers to such questions as: What are the motivations and interpretations for this new mode of *josō* among the young generation? How do these young practitioners negotiate multitudes of masculinities and femininities through different gendered perceptions and ideologies? What are the consequences of their *josō* practices? Are they breaking any gender boundaries? Or are they merely cultural appropriators and reinforcers of traditional gender and sexual ideologies? I will argue that these participants' *josō* enactment and their reflexive metadiscourses exhibit a multiplicity of pragmatic consequences and presuppositions.

2 HYBRID MASCULINITIES?: THEORIES ON CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Researchers on gender first saw the need to understand masculinities in the plural through Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity (1995), the most influential theory in research on men and masculinities. According to Connell, the perception that the type of masculinity exhibited by elite men is the only masculinity is wrong. Multiple masculinities reside in any given society, all placed in its power constellation: hegemonic masculinity defines and subordinates marginalized masculinities and femininities. This idea of plural masculinities thus helps to analyze how multiple masculinities and femininities crisscross in constructing complex power relationships.

Recently, diversifications and changes in masculinities have attracted much attention in the field of gender and sexuality studies. Masculinities are now not only in the plural but also merged with femininities.

² This chapter is based on a qualitative project that Gavin Furukawa (Sophia University), Shunsuke Nozawa (Hokkaido University), and I have been conducting from 2016 to the present. We have observed not only *josō* contest events but also a preparation meeting, make-up sessions for these events, *josō* cafes, and a *josō* salon, and we gathered Twitter data about *josō* contests and cafes. We also conducted seventeen interviews in 2016 with participants, organizers, and make-up helpers for *josō* contests and a *josō* café worker, asking them how they got involved in the *josō* event or came to work at the café, how they construct their *josō* performance and service, and how they interpret the meaning of *josō* and their masculine and feminine identities. This research is an ongoing project; we continue to conduct follow-up interviews and analyze *josō* contests and comments about the contests posted online.

A growing body of sociological research focuses on the emergence of recent transformations in masculinities (e.g., Demetriou 2001; Messerschmidt 2010), and the concept of *hybrid masculinities* is one of the most promising tools for deciphering such transformations. Hybrid masculinities can be defined as “the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and—at times—femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities” (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). This line of research tries to understand how men are increasingly incorporating elements of cultural codes from various “Others,” including “feminine,” in their identity projects. By examining hybrid masculinities in various contexts, these studies try to answer a central question: Do hybrid masculinities promote gender equality?

To answer this important question, many studies on hybrid masculinities explore the complex relationships between men and femininities, with most of these studies focusing on men representing the heterosexual-identified majority and using femininities to strengthen their masculinities. For instance, Barber (2008) depicts white men who rely on beauty work formerly coded as “feminine” to form professional-class masculinities. Messner (2007) analyzes Arnold Schwarzenegger’s speech and how he mixes his toughness with symbolic displays of compassion to gain more power. And a predominantly white, middle-class boxing gym in Rabbii’s study (2021) promotes the discourses of “love, bridgework and sparring with care” to differentiate this gym from other gyms where the members claim to represent violent masculinity. In spite of its surface-level feminine philosophy, however, this gym discursively forms American hegemonic masculinity and discriminates against women by assuming they are weak and unskilled. This gym thereby unwittingly uses hybrid masculinities to gain power as a white-collar, male-centered gym. These studies conclude that hybrid masculinities are for securing power among men who already have it, and they do not change the existing system of inequality. Thus, although some studies argue that hybrid masculinities have a liberating effect, many studies reveal how hybrid masculinities merely obscure and hide persistent gender inequality.

In fields other than sociology, the concept of hybrid masculinities has not found widespread adoption, but scholars of such domains as race, the arts, law, and language have extensively discussed the issue of *cultural appropriation*, which encompasses the notion of hybrid masculinities. Cultural appropriation can be defined as “the taking of the items (whether

tangible or intangible) including ideas from one culture by another” (Arya 2021, p. 1). The act of cultural appropriation becomes extremely problematic when the culture is appropriated from a marginalized group in a way that denigrates and lessens the value of the peripheral group only to elevate the status of the mainstream group (e.g., Arya 2021; hooks bell 1992; Young 2010). Hill, a linguistic anthropologist (2008), calls attention to the danger of linguistic appropriation (see also Bucholtz 2011; Chun 2009), another form of cultural appropriation, based on her research on widely circulated loan words from minority languages by white middle-class people, such as mock Spanish, and stresses the serious consequences of this seemingly innocent language practice. These acts of borrowing words are never neutral because they denigrate and stereotype minorities by reshaping their images and words in a harmful way. Hill defines this “borrowing-as-theft” as linguistic appropriation as follows:

In linguistic appropriation, speakers of the target language (the group doing the borrowing) adopt resources from the donor language, and then try to deny these to members of the donor language community. They attempt this denial through formal legal prohibition and informal monitoring and censure [...] But they also achieve it indirectly, by reshaping the meaning of the borrowed material into forms that advance their own interest, making it useless or irrelevant, or even antithetical, to the interests of the donor community. This reshaped meaning may then be imposed on donor speakers. (Hill 2008, p. 158)

Japanese young men’s *josō* practices may be interpreted as a form of this harmful borrowing from female culture, depending on their motivations and interpretations. By referring to the concepts of hybrid masculinities and cultural appropriation, this chapter focuses on the various motivations and interpretations of young *josō* practitioners and analyzes how these practitioners bricolage femininities and to what purposes. Through contrasting interview extracts explaining contestants’ interpretations of *josō*, I will be asking crucial questions about their practices: What relationships do the *josōkon* contestants have with femininities? Are their masculinities “hybrid” and “cultural appropriation” merely reinforcing hegemonic masculinities? Or are they instead blurring gender boundaries and representing a change in gender inequality?

The participants in this research had diverse interpretations of what it means to dress as a woman and their own motivations for taking part

in this culture. Not all the contestants interpreted *josō* as a means of expressing their gender and sexual identities. Indeed, none of the research participants we interviewed explicitly identified themselves as transgender. Understandings of *josō* shared by participants ranged from a tool for expressing one's identity to the path of an entertainer, to the showcasing of feminine beauty, to a means for self-discovery, and finally, to a resource for accruing social capital. It seems that these young people strategically borrowed hybrid performative styles and created a complex indexicality (e.g., Silverstein 1976) of masculinities and femininities.

How can we then understand such diverse interpretations of *josō*? One common classification of *josō* that repeatedly came up in interviews with *josōkon* contestants was whether the motivations are external or internal. The internal motivations of *josō* mean that the participants practice *josō* out of their internal need to express their gender and sexual identities. External motivations, on the other hand, have nothing to do with *josō* participants' gender and sexual identities; rather, practitioners with external motivations engaged in *josō* to gain power, popularity, social capital, or whatever resides outside their identities. Some participants described the internal and external motivations as belonging to two different kinds of people. To give an example:

*Extract 1*³

Onna ni naru no ga suki nan datte iu hito to, kosupure no ichikeitai to shite josō wo miteru hito to, tabun zenzen chigau to omoi masu. Noka, onna ni nattara wadai ni naru kara onna ni naru no katte iu.

“I think it's probably completely different from those who want to be a woman or those who see *josō* as a type of cosplay. Or (for me) it's about becoming a popular topic of conversation [*wadai*] by becoming a woman.”

In this first excerpt, this *josōkon* participant is discursively constructing different groups of people with different orientations and motivations for *josō*. The first group consists of those who want to be women, which we might describe as women of trans experience, a woman being born in a man's body. The second group he describes is of cosplayers who see *josō*

³ In the extracts, two colons (::) indicates a prolonged sound, [] shows Japanese translations of keywords, and () supplements extra lingual explanations.

as an extension of that practice, also sometimes referred to as cross-play. The *josōkon* participant then goes on to position himself in contrast to these other groups, explaining his motivation through the use of the noun *wadai*, a gimmick or topic of conversation. In this data, he constructs two different kinds of motivations, one internal and gender-based, and the other external with social and performative purposes.

In the following section, by using this emic categorization of *josō* as an object of investigation, I will closely examine the interview excerpts of five *josō* practitioners—three of whom seem to have external motivations and two of whom seem to have internal motivations—and illuminate how they interpret the labor of *josō* in relation to their complex positioning of gender, sexualities, and femininities. On the surface, the external motivation seems to be akin to “hybrid masculinities” and “cultural appropriation.” *Josō* practitioners with an external motivation seem to externalize femininities as their resources and employ them for their own purposes. On the contrary, those with an internal motivation internalize femininities and use them as part of their own identity. But is this distinction as explained by the *josōkon* contestants always a clear-cut dichotomy? Is it always the case that internal motivations promote gender equality and that external motivations project harmful hybrid masculinities and cultural appropriation? I argue that this emic distinction of the internal and the external is only part of the complex motivations for *josō*, as becomes evident in the following analysis.

3 THE MEANING OF *JOSŌ* AND FEMININITIES: EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL MOTIVATIONS

External Motivations for Josō vs Hybrid Masculinities

For some *josō* practitioners, *josō* appears to be derived from external motivations. It is a form of performance, a cultural practice, a modality of “characterization,” a means to make a leap from their ordinary life, to set themselves free, and a resource to gain popularity, power, recognition, and social capital. These *josō* practitioners consider that *josō* has little to do with their gender and sexual identities. Having an internal motivation is not only disavowed by many of the participants but is also occasionally constructed as being particularly unwanted by some. For example, A participated in a *josō* contest simply because he has long legs and a slender figure, which he believes are great attributes to express feminine

beauty. A does not like it when *josō* is used as an expression of gender and sexual identity, and what he calls *gendā-teki na mono* (something related to gender.) For him, it is impossible for a man to pass as a woman, and he hates it when men seriously want to become feminine or a female, which he thinks is unnatural.

Extract 2

Etto, boku wa hontō ni josei ni narō to wa omotte nakatta node, toku ni, akumademo, boku no ishiki to shite wa, josō na node. Tatoeba, e::ttō, joseit-ekina kachikan de mite dansei no hō ga ii tokoro, tatoeba, dansei no hō ga tōzen suratto shite masu shi, ma:: sono::, hosoi shi, sō desu ne, sōiu tokoro ha, etto, aru imi, sono josei no kachikan no naka de, josei wo uwamawatte iru tokoro da to omou node. Sōiu tokoro wo, sono dansei to shite, e::, josō wo shite, ano::, sōiu sono (josei no) bitoku wo uwamawatteikutte iu no wa zenzen ii to omou n desu kedo, sono josei ni naru, josei sonomono ni narutte iu to, chotto boku wa kenokan desu ne, yappari. Ma, sō desu ne. Hai.

“Well, I was not seriously trying to be a woman. In my mind, it is just *josō*. For example, well, in terms of feminine values, men are better in some respects, for example, men naturally have better features, well, slimmer figures, I think. In those aspects, well, in a way, men are better than women at being feminine. I don’t see any problem at all with doing *josō* by using these features, as a man, and doing better than a woman in (female) virtue of beauty. But becoming a woman, a real woman, disgusts [*kenokan*] me. Well, I think so.”

In this excerpt, A’s comparison of *josei* (women) and *dansei* (men) is striking: he argues that men have better figures and therefore are better than women in realizing feminine values. A’s stance is firmly in male identity and masculinities, as shown in his repeated reference to “man,” and its contrast to “woman.” His stance draws a clear boundary between men and women, and he claims that men as a category are better at expressing feminine beauty. *Josō* for A is a performance simply to express his ideal woman and his aesthetics as a man. Through reappropriating femininities and using his male body, with a slim figure and long legs, he creates an ideal feminine beauty and in doing so gains social capital at the university as an important figure at the festival, acquiring power over some women he considers to be less beautiful than he, a man. For A, *josō* is simply men wearing women’s clothing, and it has nothing to do with

expressing sexualities. *Josō* as something done for performance, devoid of any political motivation for the purpose of gaining social capital, is totally fine. However, the idea of an internal motivation for doing *josō*, in other words, being a trans woman is seen in a negative light, creating *kenokan* or a feeling of disgust.⁴

These external sources of motivation are subject to the dominant heteronormative hegemony of Japanese society and universities as well. Make-up helpers, mostly mothers of the contestants and their friends, explained in interviews that they understood *josōkon* as young men's attempt to create an unrealistic, virtual view of ideal women. These young men often go to boys' high schools, of which there are many in Japan, and often have little contact with real women until they enter a university. This interpretation of *josō* as a creation of an ideal woman might well be a product of the often gender-segregated Japanese educational system and widely circulated traditional images of Japanese women.

Moreover, A feels uneasy not only about transgender and gender-diverse people but also with certain women when they express femininities. In his interview, including the following excerpt, he extensively criticizes the "improper" pursuit of feminine beauty displayed by women whom he determines to be ugly and to lack aesthetics. He developed such a critical perspective about women, which he calls misogyny, during his traumatic transition from a boys' high school to a co-ed university. He was suddenly thrown into a competitive romantic market at the co-ed university where women *bakeru* (disguise or completely change themselves into) fashionable beings, men fiercely fight for women, and they all *maunto wo toru* (one-up) him and make him feel left out. He had no clue whatsoever about how these women and men operated in the field.

⁴ As A's excerpts index, the policing of sexual boundaries is observed in *josōkon*. A, as well as other organizers of *josōkon* events, argued that *josōkon* should not be seen as a means of expressing sexualities, and tried to exclude people with internal motivations from *josōkon* events. What *josōkon* should be was a different story from what *josōkon* should be, and the policing of sexual boundaries appeared in a different way, which I hope to discuss in a different paper.

Extract 3

Yononaka no sono onna no hito tte, tatoeba kōkō kara daigaku ni hairu atari no atari de, etto, bakeru ja nai desu ka, koto ga ōi. De, nani ka soko de, ano::, nan darō, e::tto, jibun wa, e::tto, sono zenzen sono yōshi toka, sono kankei nai fū ni ikitekita noni, aitsura wa, sono nani ka shiranai aida ni sono sonzai ni kizuīte ite. Sore de, sono ano nani ka, etto, tatoeba, ano::, aipuchi desu toka, anō, sonō nan darō, Shinjuku no PARCO mitai na toko toka, sono, tokoro de, sono kaimono wo shitari shite, nani ka e::tto, biishiki mo nai kuse ni yoku wakannai noni, oshare ni natta ki ga shite, sore de sore wo sono nani ka, e::, konkyo to shite, ore ni maunto totte kuru zo, mitai na. De, ore yori ue dazotte omotteru zo, mitai na. Sore ga chotto yurusenakutte, boku ha. Nanka, de, keshō haida ra, moto no jagaimo ga korogaru noni, sore wa nani ka boku to shite, hen na kibun ni natte. Hai.

“Women in this society start to disguise [*bakeru*] themselves, say, when they move from high school to university, right? Well, that’s often the case. At that moment, well, how should I put it, I myself had lived without thinking about my appearance, but without my realizing it, they [*aitsura*] begin to notice the existence (of appearance). And well, for example, well, they use eyelid glue, or what is it, say, go shopping at a place like PARCO in Shinjuku, but they have no aesthetics and no idea, but they think they have become fashionable. And then, well, based on that, they one-up me [*ore*] and think they are superior to me [*ore*]. I [*boku*] can’t accept that. Well, without make-up, they are just potatoes lying on the ground. That’s something, really something that makes me feel strange.”

In this extract, A explains that upon entering a university, women suddenly try to *bakeru* as fashionable women by shopping at PARCO (a building devoted to fashion-related shops) and putting on *aipuchi* (eyelid glue to make double eyelids), even though they have no idea about aesthetics and fashion. A argues that women he determines to be ugly should know their place and that they should not try to one-up him. For A, it is not acceptable that these women, just like potatoes beneath their make-up, feel superior to A, who has aesthetics and who could be more beautiful than they through *josō*. In this excerpt, too, A presents a sharp contrast between women and himself—a man—and belittles women, manifested in his shift of pronouns. In this interview, A mostly used *boku*, a polite masculine pronoun, indexing the character

of “interviewee” and “student” in relation to the addressees who are older researchers. In the narrated event of women disguising themselves as fashionable and one-upping him, however, A shifts his pronouns from the mildly masculine *boku* to the strongly masculine *ore*. A deprecatory second-person pronoun, *aitsura*, is also used to address these women in a confrontational way. This *ore* and *aitsura* characterization in the narrative event points to a character in a hostile relationship with women, whom he views as a threat to his status.

These extracts reveal that A has a sense of entitlement to femininity. He uses *josō* as a tool to create a heteronormative notion of femininities to his own external purpose while simultaneously denying some women’s and trans people’s right to express their femininities. *Josōkon*, as he explains in the interview, is after all a place for men like him, who are confident, popular, reasonable, good communicators, and winners in real life. Therefore, A’s case represents one typical manifestation of hybrid masculinities that draws on the power of the heteronormative hegemony of Japanese society and universities. A’s use of feminine resources is also clearly linked to appropriation, especially in the way explained by Hill in an earlier quote. A adopts feminine resources and denies these resources to women. He reshapes feminine resources to be owned not by women but by men who have aesthetics.

The distinction of the external and internal purposes of *josō*, however, is not as clear in other *josō* participants’ accounts as it is in A’s case. For example, B says that *josō* is not related to his sexuality but is deeply connected to his pursuit of entertainment. In some parts of the interview, B’s motivation seems clearly external. In both Extracts 4 and 5, there are similar foci on the external sources of motivation for B.

Extract 4

Sore mo akumade wadai zukuri ccha wadai zukuri desu kedo. Ma:: danseisei to joseisei no ryōmen de nani ka hyōka sare taga tterutte iu bubun mo aru no kana.

“There’s also still a sense of doing it for the sake of attention. Well, there’s also the part about being appreciated [*hyōka sareru*] for having both masculine and feminine sides, I guess.”

Extract 5

Ma, jibun ni ironna men ga arundatte iu yōna bubun mo, chotto mitehoshikatta no kana to omou. Soto ni mukete apīru shitakatta no kana to, ima demo omoi masu.

“Well, there is probably a little part where I want to be seen as someone who has several sides. I guess I sort of want to make an appeal to the people around me [*soto ni mukete apīru*]. I still feel like that.”

In Extract 4, B refers to winning both the *josō* and the male beauty pageants at his university. He explains that *wadai* (a gimmick) is a motivating force for doing both contests, and he also uses the verb *hyōka sareru* (to be appreciated or recognized), which shows that the motivation does not come from within him so much as from outside. In Extract 5, B continues to explain the external nature of his motivation. B’s use of the adjective phrase *mitehoshii* (want to be seen) and the phrase *soto ni mukete* (looking outward) *apīru* (making an appeal) shows that B’s motivation comes strongly from a type of social capital gained by the perceptions of other people around him.

Extracts 4 and 5, however, also show that femininities are not just a resource for B’s performance, but also part of him. He says that he has several sides, including both femininities and masculinities, and he wants other people to value multiple aspects. Unlike A, who considers femininities as an external tool to achieve societal power, B would like to acquire and express his femininities as his mode of expression. Furthermore, B discovers femininity as part of himself through the development of his *josō* practice. As B explained in Extract 6 and in other parts of the interview, femininities are something he creates with much preparation and labor. Simply putting on a wig, according to him, would not be *josō*. When he appears on *josōkon* stage, he is not nervous. He is in the zone. He is a comic, queen-like *josō* persona, completely different from how he otherwise perceives himself. With the audience’s enthusiasm and laughter, an extraordinary space is created, in which he is set free. *Josō* is something that enables him to make a leap in his performance.

Extract 6

U::n, nan darō? Ma:: demo, hontō ni sono toki (butai de) wa, kanzen ni boku ja nai kanji desu ne. kanzen ni jinkaku ga chigau natte iu. Kore, ma:: kanari jūyō na kankaku kamo shirenai desu kedo. “Boku ja nai na” tte. Nanka hontō ni (josō no kyarakutā mei) to shite mō betsu-jinkaku to

shite minna no mae ni dete, sōnarikitte, betsunō jinkaku ni kataku shite nanika iroiro dekiru, jiyūhonpō ni dekirutte iu.

“Well, what is it? Yeah, but in that moment (on stage), I feel that it’s completely not me. I’m a completely different character. This, well, may be a very important feeling: ‘This is not me.’ I am really [the *josō* character’s name.] I appear in front of everyone as a different character, I am completely immersed in it, and I give myself over to this other character, that lets me do various things, freely.”

In Extract 6, B says that his female character is completely different from him, and yet he is completely immersed in it on stage. B gives himself to the female character, which lets him do various things freely. When he takes *josō* seriously as a form of performance and art, femininities seem to enter deeper into his identity. In this performative context, B’s feminine and masculine identities seem to have fused and become one entity. B’s account thus deviates from the simplest definition of hybrid masculinities, showing the complexity of the boundary between femininities and masculinities, and between the self and the other.

This complexity of hybrid masculinities is also shown in the next extract, in which C, another participant at a university *josō* contest, explains that he would like to obtain “cuteness” through female clothing, a sign of femininity that he considers is no longer just for women but for men too. Femininities have been accepted in men’s world, particularly in young men’s generation.

Extract 7

Mobaya genjō kawaii tte, mō futsū ni dansei no sekai demo ukeirerare tsutsu aru n ja nai ka to iu no wa hitotsu ni omottete. Tatoeba, nanika josō no shōgyōka tte yappa aru to omou n desu yo, hitotsu niwa. Sono janīzu ga josō shite bangumi detara, shichōritsu agaru mitai na. Kōiu shōgyōka sareteru sono kawaii tte iu mono wo, mō orera no sedai to shite wa, bunka to shite hitotsu ukeire rarete mo ii n ja naikatte iu noga hitotsu omotteite. Ma::, soremo fumaete, boku ha konkai no (josōkon no)shutsujō dewa aru n desu kedo.

“I’m thinking that being cute is, if you look at the situation now [mobaya], already [mō] gaining acceptance in men’s world. For example, I think *josō* is actually commercialized for one thing. Like when Johnny’s idols (massively popular male idol groups) do *josō* (on TV), the ratings go

up. I am thinking our [*oreru no*] generation should already [*mō*] accept such a commercialized cuteness as a culture. This is why I'm participating (in the *josō* contest)."

C goes on to explain in Extract 8 that for men, although it is difficult to attain a feminine attire and cuteness, many men nonetheless wear female clothing now, which is an indication of men's acceptance of women's culture. Moreover, C explains in Extract 9 that the Japanese fashion industry for men is still based on the old generation's values, but his younger generation is definitely changing attitudes toward fashion.

*Extract 8*⁵

Menzu muke no kawaii tte dezain meccha muzukashikute. Iya, kao wo sonnani kawaiku naitte iu no ga, kakkoi ja nai desu ka, yappai otoko no hō wa. Kawaii ja naku te, kakkoi tte keiyōshi ni nacchau n de. Ni taishite, kawaii fuku tte dōshiteno misumacchi de awanai kedo, soreto dōji ni, kawaii taipu no nanika kao shiteru otoko no hito ha, ma, kekkō boku no tomodachi demo, sono, hitotsu ni, ma::, kore (C no kiteiru fuku) kanzen ni joseimono nan desu kedo. Mō kono kawaii tte iu bunka no juyō no arikata no hitotsu kana to iu no ha omotte masu.

"It's really hard to find cute clothes that suit men. Well, after all, men's faces are not that cute, but rather cool, aren't they? An adjective for men is definitely not cute, but cool. Men definitely don't look right in cute clothing, but at the same, men with cute faces, actually I have many friends who wear women's clothing. For that reason, well, one thing is, this (what he is wearing) is actually completely female clothing. I think this is one of the ways that the culture of cuteness is already [*mō*] accepted (by men)."

Extract 9

Ma::, somosomo no hanashi, danseifuku tte sono danseifashon gyōkai tte mada kasseika shite nakutte. Nani ka yappari dōshiteno kyūtaiizen no, "Otoko ni wa fuku ha dōdemo yokute, sūtsu de bishitto kimete shigoto shiyō!" mitai na, sōiu kachikan ga bokura no ue no sedai ni mada manen shiteru n de. Nanika sono, ima hanashiteta Ryuchell toka, nanika ima no geinin janai desu kedo nani ka tarento san de iru ja nai desu ka. ... Arette,

⁵ This is an extract of a long dialogue between C and the author.

hitotsu ni nanika bokura no sedai no bunka no ketsujitu de atte, nanika sono fukusō toka mitame, fasshon ni kanshite danseï ga kyōmi wo motte shutaiteki ni yatteiku no ha, ma, bokura no sedai ni yappa arun de.

“The bottom line is that men’s clothing, men’s fashion industry, hasn’t been vitalized yet. Old-fashioned [*kyūtaiizen*] values, like ‘Men’s clothing doesn’t matter. Let’s just look sharp in suits and work!’ still prevails in the generation above us. But like, I was just talking about Ryuchell (a popular TV personality in genderless fashion), like not a comedian but a talent ... That is the fruit of the culture of our [*bokura no*] generation. Men are interested in, and actively engage in, clothing, looks and fashion. That is our [*bokura* (masculine pronoun) *no*] generation.”

Do C’s descriptions of men incorporating femininities demonstrate hybrid masculinities or do they actually point toward the collapse of the gender boundary? C’s accounts seem to show that C and other men incorporate femininity from men’s standpoint and as men’s resources. C repeats “*mobaya/mō* (already)” three times in Extract 7, and once again in Extract 8, to stress that cuteness or femininities have already been accepted and banalized in men’s world as their culture. As shown through these accounts, C seems to take a stance toward male identity and masculinities, as is demonstrated by his contrast of *dansei* (man) and *josei* (woman) and a masculine possessive pronoun, *oreru no*, in Extract 7. From the standpoint of men, C tries to incorporate cuteness through women’s clothing, which is sometimes difficult because men generally have a cool, not cute, face, but C demonstrates that many men, including him, especially those who have a cute face, wear clothing specifically made for women. In Extract 9, C asserts that men of the new generation actively pursue clothing, fashion, and looks and create their own realm of fashion. In this extract, too, his repeated reference to men, men’s fashion, men’s clothing, and men’s generation indicate that his footing is in the men’s field.

C’s accounts show that his firm positioning as a man and the act of utilizing femininities from his position as a man apply to hybrid masculinities and hence do not change the gender boundary. The new generation of *josō* practitioners, like C, mobilizes cultural images and societal discourses of myriad femininities, masculinities, and sexualities, which seemingly feminize masculinities. Such feminized masculinities, however, might be commercialized and commodified only to give men new ways of expressing their masculinities, and these hybrid masculinities might only

reinforce the boundary between men's and women's world; paradoxically intertwining masculinity with femininity would then reinforce the overlap but also the separation between maleness and femaleness.

A close analysis of C's discourses, however, reveals that the relationship between hybrid masculinities and the traditional gender binary in C's case is more complex. C claims cuteness through female clothing as what men own, which exhibits a feature of hybrid masculinities, but in fact, C also criticizes the traditional gender norms that created the gender boundary in fashion. For instance, C, through sharply contrasting men in the old generation and in his generation, C criticizes the former for holding a *kyūtaiizen* (old-fashioned) value that fashion is not for men. He also criticizes the male fashion industry for being underdeveloped because of the traditional gender norms on fashion. Moreover, in a follow-up interview sixteen months after his appearance at a university *josōkon* event, while still identifying with a male identity, C talked extensively about gender non-binary and the mixing of femininities and masculinities. For example, C talked about the crisis of masculinities and a gender-non-binary society, as shown in Extract 10.

Extract 10

Dakara, kekkō otoko no bōryokusei toka, tabun, (kikikan ga atte), tabun kekkō kono hanashi tte dokka de giron sareteru to omou n desu kedo, jendā-furī ga, jendā-furī no yononaka ni natta toki ni, josei ga dansei ni chikazuku no ka, dansei ga josei ni chikazuku no ka, tabun josei ga dansei ni yoru yori mo, dansei ga josei ni yoru to omou n desu yo ne.

“So, probably (there is a sense of crisis in) men's violent nature, and I think there must be some debates on this, but gender-non-binary, when society becomes gender-non-binary, do women get closer to men or do men get closer to women? Probably rather than women getting closer to men, men will get closer to women.”

In this extract, C recognizes that there is a discussion about a sense of crisis in masculinities. He envisions a gender-non-binary society which, upon its realization, will see femininities, not masculinities, prevailing. In the same interview, C also explains his view on the ideologies of desirable and undesirable femininities, which he came to realize through heated debates among *josōkon* contestants about what the correct *josō* really is. According to C, many *josōkon* contestants uphold the traditional ideas concerning women and girls, and have a very narrow image

of the correct and desirable femininity and *josō*. In this interview, he criticized those contestants for *ganko ni* (stubbornly) defending the uniform image of “*kiyoku tadashii* (pure and correct)” *josō*, which conforms to a conventional prim and proper image of women. These contestants in return criticized C for having done a *josō* that evokes undesirable feminine figures, such as “*kyabajō* (female companion in a hostess bar)” and “*bangyaru* (an avid fan of *visual kei* bands).” C thought that it was not fair to deny certain kinds of femininities and advocate for only an image of unrealistically traditional femininity in *josō* practices, as shown in Extract 11. After pointing out that other contestants’ *josō* figures always have black hair, which actual young women rarely have, C says:

Extract 11

Iya datte boku kurokami no onnanoko kirai desu mon, tanjun ni. Dakara ... iru ja nai desu ka, chotto akarui iro nuketa onnana ko ga sukutte iu hito ga zettai sokosoko iru naka de, soredemo josō ni nattara, minna kurokami ni mukatte iku. Datte, ... moshimo honto ni otoko ga minna kurokami no onna no ko ga suki nan dattara, josei tte sonna ni, joshidaisei tte minna kami someru ja nai desu ka. ... (Kurokami no josō wa) kyokō ni nezashite iru mono de. Sono kyokōsei tte iu mono ga nanka hito wo ganko ni suru no ka. ... Dakara, tatoeba, kyokō dakara koso, (josōkon sankasha) minna kurokami no onnanoko tte mono ni taishite no akogare wo hyōgen shiyō to shichatta, mitai na. Sore igai no josō wa josō deha nai to kangae chau. Nazenara, sore wa jibun tachi no kyokō ni sonzai shinai kara.

“Well, I simply don’t like girls with black hair. So, ... there are definitely fair amounts of people who like girls with dyed hair with bright colors, but when it comes to *josō*, everybody heads toward black hair. If ... every man liked black hair, you know, but women, female university students always dye their hair, don’t they? ... It (black hair for *josō*) is rooted in their (*josō* practitioners’) fantasy [*kyokō*]. The fantasy is probably making them stubborn. That’s why they all end up trying to express their longings for women with black hair (in *josō*). They think that other kinds of *josō* are not real *josō* because they don’t exist in their fantasy.”

In Extract 11, C argues that mainstream *josō* practitioners express an unrealistic form of femininity represented by black hair and that this type of femininity resides only in their fantasy. C’s keen analysis reveals the ideology of acceptable and unacceptable femininities, which he passionately talked about and tried hard to understand. C’s accounts demonstrate his urge to understand the system that impedes the non-binary fashion and society he hopes to see realized. It is true that C’s stance as a man

does not change, that his motivation for *josō* can still be classified as external, and that his use of *josō* can be cultural appropriation of femininities. He has a critical perspective on gender norms, however, and his worldview on gender seems to be shifting and moving toward a non-binary thinking. His example shows the complexity of the dominant ideologies about gender and sexualities; it further indicates a possibility of hybrid masculinities that would not solely reinforce the gender binary ideologies in society.⁶

Internal Motivations for Josō

In contrast with A, B, and C, who interpreted *josō* as their external resources, for many young *josō* practitioners, *josō* is an expression of gender and sexual identities and something derived from their internal motivations. D, a participant and an organizer for a university *josō* contest, explains that *josō* is inseparable from the construction of his⁷ gender identities. D's participation in the *josō* contests is motivated by an instability, what he calls *fuantei* (unstable), regarding his gender, as he explains in Extract 12.

Extract 12

Boku mukashi kara kiwamete seijinin ga fuantei datta n desu yo ne. Danseisei ga tsuyoku deru koto mo aru shi, joseisei ga tsuyoku deru koto mo aru shi, de, jibun no naka ni sono joseisei to danseisei ga ryōhō aru n datte iu no wa wakatte te ... Demo josō shiteru toki tte iu no wa, joseisei de ante shiteru n desu yo ne. Un dakara, boku ni totte wa, sōiu imi ga aru no kana tte iu no wo omoi hajimeru to, ano, josō shiteru toki ha josei de kotei sarerushi, nde, teikiteki ni josō shiteru aida wa, josō shite nai toki mo danseisei de kotei sareru n desu yo ne. Sore wo ishiki suru to, a, sōiu sōchi nan datte omou to ante suru yō ni nari mashita ne.

⁶ The crisis of masculinities that C talked about and the intense longing for femininities that other research participants talked about are worth exploring to understand the complex relationships between cultural appropriation and gender boundary breaking.

⁷ We asked some research participants what their preferred pronouns would be, but they were a little puzzled by this question, probably because they have not been exposed to the debate about neutral and diverse pronouns that has recently flourished in the US, and because the Japanese political and linguistic context is entirely different. The participants felt that “he” was the appropriate pronoun at the time of the interview, but this may change over time.

“My gender identity was unstable [*fuantei*] for a long time. There are times when masculinities are stronger, and there are other times when femininities are stronger, and I have always known that both femininities and masculinities reside within me. ... But when I do *josō*, I am stable with my femininities. Yeah, so I started thinking about what *josō* means to me in that way, and then, well, when I do *josō*, I am stabilized as a woman, and when I do *josō* regularly, even when I stop doing it, I am stabilized as a man. When I became aware of that, I realized that *josō* is such a tool, and I felt stable.”

D said that he felt his gender identity to have been extremely unstable for a long time; he has known that both femininities and masculinities reside within him, sometimes with an emphasis on femininities, at other times identifying more strongly with his masculinities. When he did *josō*, he realized that his *fuantei* (feeling of instability) dissolved and both femininities and masculinities appeared fixed. Because *josō* stabilizes his femininity, even when he is not doing *josō*, his masculine identity, too, is stabilized, and his identity as a whole becomes stable and controllable. He came to understand that *josō* is an important tool for his identity operation.

Similarly, E, another participant at a university *josōkon*, seems to have an internal motivation to practice *josō*. E feels sheer joy in expressing femininity and cuteness through his *josō* and he participated in a *josōkon* in the hope of changing society so that people would think that *josō* is interesting. For him, femininity and cuteness are not something external but something that naturally emerges from inside. The following extract is from a follow-up interview sixteen months after E participated in the *josōkon* as a contestant. For this occasion, I, together with my co-investigators Shunsuke Nozawa and Gavin Furukawa, accompanied E to a *josō* salon where we watched as a salon beautician helped E to change into *josō*. We then interviewed E while he was dressed in a cute pink *josō* outfit.

Extract 13

Ayumi: Pōzu ga umaitte, (saron no meiku-appu āthisuto) sugoku homer-areteta desho (josō sabisu ni tuite kuru shashin-satsuei de)?

E: Nanka shizenni dechau n desu yo. Kokoro ga sugoi onnanoko ni nacchau n desu yo. Jubun no naka de nanka kawaii onnanoko zō mitai na mono ga, tabun itsumo aru n da to omou n desu yo ne. Sore wa, (josō shite) iza

jibun ga sore ni chikazuitara, mō ano, nanka katteni dechautte iu ka, sōiu tokoro ga aru n desu yo.

- A: “(The make-up artist at the salon) praised you a lot for your pose (for the photo session that came with the *josō* service).”
- E: “I don’t know why but it comes out naturally. My heart becomes very girly. I think I probably always have some cute girl images in my mind. When I come close to the image (by doing *josō*), it tends to come out on its own and that is how it is.”

As shown in this extract, E’s girl inside comes out naturally when he does *josō*. He always has some images of cute girls in his mind, and he is automatically turned into those images. In another part of the interview, E says that this image of a cute girl emerges so naturally when he does *josō* that he wonders what his real gender identity is. He considers himself male but at the same time, he suspects that this recognition might merely derive from his body being that of a male since he feels differently when he does *josō*.

Extract 14

Sō desu ne, ano, nanka seijinjin te nan darōtte iu noga ichiban ōkikute, nanka ichiō watashi wa seijinjin no dansei tte koto ni natteru n desu kedo, nanka sonota ni sakki no koto de, iwayuru omoi mono wo hakoberu, ma::, ano kokkaku mo sōiu kanji dakara, dansei to omoi, eto, ninshiki shite iru ni sugi nai desu yo ne. Nanka sō desu ne, seijinjin te nan darō mitai na. Demo, jibun no kokoro no naka wa moshi ka shitara, josei kamo shirenai desushi, n::, sono nanka jibun no kono karada no tokuchō ni ma:: nante iu ka, jakkan gohei arimasukedo, damasareteru dake ja nai ka toka. Toku ni kō yatte kigaete onnanoko rashii koto ga wakidetekuru no wa, moshika shitara, sōiu koto nano kana, mitaina kanji desuka.

“Well, uh, the biggest thing is what gender identity is. My gender identity is supposedly male, but as I mentioned before, I recognize myself as a man maybe just because I am able to carry heavy things, or uh well, I am well-built, or things like that. Well, like, what is gender identity really? But I may be a woman at heart. Well, I might be, maybe this is the wrong way to explain it, but I might just be deceived by my physical features. Especially once I transform into a girl like now, feminine things spring out, and this may mean that, perhaps.”

In the next extract, E says that he is not entirely unsatisfied with the male clothing he wears most of the time, but when he does *josō*, he can feel “the happiness and fun” he could never experience in male clothing. According to him, this is the very reason he transforms into a girl. Worth noting is the wording he uses: he does not say “do *josō*” but “become a girl.”

Extract 15

Betsu ni dansei no fukusō ga iyatte koto wa nai desu shi, dansei no fukusō shitetemo ano tanoshimeru koto ha ari masu kara. Iza, kōyatte josō no fukusō shite miru to, kono kakkō dakara koso kizukeru tanoshisa to shiawase ga arutte iu ka, sōiu fū ni omou n desu yone. Dakedo nanka ima no dansei no fuku kiteru jibun niwa soko made tsuyoi fuman ga aru wake ja nai n desu kedo, demo kō shite miru to, kōiu kakkō shite miru to, dansei no kakkō dato zettaini ajīwaenai mono ga arunatte. Tabun sōiu mono wo kanjirareru no ga, nanka fuku wo kite, onnanoko ni naru imi kana::

“It’s not that I hate male clothing. There are some fun things to do when you wear male clothing. But once I put *josō* clothing on this way, I think that there is fun and happiness that I can find only in this clothing. But well, it’s not that I’m strongly dissatisfied with myself in the men’s clothing I usually wear, but once I dress this way, I put on this kind of clothing, I realize there are things that I would never appreciate in men’s clothing. Probably, I can feel those things, that is the reason why I put on the clothing and become a girl.”

When I asked him what kind of happiness and fun he can obtain from practicing *josō*, he explained:

Extract 16

Wari to mō kotoba niwa deki nai n desu kedo, sugoi watashi josei ga urayamashii n desu yo ne. Tatoeba desu kedo, densha toka de, tonari no seki de suwaru no ga, dansei no tonari to josei no tonari ga aiteitara, doko ni suwaru no? Shizen to josei no tonari wo erabu hito ga danjo tomo ni ōi yō na ki ga suru n desu yo ne. Sōiu imi demo sugoi josei tte urayamashii desu shi, dansei futari (Gavin Furukawa to Shunsuke Nozawa) niwa hontō ni kizutsukanai de hoshii n desu kedo, anō, sugoi tatoeba, hanzairitsu mo takai, ano, dōshittemo nanka chikara de osaekomu mitaina bōryokuteki na imēji ga nuguenaī n desu yo ne. Anō, onaji seibetsu tte dake de, sono ichiin ni natte iru no ga, sugoi iya desu shi, anō, gyaku ni josei no sugata

dattara, sōiu koto wo kangaezuni, mushiro kawaii hito dattara, kawaiigatte moraeru. Sō omou to, dansei tte iu shakaiteki na yakuwari kara hanarerareteru yorokobi mo arimasu shi, josei no hō ga danzen me wo hiki masu shi, sōiu tanoshisa to ka kōfuku toka mo ari masu.

“I can’t really explain this through words, but I am really envious of women. For example, on the train, if there is an empty seat right next to a man and another seat right next to a woman, which seat would you choose? I think most people, regardless of their gender, would sit next to the woman. In that sense, too, I am really envious of women. I hope I’m not offending the two men here (Shunsuke Nozawa and Gavin Furukawa), but well, for example, the crime rate for men is high, well, I just can’t wipe away the violent images of men holding down people by force. Well, I hate the fact that just because I am the same gender, I’m a member of this category. On the other hand, if I have a female look, I don’t have to think about these things. Rather, if I were a cute person, people would pamper me. Then, I could feel the joy of getting away from the social roles men have to bear, too, and women get far more attention, so I would feel fun and happy.”

E stresses that he is envious of women for being unthreatening: according to him, people feel more comfortable sitting next to women than men on the train, for example. For him, men represent force and violence, behavioral images E doesn’t want to be associated with. On the other hand, a cute female look allows him to be approachable, appreciated and pampered, all of which give him reasons to practice *josō*.

The comparison between C’s and E’s discourses sheds light on the complexity of the relationships between *josō* practices and hybrid masculinities. First, note the differences between C and E. E seems to be driven by internal motivation, whereas C seems to be driven more by external motivation. C contrasts men and women and talks about “men’s” world and “men’s” generation, incorporating cuteness through feminine clothing, even though it is not clear if femininities are entirely external to C when he feels that femininities have become a part of men’s culture. On the other hand, it is interesting that the difference seems to be flipped when C rejects traditional ideas about women and girls that other *josōkon* contestants seem to uphold, and when E cultivates rather stereotypical female cuteness for his *josō*. Despite their differences, however, C and E share a number of attitudes and interpretations about *josō*. Both C and E hope that the old-fashioned gender values will change, although C’s

hope is mainly about fashion and E's hope encompasses a broader identity. Moreover, C and E share their doubt about violent masculinities and envision a gender non-binary society. As the comparison between C and E makes clear, *josōkon* contestants' complex reflective accounts demonstrate that their motivations are too complex to analyze with the notion of hybrid masculinities because their femininities and masculinities are deeply intertwined.

4 CONCLUSION

As is evident from the above analysis, each *josō* participant has his own interpretation of what it means to dress as a woman and his own motivations for taking part in this *josō* culture. The diverse interpretations of *josō* are too complex to analyze with the concept of hybrid masculinities (defined as masculine men borrowing elements of femininities to construct masculine identities for advancing their own heteronormative agenda). The myriad interpretations of *josō* also went beyond the analytical capacity of the external/internal distinction, which emerged from the emic categories that contestants explained in the interviews. On the surface, this emic distinction seems to differentiate *josō* practitioners' theories of *josō*. Some practitioners interpreted their *josō* as nothing related to their identities, but rather, as relating to relational and societal benefits, and others considered their *josō* experiences as *shizenni* (naturally) springing out from inside themselves.

The diverse interpretations of *josō* motivations, however, defy the dichotomy between the internal and external, and the assumptions of hybrid masculinities, because femininities and masculinities are deeply intertwined in *josō* contestants' interpretations. There were participants at *josō* contests who constructed hybrid masculinities and committed cultural appropriation by using and commodifying femininities, and in doing so gained social capital or new ways of expressing their masculinities. One participant seemingly used hybrid masculinities for his pursuit of *josō* entertainment, yet, in his performance and in the course of his *josō* history, the simple distinction between femininities/masculinities, female/male, woman/man, internal/external, and self/other blurred. Yet another participant, while keeping a firm stance on his maleness and masculinities, thus exhibiting some signs of hybrid masculinities, explored the possibility of crisscrossing femininities and masculinities that led him to envision a more gender non-binary society. Moreover, there were

also *josō* practitioners who constructed *josō* from their internal motivations. For them, femininities were not something to borrow from the outside. Both femininities and masculinities already resided within these practitioners and *josō* was an important tool for their identity operation. Their complex androgyny clearly shows that, as Judith Butler (2004) suggests, femininity emerges in men, as masculinity emanates from women, and femininity and masculinity do not belong to differently sexed bodies.

The contestants also seem to disagree on such issues as what forms of femininities and masculinities can be considered acceptable in *josō*. Some contestants reject the traditional images of women in doing *josō*, while others promote a stereotypical femininity and cuteness. Furthermore, contestants have different positioning toward the issue of gender equality. There was a participant who considered that men are superior to women, while some participants shared their vision for a gender-non-binary society, in spite of their differences in motivations and ideas about *josō*. In this way, *josōkon* participants created complex indexical fields (e.g., Eckert 2008) of different constellations of masculinities and femininities, gendered norms, and the interpretations of *josō*. The differences and similarities in those indexical fields overlap, contradict, and intertwine, revealing the surprising combination of gender identities and bodies, and femininities and masculinities, which further complicates the idea of gender polarity.

The meaning, or pragmatic effectiveness, of *josō* performances thus cannot be reduced to a binary gender structure and decontextualized within the framework of masculinities and femininities, or gender and sexualities, which the notion of hybrid masculinities seems to assume. Rather, these performances convey a complex intertwining of all these categories together with other modalities of difference, making them an index of the contemporary sociocultural condition. The complex endeavors of *josōkon* contestants not only disregard the idea of gender as binary but also question what gender as non-binary means. All the *josō* practitioners interviewed engage in the complex negotiations of gender and sexual normativities through using their cultural knowledge of gender, which simultaneously blurs and reinforces gender hegemony.

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The Widening Road: Constructions of Gay Japanese Men on YouTube

Gavin Furukawa

1 INTRODUCTION

The issues of genderqueer individuals in Japan are becoming more and more visible in the public eye. For many years, only the most stereotypically feminine men were ever seen by the audiences in Japan through its rigidly corporation-controlled television networks. Although network TV remains a conservative source of media with few examples showing the diversity within LGBTQ society and culture, many queer Japanese people have found social media and the internet to be a welcoming space that is not only possible to queer, countering the negative influence of heteronormative space, but it is also a place where they are able to find a real sense of community and acceptance.

For many years, Japan's only commonly seen example of LGBTQ individuals has been *onee tarento* on variety television. The term *onee* comes from the Japanese word for older sister and typically refers to an extremely camp and feminine gay man. These queer *tarento* (from the English word talent, referring to a type of minor celebrity) first started coming on the scene as part of a generic gay *buumu* ("boom," a term signally a quick

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but typically short-lived period of heightened popularity usually marked by seeing a person, object, or topic brought up in several media sources in Japan on a very regular basis) in the 1990s followed by what Maree (2020) calls an *onee kyara buumu* (“older sister character boom”) in the 2000s (p. 15).

In more recent years, the rise in popularity of social media has led to decreased viewership for traditional network television programming (Bridge 2022). Along with this shift in popularity has come an increase in the number of LGBTQ social media channels where queer content creators have more freedom to express themselves and give followers a deeper insight into their lives and communities. Japan’s queer society has joined in this movement as well with a large amount of Instagram and TikTok accounts all focusing on the lives of Japanese LGBTQ individuals. YouTube in particular is already a popular site for many Japanese to begin with, given that for the past several years the job of YouTuber has ranked consistently as one of the most popular dream jobs for Japanese youth (Baseel 2019).

In addition to individual LGBTQ content creators, many queer-owned and/or operated businesses such as bars and cafes have turned to YouTube as a means to bring in business as well. This is done either by creating their own channel such as the popular channel Ao CH, which is based around a gay bar in the famous gay district of Tokyo, Shinjuku Nichome, or by collaborating with established influencers such as the duo Sekando Sutoriito, a pair of queer comedic content creators who do various skits based on the gay lifestyle or interview workers from various gay businesses. Even non-Japanese queer people living in Japan have sources like Tokyo BTM which features English videos that inform about clubbing, dating, and moving to Japan as members of the community.

This chapter will specifically look at the role that family plays in the discourse of queer Japanese content creators and how the discourse of family is used as a resource to challenge hegemonic masculinities within Japanese society. I examine two YouTube channels, created by the YouTubers Moa and Kazue-chan, both of whom are active within the larger queer community offline as well as online, to see the role and influence of family in the lives of Japanese men.

In my previous research on Japanese queer YouTubers, I have shown how these YouTube channels serve an important role for the LGBTQ society in Japan. By creating channels that consistently entertain while educating on queer issues, these sites become Japanese queered spaces that have their own rules and norms based on the specific culture of Japanese gay and trans society (Furukawa 2021). For example, Japanese

transgender men will often refer to themselves as *motojoshi* ('former girls') which directly contrasts with the ideologies of English-speaking inner-circle countries that often see men of trans experience as always being men from the start (p. 186). Moreover, such sites become resources to push back against the larger heteronormative society by complex identity work on themselves and their supporters/subscribers by indexing alliance.

While collecting this data, it started to become obvious that family plays an important role for many LGBTQ individuals. Around the world there is increasing attention being paid to queer families after a long history of being mostly ignored (Bauer and Giles 2020). In the case of Japan, the idea of queer people having families is still quite new for the general populace. Typically for many Asian countries, the family plays a much stronger role in people's lives when compared to the West, not just because of tradition but also because of economics where the family as a whole unit is often the main source of financial support (Izuhara and Forrest 2013). Because of this, coming out to one's family in Asia often jeopardizes one's financial well-being. It is therefore increasingly important to understand how the concept of family impacts the Asian queer community and to investigate the ways in which this can differ from Western queer discourses.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The discourse analysis in this chapter draws upon *sociocultural linguistics*, a general term for an approach to sociolinguistic analysis that is highly flexible in its use of tools from different research traditions but tied together most strongly by a social constructionist base. In their description of this approach, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) list five key principles on which it is founded: emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness. The main draw of this approach is that it is ideal for examining the construction of identity which is quite central in the queer online content being analyzed here.

The first two principles relate to the reliance on interaction for insight and understanding. The principle of emergence is one found in many social science approaches regardless of whether or not the term is used. According to it, identity and the sense of self emerge in the way individuals use language and specifically in their interactions with others. Like most constructionist-based concepts, this principle requires the analyst to work with what is in the data rather than superimpose their ideas upon the speakers. The second principle of positionality is somewhat related to

the first principle except that it focuses on identities. Specifically, positionality requires the analyst to use the categories that their speakers use, not broader social categories that quantitative studies might choose to use.

The third principle of indexicality tries to look at the actual way in which identity is constructed in discourse. By examining the connections of meanings in societal discourses and ideologies, we can see the complex ways that identity is constructed through reference (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, p. 594). Such an approach is not only essential for sociocultural linguistics, but I believe it is important for studying discourse in Japanese as well, given the often reported cultural tendency for inference (Haugh 2003). By this I mean that in Japanese, many things are often inferred linguistically rather than overtly stated (Okamoto 2008); this is quite common for the LGBTQ community in Japan where customers must interpret signs beyond what is referentially given to know what kind of clientele is served (Baudinette 2017).

The last two principles deal with the way identity is constructed and the limits of what we see when examining it. The fourth principle of relationality focuses on the fact that identity is often constructed in relation to others. This can be seen in the way that we see ourselves and others along dimensions of similarity or difference or realness versus artifice or by having authority or not. These specific relations are often referred to as *tactics of intersubjectivity* and are often part of the process we use with other people when constructing the identities of ourselves and others (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). The final principle is that of partialness which is something that most social scientists understand already: it means that what we see in our analysis is always an incomplete image. This relates to the understanding that what is being examined is limited by context. With this understanding we must accept that we can never know everything about a subject and their identity. What we are seeing is only a glimpse into a small section of who they are and how they negotiate their sense of self.

In addition to these principles, I also draw upon the concept of categories as conceived by Sacks's Membership Categorization Analysis or MCA. MCA is quite useful for analyzing identity work because it gives an empirical means to map out culture. It is also well suited as part of a sociocultural linguistics, drawing heavily on indexicality as well as positionality, and is quite rigorous in its desire to focus on the local nature of data which are found in the principles of emergence and partialness. MCA examines social categories that people invoke in conversation and examines them in relation to other categories which form collections and the specific actions or category-bound predicates that speakers refer to define

membership in said categories (Hester and Eglin 1997). In other words, in informal conversations people tend to mention, implicitly or explicitly, such social categories as gay, lesbian, son or daughter or such related actions as getting married or having children. Extending this, categories like gay, lesbian or trans can be taken together to form collections such as sexual minorities or sexualities.

An easy example of this to help in understanding these terms can be seen in coming out videos. A young man coming out as bisexual to his parents might say something like “I’m bisexual. Um, so I like guys and girls.” In this case, the young man invokes the category of bisexual for himself and then in the very next sentence he explains what it means by giving the predicate which is connected to the category. By liking guys and girls, he is bisexual. Being attracted to both genders is constructed as necessary for the category in this young man’s words. In the videos I analyze in this chapter, several categories and their predicates are involved which makes this an ideal form of analysis to draw on for this study.

3 INTRODUCING DATA

The main data in this study comes from the channels of two Japanese YouTubers. While both content creators were born and raised in Japan, it should be noted that both have had experience with living abroad in English-speaking countries. The first content creator is Moa of the channel Moa and More. Moa is a gay man from the Kansai region of Japan and has been quite prolific in his content creation since joining the platform in 2014 with nearly 400 videos many of which he subtitles in English, drawing upon his language skills to attract both a Japanese and international audience. Although Moa covers a wide range of topics from discussions about his daily life to issues facing queer individuals in Japan and abroad, his most popular videos are his recordings of him coming out to his family. The process of coming out to one’s family, being one’s “authentic” self with them, is perhaps one of the best places to look for the impact of family on queer Japanese people.

The first video like this that he recorded was uploaded on February 28 in 2017 where he comes out to his mother on camera. This is Moa’s most popular video to date and has over 6 million views. Extract 1 begins just a few seconds after the start of the video where the introductory animation shows the name of his channel, and Moa and his mother are sitting in front of the video camera. Initially, we see Moa adjusting the camera and his mother asking him what he is doing. He then tells her that he wants to talk to her.

Extract 1

- 01 Moa: ja hanashi atte
CP talk exist
'**I want to talk to you about something.**'
- 02 ja mou ryuugaku ikun yan ka
CP already study-abroad go-N CP Q
'**I'm going to go overseas, right?'**
- 03 nde, ryuugaku mae ni,
IP study-abroad before at
'**Before that...**'
- 04 iuoo to omotta koto
say-VOL QT think-PST thing
'**I wanted to say something.**'
- 05 [((laugh))]
- 06 Mother: [((laugh))]
- 07 Moa: \$sono mae\$ ((laugh))
that before
'**Before that**'
- 08 Mother: ((laugh)) \$NANI?\$
what
'**What?'**
- 09 Moa: Honma ya de
true CP IP
'**I'm being serious you know.**'
- 10 Mother: hai.
yes
'**Yes.**'
- 11 Moa: ano nan ya.
um what CP
'**um.**'
- 12 iya:. mou nan tsute ii no mou moshikashitara
no already what say good N already if
- 13 wakatteru kamoshirahen kedo ((sniffles))
know maybe but
'**How should I say this... You might already know this.**'
- 14 Mother: un.
'**okay.**'
- 15 Moa: ((looking down)) ano, wakatteru kamoshiran kedo
um know maybe but

- '*You might already know this.*'
- 16 ((smiles))
- 17 sono boku wa, °nani?° ((looks at Mother)) renai taisho to
that I S what love object QT
- 18 shite dansei ga suki.
do men T like
'*I like... I like men.*'
- 19 Mother: yappari na. ((tilts head and nods))
of-course IP
'*I thought so.*'
- 20 Moa: ((laughs))
- 21 Mother: sou ya to omotta wa. nde?
true CP QT think-PST IP N-CP
'*I thought so... And?*'

Line 1 serves as the beginning of this interactive segment which can be seen pragmatically by the use of the copula *ja* at the beginning as a discourse marker signaling a new topic of conversation is about to start. By explaining then that he wants to talk to his mother about something indicates that the activity to come is something serious which is in contrast to the light joking that occurs before this segment when Moa is setting up the camera. He then starts line 2 with the same discourse marker again, displaying a level of discomfort by basically starting the new interaction twice. He then begins to set up the background for this discussion by framing it in terms of his upcoming trip overseas to study English. He then connects the context of this upcoming trip with the current talk in line three through the connective *nde* which creates cohesion between different parts of discourse (Sadler 2006). He then goes on to show the seriousness of the current discussion in line 4 by suggesting that this discussion is something he has been thinking about or planning through the past tense verb *omotta* (to think). This is then followed by overlapped laughter from Moa first, which is then followed quickly with the same reaction from his mother. Laughter in uncomfortable situations like this is often understood as a type of release of stress or social tension (Glenn 2003, pp. 76–77).

Moa then continues his discussion while at the same time displaying discomfort by over-explicating the set up in line 7 where he starts a new sentence that functions as an introduction to a new topic ("Before

that”). This is said with some laughter carried over from the overlapped laughter. His mother responds to this over-explication by asking what this is about. The continued laughing tone in her voice, combined with the loud volume and frustrated tone, is in response to the prolonged and awkward set up but at the same time she is still not shown as angry. Moa then shifts things to a more serious tone by telling her that he is trying to be serious in line 9, a statement his mother acknowledges. Moa then continues his hedging in lines 11 and 12 through the word search token *ano* and the vowel stretch on *iya*. He then continues to show discomfort by explaining that his mother might already know what he is about to tell her. At this point, he begins to cry as seen in the sniffles in line 13. Moa’s mother gives a simple acknowledgment token or *aizuchi* in line 14 often understood as a gesture of encouragement or support (Iwasaki 1997).

Moa further displays his discomfort by lowering his gaze at the beginning of line 15 and repeats his previous statement. He then smiles and comes out to his mother in line 17 by using the phrase *renai taisho* (“object of love”) and explaining that he likes men. His mother’s first response to this is the phrase *yappari na* indicating that this was something she had thought for some time already. Moa laughs in response to this statement in a renewed release laughter, after which his mother restates herself in line 21 saying that she had thought this and then follows with the token *nde* with a rising pitch basically asking her son “and what?” at the end of the extract.

Moa’s coming out process is a bit drawn out and painful in this extract, something quite common to most queer people who come out. Like for many in the LGBTQ community, even if you are fairly confident that the statement of coming out will be accepted well, the fear of it not being accepted or resulting in emotional or sometimes physical danger is quite powerful. The obvious discomfort Moa experiences is related to such fears or insecurities. Indeed, the indirect way that Moa chooses to come out is quite striking. He could simply say *boku wa gei desu* (“I am gay”) or if he believed that his mother might not know the loan word *gei* (“gay”), he could have used any number of other terms that exist within Japanese to say it. Rather than defining himself with his coming out statement, he chooses instead to describe the kind of person he likes which indexes his gayness in a less direct way. What is even more interesting is that Moa uses this exact phrase several times during the conversation. With his mother,

Moa basically says: *Ano wakatteru kamoshiran kedo, sono boku wa, nani, renai taisho to shite dansei ga suki* (“Um, you might already know this but I, I like men.”) in lines 15–18.

In a completely different video uploaded three days later, Moa shows himself coming out to his father with his mother sitting in for support. In that video, his words for coming out are: *kono kikai ni zenbu iou to omotte, saki okaasan ni iuttan yakedo, tantou chokunyu ni iu to, ano boku no renai taisho wa dansei* (“I thought I’d take this opportunity to tell you everything, although I already told Mom earlier, to get straight to the point, um, I like men”). Again, he chooses to use the phrase *renai taisho* (“object of love”) to reveal his sexual preference. In another video filmed much later and uploaded two years and five months after these first two recordings, he comes out to his younger sister, saying *niichan no himitsu, himitsu de wa nai kedo, niichan no, renai taisho wa dansei* (“my secret, well it’s not a secret, but umm I, I like men”), again expressing his sexuality with the same phrase.

This careful indirect indexing stands in contrast to the way Moa comes out to a crowd of strangers in another video filmed between these times using the word *gei* (“gay”). Of course, coming out to one’s family as opposed to strangers is often something which needs to be handled more carefully since the stakes are so much higher. We can then see how different ways of expressing sexuality here can be a resource for negotiating with others based on their level of social distance.

Another interesting aspect within Moa’s coming out videos is that after coming out as gay to his family, the idea of family seems to be an important related topic. Specifically, we can see that the expectations of Moa’s mother for a gay son come into conflict with her son’s dreams for the future. In Extract 2, we can see what happens to the conversation shortly after Extract 1.

Extract 2

- 01 Moa: nde, ma kekkon dekihen wake ja nai shi
CP well marry can-NEG reason CP NEG and
'It's not impossible to get married.'
- 02 Mother: dare ga dare to
who T who and
'Who's getting married? to who?'
- 03 Moa: sore dansei doushi ga
that men mutual T
'People who like same sex.'
- 04 Mother: un un.
'uh huh.'
- 05 Moa: de kodomo sazukenai wake ga nai
CP child bless-NEG reason T NEG
'It's not impossible to have a family with kids.'
- 06 Mother: nande
how
'How ?'
- 07 Moa: sono ma. kodomo o
that well child O
'Well...'
- 08 Mother: dare kara morau tte koto
who from receive QT thing
'You mean adopt ?'
- 09 Moa: nn. ano. ma kodomo o sazuku houhou wa ma iroiro aru.
um well child O bless way S well various exist
'There are a couple of ways to have children.'
- 10 Mother: nn. nn.
'hm. hm.'
- 11 Moa: un. tabun shiran to omou kedo.
yeah probably know-NEG QT think but
'You probably don't know about them, but...'
- 12 Mother: shiran.
know-NEG
'Nope.'
- 13 Moa: sou. Kaasan shiran kedo, iroiro atte.
true mom know-NEG but various exist
'You probably don't know about them, but there are a couple of ways to have children.'

This talk segment starts with Moa's use of *nde*, which as stated before works to create cohesion, but in this case, it is in response to his mother's use of *nde* at the end of the previous extract. The one here in line 1 of Extract 2 has a downward pitch at the end showing that the forthcoming discourse, in addition to being connected to Moa's coming out, is also pragmatically in response to his mother's request for more information.

Moa then goes on to explain that getting married is not impossible for him. Because Japanese is pro-drop (meaning “pronoun-dropping” that refers to a language in which certain pronouns may be omitted), his statement in line 1 results in confusion for his mother due to the apparent possible clash of category-bound predicates resulting in what is typically referred to as an other-initiated self-repair (Schegloff et al. 1977). This can be seen in her response in line 2 asking who is getting married and to whom. Moa then repairs the comprehension difficulty by further clarifying the predicate as marriage between two men. After his mother signals understanding, he then expands this discussion further by stating that he could also have children. Again, we can see that this predicate does not match the understanding that his mother has of the category of gay man. She displays her understanding difficulty in line 6 with the question word *nande* (“how”). As Moa begins to explain in line 7, his mother offers a possible method to find out if he means adoption. Rather than answering this question from line 8 directly, Moa instead tells her that there are a variety of ways for two men to have children. After his mother gives a non-committal response in line 10, Moa then unpacks the previous statement further saying these are methods she probably would not know about which she agrees with in line 12. Moa then reiterates that even though she may not know these methods, there are ways for him to have children.

As an extension of Moa’s coming out, this discussion of marriage and having children, this discussion of family, is quite significant. Moa makes similar statements when coming out to his father and his younger sister as well, as seen in Table 1. In each video, after coming out as liking men, he then immediately goes into a discussion of how he can get married and have children.

Table 1 Moa’s discussions after coming out

Mother	nde, ma kekkon dekihen wake ja nai shi <i>‘it’s not impossible to get married.’</i> De kodomo sazukenai wake ga nai. <i>‘It’s not impossible to have kids.’</i>
Father	Dansei shika suki ni narahen shi, mou kekkon dekihen- dekinai wake ga nai shi, de kodomo mo sazukenai wake ga nai. <i>‘I only like men and well it’s not like I can’t get married or can’t have kids.’</i>
Younger sister	Mou kekkon dekihen wake ga nai shi, mou futsuu, futsuu no kappuru to ishshou no koto wa dekiru. Ma kodomo mo motenai wake ja nai kara. <i>‘Well, it’s not like I can’t get married and well we can do the same things as normal couples. And it’s not like I can’t have kids.’</i>

It is particularly interesting that the wording that Moa chooses each time is to say that such things are not impossible. He does not state positively that he *can* get married and that he *can* have children. The use of the double negative when viewed through the lens of English often leads people to the assumption that the speaker is being obtuse or indirect; however, from the perspective of the Japanese language, this structure can also be seen as a way of seeking approval and/or displaying stance toward the topic (Akatsuka 1992). We can then see that after coming out to his family, Moa also tries to get his family's approval on something that they do not even consider to be possible for him.

Related to this discussion is also his family's responses to his coming out and his statement that he still can and would like to get married and have children. In Table 2, I have compiled a collection of his parents' responses to this discussion of sexuality and family.

We can see in this second table that Moa's mother and father are not comfortable with the idea of Moa being gay even though both of them stated quite clearly in the videos that they knew that he was gay before he came out to them. His mother seems to move back and forth between perceiving it as a problem by saying *akan ya* ("this is no good") to a sort of resigned perspective *sore sha nai koto chau ka* ("there's nothing to do about it right?"). And we can also see that the predicate of having children is still something that she cannot reconcile with the category of gay man when she states *mago muri ya, mago* ("grandchildren are impossible").

Moa's father has a similar difficulty in reconciling the notion of gay men getting married. Right after Moa mentions that he can get married as seen in his statement to his father in Table 1, his father immediately comes back with *josei to kekkon shitara na* ("you mean if you married a lady right?"). He does fairly openly admit that he fails to understand what Moa is going through but also tries to warn his son that the life

Table 2 Moa's family reacting to his wanting to marry and have children

Mother	Dare ga dare to <i>'who would marry who?'</i> Nande <i>'how?'</i> Akan ya, akan ya. <i>'It's no good, it's no good.'</i> Sore sha nai koto chau ka? <i>'There's nothing to do about it right?'</i> Mago muri ya, mago! <i>'Grandchildren are impossible then, impossible.'</i>
Father	Josei to kekkon shitara na? <i>'You mean if you married a lady right?'</i> Sore wa ne, jibun no ikikata as a shikata ga nai kedo na, demo sou iu jinsei wa mono sugoi are de, semai yo. <i>'that's, well it's your life and there's nothing I can do about it but but that kind of life is really semai (restrictive).'</i> Orera ga wakarahaen kankaku nan da kedo. <i>'Those are feelings we can't understand though.'</i>

he is choosing is difficult through the use of the word *semai* meaning “narrow” or “restrictive.” This concept of a restrictive life for gay people is obviously based in culture but is also shifting within the gay community to a certain degree as can be seen in Extract 3 which takes place just after Extract 2.

Extract 3

- 01 Mother: mukou de sou iu aite o mitsukeru tte koto? Ja nakute?
There at that say partner O find QT thing CP NEG
'So you're going overseas to find someone? Or not?'
- 02 Moa: iya, Kanada wa, toriaezu benkyou no tame ya kedo,
no Canada TP tentative study N for CP but

Nihon ni ottara, nan tte iu no,
Japan at exist:COND what QT say N

mou kekkon wa dekihen, shi. . .
shoot marry TP can:NEG and
'No, I'm going to Canada to study, but if I'm in Japan I can't get married.'
- 03 Mother: mukou de gaikokujin to kekkon shiyou to omotteru wake?
There at foreigner and marry do:VOL QT think reason
'So you mean you're going to get married to some foreigner overseas?'
- 04 Moa: maa wakarahan, ma wakarahan.
Well know:NEG well know:NEG
'I don't know yet, I don't know.'

In this Extract, we can see that Moa's mother is connecting this discussion of marrying and having children with her son traveling to study abroad. She asks him in line 1 if he plans to go looking for someone while in Canada. Moa then assures her that he is going to study (in line 2) and then he begins to modify the category-bound predicate for marriage by explaining that he is unable to get married while in Japan. It is interesting at this point that his mother then assumes he will marry a foreigner in line 3 rather than consider the possibility that Japan might allow for same-sex marriage or that he might marry a Japanese man abroad. Moa then tells her that he does not know if he will marry a foreigner or not.

For LGBTQ people in Japan, the idea of traveling abroad and the possibilities of marriage and family are very closely connected. Online discussions of gay people talking about marriage, as opposed to civil unions which are allowed in some parts of Japan yet have only limited legal power (Williams 2015), will often shift to talking about countries that allow same-sex marriage which is still not legal in Japan, or discussions about experiences while living abroad, as can be seen in this last piece of data.

The final extract in this chapter comes from the channel Kazue-chan, which has been around since 2016. The channel as a whole has over 30 million views and its stated main purpose is to inform people about LGBTQ issues. The channel features a wide range of videos from travel segments, activist movements, and interviews. The creator of the channel is nicknamed Kazuechan where the diminutive honorific *chan* is attached to the creator's name Kazue.

This particular video the extract comes from is titled “*Boku ni wa papa futari iru: gei kappuru to musuko-kun no hanashi*” (“I have two dads: discussing a gay couple and their son”). In the video, Kazue-chan interviews his friend Mittsun, who is currently a vlogger on YouTube himself although at the time of the interview in March of 2018, he mainly ran a blog about his life with his husband and son.

Extract 4

- 01 Kazuechan: Kyou chotto iroiro hontō ni kikitai koto ga
 today little various really at ask-want thing T
 takusan atte. Ano mā Nihon de Sas a douseikon
 lots exist um well Japan at S IP gay-marriage
 mada dekinai ja nai?
 Still can-NEG CP NEG
**'Today there's lots of different things I really want to
 hear about. Um well, in Japan, um, there's still no gay
 marriage right?'**
- 02 Mittsun: unn.
 'mm.'

- 03 Kazuechan: demo sa ano:: ma sono kekkon mo shite ima
 but IP well um that marriage also do now
 okosan mo motteru tte iu naka de sono:
 child-HON also hold QT say middle at that
 kodomo ne? kono:: jibuntachi ga
 child IP that self-PL T
**'but well, umm seeing that you're married and you have a
 child, with that, right?'**
- 04 Mittsun: un.
'yeah.'
- 05 Kazuechan: nanka kekkon kangaeru tte iu nan to naku
 somewhat I think QT say what QT NEG
 wakaru no ne? demo,
 understand N IP but
**'but I can sort of understand thinking about marriage
 right? but still.'**
- 06 Mittsun: Kazue-chan mo aru?
 HON also exist
'You too Kazuechan?'
- 07 Kazuechan: sou. aru. sore koso boku Kanada ni sundeta toki ni,
 true exist that EMPH I Canada at live-PST time at
 douseikon ga dekiru kuni datta kara
 gay-marriage T can country CP-PST because
**'that's right. I've thought about it. back when I lived
 in Canada since they have same sex marriage.'**
- 08 Mittsun: oo.
'oh.'
- 09 Kazuechan: sou. a! Nihon wa deki- nanka- Nihon ni zu:tto
 true ah Japan S can somehow Japan at always
 ita toki wa kekkon suru wa kangaeta koto nakatta.
 exist time S marry do S thought thing NEG:PST

'right. ah! in Japan we- well, when I lived my life in Japan I never thought about marriage.'

10 Mittsun: un. sou da ne
yeah true CP IP

'yeah, that's true right?'

11 Kazuechan: demo kankyō kawatte Kanada ni itta toki ni:
but situation change Canada at go-PST time at
sono koko de wa kekkon dekiru n da tte natta
that here at S marriage can N CP QT become:PST
toki ni, kekkon wa a! tsukiatta boifurendo ga itta
time at marriage S ah date boyfriend S go-PST
kara kekkon: tte ii na tte sono tokImarraige QT good
IP QT that time
kanjita node= ne? a,
go because right oh

'but you change the situation, when I was in Canada, when I got to a place where oh I can get married here, marriage is ah since I had a boyfriend at the time right? I started feeling wouldn't it be nice to get married?'

12 Mittsun: =un.

'yeah.'

13 Kazuechan: demo, Mittsun de sono saki no kodomo motsu
but at that before N child hold
tte iu tokoro o, ima shiteru wake ja nai
QT say place O now do reason CP NEG

'but Mittsun, that's still different from you having a child now.'

- 14 Mittsun: un un.
'right right.'
- 15 Kazuechan: sono jibun-tachi ga sono kodomo o mochitai
 that self-PL T that child O hold-want
 to iu ka motou to omotta nante iu no ka na
 QT say Q hold-VOL QT think what say N Q IP
 sono kikkake to ka omoi tte iu no wa nan ka aru?
 that catalyst QT Q heavy QT say N S what Q exist
*'so what made you both decide I want to have a child?
 was there something in particular?'*
- 16 Mittsun: sou da ne: yappari ma (.) zu sannen gurai
 true CP IP of-course well uh three-years about
 a Toukyou de ima no kare to shiriatte sannen
 uh Tokyo at now N at and know three-yearhs
 gurai shite kara Rondon ni ma
 about do from London at well
*'that's right. of course. al- about three years, uh we
 knew each other in Tokyo for about three years before we
 went to London, then well.'*
- 17 Kazuechan: sou da yo ne
 true CP IP IP
'that right.'

- 18 Mittsun: shigoto no kankei de utsutta n dakedo yappa
 work N relation at contact N but of-course
 Rondon ni sundeta tte iu no wa warito yappari ookii
 London at live:PST QT say N S sort-of of-course big
 eikyou ga atta no ka na tte ima ni naru to
 effect T exist:PST N Q IP QT now at become QT
 omou ne yappari motomoto boku no naka de
 think IP of-course originally I N middle at
 kekkon: suru no wa kangaeta koto nakatta
 marry do N S think:PST thing exist:NEG:PST
***'it was for work but of course living in London, it sort
 of had a big effect on me. When I think about it now. of
 course originally I never thought about getting
 married.'***
- 19 Kazuechan: nakanaka yappari sou da yo ne
 quite of-course true CP IP IP
'of course, you wouldn't right?'
- 20 Mittsun: sou sou dekinai shi
 true true can:NEG and
'right right, and we can't'
- 21 Kazuechan: sou sou saisho kara mo akirameta yo ne
 true true start from also give-up:PST IP IP
***'right right, you just give that up from the start
 right?'***

- 22 Mittsun: sou sou
 true true
 'true true.'
- 23 Kazuechan: muri jan
 impossible CP:N
 'it's impossible'
- 24 Mittsun: sou sou sou sou
 true true true true
 'right right right right'
- 25 Kazuechan: wakaru wakaru.
 understand understand
 'I know what you mean. I know what you mean.'

The data here starts with Kazuechan at the beginning of the interview saying that he has many things he would like to talk to Mittsun about. Using the discourse marker *sa*, he raises the first topic of gay marriage in Japan. Mittsun then gives a positive minimal response token in line 2 and Kazuechan then follows this up pointing out the relevance of the topic for his interviewee. Although both speakers share the principal positioning in this interaction (Goffman 1981, p. 226), it is constructed as especially relevant to Mittsun (in line 3) as a man who is himself in a gay marriage and is Japanese. After another positive minimal response, Kazuechan shows that he also is in the principal position by saying that he can understand thinking about getting married. Although he ends his turn with a negative conjunction, Mittsun immediately picks up on Kazuechan's similar formulation and asks for confirmation in line 6. Kazuechan then explains that he had thought about it while living in Canada and provides the information about Canada allowing *douseikon* ("same-sex marriage") through the use of the conjunction *kara*, which shows causation as the reason for thinking this way. After a change of state token showing Mittsun's understanding in line 8, Kazuechan further unpacks the relationship between living in Japan and contemplating marriage as a gay man. He explains that while living in Japan he never even thought about getting married, but once he was in a place where it was allowed, he started to think that it might be nice to get married, especially since

he had a boyfriend at the time. He then goes on to say that even then, it is not the same as Mittsun now having a child.

Kazue-chan then leads into his question of what led Mittsun and his husband to having a child (in line 15). Mittsun then begins to explain that after living in Tokyo both he and his husband moved to London. Mittsun then clarifies in line 18 how moving to London had a big impact on him. As he explains this, he also states that he never originally thought about getting married using the adverbial *yappari*, which roughly translates to “of course,” thus revealing that thinking about marriage before moving to a country where it is possible was not likely. Kazue-chan then agrees with him in line 19 with the ending copula plus particles *da yo ne* which show assertion and involvement (Matsumoto 2004, p. 253) from the speaker. They then further go on to explain that since you are unable to marry within Japan you just give it up from the start. This discussion is quite telling about the lives of queer Japanese people. It highlights how the lack of knowledge or thought of the world with other alternatives beyond Japan limits their possibilities in certain respects. While living in Japan, other options do not really exist, perhaps as a result of the often-criticized xenophobia present in Japanese society (Kubota 2016). Certainly, in these conversations there are no traces of any discussions about changing the law to allow for same-sex marriage.

4 DISCUSSION

When examining this data, it becomes very clear that the concept of family is highly centralized for many Japanese LGBTQ individuals. In the case of Moe, a very important speech act, that of coming out, focuses heavily on his family members. Moe comes out by indexing the category of gay through the bound predicate of having a male *renai taisho* (“object of love”). This indirect categorization helps him to navigate a somewhat delicate and important process of articulating his sexuality. While he comes out in other videos to strangers as just gay, the coming out to family is particularly weighty leading him to index the category rather than naming it.

Coming out to one’s family is obviously not unique to Japan. It happens in many cultures and is typically a stressful and difficult process for the person coming out. What seems to be different in this Japanese context is Moe’s need to mention the desire to marry and have children. In other words, while speaking to his family about something deeply

personal, Moa also connected this speech act to his role in continuing the family. By doing so he also indexes the collection of family that he belongs to as well as contests the view of the category of gay man by offering new predicates that his family does not expect. By repeatedly discussing the possibility of marrying a man and having children, he challenges the predicates that his parents felt were bound to the category of gay. This contest of bound predicates is clear from his mother's statement of *mago muri ya, mago!* ("Grandchildren are impossible then, impossible.") and from his father's belief that getting married meant marrying a woman (*Josei to kekkon shitara na?* "You mean if you married a lady right?"). The verbal exchange between Moa and his family members seems to reveal, or confirm, the importance of marriage and having children in a Japanese family structure. It seems to be one of the parents' main concerns in learning that Moa is gay.

In addition to being able to live authentically with his family and possibly changing their perceptions and beliefs about gay men, we can see that this kind of coming out discourse directly challenges hegemonic Japanese masculinities which, due to lack of linguistic contact with Western countries (Fukuda 1975, p. 15), has prevented many Japanese from realizing the fact that gay couples can marry and have children in other countries. This was made quite visible in Kazue-chan's discussion with Mittsun where we could see how the categories and the predicates were constructed as being limited by the space in which people were living and their experiences living abroad. Perhaps this limitation is real concern of Moa's father when he warns his son about the life he is choosing. Despite Moa's father's concerns about the *semai* ("narrow") life that his son is leading, I have hopes that Moa's experiences and openness will help him to find a life that instead is widening.

APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions

S	—subject marker
T	—topic marker
O	—object marker
Q	—question marker
QT	—quotative marker
IP	—interactional particle

CP	—copula
N	—nominative
NEG	—negative
(.)	—micropause
.	—downward tone
?	—raised tone
<u>under</u>	—emphasis
(())	—notes
\$ \$	—laughing voice
PL	—plural
PST	—past tense
!	—strong emphasis
HON	—honorific
VOL	—volitional
EMPH	—emphatic

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Boys' Love, Transmedia Storytelling, and LGBT Awareness in Contemporary Japan

Emiko Nozawa

1 INTRODUCTION

With the recent “LGBT Boom,” fueled by the rise of the global LGBTQ+ movement, the media coverage of individuals, activism, the news, and films and dramas related to LGBT people is increasing in Japan (Fotache 2019). There are several hit movies and TV dramas about so-called LGBT people, where male-male romantic relationships are often depicted, and some are based on Boys' Love manga (BL). BL is a distinctive genre within comics for female readers, highlighting male-male intimate relations. BL is unique in that both authors and readers are predominantly heterosexual ciswomen. It has acquired a wide readership across national borders and has been taken up in forms of transmedia storytelling such as live-action movies and TV dramas. With the market success of these films and TV dramas, BL or “BL-ish” representations are becoming available to large audiences (Hori and Mori 2020, p. 72). They are sometimes regarded as one of the sources for the public to learn about LGBT people

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and issues, even though many authors acknowledge that the representations in BL do not necessarily reflect the reality of same-sex attracted people.

BL originated in two forerunners, boys' romantic manga (BRM) and Yaoi fanfiction. BRM that emerged in the 1970s, Yaoi in the 1980s, and BL in the 1990s have all invited scholarly analyses and discussions from diverse viewpoints and theoretical frames including feminist psychoanalysis, queer studies, and fan studies. Bold representations of male-male intimate relations in boys' romantic/Yaoi/BL manga have been considered a sort of "counter-discourse" against patriarchy, which has the potential to liberate female readers from the suppressive gender structure. Some scholars and gay commentators, on the other hand, have claimed that the dissemination of unrealistic descriptions of male-male relations by heterosexual cisfemale writers is discriminative, which would further marginalize and rhetorically appropriate sexual minorities.

According to *Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities in Japan: Report of 2015 National Survey* (2016), more than 90% of the respondents believed that there is not one single homosexual person around them. It suggests that most Japanese people see and acquire knowledge about LGBT people not in real life but through media. The respondents are most likely to encounter the images and information about same-sex relations on TV—following news and educational programs (74%) and variety shows (50%); 41.3% of the respondents answered that they saw same-sex relations in films and TV dramas. In comparison, 8.0% saw them in women's manga and 5.8% in men's manga. Although many more see and learn about same-sex relations in dramas and films than in manga, research on the representations in BL and BL-ish movies and dramas has not been carried out to any great extent yet.

This chapter analyzes how BL is located in Japanese society amid the rise of LGBT awareness. It examines the representations of same-sex relationships in BRM, Yaoi, and BL manga, following the recent growth of the genre into a form of transmedia storytelling that has attracted a much wider audience, and has generated debates on the representations of same-sex relations in BL and transmedia storytelling. Drawing on these analyses, the chapter argues that BL and BL-ish transmedia storytelling is a valuable space for creators from diverse media to collaboratively explore new forms of narratives and interpretations; however, these sources could

simultaneously disseminate distorted representations of same-sex relationships if they failed to adequately understand and scrutinize the nature of BL.

2 BRM/YAOI/BL AS A COUNTER-DISOURSE

Feminist scholars have used psychoanalyses in their studies on why female readers are attracted to BRM/Yaoi/BL. Chizuko Ueno (1998 [2015]) argues, based on her analyses of early BRM, that male-male relations are a rhetorical device that helps objectify male bodies and sexuality and, furthermore, contest gender politics. It allows female readers to watch sexual contacts—often violent ones, including rape—from a safe vantage point without real or imaginary pains. Ueno also identifies misogyny enclosed in BL manga. Women are often absent or described derogatorily as competitors who interfere with the male couple alleging legitimacy of heteronormativity and their reproductive ability. While they hate these female rivals, readers strip off their women's identity and instead identify themselves with effeminate beautiful male protagonists. Ueno further claims that the effeminate beautiful boys are neither male nor female but are the third gender ideal self, particularly for readers who do not want to be contaminated by any “detestable genders” (p. 247). The flipped gaze/gazed relations and the third gender ideal identity uncover and invalidate the patriarchal structures and potentially liberate readers from gendered suppressions. Comparing BL manga with porn where women's bodies are objectified, Akiko Hori (2020) argues that more equal power relations are found in BL that would, to a certain extent, prevent the objectification of men's bodies. Readers appreciate the more equal power relations in male-male couples, which resonates with the analysis of Ueno and a comment by Fumi Yoshinaga (2013), a famous BL manga writer, who states that female readers long for the equal relationships described in BL manga that cannot be achieved in heterosexual relations.

On the other hand, some critics argue that homophobia is implied in many BRM/Yaoi/BL narratives—especially in early creations—in the frequent depictions of tragic endings with forced separations, fatal diseases, and deaths. It is questionable, however, whether the writers themselves recognize it would spread the impression that same-sex relations cannot last long or they can never become happy in the end, which could be internalized by gay readers themselves (Maekawa 2020).

Another sort of homophobia and heteronormativity is observed in prevalent descriptions in BL. One of the male protagonists denies that he is gay and is totally perplexed to find him attracted to a man in front of him. It is a rhetorical device that would underscore how special their relationship is, implying that the person in front of him is the only “exception” he loves regardless of his sexual orientation. However, even if it were just a rhetorical device that helps emphasize how special their relationship is, when such descriptions have been repeated, Naoya Maekawa and Akiko Mizoguchi (2015) argue that it can replicate and underpin heteronormativity that possibly marginalizes same-sex attracted readers.

Lately, scholars have focused on more positive aspects of BL manga, as Junko Kaneda (2007) observes. Yukari Fujimoto (2015) claims that BL can create an alternative space that has allowed readers to flee from patriarchal gender structures and “play with” gender. Mizoguchi (2015) distinguishes some BL manga that more likely incorporates recent social changes and calls them “Transformative BL.” Unlike traditional “Fantasy BL,”¹ in which readers enjoy unrealistic characters and episodes, “Transformative BL” has opened a new horizon where the creators refrain from homophobic depictions and challenge existing gender norms, explore queerness, and even foresee newly emerging alternative sexuality and shifting social climates.² The following sections will be devoted to a chronology and analyses of the development of BRM/Yaoi/BL and transmedia storytelling, focusing on several critical works.

3 THE “BIRTH” OF BRM IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

Manga for an adolescent and young adult female readership traditionally consisted of stories with female protagonists with the occasional appearance of cross-dressed handsome women in pieces such as *The Rose of Versailles* (1972–1973). However, the advent of BRM marked a considerable gender twist and fluidity. In the mid-1970s, a new sort

¹ Although it is impossible to lump BL manga with diversified themes and styles together, in order to distinguish them from “Transformative BL,” the other more traditional BL manga are referred to as “Fantasy BL” in this chapter.

² To make the distinction easy to comprehend, Mizoguchi notes that “Fantasy BL” includes stories where the main character rapes another man immediately after the first encounter. Here, rape is interpreted as how passionate the character is and how ardently loved the victim is.

of manga appeared, highlighting intimate relationships between beautiful boys. *Thomas no Shinzo* (*The Heart of Thomas*, 1974: *Thomas*) by Moto Hagio, and *Kaze to Ki no Uta* (*The Song of the Wind and Trees*, 1976–1984: *Kaze*) by Keiko Takemiya were two of the significant creations written at the dawn of BRM. Both narrate romantic relationships between effeminate beautiful boys in European boarding schools. *Thomas* is a mystery set in a mid-twentieth-century German gymnasium. In the beginning, Thomas commits suicide, leaving a suicide note to Julusmole (Juli), the protagonist of the story; seeking out why Thomas died is the central theme of this intricate narrative. As the story unfolds, readers realize that although Juli is the best student and loved by his classmates and teachers, he has built an emotional wall around himself because of his “sin,” that is, he was raped by an older male student in the past. Although no one knows what happened to Juli, Thomas, who admires him, senses that Juli believes he is not entitled to anyone’s love because he has somehow sinned. Knowing that Juli is mentally a living corpse, Thomas chooses to sacrifice his own life to save Juli, to let him recognize that he deserves love: the death of Thomas would prove that he *is* loved. At the end of the story, Juli finally understands Thomas’ true message and leaves the gymnasium to attend a theological school where he will regain his own life.

While the physical contacts were restricted in *Thomas*, *Kaze* contains more direct depictions of intimate physical encounters between beautiful boys in a nineteenth-century French boarding school, another exotic setting for Japanese readers. Serge, a new student and talented pianist, is roomed with Gilbert, a beautiful but not disciplined boy. Serge tries to accept his roommate based on his belief in fairness and the discrimination he experienced due to his mixed-race background (he is defined as half White and half Gypsy); however, Serge’s kindness only disturbs Gilbert. Ruined by his abusive father, Gilbert is extremely insecure and repeats sexual relations with other boys for short-lived satisfaction and mental relief. While trying hard to win Gilbert’s trust with patience, Serge begins to love him. When Gilbert eventually learns about healthier human relationships not dominated by violence or brainwashing, he and Serge decide to run away from school to escape the pursuit of Gilbert’s cruel father. However, shortly after they start their new life in Paris, Gilbert, suffering from keen anxiety and insecurity stemming from his traumatic childhood experiences, becomes addicted to opium and ends up having a tragic death. With his heart broken, Serge returns home as successor to

the family title; at home he gradually recovers by playing the piano tunes inspired by Gilbert (Fig. 1).

Despite their very complicated plots and cultural differences, *Thomas* and *Kaze* appealed to teenage girls. In these pieces, the main characters are portrayed as beautiful boys, isolated and marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, class, social status, sexual orientation, and problematic relationships with their families. They appear as distant “Others” for adolescent female readers, but scholars, such as Ueno (1998 [2015]) and James Welker (2006) argue that Japanese teenage girls, who often feel insecure and as if they fit nowhere, project themselves onto the effeminate boys suffering and struggling in isolation. Adolescent girls are likely to face an identity problem with physical growth and sexual maturity and are torn between patriarchal gendered expectations and individual desires. Ueno also contends that readers can relate to hidden misogyny in BRM, with the frequent derogatory representations of women if not total absence of women figures. The beautiful boys embody the liberation from gendered pressures and reproductive obligations inflicted on women within the patriarchal family and social structures. In addition, the stories that describe intimate relationships between effeminate beautiful boys satisfy teenage girls’ curiosity when they are not allowed to express their sexual desire. Gendered repression drives teenage girls to feel guilty about exploring their sexuality. Indeed, Hagio (2022), the author of *Thomas*, recalls that she once thought of girls as the main characters when she was creating the plot but shifted them from girls to boys as she felt it would make the storytelling more “free.” In this context, it is sensible that teenage girls also perceived that it would be less awkward to read boys’ romantic narratives, where women’s sexuality was not involved. Through the flipped gaze/gazed gendered framework, girls read boys’ romantic stories from a safe distance to envisage their own sexual desire for boys (Ueno 1998 [2015]). The popularity of these BRM and other narratives—including manga and novels published in *JUNE*, a girls’ magazine of the 1980s—paved the way for the later evolution of Yaoi and BL.

4 YAOI: FANFICTION COMMUNITY IN THE 1980S

In the 1980s, boys’ romantic stories expanded with their fan engagement. Both professional and amateur manga creators wrote fanfiction, so-called Yaoi manga, and published them privately. Most of the time,



Fig. 1 *Kaze to Ki no Uta* (©Keiko Takemiya/Hakusensha)

amateur writers used the characters and settings of existing manga as a basis for their fanfiction. They paired their favorite characters and created imaginary love stories. *Captain Tsubasa* and *Saint Seiya*, comics with elementary school boys as the primary readers, were especially popular among amateur creators. They loved to share their manga in their circles, and many groups of writers sold their fanzines, the collections of their fanfiction, at the Comic Market. In this grassroots market, fanzines of manga, animations, and video games are sold, and more recently, it has become to be known as a primary site where costume play is performed. Though most of the writers were non-professional, some professional manga creators would join these circles since there was no place at that time to commercially publish stories that included the explicit and detailed descriptions of sexual contacts between boys that had been avoided in the forerunner, BRM.

The Yaoi community soon developed distinct tropes, such as *seme* (aggressive) and *uke* (passive) pairs. A couple in Yaoi fiction usually consists of a bold *seme* character who is taller, more masculine, mature, and richer paired up with a passive *uke* who tends to be shorter, less masculine, and younger. The writers interact discussing their “tastes” in terms of their favorite pairs—including *seme-uke* relations. The *seme-uke* associations in Yaoi fanfictions do not necessarily reflect real relationships of gay couples. Instead, as Mizoguchi (2015) makes an astute point, they resemble heterosexual relations that most female readers/creators are more familiar with. The almost universalized *seme-uke* rule demonstrates how active and close their communications with each other were in the Yaoi community: as Fujimoto (2015) claims, the Yaoi community was a revolutionary space for girls and women to creatively generate their own discourses of gender/sexuality playing with gender. While scholars admit that it is difficult to systematically analyze Yaoi fanfictions since they were privately released and have been mostly lost, a wide variety of stories were included: both happy stories and narratives with couples destined to fail in the end. The Yaoi community was the site where female reader-creators could envision their own sexuality liberated from gender norms, but as the *seme-uke* combination exemplifies, the discourses they had collaboratively created to a great extent depended on heteronormativity.

5 COMMERCIAL SUCCESS OF BL IN THE 1990S

In the 1990s, several new women's magazines specializing in stories on male-male relations were launched; they immediately attained commercial success. The term Boys' Love (BL) was first used in 1991 on the cover of one of these magazines, *Image*, and the term took hold in the next several years (Fujimoto 2020). Like BRM in the 1970s and 1980s, unusual settings and dramatic plots with violence, abusive relations, and tragic separations were still found in some pieces. However, emerging BL manga is generally considered lighter in its themes and more entertaining while following the common rules, such as *seme-uke* relations. As Fujimoto explains, it might be reasonable to assume that publishers attempted to diversify the themes and styles in commercial BL manga to attract a broader readership. Yoshinaga (2013) recalls that she welcomed the publication of these magazines that first recognized girls' sexual desires that had been long stifled within the texts.

Kizuna (1992–2008) by Kazuma Kodaka is one of the pioneers of BL manga, and the English translation of it was a success in the United States. The story is about college students caught up in a near-fatal accident and Yakuza (Japanese mafia) conflicts, with detailed descriptions of sexual encounters between male characters. When compared to the earlier manga, the lyrical tones disappeared, while dynamic episodes with masculine characters that could be found in action movies were introduced. Kodaka, who started her career as a writer of manga for boys, admits that she had never read earlier BRM before she began to create BL manga. Kodaka and Yoshinaga agree that Kodaka's manga is written based on the "grammar" of manga for boys (Yoshinaga 2013). Like previous BRM, multiple problems, obstacles, and enemies appear one after another in *Kizuna* too. Still, unlike these forerunners, the main characters in *Kizuna* tackle the crises actively and collaboratively, which is often observed in boys' manga. Although in the beginning, *Kizuna* included unrealistic descriptions, it began to address issues that gay people are likely to face. The author consistently presents the problems that could and should be solved, and as the story evolves over a long time, the characters build healthier relationships with their partners, family members, and close friends. Kodaka clearly states that she wished to shift the image of BL manga and deliberately continued to write happy-ending stories, not the ones where most of the couples end up in tragic separations. Kodaka

and Yoshinaga believe that BL manga informed both hetero- and homosexual readers that same-sex couples could have lasting relations and gain support from people around them (Yoshinaga 2013).

6 GAY QUESTIONING OF YAOI/BL

Debates that emerged between gay readers and BL writers and commentators included criticism by Sato, a gay commentator, who initiated a dialogue with the rise of the Yaoi community in the mid-1990s. In short, Sato criticized that Yaoi women and manga were full of stereotypes against gay, they objectified gay people and subjugated gay sexuality to forced heteronormativity (Ishida 2007b; Maekawa 2020). Lookism and ageism in BL were also pointed out where only good-looking boys and young men were depicted as the main characters. In his criticism, Sato was likely equating characters in Yaoi/BL with real gays. At the same time, female commentators deemed Yaoi/BL representations fundamentally different from the real-life experiences of gay people. Although the debate did not necessarily reach an agreement or shared views, it helped some Yaoi/BL creators to self-reflect and become aware of their prejudices that could harm society's impressions about same-sex attracted people. For example, in an interview, Ko Yoneda, a popular BL writer, expresses her concerns about how gay readers would receive her products (Yoshinaga 2013). Mizoguchi (2015) argues that the Yaoi debate opened a dialogue between gays and BL creators and scholars, which, to some extent, inspired the emergence of "Transformative BL" in the 2000s, with increased awareness of gay readership and pursuit of more realistic and respectful representations. On the other hand, Mizoguchi also defends entertaining BL with unrealistic episodes and attitudes, where rape can be regarded as the expression of passionate love. Criticizing the reductionism that equates representation and reality, she carefully divorces rhetorical and real rape and claims that rhetorical rape will never encourage sexual assaults in real life. While Mizoguchi is against placing regulations within BL, she simultaneously expects that the continuous dialogue would further reassure the development of new forms of BL representations. It is still controversial if the genre needs more self-regulation to validate its creative activities.

7 “TRANSFORMATIVE BL” AND DESTIGMATIZATION

Since the early 2000s, while BL manga with unrealistic stories continued to be popular, a new type of less dramatic BL manga acquired a wide readership. Mizoguchi (2015) calls them “Transformative BL,” which are located in realistic social contexts and describe the social relations between gay characters and others around them. *Doshitemo Furetakunai* (*Just Don't Want to Touch You*, 2007) by Yoneda narrates an ordinary businessperson's secret love for his coworker with nuanced descriptions. The *Donkyusei* (*Classmates*) series (2008–2020) by Asumiko Nakamura portrays two shy high school boys, Rihito and Hikaru,³ who slowly and timidly build an intimate relationship and patiently win support from their family and friends. The story unfolds with other gay characters, incorporating changes in social climates and hostile systems in relation to the same-sex partnership. At the story's beginning, Rihito and Hikaru see each other in places where no one is around. It seems they are isolated and believe no one would sympathize with them. However, the latter half of the *Donkyusei* series contains episodes where the characters have dialogues with their partner about how they could get their family's understanding. Whether or not one comes out to one's family is a sensitive issue for LGBT people in the Japanese context, becoming one of the main topics in BL manga in the 2000s-2010s (Fig. 2). One episode in *Donkyusei* is about an emotional family reunion of a middle-aged teacher. Arisaka, a divorced gay science teacher, who once had a fake marriage, gets a call from his daughter, who is getting married soon, asking to meet him after many years of separation. Arisaka's coming out at the meeting is received with initial upsets, but his daughter eventually accepts him, which, in turn, allows him to reaffirm his true self. Toward the end of the series, noticing Rihito's worries about his father's approval of his “marriage” with Hikaru, Hikaru's father tells Rihito that nothing is more essential than what Rihito himself wants. Having always been pessimistic and apologetic because he has felt guilty about being gay, Rihito decides, on his wedding day, not to apologize anymore but instead thanks his father for his not yet whole-hearted approval. The story can be read as a bildungsroman of Rihito and Hikaru. Unlike earlier BRM, where the protagonists must grow up

³ Rihito's name is from the German word Licht (light), and Hikaru means light in Japanese.

through a tragic separation, they accept themselves and live together with the support of their family and friends.

In 2019, *Momo to Manji* (*Momo and Manji*, 2017-: *Momo*) by Sawa Sakura won a Manga division prize at the 22nd Japan Media Arts Festival, sponsored by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, a government organization. The period manga narrates, with detailed descriptions of antique customs and objects, a male couple's poor but happy life at a corner of downtown Edo. The first issue is devoted to Momo, a former *kagama*, a boy prostitute, and how he came to serve in a *kagemachaya* (brothel) and met Manji, his lover and caretaker, after leaving the *kagemachaya*. On the 22nd Japan Media Arts Festival website, Taro Minamoto, a famous history manga writer, explains why *Momo* was selected. "BL, sodomy, *fujoshi*.⁴ It is time to stop using these keywords and eliminate discriminatory mocking prejudices of the past, isn't it? It is the primary reason I recommended this piece" (Minamoto 2019, translated by the author). He continues by stating that we should accept BL as "valuable" books. Therefore, this comment can be read as an appreciation of this individual piece as well as BL as a genre that constitutes an integral part of Japanese manga culture.

8 TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AND THE FIRST "GAY BOOM" OF THE 1990S

The current LGBT "Boom," so to speak, is recognized as the second boom following the first "gay boom" of the 1990s when gays and gay culture were frequently featured in the mainstream media. The first "gay boom" coincides with the appearance of BL manga as a newly emerging genre. In the 1990s, gay people were frequently featured in magazines, academic journals, TV programs, films, and TV dramas. It is said that the boom began with a feature article "Gay Renaissance 91" in the February 1991 issue of *CREA*, a famous women's magazine, which presents gays as ordinary people living with us and having the same rights as others but simultaneously being stylish with an excellent artistic sense. There is no single common explanation about what fueled the "gay boom," but various things, including gay lib in the 1970s, HIV/AIDS activism,

⁴ *Fujoshi* (rotten girls) is a derogatory term for girls and women who favor BL. It is used by both BL fans themselves and other people. For more detail, see Hester (2015).

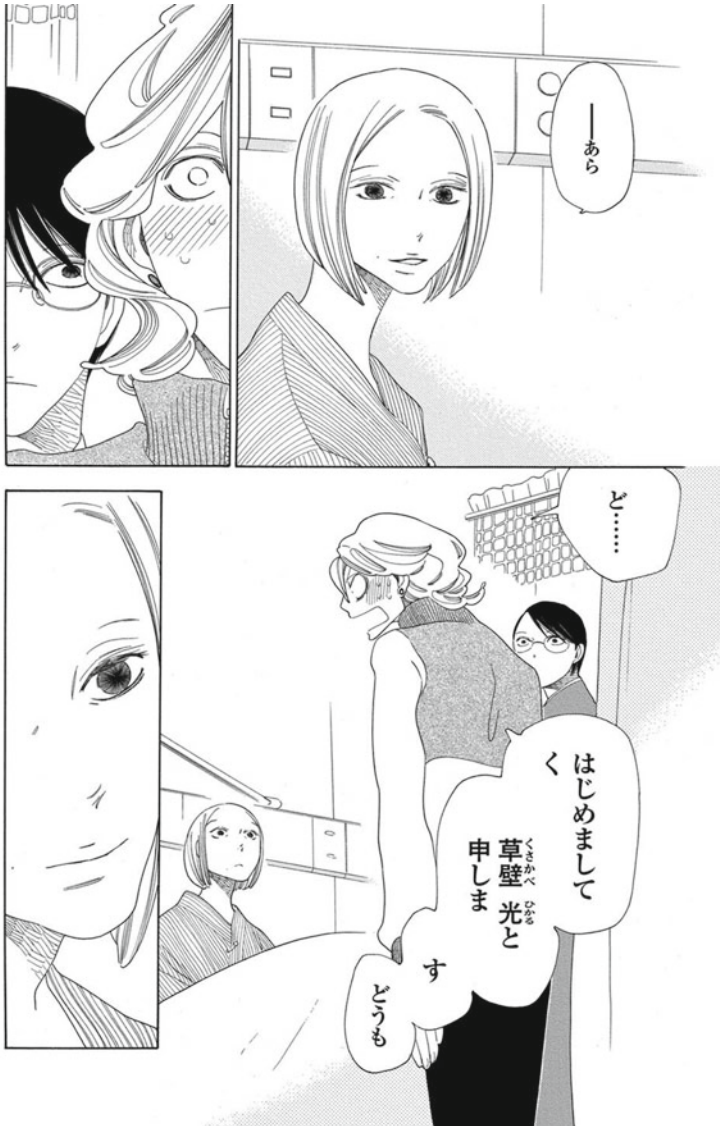


Fig. 2 *Doukyusei/ Sotsugyousei: Haru* (©Asumiko Nakamura/Akaneshinsha)



Fig. 2 (continued)

and the tragic death of famous gay creators due to AIDS in the 1980s, might have made people aware of gay people. In this context, the first Tokyo Lesbian & Gay Parade took place in 1994. According to Takashi Wakamatsu (2018), the “gay boom” occasioned debates on sexual identity, equal rights of sexual minorities, and questioned the ideas about gender and sexuality. However, next to these articles were sometimes sensational reports on gay bars that would satisfy the hollow curiosity of the reader and undermine the dignity of same-sex attracted people. It has also been pointed out that women’s magazines often created and disseminated the discourse that gay people could be good friends of women as they would understand the difficulties women face because of their marginalized positions. After the enforcement of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (between men and women) in 1986, the number of women who entered the workplaces that had been formerly considered men’s domains increased, and many women faced gender-related problems. Gay people were regarded as standing somewhere between men and women: they would understand men’s business and yet be sympathetic about women’s issues. Against this social backdrop, same-sex attracted people and their stories caught women’s attention (Ishida 2007a).

In literature and visual arts, the commercial success of British films in the 1980s, such as *Another Country* (1984) and *Maurice* (1987), might also have made same-sex attracted people more visible. Since the late 1980s, young Japanese writers have written stories with queer characters that could shake established gender norms. Hisao Hiruma’s novel *YES: YES: YES* about male prostitutes working in Shinjuku Nichome won Bungei-prize in 1989, an award deemed a gateway to success for new writers. In *Kitchen* (1988) by Banana Yoshimoto, the heroine stays with her male friend and his MtF mother working at a gay bar. Kaori Ekuni’s *Kirakira Hikaru* (*Twinkle*, 1991: *Kirakira*) is a story about the awkward and delicate relationship between an alcoholic wife, her gay husband, and his young boyfriend. Rieko Matsuura wrote a lesbian love story in *Natural Woman* (1987) and a woman whose big toe turns into a penis in *Oyayubi P no Shugyo Jidai* (*The Apprenticeship of Big Toe P*, 1993: *Oyayubi*).

Around the same time, films and TV dramas on male-male relations were also created. *Hatachi no Binetsu* (*A Touch of Fever*) and *Nagisa no Shindobaddo* (*Like Grains of Sand*), two of Ryosuke Hashiguchi’s films on isolated teenage gay boys’ love and friendship, were released in 1993 and 1995, respectively. Ekuni’s novel, *Kirakira*, which was made into a

movie in 1992, won several awards, and an original film about the friendship between a young woman and a middle-aged gay couple, *Okoge (Fag Hag)*, was screened at the second Tokyo International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 1992. A couple of TV dramas aired in the prime time, such as *Asunaro Hakusho (Hiba Arborvitae White Paper, 1993)*, based on Fumi Saimon's manga, in which a gay character dies prematurely, and *Dosokai (Alumni Reunion, 1993)*. The central theme of *Dosokai* is the anguish and painful struggle of a straight wife and her gay husband to build their relationship. Like in *Kirakira*, the heroine with a childhood trauma attempts to seek emotional stability by constructing a weak bond with her gay husband and his boyfriend, which causes her loneliness and dissatisfaction. The story is filled with homo- and transphobia, violence, rape, a tragic death, and the distress and resistance of men and women who cannot accept their own or partners' sexuality. The camerawork describes Shinjuku Nichome, a town lined with gay bars, as a dubious place. The story, full of stigma against same-sex relations, ends with an abrupt series of conversations and monologues by the main characters about gender and sexual diversity. The defensive and out-of-place accounts leave the audience with an impression that the creators received mixed reactions from the audience. And yet, they did not have the appropriate vocabulary to incorporate all their responses into the story.

It should be noted that these creations were independent of Yaoi/BL; that is, none of these pieces were based on BL manga. As described above, in the early 1990s, BL manga was still in the process of forming the newly emerging genre and had not been established in the mainstream media. Yet, it is interesting that many of these creations in the mainstream media also involved female authors or protagonists. Except for Hiruma's novel and the movies directed by Hashiguchi, who comes out that he is gay, many of the above stories are narrated from women's points of view. It shows a sharp contrast with films produced in other countries, such as *Another Country* (1985), *Maurice* (1987), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) that do not involve a straight woman's perspective. It might be no exaggeration to assume that at least some of the works depicted from a heroine's point of view conceived with women as the primary audiences to be widely accepted. By looking through the heroine's viewpoint, the audience would sympathize with her anguish more easily than that of her gay husband or friend, who occasionally troubles her. It is likely to

give the impression that same-sex relations are, in nature, problematic for people around them. The end result would be diluted—if not distorted or completely erased—voices of gay people.

Creations and coverages of gay motifs flourished across the media, but the “boom” has passed its peak quickly. Some directors, such as Hashiguchi, continued to create films focusing on gay characters. However, movies and dramas on same-sex relations and queer sexuality rapidly declined, at least in the mainstream media. Although these pieces left vivid impressions on the audiences, they did not stir serious debates or raise awareness of the rights of sexual minorities. Similarly, in the case of *Oyayubi*, it sold well and was frequently featured in media, but the central theme of which, a denial of phallicism and an interrogation of an established view of sexuality, was not widely discussed. Instead, what was found in talk shows were many beautiful cross-dressers complimented on their female-like appearances; they were asked disrespectful questions about their bodies and sexual orientation, or treated discriminatorily. A few of them had a chance to win their own shows, but for the most part, many of these cross-dressers appeared on media for a short period to satisfy the audience’s curiosity. Such misrepresentations would only reiterate the prejudice against same-sex attracted people: many audiences erroneously equated gay people with cross-dressers. Despite some serious attempts to recognize them as ordinary people living among us, as Wakamatsu (2018) concludes, the majority of the mainstream media represented gays as “different,” and the biased image was consumed to satisfy viewers’ curiosity.

9 TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AND THE SECOND “LGBT BOOM” OF THE 2010S AND ONWARD

Some 20 years after the first “gay boom,” LGBT rights and activism began to be reported in the mainstream media, presumably motivated by the global LGBTQ+ movement. According to Junko Mitsuhashi, the second “LGBT boom” started around 2012 with the articles in *Weekly Diamond* and *Toyo Keizai*, and the term came to be used broadly in 2015 (Yasuda 2017). This time, the media coverage engaged with legal and political recognition of LGBT people in relation to human rights and justice. In this second boom, many films and TV dramas apparently featuring LGBT people were again produced. Miho Suzuki (2019) calls

the phenomenon the “LGBT drama boom.” In the same article, Takehiko Yoshioka, a professor at Saga University, analyzes the visibility of LGBT activism, and the introduction of the certificate for same-sex partnership attracted people’s attention to LGBT issues and encouraged the creation of stories related to such motifs. On the other hand, Takashi Kimura, a TV drama critic, thinks that viewers who faced the hardness of everyday life might sympathize with the difficulties that LGBT people would experience—seeking mutual understanding and empathy (Suzuki 2019). It indicates that the viewers perceive LGBT people as ordinary, socialized, and facing difficulties that everyone can relate to, rather than exotic or distanced. Unlike films and dramas in the 1990s, that did not involve BL manga, several favorably received TV dramas and movies on the themes of same-sex relations have been created based on BL manga.

Some commentators are strict about the distinction between BL and BL-ish pieces. Mizoguchi (2015) determines that only the pieces released in one of the magazines specializing in BL should be called BL. Fujimoto’s (2019) position, instead, seems to be more relaxed when discussing the impacts of *Ossan’s Love* (*Middle-aged Man’s Love*, 2018: *Ossan*), a TV drama independent from BL in an anthology about BL. While Mizoguchi’s standpoint seems straightforward and reasonable, there is, at the same time, an ambiguity that remains with categorization. Setona Mizushiro’s *Kyuso wa Cheese no Yume wo Miru* (*The Cornered Mouse Dreams of Cheese*, 2006; 2020: *Kyuso*), with close descriptions of male-male intimate contacts, was published in a non-BL magazine, but it was ranked first in BL manga ranking in 2010. Yoshinaga, the author of BL-ish *Kinou Nani Tabeta?* (*What Did You Eat?* 2007–: *Kinou*), states that although *Kinou* was published in a comic magazine for young men, she wished to publish it in one of the BL magazines (Mizoguchi 2017). She states that even if it had been published in one of the BL magazines, she would have written the story in the same way, assumingly without heavy sexual descriptions.⁵ Bearing categorization ambiguity in mind, this chapter then takes a more relaxed position and analyzes both BL and BL-ish transmedia storytelling.

⁵ According to Yoshinaga, the ages of the main characters, in their forties, were considered a little too old, and some of the topics—including illness and caring for aging parents—were deemed to harsh and realistic for BL manga that editors believed should give joy to readers (Mizoguchi 2017).

From the mid-2010s to early 2020s, there have been hit films and TV dramas about male-male relations or MtF transgender. *Karera ga Honki de Amutokiwa* (*Close-Knit: Karera*) is a social problem film, released in 2017, about a girl living with a man and a transgender woman, dealing with LGBT, familial relations, and child neglect issues with sensitive character descriptions. The first series of *Ossan* was aired in 2018 as a midnight drama and it won the Tokyo Drama Award 2018. The second series was broadcast in 2019 and then made into a movie in the same year. Also in 2019, a TV drama *Kinou* based on Yoshinaga's manga was made into a smash hit as a midnight drama and also into a live-action film in 2021 that was ranked third when it was released (*Asahi Shinbun* 2021). In 2020, *Kyuso* became a live-action film directed by Isao Yukisada, a multi-awarded filmmaker, starring two famous male actors.

As in the 1990s, female creators played central roles in these creations again.⁶ *Karera* was written and directed by Naoko Ogiue, a female movie director, and the producers of the *Ossan* series were women. The drama series and the movie of *Kinou* were scripted by Naoko Adachi, one of the most celebrated female scriptwriters, awarded by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2021. And the original manga *Kyuso* was written by Mizushiro, a popular girls' manga writer.⁷

The success of these films and dramas could be attributed to the ways same-sex relations are represented and the marketing strategy that focuses on women as the primary viewers. Unlike the movies and dramas created in the 1990s, same-sex ties tend to be depicted as less stigmatized in the new films and dramas. First, a rhetorical device, where the audience sees the dramas through a cisfemale heroine's eyes, disappeared:

⁶ There were also several live-action films and TV dramas based on manga or novels written by male authors who came were gay; these productions had good reputations. Among them were *Ototo no Otto* (*My Brother's Husband*, 2018) adapted from a multi-awarded manga with the same title by Gengoroh Tagame (2014–2019); also a TV drama *Fujoshi Ukkari Gay ni Kokuru* (*Fujoshi Asks a Gay Out Thoughtlessly*, 2019) and a movie *Kanojo ga Sukina Mono wa* (*Who She Loves*: 2021), both based on a novel, *Kanojo ga Sukina Mono wa Homo deatte Boku dewanai* (*Who She Loves Is a Gay, Not Me*, 2018) written by Naoto Asahara were among them.

⁷ If we categorize these pieces according to Horii and Mori (2020), *Karera*, focusing on social and familial issues, would be a non-BL film, and *Ossan* and *Kinou*, both of which do not involve sex scenes, would be BL-ish. *Kyuso* could be BL or BL-ish; despite its intense descriptions of male-male physical encounters as in many other BL manga, it could be categorized as BL-ish since this manga appeared in a ladies' manga magazine.

instead, same-sex attracted characters become the protagonists. Accordingly, fake marriage and the conflicts and distress between the heroine and her gay husband also disappeared. Without the heroine's viewpoints, the stories become more straightforward and allow the audience to sympathize with the main male characters. Other motifs disappearing from the recent films and dramas are gloomy elements long (incorrectly) associated with homosexuality—prostitution, traumas, and violence. Instead, same-sex relations are situated in everyday lives in the same way as heterosexual relations. Focusing on the everyday experiences of the main characters, very common emotions and feelings emerge, such as struggles to understand one's partner, regrets for uttering the words that one should not have said, or remorse for remaining silent. The audience is reminded that emotions are universal. In an interview, Koji Tokuo, the scriptwriter of *Ossan*, says: "The starting point was to make a drama about what it means to love the person in front of you" (Minato and Yada 2018, translated by the author).

Yukisada, the director of *Kyuso*, recalls that to refrain from sensationalism, they removed terms like LGBT or BL from their proposal but simply highlighted a love story that anyone can relate to. The tale of *Kyuso* progresses with the entangled emotional turmoil of the couple—Imagase and Kyoichi. At the same time, male-male sex scenes are shown as a part of the natural development of their relationship. As a heterosexual male director, Yukisada admits that he strived to understand the protagonists. After shooting the movie, he hoped it would reach the audience—regardless of their sexual orientation—and help them understand and sympathize with the characters (Tatsuta 2021). Large audiences have watched *Kyuso's* film because it is available online. Yukisada welcomes the comments of male viewers, who hesitated to go to the movie theater but watched it online to find it unmistakably a love story. The intricate and painful relationship between Kyoichi and Imagase reminds the audience of the happiness and pains they themselves had in their romantic relations (Figs. 3 and 4).

Kimou was particularly successful with its focus on portraying a middle-aged same-sex couple's everyday conversations at dinner, for instance, on recipes for home-cooked meals. The topic gained the interest of middle-aged women. Several recipe books were also published with images and interviews of the actors who played the main characters. The drama shows selected episodes from the original manga, where the events related to their jobs fade away. On the other hand, with an explicit denial of ageism,



Fig. 3 *Kyuso wa Cheese no Yume wo Miru* (© Setona Mizushiro/Shogakukan)

their family issues, such as aging parents' care and worries about their own lives after retirement, are highlighted, allowing middle-aged female viewers to relate to the characters. Of course, the relationship with parents might seem different between same-sex and heterosexual couples. Same-sex attracted people usually start with uncovering their sexual orientation, which, in many cases, upsets their parents. In addition, it is generally more challenging to get approval and support from their family for their conjugation. Both manga and drama versions of *Kimono* patiently locate same-sex love within the social network of the people around them. They describe the long trajectory of Shiro, the protagonist, in detail as he strives to have his old parents understand his sexual orientation and relationship with his partner. Another interesting observation is that a character called Wataru is given the nickname Gilbert, one of the main characters of *Kaze* and prototype of an early BRM character. Like the original Gilbert, Wataru makes unreasonable demands and troubles his partner. Reciting a passage about strawberry shortcake and unconditional love from *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami, Wataru seeks his partner's



Fig. 4 *Kysuo wa Cheese no Yume wo Miru* (©水城せとな・小学館/映画『窮鼠はチーズの夢を見る』製作委員会)

full attention and pressures him to fulfill his unpredictable and burgeoning demands. His behavior resembles that of Gilbert, who ends up having a premature tragic death; however, Wataru is a day trader in his thirties who knows the meaning of his odd behavior and is given a safe space

where he can comfortably live with his partner. Depicting Wataru as an homage and parody of an early tragic BRM prototype, *Kinou* embraces Wataru/Gilbert in their gentle, peaceful world and casts off the old spell (Figs. 5 and 6).

While many characters support same-sex relations and transgender in recent hit films and dramas, not everyone understands them, as is shown in *Kinou* and *Kyuso*. There is also emotional turmoil in accepting their sexual orientation and in gaining the understanding of their family and



Fig. 5 *Kinou Nani Tabeta?* (©Fumi Yoshinaga/Kodansha)



Fig. 6 *Kinou Nani Tabeta?* (©“What Did You Eat Yesterday?” Film Partners)

friends. Furthermore, some characters leave their hetero- or bisexual boyfriend since they hope for their partners to have a happy “ordinary” life—to have a heterosexual relationship and become a father. BL manga might have helped female readers escape patriarchal expectations that impose family and reproductive obligations onto women, but since the dawn of BRM, the creators have been sharp enough to portray male characters equally trapped in the patriarchal structure. The characters are caught in their familial obligation and business (including Yakuza), religion, and nation-state. More recently, some writers, such as Yoshinaga (2007–) and Nakamura (2008–2020), have incorporated episodes related to the discriminative legal system that does not recognize same-sex marriage. The Civil Code that controls citizens’ conjugation and reproduction might be a supreme form of a patriarchal structure. These stories critique the existing discriminative legal and political system, and they envision the possibility of same-sex couples enjoying equal rights with heterosexual couples.

10 ISSUES CONCERNING REPRESENTATION

As discussed above, some BL writers, such as Nakamura, Yoneda, and Yoshinaga, have reflected on their creations and attempted to incorporate views and criticism from gay people into their products. Nonetheless, Ishida (2007b) maintains that many BL creators/readers' attitudes toward the Yaoi debate responded to the gay community of the 1990s and included such comments as: "leave us alone because our imaginary characters are different from real gay people" (translated by the author). As BL writers and readers remark, same-sex relations with a sense of taboo and numerous obstacles can increase the "purenness" of the love story and tingling sensations among readers. Ishida points out the problems with their arguments, claiming that the literary device and descriptions of male-male relations adopted in Yaoi/BL manga are essentially representational appropriation of the "Other." Many BL writers and readers would believe their "gay" characters are separable from real gay people and continue to portray same-sex relations in the same pattern, for example, *seme-uke* relations and rape as a representation of passionate affection, which does not reflect the actuality of living gay people. Ishida interrogates the writers' discourse by questioning if it is possible and viable to divorce represented/real gays.⁸ As numerous scholars in critical media studies and media literacy, such as Robert M. Entman (1994), Thomas E. Ford (1997) and Dana Mastro (2015) have shown, the stereotyped (mis)representations would lead to a "false cognitions within audiences" (Entman 1994 p. 509) and a mix-up of represented/real people especially from minority groups. Furthermore, Srividya Ramasubramanian's research (2011) revealed that exposure to stereotypical or counter-stereotypical representations of a group of people in entertainment genres could yield certain beliefs and attitudes among viewers—either prejudiced or supportive—towards those people. As long as there are people who resemble the ones depicted in the manga, films, or other popular culture forms, it can confuse and, thereby, marginalize the group of people by disseminating erroneous images.

⁸ Ishida (2007b) is careful not to interrogate the attitudes of BL writers/readers single-mindedly. He simultaneously suspects the validity of the "scientific" inquiry of Yaoi/BL drawing on the relations between Western enlightenment and colonialism. Ishida also mentions the possibility of psychoanalysis of Yaoi/BL and then argues that a *seme-uke* couple might be indeed a split *self* and the union of *seme-uke* represents the acceptance of the readers' femininity.

Such confusion is already found among creators and scholars new to the genre. Yoshioka attributes *Kinou's* success to their strategy, stating, "The drama did not focus too much on LGBT issues, but rather depicted their relationship regarding diversity, which probably resonated with viewers. The word LGBT tends to be discussed with a heavy focus and a furrowed brow, but this drama, set in everyday life around a dining table, made us find love can be depicted in such a lighthearted way" (Suzuki 2019, translated by the author). Yoshioka's analysis sounds persuasive in the part where he mentions that the audiences might have favored the drama in a not too severe but relatively carefree tone without addressing the power relations and structural inequality that involve all viewers. Still, a question arises about the extent to which we should relate a piece like *Kinou* to LGBT issues in the first place.

Yukisada, the director of *Kyuso* film, states in an interview that while acknowledging heterosexual couples would follow a similar emotional trajectory, the male-male love story in *Kyuso* became more alluring, and their relations came to seem "purer" than that of heterosexual couples (Tatsuta 2021). It is highlighted in the scene where Kyoichi's ex-girlfriend pressed him to choose between Imagase and herself. To convince him to make a choice that aligns with the "norm," she resorts to man/woman and homo/heterosexual dichotomy. It contrasts with Imagase's attitude described throughout the story that Kyoichi is the only person he has been seeking for. Yukisada believes that the essence of love could be more crystalized in same-sex relations. Interestingly, his remarks resonate with Yaoi/BL creators/readers. Despite their earlier avoidance of sensationalism evoked by such terms as LGBT or BL, the director still shares the same sentiments with many Yaoi/BL creators/readers that same-sex romance is somehow different and purer than the dull, ordinary heterosexual relationships.

An interesting "twist" cannot be overlooked between the original *Kyuso* manga and the film. When asked about his thought on the visibility of LGBT and diversity in contemporary filmmaking, Yukisada answered that creating a movie means understanding the issue. Drawing on Nagisa Oshima, he claims that the director's beliefs and perceptions manifest in the process of creation itself. In other words, how to produce it and what motivates the filmmaking represent the creator's commitment. It attests to how his beliefs and perceptions endorsed his filmmaking. Yukisada states that when he shot *Go*, a multi-award-winning film based on Kazuki Kaneshiro's semi-autobiographical novel, he decided to be committed and

he paralleled that experience with the one he had when creating *Kyuso* (Tatsuta 2021). Again, it would be debatable whether the creation of *Go* and *Kyuso* can be considered comparable in terms of the representations of “minorities.” In the case of *Go*, where the family tensions and a complicated identity of a young Korean man living in Japan are autobiographically narrated, we could easily presume that the filmmaking should have required the director’s commitment. However, the original manga *Kyuso* is about imaginary male-male associations written by a female writer to entertain predominantly heterosexual female readers. Mizushiro (2020) mentions that when planning the story, she, as a heterosexual woman, pictured how she would react if an attractive woman approached her. Then she incorporated the emotions and feelings she had in her past heterosexual romantic relations. If we suppose that the purpose of the original manga is not to precisely describe the feelings and situations gay people have in their lives or convey a sort of message, in that case, it remains ambiguous to whom and how the movie creators can address LGBT issues. It should be underscored that Mizushiro, Yoshinaga, and Yukisada are all indisputably talented creators who have been producing numerous great human dramas: *Kyuso* weaves a tense, charming story that deliberately describes the joys and sorrows of love and Yoshinaga is known for including what she has learned from gay communities and cautiously presenting realistic descriptions with social contexts (Yoshinaga 2013). In addition, it is futile to automatically reject fiction written by authors who are not in the same position as the main characters. Many authors have created masterpieces even though they share nothing with the protagonists. While disagreeing with the simplistic dichotomy, we should still be careful not to naively parallel what is depicted in BL and the emotions and experiences that same-sex attracted people have in real life. There is a vast difference between making use of same-sex relations as a rhetorical device to increase the pureness and value of love from presenting LGBT issues with the recognition of the existing power relations associated with the representation of others.

Recently, many live-action movies and dramas based on manga have been created in Japan. BL and BL-ish manga is not an exception. With the expansion of transmedia storytelling, BL extends where various people are engaged, and the audience size is now incomparable. Moreover, numerous e-books, films, and dramas with dubbing technologies have been available online across national borders. As shown in the survey mentioned above, a more significant number of people see and hear about

same-sex relations in films and TV dramas than in manga. It indicates that the majority of people who encounter movies and dramas based on BL do not share the rules and claims of many BL writers about represented/real gays being considered unrelated. Most viewers should understand that representation and reality are not the same. However, as the comment by Yukisada reveals, even though the BL community takes it for granted that representation and reality are dissociated, the growing transmedia storytelling would easily bring about confusion and misrepresentation among both creators and audiences, which could have an unfavorable impact on the social impressions about living same-sex attracted people.

11 CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed the evolution of BRM/Yaoi/BL as a distinct genre, as well as the recent proliferating transmedia storytelling and the discourse with regard to the rising LGBT awareness. Creators across media boundaries take advantage of the potential of BL to produce new forms of narratives. It is unpredictable to what extent BL can become a shared space where people from various fields can pursue alternative gender/sexuality and work together to produce new representations without exploiting and dominating a group of people. The participation of creators from diverse fields might give occasion to positive and productive outcomes. On the other hand, there is also a considerable risk of misrepresentation if creators simply equate representations in BL with realities of gay people and as related to LGBT issues. It does not mean, however, that BL manga always fails to address LGBT issues. With the diverse standpoints of the authors, the extent to which each piece reflects the voices and experiences of gay people varies. Yet, it should be underscored that transmedia storytelling based on BL requires careful scrutiny to identify whether an individual work represents a sheer imaginary story or the actuality of living gay people, which would shape the way creators commit to the work and the kinds of representations.

As the earlier Yaoi community demonstrated, the flipped gaze/gazed relation along gender lines and close communications between readers/creators empowered and encouraged teenage girls to actively participate in the creation of their own discourses on gender/sexuality. Open and continued dialogue among creators and with communities represented in the creations may contribute to the further exploration

of new representations that could help liberate both creators and those who are represented.

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Creating the Body Beautiful Cosplay: Crossdressing, Cosplay, and Hyper Femininity/Hyper Masculinity

Emerald L. King

Keep your eye on the beautiful magical girl as they sashay through the crowd, their sparkly platform heels and towering mauve wig making them stand heads taller above a sea of colored hair. Note how their frothy white skirts bob along in the crowd like the jelly fish they are modeled on. A similarly dressed brunette floats along behind them, pink skirts in motion. Both of their diamante studded dresses glisten in the scorching Nagoya sun as they walk from the searing heat of a photo shoot to the shade offered by the historical buildings of the Meiji-Mura architectural park.¹ The two hyper feminine figures are the United States representatives at the 2019 World Cosplay Summit (WCS) held in Japan. Joshua Hart and Garnet Runestar (Garnet Hart Designs) would win the Bioré makeup award and second place overall at the 2019 WCS finals—the last to be held in person before COVID-19. On this particular day, at the

¹ @garnethart_costumiers, 31 July 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B0k3K4cDG_N/.

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Meiji-Mura photo shooting² event, the pair were dressed as Kuranosuke “Kurako” Koibuchi and Kurashita Tsukimi from *Princess Jellyfish* (*Kurage-hime*, manga 2007–2017). Although we might talk about Hart’s frilly white Kurako outfit in terms of crossdressing or “crossplay,” this chapter will, instead, focus on the processes that cosplay practitioners, regardless of their gender, undergo to create hyper feminine and hyper masculine cosplay costumes.

Drawing on cosplay studies and theories of 2.5D, I will explore how cosplayers create hyper feminine and/or hyper masculine silhouettes. In addition to scholarly sources, this chapter will also make use of the commentary on gender, race, and body type posted by cosplay practitioners on public, global social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter in order to understand what constitutes the “perfect” or ideal cosplay body—if, indeed, such a thing exists. Most Anglophone articles on cosplay give a definition of “cosplay” as a portmanteau of “costume” and “play.” A. Luxx Mishou (2021, p. 1) notes that many scholars focus on the PLAY part of cosplay.³ This chapter, instead, focuses on the COSTUMES made and worn by cosplay practitioners around the world. In addition to the sources mentioned above, this discussion is also informed by personal observations as a volunteer Japanese to English translator and interpreter at the WCS finals in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2021. Rather than asking why these cosplayers dress up as their favorite characters from popular culture, the focus here will be on examining the ways in which cosplayers create their costumes. While many cosplay practitioners buy or commission their garments from online stores, the focus here is on cosplayers who create their own costumes for the purpose of taking part in competitions. This chapter will explore how cosplay practitioners sculpt the body beautiful cosplay and what the challenges may be in portraying in 2D superheroes and magical girls in a 2.5D or 3D reality.

² I am using the international English term here, despite the fact that it can appear jarring to some native English speakers. It is interesting to note that many photography terms come from shooting and hunting.

³ See also, for example, Winge (2019), Mountfort et al. (2018), and Norris and Bainbridge (2009).

1 TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Before we begin, I would like to outline my use of terms such as “cosplay” and “crossplay,” as well as “hyper femininity” and “hyper masculinity.” The definition of cosplay that I use in my work focuses chiefly on costumes constructed by their wearers for the purpose of cosplay competitions. These hand-constructed, fan-made costumes are based on pre-existing anime, game, manga, film, or literary characters, often of Japanese origin rather than original (OC) designs or Japanese street fashions such as lolita and other kawaii (cute) styles (note the use of a lower case “l” for lolita. This is the preferred spelling by Anglophone followers of lolita fashion to differentiate from Lolita-fetish and Nabakov’s novel). This narrow definition of cosplay is somewhat artificial and, by current usage within global fandom communities, almost obsolete given that most current English language usage of “cosplay” covers any fancy dress costume, including original characters and Western origin comics, while current Japanese language usage of the term also covers Halloween style costumes and erotic lingerie style costumes. It should be noted that as in any field, there is a delay between what is happening in the global world of cosplay and what is being published by cosplay scholars. Several of the terms that are being used by academics are no longer used by cosplayers themselves or have meanings that have shifted. For example, rather than refer to a “cosplayer,” I often use “cosplay practitioners” throughout my work—a term that has never been adopted by cosplayers themselves.

Speakers of International or European English will often use “coser.” In Japan, “*reiya*” (a pun on the “layers” of a costume as well as a short form of cosplayer) has become widespread among cosplayers (see, e.g., Hoff 2012, pp. 149–161). It is interesting to note that both of these terms place emphasis on the importance of “costume” to the identity of “cosplayer.” Further, it should be noted that just as cosplay differs from place to place, the meaning of the word itself differs from UK English to US English to Australian English to international English. As Amalia Andini points out, most cosplay studies focus on Western societies (Andini 2018, p. 3) opening the door for assumptions that cosplay and its practitioners are universal (see also Yamato 2020). However, this is not the case—Chinese cosplay focuses on long form skirts and bought costumes (Ruan 2018, p. 210; Jacobs 2013, p. 27); cosplay in America seems to

embrace “OC” or Original Character as well as published or licensed characters, while this is vanishingly rare in Australia. By focusing on an event such as the World Cosplay Summit, which brings together cosplay practitioners from over forty countries,⁴ intermixing forty-plus languages and cultures, it is possible to view what cosplay is at a global and international level. This can be seen in the shift that took place in 2015 when participants were encouraged to perform the championship skits in their native language (with simultaneous or pre-recorded translation and interpretation into English and Japanese) in order to illustrate the global nature of cosplay.⁵

In the same way that cosplay practitioners have developed words such as “coser” or “*reiya*” from “cosplayer,” terms such as “crossplay” to describe crossdressing while in cosplay has fallen out of favor. While these terms are still used, it is becoming more evident that many cosplay practitioners view crossplay or crossdressing as just another part of cosplay. As early as 2009, a survey of Australian cosplay practitioners showed that crossdressing was seen as a skillset to be learned and perfected, akin to wig styling, armor making, or pattern drafting (see, e.g., King 2019a, pp. 279–288). As the Australian cosplayer Wirru who was one half of the 2019 WCS championship winning team noted in response to a question about who his favorite crossplayer was via Instagram stories in 2019: “[to be honest] they’re all just cosplayers.”⁶

Cosplay studies scholars working on “crossplay” often speak of their research participants in terms of F2M or M2F (female to male or male to female) cosplay (see, e.g., Mishou 2021, and Andini 2018, pp. 89–110).

⁴ World Cosplay Summit, “About,” 2021, <https://www.worldcosplaysummit.jp/en/about/> (accessed 15 July 2021).

⁵ See World Cosplay Summit, “Regulations,” 2015, <http://www.worldcosplaysummit.jp/en/about/regulations.html> (accessed 30 September 2015); For more on languages at the World Cosplay Summit see Emerald L. King, “Tailored Translations—Translating and Transporting Cosplay Costumes Across Texts, Cultures, and Dimensions,” *Signata: Annales des sémiotiques/Annals of Semiotics* 7 (2016): pp. 361–376, <https://journals.openedition.org/signata/1243>.

⁶ @amenokitaro, Instagram stories, 17 May 2019, <https://instagram.com/amenokitarou>.

Abbreviations such as FTM and MTF have been used by transgender individuals since at least the 1990s to help denote or define their transition.⁷ While some cosplay practitioners are trans, not all are. Similarly, not all trans-cosplayers are out to their family and friends (and indeed it might not be safe for them to be “out” outside of a cosplay environment). As a result, I would prefer to avoid such terms. Rather, I use Japanese terms such as *josō* (wearing women’s clothes) and *dansō* (wearing men’s clothes). As my cosplay research is heavily focused on Japanese cosplay (by which I mean costumes based on Japanese source materials such as anime, manga, and computer games; cosplay performed in Japan; and cosplay done by Japanese *reiya*), this usage of terms feels appropriate.

Throughout this chapter, crossdressing is used to critique theatrical and performance modes of dressing rather than to interrogate lifestyle choices or cultural modes of dress. Further, while sexuality and queerness in cosplay is an area that needs further work,⁸ I am less interested in the gender and sexuality of the cosplay practitioners than I am in hyper-real genders they portray in costume. Gender is, as Judith Butler (1999, p. 179) suggests, something that one does rather than something that one is. Gender is “constructed and never static,” meaning that crossdressing can provide a platform for temporary liberation from pre-established orders (Loke 2016, p. 13). Cosplay spaces then become a site of play and experimentation where gender identities can be tried on and experienced, or perfected and later utilized in everyday life. It would also be possible here to include terms such as “genderbending” or “Rule 63,” where cosplay practitioners swap the gender of a character to one that aligns with their own gender identity. As *The CON-fidential*, an online magazine written by US cosplayers, points out, much of the discussion around crossplay focuses on binary genders rather than including non-binary and a-gender cosplayers.⁹ While this chapter will also focus on cosplaying the binary, I will talk about female and femme presenting cosplayers and male and masculine presenting cosplayers in an attempt, however flawed, to

⁷ See, for example, Christopher Kyrzan and Jeff Walsh. “The !OutProud! Internet Survey of Queer and Questioning Youth, August to October 1997” Outproud, National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth *Oasis Magazine* (1998).

⁸ Excellent works that do exist include: Mishou (2021) and Tompkins (2019), <http://doi.org/10.3983/twc.201921459>.

⁹ “What Is Crossplay?” *The CON-Fidential*, 24 April 2019, <https://www.con-fidential.com/articles-1/2019/4/3/what-is-crossplay> (accessed April 6, 2022).

be inclusive. Where terms such as “crossplay” are useful, however, is in emphasizing that the act is only a temporary swap—a moment of “play” (King 2019b, pp. 233–260).

Cosplay can further be defined in terms of 2.5-dimensional fandom (2.5D) and space. As Akiko Sugawa-Shimida (2020, pp. 124–139) points out:

In recent years, the term “2.5-dimension (*ni-ten-go jigen*)” has gained much attention within popular culture studies. The term “2.5 *jigen*” roughly means the space between the two-dimensional (fictional space where our imaginations and fantasy work) and the three-dimensional (reality where we physically exist).

Sugawa-Shimida (2020, pp. 41–47) further defines 2.5D as “cultural practices which reproduce the fictional space of contemporary popular cultural products (such as manga, anime, and videogames) along with the fans’ interplay between the real and fictional spaces.” Cosplay can be located as part of the 2.5D in that it usually only takes place in a certain zone or space—a liminal moment between the 2D page and the real world.

In 2013, Katrien Jacobs proposed that cosplay and related activities take place within a set “zone”:

As a theory of liminality suggests, the Cosplay zone is a space of fan-driven entertainment and identity transgression that involves strict boundary-policing by authorities and by peer groups themselves. [...] At the same time, the Cosplay zone offers access to fringe venues, as well as support and tolerance between these ‘misfits’ and queer activism, which is where the potential for social change is located. (Jacobs 2013, pp. 22–24)

In my own work, I have written on the links between *shōjo* (“girlhood”) space, as theorized by Honda Masuko, and cosplay (see King 2016, 2019b). Honda speaks of girlhood as taking place in a liminal “bower” where delicate hot house flowers are able to bloom freely among “ribbons, frills or even, lyrical word chains [which] flutter in the breeze as symbols of girlhood” (Masuko 2010, pp. 19–37). Within this space, girlhood is allowed to bloom and develop unrestrained by societal restrictions or demands, until the girl is ready to emerge into adulthood. The *shōjo* space can subsequently be revisited or remembered, even after leaving. While *shōjo* can be translated as “girl” in this context, it is most often

used to refer to fiction products such as *shōjo* manga, anime, literature, and games with a specific intended girl audience and consumer base. *Shōjo* scholars such as Helen Kilpatrick (2013) pair the work of Honda with Eiri Takahara's (1999) concept of "girl consciousness." Takahara proposes that having the consciousness of a girl while consuming and indulging in *shōjo* fiction inspires a freedom where "desires and wishes in the actual world can be satisfied through the subject's imaginative process" (1999, p. 17; Kilpatrick's translation 2013, p. 2). Most importantly for our purposes, Takahara's feeling of a girl is not restricted to ciswomen and girls, rather, such girlishness is open to anyone who seeks escape from "socially imposed chains such as daughterhood, wifehood, motherhood, boyhood, manhood and so on" (Takahara 1999, p. 10).

Cosplayers in various communities around the world and online create and negotiate spaces where they are able to cosplay the characters that they love, regardless of age, skin color, and, perhaps most importantly, gender. It should be noted, however, that issues of race, skin color and black/yellow/white face in cosplay are too complex to be discussed in depth here but require further study. This notwithstanding, for the majority of cosplayers, dressing as the favorite character is more important than questions of gender. As Jacobs notes, "the liminal zone of Cosplayers is indeed also a by-product of capitalism which offers a type of gender play that can be easily cast aside and forgotten" (Jacobs 2013, p. 31).

In Sugawa's 2.5-dimension, Jacobs's "zone," and the *shōjo* space, cosplay only occurs safely and successfully in a set, negotiated, and clearly defined location: the frame of a camera lens, the set of a photography shoot, the masquerade floor of a popular culture convention, the cosplay competition stage, and select social media platforms such as Cure World Cosplay, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and DeviantArt. Such control is also evident in real world cosplay spaces: conventions and popular events police where and how cosplay practitioners are allowed to wear their costumes,¹⁰ and these are clearly indicated in the rules of cosplay competitions and the gatekeeping deployed by users in online fandom spaces. Cosplay spaces then become a site of play and experimentation where

¹⁰ See, for example, Devan Baird, "What It Takes to Be a Cosplayer at Comiket," *Tokyo Cheapo*, 16 August 2016, <https://tokyocheapo.com/lifestyle/how-to-comiket-cosplayer/> (accessed January 2018); "'No Low Angles!' and Other Comiket Cosplay Photography Rules," *Sora News 24*, 30 December 2014, <https://en.rocketnews24.com/2014/12/30/no-low-angles-and-other-comiket-cosplay-photography-rules/> (accessed December 2015).

gender identities can be tried on and experienced or perfected and later utilized in everyday life.

The costumes worn in these spaces often enhance and exaggerate the femininity and masculinity of the character that is being portrayed. In this way, cosplay silhouettes become hyper feminized and hyper masculinized. I will use the terms hyper femininity and hyper masculinity to indicate stereotypical expectations of “idealized” masculinity and femininity such as muscles, curves, and jawlines as per the character designs of cartoons and comic books. While speech and gesture are also a factor in the performance of masculinity or femininity the focus here is on costuming and makeup. In 1984, Donald L. Mosher and Mark Sirkin developed the Hypermasculinity Inventory to measure men’s adoption of a “macho” personality style (McKelvie and Gold 1994). This index measures three factors: a callous sexual attitude toward women, a belief that violence is manly, and the experience of danger as exciting (Mosher and Sirkin 1984). In 1991, Sarah K. Murnen and Donn Byrne designed the Hyperfemininity Scale to identify women who present an extreme version of the traditional female gender role. Murnen and Byrne described the hyperfeminine woman in terms of relationships with men, the use of sex to control relationships (romantic or otherwise), and the preference for “traditional” male behavior in partners (McKelvie and Gold 1994, pp. 219–228). These definitions locate hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity within predominately heteronormative relationships and sexual roles. However, I am interested not in sexual attitudes but in gender performance that does not necessarily hinge on any relationship to another individual but rather on an embodied shape or form. In other words, my interest lies in the exaggerated performance inherent in the word “hyper” rather than “femininity” or “masculinity.” Hyper femininity and hyper masculinity in cosplay should be thought of in terms of an idealized body type where, in most cases, hyper feminine bodies have slender limbs, small waists, and large breasts, and hyper masculine bodies have large muscles, square jawlines, and narrow hips (Figs. 1 and 2).

2 2.5D EN TRAVESTI

En travesti is a theatrical term which denotes the performance of a character by a performer of the opposite gender. The term has its roots in opera, plays, and ballet and it builds on the long tradition of



Fig. 1 The author dressed as Gladio from *Final Fantasy XV* (Costume by Emerald L. King; photography and editing by Nyxling Photography/Harley Bird)

banning women from the stage in both European and Japanese theatrical productions including Jacobean theater, *castrati* opera, kabuki, noh, and bunraku puppetry. It could also be applied to drag or pantomime and by extension, cosplay. The term is most likely a bastardization of the French *travistiv*, disguise (Speake and LaFlaur 1999), or perhaps of the Italian



Fig. 2 The author dressed as Tamamo no Mae from *Warriors Orochi* (Costume by Emerald L. King; photography and editing by Fiathriel)

travestire, which has the same meaning, to disguise or rather to transform one's appearance by dressing up. There are also links to the term "travesty"—a parody or imitation.

In 2009, Craig Norris and Jason Bainbridge proposed that "unlike other fannish dressing-up [such as wearing merchandise or pins], cosplay is closer to drag" (n.p). Frenchy Lunning (2011) and Nicolle Lamerichs (2011) also made similar suggestions in their early cosplay scholarship. I prefer to think of cosplay in terms of pantomime, particularly as

pantomime has space for beautiful boys in the figure of the Principal Boy and humorous parody, satire, and drag in the form of the Dame. Shirley Ardener (2005, p. 120) provides two descriptions of British pantomime from the 1970s and the 1990s:

A romantically farcical fairy tale set to music, peopled with men dressed as women, women dressed as men, humans dressed as animals and packed with spectacle and slap stick, topical jokes and old chestnuts, community singing and audience participation.

A bewildering mix of comedy, “drag,” audience participation and topical jokes. In the panto, the man dressed as a woman is, of course, known as a Dame, while the young woman who dresses like a young man is The Principal Boy.

This description of pantomime could also be applied to cosplay competition skits such as those performed at the WCS finals. For WCS competitors perform (either on live on stage or, in 2021 and 2022, on film) a two minute and forty second skit usually with a vocal track, soundtrack, and video background. These skits may reference popular culture and fandom in-jokes and often include martial arts, tragic love stories, costume changes, and magic or illusion.

While there is some crossover with makeup techniques and parody between drag and cosplay, as Rachel Leng (2013, p. 89) asserts, “[many] cosplayers insist that crossplay is distinct from drag.” Further, as shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has become more mainstream, there is a persistent notion that “drag queens [...] typically connotes men crossdressing as an exhibition of self-identity” (Leng 2013, p. 90). This notion erases the performances of women, transmen, transwomen, a-gender, and non-binary individuals who also perform in drag as drag kings, faux-queens, and practitioners of bio-drag, not to mention non-binary and genderfluid queens and kings. Although drag queens have been embraced by a mainstream consciousness, the same cannot be said for their drag king brothers and other siblings. Further, numerous comments made by *RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* (2009 onwards) host RuPaul over the years have also led to trans and non-binary practitioners of drag being excluded from mainstream

ideas of drag and crossdressing.¹¹ To make drag the “point from which all discussion of crossdressing follows simply reinstates the presumption of the male as universal” (Ferris 1993, p. 6).

Much of the focus of crossdressing, particularly in performance studies of stage and screen, is on men wearing dresses. Writing in 1993, Lesley Ferris (p. 6) noted that “much of the available material on crossdressing has a straightforward bias for male-to-female transformation.” Although statistically there are more female and femme presenting cosplay practitioners¹² than male and or masculine presenting practitioners, research into “crossplay” also seems to concentrate on masculine bodies in femme clothing. So too does mainstream media reporting, for example in 2014, when *The Daily Mail* covered Melbourne Oz Comic Con, focusing their report on three muscular men in the garb of petite, female characters (Lewis 2014) while more recently, the *South China Morning Post* reported on “the Singaporeans who crossdress as anime princesses to relieve boredom of their everyday lives” (Kang 2020). This is despite the fact that it has been noted repeatedly by scholars that most cosplayers who practice crossdressing are women or femme presenting individuals who dress as male or masculine characters (see, e.g., Okabe 2012).

This is not to say that cosplay and drag are completely incompatible. As pointed out by American cosplay practitioner Lizard Leigh, a “nonbinary cosplayer who cosplays the binary,” cosplay and drag borrow heavily from each other.¹³ Indeed for Leigh, thinking of cosplay as a style of drag helped them to come to terms with wearing hyper feminine gowns in spite of their non-binary identity.¹⁴ As Judith Butler (1993, p. 26) notes, “what is ‘performed’ in drag is, of course, the *sign* [...] which is not the same as the body it figures.” In this way we are able to see that, just as cosplay is not universal, neither is drag. There is the lounge room tv stream on demand drag of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and the “raw kind of drag that showcases the liminal space between tender and tough, pain and pleasure, masculine and feminine” (Hobson 2013, p. 36). As Nicolle Lamerichs

¹¹ See, for example, <https://www.advocate.com/television/2020/1/27/drag-race-alumni-slam-new-season-erasing-trans-queens-women>; <https://www.flare.com/tv-movies/rupaul-on-offensive-comments/>. Victoria Scone/Victor Stone’s appearances in UK and Canadian spin offs demonstrates that this may be changing - Scone is a cis lesbian who walked the runway in a Fabio tribute as the first drag king. See for example, <https://ew.com/tv/victoria-scone-drag-king-look-canadas-drag-race-canada-vs-the-world/>

¹² I am using female and femme presenting and male/masculine presenting here to include non-binary, agender and trans-identities in the gender binary.

¹³ @heylizardleigh, 26 June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB3jl8ZjaSm/>.

¹⁴ @heylizardleigh, 26 June 2020.

(2018, p. 211) notes, “cosplay and crossplay give us a different view of drag, which here is not confined to gender or political interventions but involves a range of aesthetic practices.” This is where terms such as *jōsō* and *dansō* which focus on the gendering of clothing items rather than their wearers are useful. This may allow for a reading of cosplay as a system of dressing up that goes beyond gender binaries for both the practitioners and the characters they dress as it is not the cosplayer who is gendered, but their clothes.

While cosplay, and other outlandish and alternative modes of dress such as lolita, punk, goth, historical recreation, or fantasy live action role play (LARP), are now discussed in terms of drag, it might be just as easy to turn to other acts of crossdressing in performance including, as noted above, kabuki, or the Takarazuka Review. Crossdressing on the stage has a long history around the world and for remarkably similar reasons. In Shakespearian England, the roles of women were taken by boys and youths; in Tokugawa Japan a similar replacement of young women with young boys occurred on the kabuki stage to stop prostitution rings—however, it would become evident that beautiful young boys were as readily prostituted as their sisters (see Isaka 2016, p. 16).

In the early 1900s, the Takarazuka Review was opened as an attraction at the end of the newly built Hankyu rail line. Initially simply a novelty, the all-women review was set up in direct opposition to kabuki. In an interview from 2000, Takarazuka playwright Ogita Kōichi pointed out that Takarazuka’s success lay in the fact that it is ultimately a “fantasy, a fictional creation,” which is why it has existed for so many years (Nakamura and Matsuo, p. 136). In the same way that cosplay and 2.5D exist only in a set zone, Ogita notes that both the *otoko-yaku* (who portray the male roles) and the *onna-yaku* (who portray the female roles) are “constructs that exist within a particular fantasy [or fictional space]” (Nakamura and Matsuo, p. 136). In the 1900s, kabuki had moved from middleclass entertainment of the 1600s and 1700s to an entertainment for educated elite. The Takarazuka Review is now an established and respected institution with five different troupes (see, e.g., Robertson 1998). Where kabuki has only recently embraced anime into its repertoire—circa 2015 with *One Piece* and later in 2018 with *Naruto*¹⁵—the Takarazuka Review has long performed everything from classical Japanese

¹⁵ Crystalin Hodgkins, “Naruto Kabuki Play Reveals Visual for New Run in Kyoto,” *Anime New Network*, 1 April 2019, <https://www.animenewnetwork.com/news/2019-04-01/naruto-kabuki-play-reveals-visual-for-new-run-in-kyoto/.145240> (accessed June 2019).

texts such as Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* (circa 1000s) alongside anime and manga titles as disparate as *The Rose of Versailles* (1972–1973) and *Ace Attorney* (2016–2019) in addition to all singing all dancing productions of Shakespeare's plays, and political intrigues including works based on JFK, Abraham Lincoln and Che Guevara.¹⁶

In kabuki, as in *Drag Race* drag, an all-male cast alters their appearance, stance, voice, and physiology to create hyper feminine characters. Indeed, there is a commonly held maxim that kabuki *onnagata* (actresses) are “more feminine than any woman” could possibly be.¹⁷ Interestingly, Ogita, when describing the appeal of the Takarazuka *otoko-yaku*, noted that they remain so popular because the *otoko-yaku* are “not men” (Nakamura and Matsuo, p. 136). Drag, kabuki, and the Takarazuka Review are a perfected fantasy, staging idealized performances of femininity and masculinity. It might be worth noting that a Takarazuka *otoko-yaku* takes on the role (*yaku*) of a man (*otoko*), while the kabuki *onnagata* performs or embodies the form (*kata*) of a woman (*onna*).

This comparison of masculinity and femininity performance can be extended to cosplayers who wear *dansō* and *josō*. Even though all cosplayers will wear some form of makeup, foundation garments, wigs, and costume, cosplayers who crossdress, particularly those who wear *josō*, are held to a higher standard (see, e.g., Leng and King). Even in a “poorly” executed cosplay, if the key elements (a moon tiara, a ninja head band, a pirate hat, etc.) are in place, the character will probably still be recognized and appreciated by the viewing public. In costumes that involve some kind of gender performance, these audience reactions are likely to be less accommodating. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that many cosplayers have stopped dressing up as characters outside of their gender as a result of online bullying and harassment (see, e.g., Han 2020); as Leng reports “it takes a *real* man to dress like a 10-year-old girl” (Leng 2013, p. 89).

¹⁶ “The 100-Year History of the Takarazuka Review,” *Official Website Takarazuka Review*, <https://kageki.hankyu.co.jp/english/history/index.html>. Online records from 1999 can be found here: <https://kageki.hankyu.co.jp/revue/2021/index.html> (accessed July 2021).

¹⁷ James R. Brandon, “Reflections on the *Onnagata*,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 29.1 (Spring 2012): pp. 122–125. <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2012.000122>. For more on *onnagata* see Maki Isaka, “Images of *Onnagata*: Complicating the Binarisims, Unravelling the Labyrinth,” in Ayclot Zohar ed. *PostGender: Gender, Sexuality and Performativity in Japanese Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 22–38.

3 CREATING THE BODY COSPLAY

While *dansō* is commonplace among WCS representatives, *josō* is comparatively rare. In 2017 Team Spain's Tobi Cosplay dressed as Xellos from *Slayers* (1995), a crossdressing trickster priest wearing a qipao style dress for the Ohs Street parade (an optional event for WCS delegates). While there are no rules against *josō* in WCS, it has long been rumored that it was at the very least frowned upon. This unspoken rule seems to have been broken in 2018 when Team Mexico, Banana Cosplayboys, won the championship with their energetic, no holds barred, *Street Fighter* (circa 1987) skit which featured a fight between Chun Li and Dhalsim.¹⁸ However, in both 2017 and 2018, we are looking at one individual out of a field of 64 cosplayers and a possible 192 costumes worn over the ten-day event. In 2019, Hart was not the only cosplayer crossdressing in *josō*, nor did he restrict his crossdressing to the frilly skirts he wore alongside Garnet Runestar at the Meiji-Mura photo shooting even. Hart and Runestar's championships costumes were from the 2015 fantasy game *Bloodborne*. In this skit, Hart took to the stage dressed as Yharnam, Pthumerian Queen, and the ghostly avatar of the city of Yharnam. At the same event at Meiji-Mura, a group of representatives and alumni (returning cosplay guests who had represented their countries in previous years) had prearranged to appear as figures from *Naruto* (manga 1999–2014). The group included Luis and Lalo from Banana Cosplayboys, attending as alumni, and team Australia 2019, K and Wirru.

Alisa Solomon posits that “men dressed as women often parody gender, women dressed as men, on the other hand, tend to perform gender” (Ferris 1993, p. 13). This is evident in the figures of K (wearing a stripped down version of Naruto's orange ninja suit with a black, sleeveless shirt) and Wirru (wearing a handmade pair of silicon breasts and hip padding in order to portray Tsunade's curves). The pair form a study in contrasts. Both K and Wirru are of a similar height and had the muscles of

¹⁸ World Cosplay Summit, World Cosplay Summit Championship 2019 Tokyo Round, 27 July 2019, <https://youtu.be/4ctyWfSmjJw>, see 00:54:30 for a reprisal of their 2018 skit.

martial arts practitioners—something that they played up in their championship winning *Monster Hunter: World* (2018) costumes.¹⁹ Where K bound and shaped her chest into pecs, Wirru wore massive faux breasts. Where K’s makeup subtly reshaped her jaw for an angular appearance, Wirru’s painted lips and false eyelashes played up to a Barbie doll ideal of feminine beauty. Throughout the events of WCS 2019, K took on the classic comedy “straight man” role to Wirru’s “funny” guy as evidenced by the fact that Wirru’s large breasts were hollowed out and filled with snacks and a supply of cooling sheets to help combat the moist Nagoya heat.²⁰

Over the years, *dansō* practitioners have built up a knowledge base of how to crossdress, with online resources dating to at least 2002—universal advice includes: don’t bind with sports bandages; contour everything.²¹ More recently, cosplayers have drawn from drag king and trans-masc dressing practices including wearing medical binders and using packers to give a desired crotch bulge.²² As might be expected, *josō* increasingly borrows from drag. In 2018, as part of the WCS costume judging before a panel of judges made up of the organizers from each country, Luis from Banana Cospboys explained that he learned how to pad, tuck, apply makeup and use body shading to achieve Chun Li’s iconic curves (personal observation, Nagoya 2018). In the same year, Wirru constructed his first pair of false breasts and hip pads to achieve Shironui Mai’s (*King of Fighters*, circa 1994) B85-W54-H90 cm body.²³ Luis and Wirru were later guests at the same convention where, dressed as Chun Li and Mai, they staged a karate fight, highlighting each cosplayer’s physical ability and the durability of their costumes.

It is important to note that it is not just male cosplayers who use these techniques to achieve hyper feminine body shapes. For her 2020

¹⁹ World Cosplay Summit, World Cosplay Summit Championship 2019 Tokyo Round, 27 July 2019, <https://youtu.be/4ctyWfSmjJw>. see 01:46:16 for Team Australia’s walk on performance at the 2019 Tokyo Round.

²⁰ Ameno Kitaro, “Snack Rack, Snack Rack,” 16 June 2021, <https://fb.watch/7qbtGJvI3T/>.

²¹ See, for example, “The New Binding-Methods Thread,” 2011, <https://cosplay.com/archive/thread/9movg3/the-new-binding-methods-thread> (accessed July 2021).

²² “The New Binding-Methods Thread,” 2011.

²³ Ameno Kitarou, “Recreating Shiranui Mai KOF Movements and Special Attacks,” 2 May 2020, https://youtu.be/U2hsJ1_CoD8.

Clara Cow's Cosplay Cup (C4) UK qualifying skit, Nomes Cosplay also crafted a large pair of breasts which she labeled her "new breast friends."²⁴ Nomes was dressed as Rebecca from *One Piece* (manga 1997~), wearing little more than a gold chainmail bikini.²⁵ Similarly, Svetlana, better known as Kamui Cosplay, has tutorials for padding her hips and thighs, and for magically increasing her bust size with bras and clever armor design.²⁶ In her bra hack video, Svetlana explains that she believes the reason for the hyper-feminine proportions of the characters that she portrays is that they are "actually designed by men because they're often very sexy, and curvy," and so she uses "all kinds of different tricks to turn [her] tiny, little, boobies into [...] monsters!"²⁷ These techniques can be further enhanced through gesture. Svetlana comically strokes and plays with her new enhanced figure, playing into tropes of objectified female bodies in popular culture. In contrast, Nomes wears her fake breasts and gold bikini to go into battle with sword and shield, bodily throwing herself at her opponent in ways that both subvert expected feminine behavior and reinforce barbarian warrior woman stereotypes.

Given the movement that Luis and Wirru needed for their fighting girl characters and the skimpy nature of Nomes' Rebecca cosplay, the hyper-feminine silhouettes are made with various forms of padding hidden in bras, body suits, and skin color tights. For her stage performance with her partner Minnie Cosplay, Nomes wore a nude leotard for safety so that nothing would slip while she was being thrown around on stage. Although these are skimpy costumes, the wearers are often fully covered. In contrast, Hart's Yharnam, Pthumerian Queen relies on corsetry to achieve the figure's feminine curves—the illusion here is not of nudity but of constraint. In another contract, the Pthumerian Queen is not a stereotypical sexy game character, but a pregnant antagonist sporting motherly

²⁴ Nomes Cosplay, "Thought You Ought to Know About My New Breast Friends," 20 March 2019, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2563252033745453&id=390098481060830&_tn__=R.

²⁵ Chris Minney, "One Piece Cosplay Skit—Doflamingo & Rebecca—C4 2020 UK Qualifier," *Be More Shonen: From Weeb to Protagonist*, 28 March 2020, <https://bemoreshonen.com/blogs/the-cosplay-fitness-blog/one-piece-cosplay-fitness-skit-doflamingo-rebecca-c4-2020-uk-qualifier>.

²⁶ See Kamui Cosplay, "Everyday Booty Hack," 30 July 2020, <https://youtu.be/U6qaNfKhEbQ>; Kamui Cosplay, "Magical Bra Hack for Cosplay," 25 October 2019, <https://youtu.be/z3O4zZjq0S0>.

²⁷ Kamui Cosplay, "Magical Bra Hack for Cosplay."

curves.²⁸ The Pthumerian Queen is clad in a long white gown with Victorian and Tudor elements. The many ruffles and layers of her dress drape to draw attention to her pregnant belly. Hart is known for his use and construction of corsetry, and detailed foundation and support garments which he uses to sculpt his body into Ken doll smooth masculine torsos and feminine bodies with impossible breast to waist to hip ratios. For his Pthumerian Queen Hart designed and constructed a waist cinching corset, a set of Victorian combination underwear, and a set of hoops and petticoats all dyed “vileblood” red.²⁹ Over this he wore a multi-layered white gown with full train, veil, and Elizabethan style ruff—all of which were distressed and aged. A further departure from the curves discussed above, the Pthumerian Queen is pregnant—Hart also constructed a “baby bump” in matching blood red satin. One of the key points of Hart and Garnet Runestar’s skit which won second place in the 2019 WCS was the shocking moment when a babe was torn from the Pthumerian Queen’s belly, revealing a fall of Swarovski crystal encrusted blood and gore.

While the figure of the mother in cosplay is outside of the scope of this piece, it is important to note that it is not just sexy curvy bodies that are being constructed and showcased by cosplay practitioners in cosplay communities worldwide as they create hyper feminine bodies that show multiple elements of womanhood and femininity. I noted above that studies on crossdressing often focus on male and masculine bodies in dresses, making this display of feminine tropes almost transgressive. I would also be curious to see further research and study done on pregnant bodies in cosplay and parents who cosplay, particularly when the cosplayer has been part of the hobby from a young age. As noted previously, cosplayers of all genders use padding and corsetry to construct and shape fantastic and hyper feminine curves. In this chapter, I have focused on costuming techniques rather than more permanent surgical options that some cosplay practitioners might choose to pursue, but these methods are

²⁸ World Cosplay Summit, World Cosplay Summit Championship 2019 Tokyo Round, 27 July 2019, <https://youtu.be/4ctyWfSmjJw>; see 00:36:55 for Team America’s walk on performance at the 2019 Tokyo Round.

²⁹ @garnethart_costumiers, 29 July 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BlyCSVyBK15/>.

just as valid.³⁰ Just as cosplay and motherhood/parenthood needs further examination, cosplay and cosmetic surgery also needs further exploration.

Readers familiar with American cosplayers such as Yaya Han or New Zealand cosplayer Jessica Nigri might ask why I have not mentioned their enhanced figures here. In 2020, Han was appointed as a Support Ambassador for the WCS and has assisted with judging for WCS spin off events such as the 2021 *Cosplay de Umi Gomi Zero* award. In her book *Yaya Han's World of Cosplay*, Han spends three chapters discussing body issues, online harassment, and racism in cosplay. While Han does not address any surgery that she may or may not have, she should not have to. In 2012, at her wit's end after years of receiving comments such as:

“Sorry but no. She ONLY got famous because of her chest”

“Man if it weren't for the those tits I probably would've never followed you”

“She's not a cosplayer, she's an attention-whore”³¹

Han made a parody Facebook page dedicated to her breasts for an April Fool's Day joke as a way to respond to her work being devalued because of her cup size.³²

4 CLOTHES MAKETH THE MAN

Many of the techniques used for creating hyper feminine cosplay costumes can also be applied to create hyper masculine silhouettes. After all, as Lamerichs (2018, p. 214) points out, in cosplay “the body itself becomes a type of medium, a fleshy texture that can be molded.” In the same way that chests can be padded and lifted, genitals can be tucked, and waists can be cinched in shoulders can be broadened, breasts can be bound down, and trousers can be stuffed. Nomes' busty warrior woman

³⁰ See, for example, Casey Baseel, “Seven Million Yen in Cosmetic Surgery Later, Japanese Coplayer Looks Completely Different,” *Sora News*, 15 May 2018, <https://soraneews24.com/2018/05/15/seven-million-yen-in-cosmetic-surgery-later-japanese-coplayer-looks-completely-different/>.

³¹ Han *Yaya Han's World of Cosplay*, 130.

³² Yaya Han, “New Fanpage for my Boobs,” *Deviant Art*, 1 April 2021, <https://www.deviantart.com/yayacosplay/journal/New-Fanpage-For-my-Boobs-293562941>.

Rebecca may have helped her and her partner win their way to representing the UK at C4, but for WCS 2021, she dressed as Cloud from *Final Fantasy VII: Remake* (2020) alongside Minney's Zack—two male soldiers.³³ By wearing bulky pauldrons on her shoulders, Nomes was able to create the illusion of broad shoulders and more narrow, masculine hips. Her hips were further narrowed through the use of belts and high-waisted pants. Although both Nomes and Minney are effectively wearing the same costume, which appear identical on screen, there are subtle differences in the placement and cut of elements such as the trousers which help to create this illusion.

Where Nomes achieved Rebecca's curves with silicone and padding, she achieved Cloud's masculine form with clever costume design and careful contouring. On the other hand, Minney, her partner, has spent the last ten years sculpting his muscular body with a careful regime of exercise. Indeed, Nomes and Minney's third place winning skit was filled with references to the *Final Fantasy* game, including a real-life version of the squat mini-game that occurs in Chapter 9. On Minney's *Be More Shonen* website, he explains how he went from skinny, drug taking "weeb" to the protagonist of his own anime, crediting *Dragonball Z* (1989–1996) for the inspiration to change his life.³⁴ In recent years, there has been a movement toward cosplay fitness accounts on social media such as Instagram and TikTok. These accounts showcase cosplayers of all ages and genders who spend as much time crafting and honing their physiques as they spend crafting and creating the costumes that they later adorn them with. The hyper masculine, muscular bodies favored by American comics produced by Marvel and DC can be difficult to achieve. Just as cosplay practitioners in *josō* costumes will create false breasts, those in *dansō* will create full body muscle suits to wear under their clothes. For those who do not wish to follow Minney's call to be more *shōnen*, it is possible to buy silicon masculine chests for those who can afford them, and novelty t-shirts printed with naked male torsos for those who cannot, which can also be worn as an "event safe" naked upper body.

However, what happens when a body is already deemed hyperfeminine, to use Murnen and Byrne's term? In September 2021, cosplayer Mia Rios

³³ World Cosplay Summit, "World Cosplay Summit 2021 Winners | Team UK: *Final Fantasy VII* (3rd place)," 10 August 2021, https://youtu.be/s_fuaSqlVw0.

³⁴ Chris Minney, "My Story," *Be More Shonen: From Weeb to Protagonist*, <https://bemoreshonen.com/pages/my-story-b> (accessed July 2021).

was banned from TikTok after she was accused of appropriating and sexualizing Japanese school girl characters such as Asuka Langley (a red haired German character) from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (anime, 1995) (Montgomery 2021). Rios' depiction did not add adult curves to her body—her Asuka is that of a young girl wearing a white, high necked school blouse, a pale blue almost teal school uniform with wide suspenders over her shoulders, and knee length black socks—her cosplay does not compare to any of the female and women characters mentioned so far. And yet, Rios TikTok was flooded with comments that stated that the way she was wearing the modest costume was akin to wearing sexy lingerie, not because of added padding or intended sexualization but because Rios is a Black woman (Rios cited in Montgomery). There is a long history in both Japan and the West of sexualizing Black women. Rios noted that “my race adds a sexual connotation to literally anything that I do” (Rios cited in Montgomery). This incident is not the first time that a Black cosplayer has been targeted, but it did spark a global response that bled into the world of Japanese *kawaii* street fashion which led to model, musician and activist Kurebayashi to make a statement that spread across TikTok, Instagram and Twitter before being picked up by sites such as Yahoo Japan.³⁵

We will see that there are few rules when it comes to the act of cosplay, but one that has increasingly widespread is “do not do Yellow or Blackface.” Unfortunately, there are numerous examples of white or light skinned cosplayers tanning or darkening their skin in a manner that is all too close to Minstrel show style black face. Indeed, when he first dressed as Dhalsim, Lalo of Banana Cospboys darkened his skin with makeup. In subsequent wearings, he has instead opted to color his skin blue as befitting a Hindi deity. Perhaps one of the most well-known incidents of Blackface in cosplay occurred in 2019 during the finals of the international Euro Cosplay Championships held at MCM Comic Con in London (see, e.g., Gerkin 2019). The French representative, Alice Livanart won the *Coupe de France de cosplay* with her cosplay of Pyke from *League of Legends*. Pyke is an undead “drowned one” who appears to be a muscled, Black man with heavy facial scarring and glowing dead eyes. Livanart is a slender white woman. Part of her transformation into Pyke's muscular form was achieved with similar methods used by Nomes

³⁵ @90884, 2 October 2021, <https://twitter.com/90884/status/1443935912086302722>.

introduced above—a muscle suit under tight-fitting gray trousers. The face, arms, and torso were created from cast silicone to make a literal skin-suit. Euro Cosplay Championships and MCM ultimately decided to ban the Pyke costume, inviting Livanart to compete in a different outfit. However, in repeated statements Livanart claimed that she should be able to compete in the Pyke costume as she had made it from a place of love, claiming that it was not Blackface, and that it had cost her over €3000 (see, e.g., Martin 2019). The Pyke costume is well-made garment which succeeds in completely changing Livanart’s face and body shape. Indeed, unlike Lalo who has changed the makeup he wears with Dhalsim, Livanart still regularly guests at cosplay events and photo shoot events wearing the Pyke suit. While Livanart claimed that her costume came from a place of love and a desire to honor the character, Black cosplayers point out that this does not feel like an act of respect but rather one of parody or derision (see, e.g., Gaines 2020). A white person who changes their skin tone by Black-, Yellow-, or Red-face is able to wash off their makeup, but at the end of the day, a Black person or an Asian person or an Indigenous person cannot wash off the racism and prejudice that they experience purely as a result of their skin tone. Writing for *Medium*, Allison Gaines notes that:

The goal of cosplaying is to portray a character, but we do not need to change our skin color for our friends and family to recognize which persona we chose. When white people feel the need to wear Blackface, they participate in racism. In doing so, they also reveal they do not truly understand their selected persona. (Gaines 2020)

5 FOLLOWING THE RULES

While there may not be many rules attached to the act of cosplayer, there are often rules and regulations at the events where cosplay takes place. Regardless of where in the world they occur, cosplay and popular culture events will have restrictions as to what kind of costumes and props can be carried at the convention or on the event floor. These often include weight and length restrictions for props, or mandating that realistic looking prop firearms must not be used. More recently, events have placed restrictions on the wearing of uniforms belonging to existing military or armed forces and offensive symbols such as the swastika or the

binomaru flag.³⁶ In 2016, Tokyo Comic Con caused global fan outrage when they announced that *josō* cosplay would not be allowed at their fledgling event.³⁷ Early in 2021, Australian convention Supanova was blacklisted by many fans and previous attendees when they were slow to react to a stall selling white supremacist merchandise (Taylor 2021; Walker 2021). In the uproar that followed, many brought up Supanova's rules for cosplay competitions in the early 2000s that prohibited cross-dressing as Supanova was a "family event."³⁸ It should be noted that at the time, it was illegal for men to wear women's clothing after dark in some Australian states (Angle 2011). While this article is not concerned with legislation of crossdressing, it is of interest since what happens in the real world is reflected on stage and on the 2.D page. For instance, Jacobean priests were instructed to preach against crossdressing (Howard 1993, p. 29). The French law banning women from wearing men's clothing that Marlene Dietrich was threatened with in 1933 was not overturned until 2013 (Bach 2013, p. 174). A similar law was also overturned in Turkey in that same year. While we may concentrate on ideals of a 2.5D realm, real world events have an effect on cosplay conventions and

³⁶ See, for example, Josh Taylor, "Supanova Expo Under Fire After Vendor Sells Far-Right Merchandise in Sydney," *The Guardian*, Thursday 24 June 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/jun/24/supanova-expo-under-fire-after-vendor-sells-far-right-merchandise-in-sydney>; Alex Walker, "Supanova Under Fire After Vendor Sells Merchandise Featuring Swastikas at Sydney Show (Update, Supanova Apologises)," *Kotaku*, 24 June 2021, <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2021/06/supanova-under-fire-after-vendor-sells-merchandise-featuring-swastikas-at-sydney-show/>.

³⁷ Reddit's r/anime board. "Male Crossplaying Banning Rule Is Cancel[1]ed at Tokyo Comic Con," 26 October 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/anime/comments/59h13m/male_crossplaying_banning_rule_is_canceled_at/ (accessed December 2017); Brian Ashcraft, "Tokyo Comic-Con Lifts Ban on Men Cosplaying as Women Characters," *Kotaku*, 27 October 2016, <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2016/10/tokyo-comic-con-bans-men-from-cosplaying-as-women-characters/> (accessed December 2017); Lynzee Loveridge, "Tokyo Comic-Con Bans Males Crossplaying," *Anime News Network*, 26 October 2016, <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/interest/2016-10-25/tokyo-comic-con-bans-males-crossplaying/.108082> (accessed December 2017); Peter Harmsen, "Duften af samurai (The Scent of Samurai)," *Weekendavisen*, 4 November 2016.

³⁸ See <http://madboards.madman.com.au/viewtopic.php?t=15804&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=50> accessed via the WayBackMachine <https://web.archive.org/web/20160609200750/http://madboards.madman.com.au/viewtopic.php?t=15804&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=50> (accessed July 2021).

fan spaces—consider, for example, the changes made to New Zealand convention rules in the wake of the 2019 Christchurch shooting.³⁹

At the World Cosplay Summit, cosplay practitioners are governed by two sets of rules: the rules for each country competing in the WCS finals and those for event attendees. Event attendees are further governed by rules for press and photographers and for cosplay practitioners. Pre-COVID-19, WCS was a ten-day summit with public and private cosplay events, culminating in a skit competition between the representative nations. In 2020, a 24-hour online retrospective was held, and awards were given for the best skit, the best costume, and the best interpretation of an anime, manga, or game series in the event’s seventeen-year history. In 2021, a weekend event was held online, with small in-person events held live in Nagoya. Instead of live skits, the 2021 WCS featured videos and short films submitted by the thirty countries who opted to participate.

Tokyo Comic Con no longer has rulings on crossdressing for its attendees, but WCS does. These rules do not prohibit *josō* or *dansō* but ask that practitioners “do not harm the image of the corresponding character.”⁴⁰ Face and body hair should be “dealt with appropriately” and the use of wigs is recommended.⁴¹ All cosplay participants are asked to uphold “morals” by wearing, for example, tights and modesty-pants under short skirts or kimono, and to not show too much chest—regardless of gender.⁴² Those with masculine chests are allowed to be topless but are warned not to make a nuisance of themselves and to cover up in between photo shoots. WCS traditionally takes place in Nagoya in temperatures that often rise above 38°C with high humidity—punishing conditions for anyone, as viewers of the 2020/1 Tokyo Olympics will remember, but downright dangerous for someone who is wearing multiple layers or fabric that does not allow for air flow such as tight-fitting nylon or faux leather. The 2021 WCS attendee rules also include guidelines for preventing heat stroke and for mask wearing by photographers (at all times), and cosplay

³⁹ “Aramageddon Cosplay Props & Weapons’ Policy,” <https://www.armageddonexpo.com/Weapons-Policy/> (accessed July 2021).

⁴⁰ “Sankakiuaku&chūijikō (precautions for attendees) Rules,” World Cosplay Summit 2021, <https://www.worldcosplaysummit.jp/en/rule/>.

⁴¹ “Sankakiuaku&chūijikō (precautions for attendees) Rules.”

⁴² “Rule: sankakiuaku&chūijikō (precautions for attendees),” World Cosplay Summit 2021, <https://www.worldcosplaysummit.jp/rule/>.

practitioners at all times apart from when posing for photos; and then social distancing should be maintained.⁴³

Conversely, the rules for the cosplay representatives taking part in the WCS do not have regulations regarding *josō* or *dansō*, although they do mandate that modesty should prevail.⁴⁴ Indeed, as skin colored stretch fabrics in different weights of nylon have become more available, it is increasingly easier to wear a full bodysuit in a nude tone to preserve modesty or to wear one in a fantasy skin tone (such as blue, purple or green) to avoid making a mess with body paint.⁴⁵ As part of the events of WCS, a smaller “Japan only” event called “Cosplayer of the Year” is held as part of the summit’s events. This event recognizes various skill types including performance, and *josō* and *dansō*. The 2021 winner of the *dansō* award noted in their acceptance speech that people who are afraid of trying *dansō* because they are small of stature should give it a try as it will make them feel powerful.⁴⁶

6 FINAL CURTAIN CALL

This chapter has focused on “ideal” cosplay bodies rather than parodies such as the pantomime Dame style beardy-school-girl worn by, for example, Ladybeard, Richard Margary, an Australian entertainer and pro-wrestler based in Japan, or Japanese cosplayer Kobayashi Hideaki better known as Sailor Suit Ojisan (Coello 2014). Team Australia 2021, Elvis Ditto and Tall Joke, embraced this parody style wholeheartedly with their *Pop Team Epic* (*Poputepipikku*, 2014~) sketch show style skit.⁴⁷ Their video culminates with the pair removing their cardboard-box masks to reveal a pair of pale, beardy guys in cotton school girl outfits. Throughout their skit and in videos that they created as part of their tenure as Team Australia 2021, the pair made a series of self-deprecating jokes, constantly putting their own costumes and skit down due to the cardboard masks

⁴³ “Sankakiuaku&chūijikō (precautions for attendees) Rules.”

⁴⁴ Personal observation, Nagoya 2018.

⁴⁵ See, for example, We Love Colours. “Critical Role Cosplay Color Guide,” <https://welovecolors.tumblr.com/post/187537786237/color-guide-to-cosplay-critical-role-using-we-love> (accessed July 2021).

⁴⁶ Paraphrased from the live streamed event, 7 August 2021.

⁴⁷ World Cosplay Summit, “WCS Australia 2021—*Pop Team Epic*—1st Place Winners,” 28 June 2021, <https://youtu.be/AFxBqwViiMs>.

and low production value. However, it was these very cardboard costumes that set the skit apart and led to its being selected for submission to the WCS 2021 video finals.

One of the reasons that I limit my study of cosplay to competitions is that at these events, the notion of “good” or “bad” is not a subjective judgment but one that is weighed against a set of event and competition rules. Indeed, whether a cosplay outfit is “good” or “bad” is meaningless if taken out of the context of a peer review by members of the subcultural community. Leng (2013, p. 104) proposes that for crossplayers in the United States, success is measured “by compliments from other cosplayers as well as the number of photography requests.” In his work with a group of Japanese cosplayers, Daisuke Okabe (2012, p. 238) notes that a “cosplayer’s assessment of her own costume is meaningless on its own”; instead, within the Japanese cosplay community, beautiful cross-dressing and costumes that recreate a “character’s appearance down to even subtle details” are “particularly appreciated.”

Cosplay brings together a wide range of skills and arts that in other costume related industries such as film, television, and stage productions are performed by a range of multiple artisans rather than a single hobbyist. In competitions such as the WCS, costumes and sets must be constructed by the wearer. A cosplayer is a makeup artist, a wig dresser, a milliner, a designer, a pattern drafter, a cutter, a tailor or dressmaker, an armorer, a prop fabricator, a prop master, a cobbler, a dresser, a script writer, an audio engineer, a stage designer, a videographer, a director, and a soundtrack designer. More recently, cosplayers are fitness experts, personal trainers, and social media influencers. While there are cosplay practitioners whose sole income comes from cosplay, most do cosplay as a hobby or as an act of fannish solidarity.

While terms such as hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity have long been used in relationship and sexuality studies, as this chapter demonstrates, these terms can also be used to describe the hyper feminine and hyper masculine costumes created by cosplayers regardless of their “mundane” gender outside of cosplay.

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Engagements with Gender, Sexuality, and Authenticity in Cosplay

Lucy Glasspool

1 INTRODUCTION

Cosplay is a fan practice in which the body of the cosplayer (who takes on various roles such as craftsperson, performer, editor, distributor, discussant, and audience) is crucial, both to their own performance and experience in real time and to the creation of digital media, which subsequently is disseminated online and used by themselves and other fans for various purposes. This chapter complements Emerald King's discussion of gender and performance, examining the concept of authenticity through the lens of sexuality and gender in three types of cosplay: cross-play, "trans" cosplay, and eroticized cosplay. It suggests that while some cosplay practices are the site of deliberate and politicized articulations of gender, others move away from purposeful meaning-making and questions of identity-based gender and sexuality, privileging affective response to the various bodies and images in the fandoms in which they participate: the bodies of characters, of cosplay performers, and of the fans themselves, in person and online. The way in which these performances are

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received and evaluated is complicated by the concept of “authenticity,” which is valued highly within many fan communities but which can be interpreted in different ways, leading to the devaluation of certain types of cosplay, particularly of subgenres like erotic and pornographic cosplay that lie outside the mainstream.

The cosplay examined here is disseminated and used on the Japanese-speaking and English-speaking Web, primarily through cosplay galleries, forums, and social media. The digital has become an inextricable and vital part of cosplay: activities in the flesh, while involving their own unique pleasures, are invariably mediated digitally and become media to be disseminated, consumed, commented on, and used as inspiration. One of the central pleasures of and motives for doing cosplay in the flesh is being looked at, with “the ritualized practice of posing for photos” (Rahman et al. 2012, p. 331). Today, much observation of a cosplayer takes place online, via that cosplayer’s digital image. This analysis mainly makes use of video game cosplay examples, particularly Square Enix’s popular Final Fantasy series (1987 onward). Compared to Japanese cultural products like manga and anime, video games and cosplay both require a level of embodied engagement and activity (Lamerichs 2015, p. 132) as well as the production and consumption of digital content. Further, in terms of Japanese pop culture exports, video games are the most widely used abroad by a large margin.

The next section introduces two types of gendered cosplay performance that in broader social terms might be considered “non-normative”: crossplay and transgender (or more generally gender minority) cosplay, both of which are contrasted and discussed in fan commentary in terms of authenticity to the character and to the performer. The final section proceeds to a discussion of the genre of erotic cosplay, which further complicates the “authenticity” goals of mainstream cosplay. Utilizing affect theory (Massumi 1995; Galbraith 2009; Paasonen 2011), where affect is defined as a kind of gut reaction (Paasonen 2011), something “generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, p. 1) which cause the potential for bodily action, we will see that these cosplay practices can contain both affective and social or meaning-making dimensions, as affective intensity is what sparks social responses such as specific emotions and interpretations (Lamerichs 2018, p. 206). However, as the level of bodily engagement intensifies, particularly in a sexual way, the semiotic aspect decreases. It is important to point out at this stage that the social, or representation,

is not superseded by affect (except, perhaps, in the instant, it is viscerally experienced), nor can it be entirely separated from it. This is something on which most affect theorists agree. In Susanna Paasonen's work:

gut reactions, intensities of experience, bodily sensations, resonances, and ambiguous feelings[...]are impossible to mark apart from articulations of emotion[...][which are] imprinted[...]with personal histories, values politics, and many things besides. (2011, p. 387)

We are only able to make sense of affective responses by parsing them as emotions, which are tied to systems of representation (Paasonen 2011). This means that cosplay can make deliberate and even activist identity statements, and at the same time encompass and transcend apolitical, "fannish" gender play in which affective pleasure often supersedes questions of representation.

2 AIMING AT AUTHENTICITY: GENDERED COSPLAY

Much cosplay scholarship takes an interest in its gendered aspects, particularly in the context of cosplay in Japan, where it has been discussed in terms of how it can impact specifically female resistance to normative gender discourses (Hjorth 2011; Okabe 2012; Tanaka 2009). One such cosplay practice often explored in both academic and English-speaking fan contexts is "crossplay," which, in its most straightforward definition, involves cosplaying a character with the opposite gender to the cosplayer (Gn 2011, p. 588), e.g., a cosplayer who identifies as a woman cosplaying a male character.

There is also another, less widespread and somewhat marginalized type of cosplay that, on the surface, appears to be closely linked to crossplay but which is newer to academia. Unlike crossplay, this cosplay subcategory does not have a standard term by which it is referred to in English or Japanese; it is called "trans" cosplay by some of its practicing fans, so this is the term that will be used here. It involves cosplay by fans who identify as transgender (though some fan definitions also include non-binary and other gender minority cosplayers). Within the cosplay community, there are online groups set up by and for such cosplayers, with dedicated cosplay galleries, discussion forums, and so on, some of which are more than a decade old. The links and disparities between trans cosplay and crossplay are articulated in fan discussions on these forums: in particular

the perceived differences in aims, pleasures, and authenticities experienced by these respective cosplay subcategories.

The following subsection suggests that crossplay, while including some identity-based meaning-making, generally prioritizes a set of values based on fan knowledge and affection for a character, relegating gender to a relatively insignificant role in the hierarchy of “good” or “authentic” cosplay. The next shows that some trans cosplayers set themselves up in contrast to crossplayers by claiming additional aims and pleasures based on a sense of strongly felt and fixed gender identity. These trans cosplayers hope to be accepted and recognized as the gender of the character they are cosplaying. Here, the cosplayer’s material body is subsumed by the identification they feel with the game character and the wish to deliberately “express their own identity through a costume” (Lamerichs 2011, n.p.): the authenticity they value is not only to the character but also to their own gender identity.

These subsections demonstrate that cosplay can incorporate the deliberate politicizing of identity performance in a way that is intricately involved with social signification and meaning-making, and also be the site of affect-based, playful pleasures that have little to do with engaging with essentialist gender and sexual norms.

Crossplay

To begin examining authenticity and gender in crossplay, it is necessary to take into account the previous literature covering cosplayer demographics as these may account for the way cosplay in the past has been written of as though it was an exclusively female fan practice, involving issues of gender pertaining particularly to women. Just as certain video game fandoms still tend to be persistently, though mistakenly, characterized as largely male in the press, the reverse is often true in discussions of cosplay in academia, especially those relating to cosplay in Japan; but the practices of male cosplayers and those who do identify as gender minorities can also provide valuable additions to an analysis of cosplay fandoms.

Perhaps the trend in cosplay studies to focus on female cosplays is because, as Daisuke Okabe states, the “majority of cosplayers in Japan are women” (2012, p. 225). His paper argues that “cosplayers see their audience as other women fans and not the heterosexual male gaze” (2012, p. 241). This is an insight into one sector of the cosplay world; however, there are multiple aspects of cosplay that may not fit this argument,

including but not limited to male cosplayers, gender minority cosplayers and, as will be discussed later, cosplayers whose work is deliberately eroticized and almost certainly aimed at attracting a male sexual gaze. It is thus imperative to also consider other types of cosplayers alongside the assumed standard female fan creating content and pleasure for other women.

Having said this, statistically there are rather more female cosplayers globally than male (King 2013), in both Japanese- and English-speaking online fandoms. For example, a survey of cosplay galleries on the international cosplay photo website Cosplay.com (2014), which yielded over 4000 instances of photoshoots featuring characters from the perennially popular RPG *Final Fantasy VII* and its spin-offs (Square Enix 1997–2020), showed a ratio of approximately three female-identifying cosplayers to one male. The popularity of FtM crossplay in fandoms of Japanese games like *Final Fantasy*, then, could be partially accounted for, not by fan desire to change identity or to engage in some deliberately subversive gender performance but by simple demographics: male characters are very popular, and *someone* is going to cosplay them. Sheer numbers dictate that some of these cosplayers will be women. As Tōko Tanaka (2009, p. 40) suggests, “in many cases, the leaning of cosplayers towards ‘*dansō*’ [women cosplaying male characters] probably happens unconsciously,” without any conscious decision to perform a “non-normative” role (Lamerichs 2015, p. 141). However, this explanation is of course not meant to be a final or singular answer to the question of the motivations and pleasures of crossplay.

Female fans cosplaying male characters do comprise the great majority of crossplayers. Female-to-male (FtM) crossplay is known in Japan as “*dansō*” (男装), literally “dressing as a man”; given the lack of standardized English terminology for this practice in cosplay fandoms, this chapter uses the Japanese term, as well as “*josō*” (女装) to refer to the rarer practice of male-to-female (MtF) crossplay. Tanaka states that many cosplayers perform *dansō* (2009, p. 39), but makes very little mention of *josō* or reasons for the lack thereof. *Dansō* has become the majority crossplay in game cosplay, and this chapter suggests that it can provide a potentially non-normative performance of masculinity that is nevertheless not politicized in crossplayer commentary and which has been criticized by some trans cosplay commentators.

Joel Gn (2011, p. 586) claims that “there has been a growing fascination with... ‘ambivalent’ bodies that display shifting gender markers

within contemporary Japanese animation,” games, etc., and that this trend is reflected in the cosplay world. It could be said that *dansō* serves to encourage this, not only by the choice of male characters being crossplayed but also by the ways in which they are performed. Okabe (2012, p. 238) states that female cosplayers who look good dressed as men tend to be popular in the community. However, Shinpei Yashima (2009, p. 275) points out that “the ‘male characters’ chosen are not masculine. There are no female cosplayers wishing to transform into macho characters.” Setting aside the problematic definition of “masculine” for a moment, the second half of her statement, that one never sees traditionally “macho” or hyper-masculine characters being crossplayed, rings somewhat true: the Cosplay.com galleries for *FFVII* character Barret, one of the few characters from the game whose design could be considered typically “macho,” do not contain any examples of crossplay, whereas the majority of the other male characters display many instances of it. Instead, there “are only *dansō* cosplayers who imitate androgynous characters or those like Sephiroth from FF who look...tall and beautiful” (Yashima 2009, pp. 275–276). Yashima’s citation of one of the most popular *FFVII* characters, Sephiroth, reflects the prominence of “androgynous” or “tall and beautiful” male characters within the *Final Fantasy* series, and their popularity in cosplay.

The proliferation of *dansō* in cosplay of these types of characters is perhaps less due to any ideological gender-centric stance than to the fact that the notions of “authenticity” and “[c]ommitment and adherence to the original character are important” (Rahman, Wing-Sun and Hei-man Cheung 2012, p. 326) in the cosplay community. Most female cosplayers’ features and builds are better suited to achieving a close resemblance to androgynous or *bishōnen* male characters than to “macho” ones, so these are the characters they choose to cosplay. This can be seen in the rates of crossplay in the Cosplay.com galleries for the various male *FFVII* characters, which rise as the characters display more recognizably androgynous or so-called “feminine” visual traits: from nothing for the hyper-masculine Barret, through an average of 60% for Cloud and Sephiroth, to 91% for Kadaj, who has particularly androgynous features.

Returning to the definition of masculinity, the assimilation of the *kawaii* aesthetic in wider Japanese culture, as well as in Western fandoms of Japanese media, might cast doubt on Yashima’s (2009) assertion that the male characters being mimicked by cosplayers are “not masculine”; to be sure, according to the standards of heretofore dominant and even

stereotypical masculinity, they are not. But perhaps, through the cultural capital accorded *kawaii* in the last two decades, including the rise in male beauty practices (Miller 2010), definitions of masculinity are expanding to include traits previously defined as “feminine.” Hjorth (2011, p. 80) suggests that the use of *kawaii* in male and female characters “in such key games as *Final Fantasy*, has afforded many ‘flexible’ modes of gender performativity.” Talking specifically about Western fans of such games, she argues that fan use of Japanese texts like *Final Fantasy* can create a space in which to perform alternatives to binary gender norms through the fans’ attachment to characters with *kawaii* visual traits:

For non-Japanese, such forms of [...] self-expression through the *kawaii*—characterized by youthful feminine or androgynous styles [...] have provided an avenue for creative identity formation and gender performativity that seemingly transcends the gender tropes within Western culture [...] (Hjorth 2011, p. 142)

This performativity is not, however, necessarily a deliberate engagement with or critique of gender binaries as such. Hjorth (2011, p. 75) earlier defines *kawaii* as a type of “affective” language. If we think of the affective in Brian Massumi’s terms as “a prepersonal intensity” (1987, p. x), a response to another body (physical or digital) that occurs *before* it comes into contact with social signification, it could be said that fan cosplay of male characters displaying *kawaii* traits in many cases has little to do with a desire to make a political or identity-based statement. It is rather based on a visceral and unreasoned attraction leading to an emotional connection and a cosplay performance that still incorporates the social (in the form of a set of rules based on peer-reviewed accuracy and authenticity to the character) while disregarding considerations of gender norms.

Thus, it may be that *dansō* crossplayers engage in cosplay of male characters of Japanese texts by highlighting their androgynous and gender-fluid aspects, not from motives of gender politics but through the influence of visual ideals generated on a peer level within the cosplay community Japanese pop culture more broadly. Participants in Cosplay.com’s Crossplay Construction Forum¹ have made it clear that, in the words of one user, “cosplay is cosplay. Gender and sexuality are trifling concerns compared with what series, what character and whether

¹ <http://www.cosplay.com/forumdisplay.php?f=46>.

the safety pins will hold” (Faust 2003; usernames of forum users are altered for anonymity). This expresses the hierarchy of priorities among many crossplayers, some of whom also engage in regular (non-crossplay) cosplay: crossplay is not entirely free expression, as there are many user-generated rules and categories to be observed if one is to do “good” cosplay; but the most important are related to fan knowledge and fidelity to the look and personality of the character, rather than ensuring that genders match up. For these practitioners, insofar as they express their thoughts online, the point of cosplay is showing love for the character (Faststart 2013); they do it because they like it, not with any “deeper meaning” (sweetsin 2013). From this perspective, it would appear that for these crossplayers, the “playful engagement with the animated body and their own bears minimal relation to an expression of a certain gender identity” (Gn 2011, p. 587), but is based more on how attracted they are to the character (King 2013). Indeed, there are many members of these sites who do both crossplay and “straight” cosplay.

Nevertheless, it is suggested in cosplay forums that for the smaller group of MtF *jōsō* cosplayers, hegemonic gender norms have more influence, multiplying the pressures of social signification beyond the fannish hierarchy operating in *dansō* crossplay. In many countries, including Japan, it is still considered more “deviant” or “transgressive” for men to cross the dominant gender binary by crossdressing (outside a comedy context) than for women. A journal entry on gender in cosplay in the Trans-Cosplayers deviantART group points out that trans women and MtF crossdressers receive more criticism from society in general because what society perceives as transvestitism seems far more taboo for a person born with a biologically male body (Sacredfire 2010; username altered for anonymity). Cosplay.com user “Maylane” agrees in the Cosplay Construction Forum that the same holds true in the cosplay world, where there is not as much judgment aimed at women crossplaying compared with men who have been more likely to worry about the social stigma around “appearing to” subvert masculine norms (Maylane 2008). While the user does not explicitly state what these norms are, it might reasonably be suggested that in the process of engaging in a non-normative MtF gender performance, the unhegemonic possibility of queerness could also be raised as the two concepts are still closely linked in Japan and in many Western societies. In Yashima’s evaluation, “[a]t the ground level of cosplay, ‘sexuality’ has more stability than ‘gender’” (2009, p. 289), suggesting that it is less acceptable within Japanese cosplay to display

fluid sexuality than gender fluidity. This might become a cause of uneasiness to male cosplayers for whom *josō* is not intended to be a statement regarding either gender or sexuality. According to Gn (2011, p. 590), “a particular act of queer simulation—such as a man imitating a female animated character—is deviant in relation to the gendered norms that have been naturalized within the subject’s socio-cultural locus,” even if the male crossplayer was operating initially within the field of affect—a spark of affection for a character—or with the goal of creating an accurate costume, and had given little thought to questions of norms or deviance. Not participating in *josō* could thus be a measure “to avoid stigmatization by outsiders” (Okabe 2012, p. 235) or by insiders who are not knowledgeable about crossplay. Here, normative identity categories impose additional constraints on the affective pleasures of cosplay based on the specter of social stigmas attached to practices still perceived as “deviant” in wider society.

The above discussion shows that the various practices of both *dansō* and *josō* crossplay display a tendency to evade fixed identity-based statement-making, with motivations based more on affective attraction to a character and a desire to produce “authentic” cosplay. Nevertheless, affect and social signification or “meaning” are not necessarily mutually exclusive but exist in different levels of connection within fan communities. Through affective pleasure crossplay, and cosplay more generally, “becomes a creative, pleasurable gesture that is at once incompatible with, yet not external to, the discursive effects of the gendered body” (Gn 2011, p. 589). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the potential for readings of gender subversion or transgression that could be made in these cosplay performances, even where a crossplayer has no particular intention of challenging normative gender ideals.

“Trans” Cosplay

This subsection turns to the motivations and pleasures of transgender cosplayers and the tensions some articulate between themselves and the more affect-based crossplay fans. It suggests that such cosplay not only expresses fannish affection but also explicitly seeks to produce meaning in terms of gender identity, adding another dimension of authenticity, not only to the characters but to the cosplayers themselves.

“Trans” cosplay is represented on a fan level by various online cosplay groups, which offer a number of definitions. The deviantART group

“TG-Cosplay” states on its front page² that it offers “a haven for transgendered cosplayers” (TG-Cosplay 2010), suggesting that its focus is on specifically transgendered fans. The “Trans-Cosplay” group on the same site defines trans cosplay a little more broadly, advertising itself as a “Support Group Community for Transgender, Intersex and Gender Variant Cosplayers...to express their chosen gender identity irrespective of their assigned biological sex at birth or current status in their Transition, whether it be pre-operative, post-operative, etc.” (Trans-Cosplayers 2010).³ The phrase “gender variant,” in particular, could encompass a wide range of identifications. The support offered is not only for cosplay-related issues (costume construction, chest-binding, etc.) but also for living as a trans individual outside the world of cosplay. In Japan, there are fewer organized groups for gender minority cosplayers, but individual trans cosplayers are represented in both cosplay and mainstream media.

Yashima (2009, p. 288) comments on the gender fluidity that many scholars and crossplayers see in current cosplay: “In a cosplay setting...the forms of gender/sexuality expressed cannot be understood in terms of a ‘nature’ or ‘true identity.’” Despite this frequently expressed opinion, what English-speaking trans cosplay groups do appear to agree on is support for the concept of a “true” gender identity, not based on biological sex at birth but nevertheless essential: TG-Cosplay insists it was for “those of us who want our true, inner gender to be acknowledged,” while Trans-Cosplay explains that for “trans-cosplayers, dressing as a character of their gender is a tool used to further their attempts at...presenting their true gender to society” (2010). On the Japanese end, this is reflected in a newspaper interview with a transgender woman cosplayer, Hiromi, who upon first cosplaying as a female character and being perceived as a woman by the people observing her states that: “at last, I feel natural” (47 News 2019). This is one of the clearest distinctions to be made between cosplay and trans cosplay. Gn, in his paper supporting an affect-based analysis of cosplay, is doubtful of the efficacy of explicitly identity-based challenges to normative gender discourses as such an approach, “with its constant reference to established gender norms, precisely ‘re-inscribes’ the dominant ideology it claims to work against” (2011, p. 590). However, it must be considered that trans cosplayers are not necessarily attempting to move

² <http://tg-cosplay.deviantart.com/>.

³ <http://trans-cosplayers.deviantart.com/>.

beyond or break down gender and sex binaries as such; rather, many are concerned with locating themselves on what they see as the “correct” side of the boundary line for them. They may be considered non-normative according to hegemonic discourse that states one’s gender should match one’s birth body, but most do not appear to wish to undo these categories entirely.

Further, these online communities, in addition to supporting cosplayers who locate themselves under the “trans” umbrella, also profess to have a didactic function which takes such groups beyond personal support for their members and into the realm of the political. For this reason, they also welcome cosplayers and fans who are not “trans” but who are interested in and supportive of trans people (although pictures in the groups’ galleries are usually required to be trans cosplay), with the aim of disseminating information and understanding of transgender issues in general as well as the motivations of trans cosplay. The front page of TG-Cosplay (2010) states that “[w]e hope to educate the world about alternative genders and sexualities,” and aligns itself specifically with “the LGBT movement.” The manifesto of this deviantART group, then, is explicitly political and activist, in contrast to groups that focus on crossplay. The Trans-Cosplay group also identifies with the LGBTQ community, displaying its alignment through the presence of banners on its main page linking to other LGBT-related groups on deviantART, such as “LGBT Cosplay” and “Rainbow-Support.”

The main motive of these groups, it seems, is to provide a space in which trans people can express their “true” identity and become part of a support network; and the choice of cosplay as the medium through which to do this surely has significance. The reason many trans cosplayers give, apart from the fan-based motives for cosplay more generally, is that cosplay is a space apart from the so-called real world (Chen 2007) and everyday life (Rahman et al. 2012). The author of the Trans-Cosplayers journal entry discussed above explains that for trans cosplayers, cosplaying a character that matches their gender is used to support their attempts to present their “true gender” to society and be understood. Dressing as a character of their gender is a “step outside” of their real lives, which may be the site of discrimination and misunderstanding (Sacredfire 2010).

It is important to note, however, that cosplay in this sense is not necessarily viewed by trans cosplayers as “a form of escapism” (Rahman et al. 2012, p. 333) or pure fantasy, as it may be for some other cosplayers; the “real” world here is not opposed to a wholly imaginary cosplay world.

Rather, for these cosplayers, the gender they present through mimicking a particular character is more “true” or “real” than the one they are (mistakenly and because of their anatomical sex) often presumed by others to hold in everyday life. They “use cosplay to further their gender image to the world, as a means to present themselves in the *right* gender” (TG-Cosplay 2010). In this way, instead of an escapist space or a site of fantasy that is primarily playful, trans cosplay “presents an alternative reality that functions as a more humane and democratic society than the real world” (Chen 2007, p. 22). Contrary to the “dreamlike states of hyperreality” (Rahman et al. 2012, p. 333), which scholars argue define many types of cosplay performances, for trans cosplayers it is a gendered performance that they feel to be more “real” or truthful than their everyday lives. This is how trans cosplay can be demonstrated to differ from crossplay and other forms of cosplay, where affect and playfulness are of great importance.

Nevertheless, this alternative reality in which one’s “true” gender can be presented is not without its difficulties, which many trans cosplayers in their online commentaries link directly with crossplay. One aspect of this appears to be connected to *dansō* cosplayers and the type of androgynous masculinity they tend to present. The author of the Trans-Cosplayers journal article reflects the opinions of Yashima (2009) and Okabe (2012) that female crossplayers, who are to be widely seen in most areas of cosplay, do not seek to give a traditionally “masculine” performance when they mimic male characters:

Crossplaying fangirls do not attempt to make themselves more masculine, and do not state that they are attempting to present as male. This creates a stereotype, a false benchmark, for watchers to think of all cosplayers they assume to be anatomically female as “just crossplaying fangirls,” disregarding the idea that there could be something more to the situation. (Sacredfire 2010)

The prevalence of *dansō* crossplay in the cosplay world, argues the author, can have a detrimental impact on the goal of some FtM trans cosplayers to present a “real” gender that is at odds with their anatomical sex; for, as one trans user states in the article’s comments section, “when I cosplay as a male character, this is not cross-dressing. I am a man” (active-bones in Sacredfire 2010). However, observers instead mistakenly view such trans cosplayers as “standard” crossplayers, who, according to active-bones, are

getting completely different outcomes and pleasures from cosplay than trans people, making it more difficult for the intentions of trans cosplayers to be perceived. Though these trans cosplayers are arguably using cosplay as a form of coming- being-out, the dominance of “standard” crossplay, and the assumption that this is what they are doing, merely produces “different region[s] of opacity” (Butler 1991, p. 25): their performance is not understood in the way they intend it, and they are therefore forced to remain closeted as far as the cosplay world is concerned. It could be said that the author here is viewing the more playful and affect-based pleasures of crossplay as contrasting and even detrimental to the serious business of gender presentation in some trans cosplay.

Other fan commentary on the article also displays agreement with the author’s opinions. User “Prof-Nusken” points out that people regard crossplay as standard in the cosplay world and will not modify their ideas to include “transpeople” (Prof-Nuskenin Sacredfire 2010), while Sacredfire agrees that the different motives and pleasures of the two forms of cosplay complicate the identity-based aims of trans cosplayers, particularly when the two might be inseparable to the average observer (2010). This comment also highlights the importance for trans cosplayers of being gazed upon, and the importance of being observed in a particular way. This shows that it is not simply the performance itself that is significant in trans cosplayers’ attempts to make meaning through cosplay but also the reception of that performance.

This illustrates the fundamental difference, for trans cosplayers at least, between crossplay and trans cosplay. As Cosplay.com user “Ranma 1–2” explains, crossplayers are “playing” at being a character. “[At the e]nd of the con the makeup, wig, costume, all comes off and we go home. We don’t live like this” (Ranma 1–2 2009). As Nicolle Lamerichs states, “this practice is occasional and, to some degree, ludic” (2011, n.p.). It is here that the ludic element, or the “play,” of cosplay becomes a significant term: for crossplayers, while they are generally in earnest about displaying authenticity to the character and giving a “good” performance, in terms of gender at least it is playful in the sense of not being fixed or essential but something that can be assumed or set aside depending on the context of the performance. The trans cosplayers on the DeviantArt forum are precisely opposite in that they very much wish to “live like this,” to live and be recognized as the gender of the character they are cosplaying, something they may find difficult outside the cosplay world; for such fans, cosplay is not only “play” but also a gender statement of

personal and political significance. This may explain the assertion of the above trans cosplayers that crossplayers do not “take it seriously.” The “it” in this phrase is ambiguous: what are crossplayers not taking seriously? Perhaps it refers to gender, which in these online groups is bound up with cosplay at a basic level. Although crossplay does generate discussions of gender and sexuality, trans cosplayers appear to recognize that the practice of crossplay itself is less concerned with meaning-making and more about various types of affection for a character or the desire to create so-called authentic, highly evaluated cosplay through the use of challenging costuming techniques and skilled performance. While trans cosplay politicizes the concept of a “true” identity—authenticity to oneself—crossplay revels in the in-between-ness born from affect.

Obviously, this does not necessarily mean that there is no element of fannish affect present in trans cosplayers’ choice of particular characters, or that these two cosplay practices are binary opposites. Further, not every cosplayer who identifies as trans is trying to make a serious identity statement; there are many who cosplay for purely fannish reasons or because the androgyny of the beautiful characters lets them engage in a more ambiguous type of gender play. This can be a draw for non-binary (in Japan “x-gender”) cosplayers, as Japanese pop culture (unlike Japanese mainstream society) abounds with gender-ambivalent characters. There is thus the potential for both affective and meaning-making dimensions to exist in both crossplay and trans cosplay.

Crossplay and trans cosplay fan practices, then, cannot simply be characterized as either apolitical play or deliberate gender transgression. Both the affective and social signification aspects of Patrick Galbraith’s (2009) discussion of affect exist within game cosplay fandoms, sometimes directly opposing one another yet both sharing physical and online space. Their coexistence, despite the tensions that have sometimes arisen between them, shows that authenticity is a key concept for both, though in crossplay it is authenticity to the character for which the fan experiences affection, while trans cosplayers add a dimension of authenticity to the gendered self. The next section brings in the concept of sexuality and its impact on the perception of “good” cosplay through a discussion of erotic cosplay production and use, and the ways in which this type of cosplay generates more questions around the notions of fandom and authenticity.

3 SEX SELLS: AUTHENTICITY AND THE EROTICIZATION OF COSPLAY

It is acknowledged by a majority of cosplay fans and practitioners that “cosplay is centrally concerned with embodying a character accurately” (Lamerichs 2011). It is by this measure that the authenticity of a cosplay performance tends to be judged, and a value of “good” or “bad” assigned to it. However, there is a particular type of cosplay that calls the primacy of this goal into question. Known variously as “sexy,” “erotic,” and “pornographic” cosplay, this group of practices has not yet been dealt with extensively in academia but is discussed and debated within cosplay and wider Japanese pop culture fandoms. Such cosplay offers another motivation for cosplay performance, namely eliciting a response based on sexual appeal and/or generating additional types of pleasure for the performer. This opens up a potential space for further considerations of affect and how it relates to the body and the digital image within fandom.

The following section explores the ways in which cosplay fans respond to eroticized performances and how this relates to community concepts of fandom and authenticity. It suggests that the concept of the social—meaning-making—decreases in importance as the cosplay performance becomes more sexually explicit and generates a different affective response in the user and/or performer. This in turn challenges the value of traditionally-defined cosplay authenticity as fidelity to a particular text or character.

“Sexy” Cosplay

In 2020, Japanese cosplayer Enako was selected by the Cabinet of Japan as an official ambassador for promoting Japanese pop culture overseas through the Cool Japan initiative (Baseel 2020). Known as Japan’s current “no.1 cosplayer,” she creates skilled and authentic cosplays in the traditional sense of the word. Displaying a *kawaii* aesthetic that is a large part of how the Japanese government promotes pop culture—cute, youthful, pastel, and feminine—Enako is also known for her bikini shoots in magazines for young men and for her cosplay in lingerie. This shows the prominent place that sexiness occupies in the public perception of cosplay today.

The terms “sexy,” “erotic” or “pornographic” suggest that issues of sexuality will be central when dealing with this type of cosplay. Indeed,

the word “sexualization” is often used by English-speaking fans in online discussions of such cosplay, as well as “sexiness” and “sexuality.” Clearly, in fan commentary at least, sexuality is a theme of interest. The concept of sexualization in general not only raises questions of eroticism but also of gender, in that sexual images provided in Japanese- and English-language mainstream and cosplay media are even today most visibly images of women. Though some now display a change from an older stereotype of passive heterosexual femininity “towards a more active, confident and autoerotic sexuality” (Evans et al. 2010, p. 115), in Japan in particular this is not always the case. There appear to be two basic stances on mainstream images of active female sexuality: one viewing it as positive, in that passivity is no longer a valued characteristic of femininity (p. 114), and the other troubled by the view that such female subjectivities simply re-enact the male-gaze ideal and objectification of women (p. 116). It has also been argued that this excludes “those who are not young...heterosexual or otherwise conforming to a narrow, globalized homogenizing conceptualization of female beauty” (p. 115).

The latter issue can be seen as a topic of discussion within cosplay fandoms. Commentary on online forums includes fans who view the popularity of certain “sexy” cosplayers problematically, as promoting a particular ideal of femininity and thus marginalizing or illegitimizing bodies that do not fit this ideal, detracting from the idea that cosplay is for everyone. Okabe mentions that even his female cosplayer respondents made comments such as “I want cute girls to cosplay” and “To be honest, I don’t want unattractive girls to cosplay” (Okabe 2012, p. 242). Other fans disapprove of this stance: one, in an online forum discussion on whether sexy cosplay is “ruining” the fandom, comments that such cosplays lead to fat shaming or insulting a cosplayer because they “don’t have a perfect body” (D.L in Cute Lush 2014; usernames altered for anonymity). On the other hand, many other fans appear to support the idealized bodies of eroticized cosplay, with comments such as “only hot chicks should cosplay” (SimplyAlex 2013) on an anime fan forum.⁴ These fans frequently identify as heterosexual and male. This gender-specific conception of sexual imagery is interesting in the context of cosplay, not least because the vast majority of eroticized or pornographic cosplay performances are enacted by female cosplayers; fan commentary on the

⁴ <http://myanimelist.net/forum/?topicid=622423>.

subject also deals almost exclusively with women performers. The bodily display of cosplayers performing “sexy,” “erotic,” and “pornographic” cosplay can be examined in terms of affect and authenticity, in order to understand how fan commentary responds to such performances.

Both at live conventions and online, some cosplay performances are labeled by other fans as “sexy.” These appellations generally point to certain shared features, including clothing that reveals a lot of skin, and prominent display of cleavage, buttocks, and other typically sexualized body parts within the rules of the particular convention or website. It may also refer to certain poses or behavior that tend to be read as sexually suggestive. Some of these cosplayers are amateur performers, while others have carved out careers as cosplay models, working as independent professionals or as representatives of companies and events in the ACG (anime-comic-game) world (sometimes known in English as “booth babes”). If they have one thing in common, however, it is that they largely identify and perform as women.

Fan commentary on such cosplay also deals almost exclusively with female cosplayers. This may reflect the claims by Evans et al. (2010, p. 114) that articulation of the sexualization of culture is focused on a particular *female* subjectivity, which according to Sharon Kinsella also holds true in Japan, where various kinds of media “featuring girls dominate the content of contemporary Japanese culture” (2006, p. 68). The type of sexual subjectivity in Japan may vary from that articulated in English-language discourse, being centered on the figure of the teenage girl rather than women in their twenties; still, as Kinsella (2006, p. 66) notes, even “material about girls has rarely excluded a dosage of visceral titillation.” It is thus unsurprising that Japanese pop culture texts and practices would see issues of sexuality in cosplay as pertaining particularly to female cosplayers.

Fan commentary on sexy cosplay shows a split between fans who criticize it as distancing the cosplayer in question from an “authentic” fan position and fans who applaud it, either as a postfeminist performance of active female sexuality or as a source of sexual stimulation. This subsection examines these various fan positions using the example of American cosplay model Jessica Nigri, who was at the time of researching one of the most frequently discussed practitioners of sexy cosplay in English-language online cosplay communities.

Jessica Nigri became a successful professional cosplayer in the English-speaking ACG community; it is how she earns her living. Self-identifying

as a gamer, anime fan, and cosplayer, Nigri attends ACG events in the USA, U.K. and other international locations, participating in cosplay panels and featured booths (for example at London's MCMExpo)⁵ and working for hire at conventions as a spokeswoman or model for various ACG-related products and companies. She has a strong online presence, not just in terms of fan discussion and dissemination of her images but also through her social media. Although her pages are full of her own fannish commentary on anime and games and the processes of her costume construction, Nigri has become best known for her commercial "sexy" cosplay images. As forum poster "Cute Lush" comments, "you can't bring up 'sexy cosplay' and not mention Jessica Nigri" (Cute Lush 2014). It is this sexualized aspect of her practices that has generated such large amounts of fan commentary that relate to the wider issues of fandom and authenticity.

First, there is a body of commentary that applauds eroticized performances by female cosplayers on the basis that such performances contribute to a postfeminist kind of "freedom," a neo-liberalist active female subjectivity. It argues that, as cosplay is supposed to be all-inclusive, it should allow for the freedom of expression of any identity. As "Cute Lush" puts it, people have the right "to show as little or as much...as they want," arguing that there is no "right" way to cosplay. On another anime forum thread,⁶ one commenter "AryaO" says of Nigri, "more power to her" because she does what she wants (AryaO 2013), suggesting that the ability to choose the sexuality one performs is a form of power in itself.

A second, larger body of fan commentary is opposed to Nigri's performance, arguing that such sexy cosplay conversely makes too much of the performer's eroticism, detracting from the prime objective of (mainstream) cosplay: "authentic" costumes and performance, and fidelity to the initial character. Such commenters argue that this is what demonstrates one's fan status as an accurate costume shows the cosplayer is familiar with, and respectful of, the initial character and text (Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Hei-man Cheung 2012). Part of this criticism is of Nigri's

⁵ <http://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/mcm-expo-london-jessica-nigri-invite-jessica-nigri-to-mcm-expo-london>.

⁶ <http://myanimelist.net/forum/?topicid=622423&show=20>.

costume choices in general, even when the initial character dresses revealingly. This type of comment appears to be concerned about the way such cosplay could impact negatively on outsiders' impressions, casting an unwanted pall of sexuality across the cosplay fandom as a whole. "AryaO," while supportive of Nigri's right to perform whatever sexuality she chooses, qualifies this by commenting that she does not altogether agree with mainstream ideas about cosplay being "something to be sexualized" (AryaO 2013). This opinion is echoed by a female cosplayer and member of the video game industry, who, in an article on the Japanese pop culture magazine site, *Kotaku*, about female sexualization in cosplay, says:

There seems to be an impression from those external to the cosplay community that the hobby is sexual at its core. Can cosplay be sexy? Absolutely. To assume that sexy is the endgame for all who participate, though, is very misguided. (Marie 2013, n.p.)

Because cosplayers like Nigri generate income from cosplay through photo sales and paid work at conventions, etc., they are particularly concerned with disseminating their images as widely as possible, which may make them visible to a larger audience of non-cosplayers than amateur cosplayers, who only share their images on specialist sites or using cosplay-specific hashtags on social media. Cosplay fans like those above thus see sexy cosplay as having become the unfortunate image of the fandom for outsiders, because it is specifically through eroticization that cosplayers like Nigri manage to reach audiences outside the fandom. Forum⁷ user "Hedgehog" brings a gendered dimension to this argument, explaining that:

I object to the assumption made in our culture that sexy cosplay is mainly for women, or the assumption that, when observing a woman in cosplay who happens to appear physically attractive, it is meant to be sexy. To put it another way, it's this obsession with sexuality, the linking of sexiness to women while excluding other qualities (like the standard of the cosplay) that I have a problem with. (Hedgehog 2012)

⁷ <http://spacefem.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=44479>.

This shows that the commenter is not only worried about detracting from the importance of authentic costuming but also about the gendered aspect of sexualization discussed earlier.

One of the possible reasons why “inauthentic” cosplays are derided by critics of sexy cosplay, and their performers regarded as “un-fannish,” can be located in Galbraith’s conceptualization of the affective *moe* response. Used specifically within Japanese fandoms, the term *moe* is a type of fannish attraction to character elements and can be defined as “a word to express affect, or to identify a form that resonates and can trigger an intensity” (Galbraith 2009, n.p.). As he explains, “costumes and people inspire *moe* because they are associated with fantasy characters” (2009, n.p.). Some fans may not be able to experience pleasurable *moe* toward a familiar favorite character, therefore, without an accurate costume that conforms to the initial character image. This may lead to the low evaluation of cosplay that deviates from the original as “an insult to the source material” (Trees 2013),⁸ because the observer is unable to be inspired with the response they feel when looking at the initial character.

This type of criticism appears to be especially marked when the cosplayer eroticizes a character outfit that did not originally display any markers of overt sexuality, as in the case of some sexy cosplay of childish, nonhuman or non-gender-specific characters. Nigri’s social media and Only Fans site, on which she sells signed prints of her cosplay images, show numerous examples of such alterations. While some, such as her Rikku from the game *Final Fantasy X-2* (Square Enix 2003), are fairly faithful to the initial character design, others depart from the original designs dramatically. Nigri’s gender-bend cosplay of male character Link from the Japanese RPG series *Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1985 onward) features a figure-hugging short dress and tights that accentuate her hyper-feminine body shape, while her cosplay of the Pokémon (Nintendo 1996 onward) character Pikachu, whose initial design is not remotely humanoid, displays an even more radical departure in the form of cleavage-enhancing bikini and skin-tight dress. Fan responses to these cosplays vary, but a considerable number take issue with Nigri for sexualizing the characters she performs. Cosplayer and male-identified blogger “Larch,” in an article titled “Jessica Nigri: Cosplaying Controversy,” complains that she “over-sexualizes” some of her cosplays, and that he

⁸ <http://myanimelist.net/forum/?topicid=622423&show=20>.

does not like it when she “sexualize[s] young characters or creates a sexy cosplay costume from a media text where sexiness seems incongruous, like a children’s anime” (Larch 2013, n.p.). It seems that cosplaying with a costume or performance that does not reflect the initial character’s represented level of sexuality is objectionable here: it does not “make sense” in terms of the text it was taken from, and may therefore hint that the cosplayers in question are not that knowledgeable about or respectful toward the text they are cosplaying and “are just doing it to show off” (IceToast 2013).⁹ In a community where knowledge of one’s chosen media text carries a certain status and value, straying from authenticity to the initial character, particularly through sexualization, can clearly diminish one’s fan status.

However, Galbraith’s analysis of *moe* and sexuality (2009) suggests that sexy images of non-sexual initial characters may not point to lack of knowledge or fannish-ness at all but rather reflect the *moe* response that allows a double reading of characters as simultaneously non-sexual and erotic. This is possible, explains Galbraith, due to the postmodern characteristics of Japanese pop culture fandoms, particularly Azuma’s (2009) database of *moe*-elements, a concept which excludes a need for narrative coherency. Such a conceptualization renders the concept of “authenticity” somewhat redundant: both initial text and fan-created image are “unreal,” so it is rather imaginings of authenticity to which cosplay fans attach value. Therefore, “*moe* can be both pure and perverse because there is no grand narrative connecting moments of pleasure endlessly reproduced as simulacra”; so a “pure character can be approached as erotic, or vice versa” (Galbraith 2009, n.p.). In this theorization, both sexual and non-sexual responses to a character image are valid and “fannish.” It cannot be categorically stated that Nigri’s choices of costume are based purely on an affective *moe* response of unconscious attraction to the initial characters; cosplay is, after all, her source of income, and “the conventional wisdom that sex sells and attracts attention has been used since the late 1800s in Western societies” (Lambiase 2003, p. 60). Thus, her particular mode is at least partially a conscious business decision. However, we cannot say that there is not an element of affective response in her sexy cosplay

⁹ <http://myanimelist.net/forum/?topicid=622423&show=20>.

choices and performances, or that the affective *moe* response—simultaneously fannish and sexual—is not present in both Nigri herself and a considerable proportion of her fans and supporters.

This leads to the third type of fan commentary surrounding sexy cosplayers. The popularity of cosplayers like Nigri and Enako suggests that one of the affective responses to cosplay has a very definite sexual element for some fans, who do not see fidelity to the initial character as the zenith of “good” or legitimate cosplay. These fans value deliberately eroticized cosplay highly as having a sexual function (for example masturbatory gratification), which they do not appear to rate lower than costuming skills or knowledge of the initial text. Commenter “SimplyAlex” gives a straightforward account of the response generated by sexy cosplay, writing that they openly admit to liking sexy cosplay because it provides “good fap material” (SimplyAlex 2013).¹⁰ Another forum user on the same page articulates the stance that both fidelity to costume and eroticization can carry value for some cosplay fans, stating that all that matters in cosplay is a) if the costume and person suit the character or b) if it’s a real “hot babe.” According to this user, Nigri falls into the second category and is therefore “making cosplay better” (Ragex 2013).¹¹

Galbraith also accords sexualized interpretations of characters that inspire *moe* with legitimacy through his above theorization of erotic/non-erotic doubling in affective *moe* response, and also with his statement that the “pleasure derived from *moe* characters is not always physical, but is masturbatory because, even when emotional, the pleasure is derived by and for the individual” (Galbraith 2009). Neither emotional masturbatory pleasure (non-sexual affective fannish pleasure acknowledged by the majority of cosplayers as legitimate when responding to character images) nor physical is necessarily more “appropriate” or authentic than the other; they are both affective pleasures in the sense that they create potential in the affected body for action (though these differ according to whether it is emotional pleasure, which leads to cosplay or other fan activities, or physical, which can prompt actual masturbation), existing along a spectrum that spans the non-sexual, the erotic, and the explicitly sexual images present in online cosplay media. This calls into question the prevailing view in cosplay that fandom equals knowledge of a media text and that

¹⁰ <http://myanimelist.net/forum/?topicid=622423&show=20>.

¹¹ Ibid.

the prime motive of cosplay should be to enact and consume “cosplay as a respectful and authentic form of (re)presentation” (Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Hei-man Cheung 2012, p. 335).

Erotic and Pornographic Cosplay

Much as the enactment of “sexy” cosplay is performed largely by female cosplayers, the physical masturbatory response to such cosplay is characterized as coming from users who identify as heterosexual men (although, of course, one of the defining characteristics of online fandom is a high level of anonymity and choice of what identity to perform in a particular space). This once again draws issues of gender into the field of cosplay and sexuality. The final subsection explores the gendered sexual response to explicit video game cosplay images in terms of affect and authenticity, using four free and commercial websites that feature professional cosplay ranging from sexy to fully pornographic.

The four example sites offer sexual images described as “cosplay,” and purport to provide cosplay models who are also fans. Three of the sites, NSFW Gamer (n.d., no longer extant),¹² Cosplay Deviants (2007)¹³, and Cosplay Erotica (n.d.),¹⁴ are also connected by advertising one another. The fourth, JCosPlay.com (n.d.),¹⁵ offers the highest level of explicitness in its pornography as well as being the only site to feature exclusively “Asian” models and male performers. The latter three sites are pay-sites, while NSFW Gamer offered free content but displayed prominent links to Cosplay Deviants and Cosplay Erotica. The three linked sites all offer video game cosplay, including the *Final Fantasy* series. The fourth is far broader in its definition of cosplay. These sites demonstrate that just as a whole spectrum of experience exists in cosplay between social signification and affect, there are also various levels of sexual explicitness; and, connected to this, is another spectrum of “fannish-ness.” This subsection argues that as levels of explicitness increase and the type of

¹² <http://nswfgamer.com/category/cosplay/>.

¹³ <http://www.cosplaydeviants.com/tour/>.

¹⁴ <http://cosplayerotica.com/tour/index.php>.

¹⁵ <http://www.jcosplay.com/>.

affective response shifts from emotional to physical arousal and masturbation (Galbraith 2009), the display of fannish knowledge and the value attached to authenticity to the character decrease.

NSFW Gamer, in addition to posting cosplay images, published interviews with featured cosplayers alongside their images, which fall into the “sexy” (clothed) or “erotic” (semi-clothed) categories. These interviews highlight the cosplayer’s fan knowledge. For example, an interview with a sexy cosplayer performing female character Tifa from *FFVII* (DarkTifa 2014; usernames of cosplayers altered for anonymity)¹⁶ stated that not only is she a cosplayer and game fan but also a journalist in the anime/gaming world, thus displaying status through a presumably high level of ACG knowledge in both her work and private life. DarkTifa locates herself as a *FFVII* fan, citing Tifa as one of the characters that “inspires” her. NSFW Gamer made a strong effort to portray itself as a site created with fans, by fans, and for fans, while in cosplay terms, its images remained in the non-hardcore sexy/erotic categories. Cosplay Deviants, likewise, does not stray into fully pornographic cosplay territory, and publicizes its models’ fan status, linking the cosplayers to the users of the site with statements like “[a]ll of the Cosplay Deviants are cosplayers/gamers/comic & sci-fi just like you” (Cosplay Deviants 2007) and “are cosplayers, geeks, fans, or nerds in some way...we do not accept the ‘random chick in a costume’ as Deviant material” (Cosplay Deviants FAQ 2013). The cosplay images on this site show partial or full nudity with recognizable character costumes and accessories, which enable the possibility of both a fannish *moe* response to the characters and sexual arousal.

Cosplay Erotica raises the level of explicitness to include solo and female-female sex acts, and, like the previous two sites, offers recognizable character cosplays from both Japanese and Western texts. It also provides links to blog pages ostensibly run by its professional models, such as “Lea” (LeaLee n.d.).¹⁷ Lea’s page contains official Cosplay Erotica photos in the central panel, and, in a smaller side panel, content that might demonstrate fannish-ness, such as initial character images she would like to cosplay, and photographs of her early, non-erotic amateur cosplays. The insistence on the fan status of the models,

¹⁶ <http://nswfgamer.com/cosplay-spotlight-carmenpilar-best-ormeno/>.

¹⁷ <http://cosplayerotica.tumblr.com/>.

however, is not so pronounced as on Cosplay Deviants. There is also a distinct lack of promotion of “Japaneseness,” which, in the absence of fannish-ness on the site, might be considered another trigger for a *moe* response in some pop culture fans who grant imagined Japaneseness high, almost fetishistic, cultural capital (Iwabuchi 2002). Indeed, the site conversely promises “EXCLUSIVE European Models” (Cosplay Erotica n.d.), thereby distancing itself from the intersection of cosplay and Japanese pop culture fandoms even when using Japanese characters.

The final site, JCosPlay, returns to the privileging of Japaneseness by calling itself “Japanese Cosplay” (JCosPlay.com n.d.). However, its promotion of “Japanese” elements (apparently interchangeable with “Asian” in the site’s text) rather comes across as a subgenre of pornography one might find on generic porn video upload sites like Xvideos.com than as an appeal to users of cosplay as the term is understood in fandom. As the only site featuring hardcore (penetrative) porn, it is also the loosest in its definition of cosplay. Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Hei-man Cheung point out that cosplay’s “meaning has expanded to include almost any type of dressing up” (2012, p. 318), at least in Japan, and this is clearly how JCosPlay is using the term: the site includes very few recognizable characters and is mainly populated with non-specific schoolgirl sailor uniforms, maid costumes, women in Japanese yukata, and housewives or “office ladies.” Compared to the way the previous three sites define cosplay, the word here is used more as an indicator of general sexual role-play, which is distinct from most fan understandings of cosplay. The text beside the images also mentions the performers by their industry names but does not state any character names; this clearly points to the focus of desire being the model rather than the character fantasy, which is what *moe* derives from (Galbraith 2009). It could be argued that this site’s more explicit sexual content is calculated to encourage the most direct sexual response in its users, with the height of the affective experience as the moment of masturbatory orgasm rather than the emotional “masturbation” of the fannish *moe* response.

For Simon Hardy (2004) and Adair Rounthwaite (2011), pornography is the media form with the strongest potential to cause an unconsidered response in the user (though other visual genres like horror are also geared to cause a visceral reaction). Hardy (2004, p. 13) states that “no other representational genre requisitions the emotional disposition of its audience in such a direct way.” Rounthwaite further insists that the potential of pornography to create a response goes beyond the

spheres of representation and emotion, both of which are part of the realm of social signification. Porn is significant, she believes, because of its affective possibilities, or even more than this, its affective *necessity*. After all, porn “needs a certain kind of affect: without the ability to generate erotic pleasure, it is fundamentally unsuccessful” (Rounthwaite 2011, p. 64). Thinking of pornography in this way, she argues—as “a form of performance documentation that is designed to create a new performance...in the viewer” (p. 63)—enables us to look at the genre in a new way, “shifting away from questions of censorship, freedom of expression, and identity...toward a consideration of how porn records and produces affect” (pp. 63–64). Rounthwaite’s argument suggests that in the recorded document of pornography, the affective pleasure and response seems to be weighted on the side of the viewer rather than the cosplayer, though the affective responses of the performers themselves cannot be ignored.

The terms “sexy,” “erotic,” and “pornographic” appear to describe different levels of sexual explicitness for online users and also appear to operate in connection with the level of fannishness displayed in the performances they are used to describe. “Sexy” tends to refer to cosplay like Enako’s or Nigri’s, which includes faithful mimicry of an already skimpy character costume or which eroticizes an initial costume but remains within the boundaries of acceptance in the semi-public space of game conventions: short dresses and cleavage-enhancing bikinis, but no full or partial nudity. “Erotic” spans the gap between this sort of cosplay, which can be seen at live events and on dedicated cosplay websites, and cosplay that includes partial/full nudity and softcore porn (one or more female participants and no penetration), which can only be found online on websites targeted at adults for the purpose of sexual stimulation. “Pornographic” cosplay includes both softcore and hardcore pornography (with penetration and participants of all genders), and can also only be found on adult-oriented websites. The cosplay images under discussion in this subsection, then, are classified as “erotic” or “pornographic,” and differ from the cosplay of performers like Nigri in that they exist in a different sphere, where it is acknowledged that the prime motivation of creating and disseminating such images is to provide sexual gratification material to the user. This may lessen the expectations from users that the images and performers display “authentic” knowledge of or devotion to the initial media text. As forum user “monk” states, “it’s just another flavor of

porn so porn rules apply” (monk 2012),¹⁸ indicating that it is acceptable to have different expectations of erotic and pornographic cosplay and that it may serve a different purpose than mainstream cosplay. Another commenter justifies sexual content in cosplay by situating it in a Japanese pop culture context: pornographic cosplay, as well as sexy cosplay, is an important part of Japanese otaku/gaming culture, and does not damage the fandom (Philip in Cute Lush 2014). In this way, users of erotic and pornographic cosplay distance it from regular cosplay by assigning it a place within a wider pornographic media context but at the same time maintain a link to the concept of fandom by locating it within otaku culture.

Intertextual connections between pornographic cosplay and other Japanese pop culture fan media can be observed in the various visual and narrative (or absence-of-narrative) conventions shared by these cosplay performances, Japanese pornographic fan comics known as *ero-dōjinshi*, and even some initial digital character images. Aside from having a primary affective aim of sexual stimulation, media related to erotic/pornographic cosplay of female video game characters shares with such *dōjinshi* a tendency to dislocate characters from the initial narrative context of the game and portray them as purely sexual beings. Kinsella (2006, p. 77) finds this tendency not only within fan media but also in commercial animated material, which, “[h]aving brought into being the image of powerful female bodies, frequently armed with weapons or magic...has tended at certain points to humiliate and quite literally attack its creations.” In terms of pornographic game cosplay and fan comic images, this takes the form of removing any traits of physical or magical power from playable female characters and placing them in a setting of sexual desire: desire for the character by the user of the image, and desire solely for sexual pleasure by the character herself.

Website NSFW Gamer, which mixed fan media by providing both fan-drawn and cosplay images of “hot video game babes” (NSFW Gamer n.d.) for free, ran a regular feature titled “Gamer Catfight!” which hypothetically compares one female character with another, often from the same game series, and asks site users to vote on who should win. Use of the term “catfight” itself suggests a particular type of “bitchy” conflict, immediately setting up the contests in a gendered way and inviting a

¹⁸ <http://spacefem.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=44479>.

reading of somewhat petty femininity. The site ran a *FFVII* version of this feature with characters Tifa and Aerith (NSFW Catfight 2010),¹⁹ who are also the most common female *FFVII* characters appearing in *ero-dōjinshi*. In the game, both these characters are playable and can be used in combat, and have considerable strength and magical power. Rather than NSFW Gamer’s contest between the characters being based on their in-game abilities, however, the article displays pornographic fan art images of Tifa and Aerith and asks, “who do we think is the hottest?” thereby turning attention away from their in-game martial aspects and transforming the contest into one of sex appeal. The article briefly refers to their roles within the game. Largely, though, readers are encouraged to view the characters as elements that have been extracted from a “database” of original and other fan texts (Azuma 2009), their main function now is to prompt a physical sexual response. Lamerichs (2015, p. 149) suggests that this dislocation is characteristic of video game cosplay in general as “attachment to a game can be directed towards specific elements of the text...This affective process has different entry points and affective moments,” meaning that attachment is not necessarily generated by deep knowledge or love of the original game but can come from the look of a character or even from the process of cosplaying a character. The Catfight article calls on its readers to make a judgment on the characters based solely on their ability to stimulate sexual desire, bluntly asking, “Tifa has the boobs and Aerith has the heart. Which one would you rather stick your penis in?” Perhaps unsurprisingly, this fleeting reference to Aerith’s kind and caring in-game persona did not carry much weight with the site users (who are clearly addressed here as male), as the hyper-feminine images of Tifa made her the winner of the “catfight” by a wide margin.

The pay-sites Cosplay Deviants and Cosplay Erotica also extract female characters from their initial contexts, engaging them with an erotic aim for which only the physical character elements appear to be necessary. Cosplay Erotica, like NSFW Gamer, features images (photosets and videos) in which female cosplayers appear together, but no male cosplayers are visible. The absence or lack of focus on male bodies (other than the penis or phallic objects) is something that is common to sexy, erotic, and pornographic cosplay as well as *ero-dōjinshi*. While the male body

¹⁹ <http://nswfgamer.com/nswf-catfight-tifa-vs-aerith/>.

in pornographic images aimed at an ostensibly straight male audience has a penetrative function, beyond the erect penis it appears of small consequence in visual terms when compared with the centralization of the female body; as Hardy (2004, p. 13) points out, the male figure “is left largely un-drawn by the text... He is simply a phallic apparatus.” On the hardcore site, JCosPlay, male actors do not have profiles and are not named, unlike the female cosplayers; and on Cosplay Erotica, images displaying penetration are not featured and the male body is entirely absent. In this way, pornographic cosplay images echo the drawn or CGI art of the *ero-dōjinshi* genre, displaying the picking-up of *moe*-inducing costume elements (Azuma 2009) that remove the character from her initial setting. This creates images of hyper-feminine bodies that naturally give rise to the same criticism of women’s objectification found in wider discourse on porn. At the same time, it excludes male bodies from the affective pleasures that come with the role of cosplay practitioner, which may be extensive and involves both being looked at and looking, depending on how far the cosplayer controls the costuming, photography, and editing of her own image.

Sites like Cosplay Erotica use extensive editing to blur the boundaries between the physical human performer and digital bodies, which involves CGI to make the photographed or filmed cosplayers look more like 3D game characters, to the point where it can be difficult to distinguish between the cosplay of a character and the initial character image. CGI manipulation is also a common practice in non-erotic or regular cosplay, adding another layer of visual fidelity to the character. In erotic cosplay, it is imbued with a particular sexual nuance, suggesting that the users will be more likely to be sexually affected if viewing bodies that display the aesthetic traits of animated characters rather than embodied humans. Galbraith states that cosplay “is not mere eroticism, but rather a desire for the two-dimensional, the image” (2009, n.p.); the photo manipulation on Cosplay Erotica takes this idea almost as far as it can go, clearly recognizing that, for certain users, it is “precisely because the cosplayer becomes an image that the *moe* response is possible” (2009, n.p.). These sites demonstrate not only that the practices of pornographic cosplay create a network of links between types of video game fan media but also that they complicate the idea of authenticity to an original text.

Thinking about pornography as a genre designed specifically to produce bodily affect grants it another tie to cosplay, in the study of which the idea of social signification and affect operating across a spectrum has

been a useful theoretical tool. It also dovetails with Galbraith's view on *moe*, which draws on Azuma's (2009) discussion of the concept, allowing us to theorize a continuum of fannish-ness that would appear to run almost parallel to both the spectrum of representation and affect and to rising levels of sexual explicitness. In the scenario presented by the aforementioned websites, the importance the user of cosplay images attaches to "meaning" (fan knowledge and character accuracy as authenticity and status, etc.) appears to decrease as the images rise in explicitness through non-eroticized ("regular" cosplay), sexy, erotic, and pornographic levels. At the same time, the type of affect that occurs could be said to shift from purely emotional *moe*, through the eroticized and sexual (but still fannish) *moe* response to "sexy" and erotic/softcore cosplay, to the most full-blown physical affect of sexual arousal and orgasm caused by hardcore images, which display the least fannish-ness or connection with cosplay culture. This shows that, as Massumi (1995) reminds us, we should not try to separate signification and affect completely: affect is always possible in cosplay fan practices. Instead, an examination of the different forms of affect and the way they intertwine with representation gives us a new way in which to look at cosplay, sexuality, and authenticity without subscribing to the notion that the sexualization of cosplay is detrimental to the fandom.

Thus, it is evident that the theoretical notion of the spectrum between social signification and affect in various cosplay practices is particularly relevant when considering fans and gender identity, and gendered connections to fannish and sexual pleasure. Moreover, alongside this spectrum runs another, which incorporates pop culture-specific concepts of fandom and authenticity. These impact on and complicate one another, and ultimately show that, while social signification or "meaning" is still important because of the values attached to it in different contexts such as *josō* or trans cosplay, it is constantly played with and troubled by the visceral and insistent experiences of bodily response. Authenticity in cosplay therefore has many meanings and may lose its importance in the eyes of users as the affective responses change from fannish affection to the contested sphere of sexual gratification.

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