

**LESBIANS AND TRANSGENDERS IN JAPANESE MEDIA**

by

**Regina Caldart**

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This thesis was presented

by

Regina Caldart

It was defended on

April 22, 2010

and approved by

Akiko Hashimoto, Associate Professor, Sociology Department

Lisa Brush, Associate Professor, Sociology Department

Hideko Abe, Assistant Professor, Asian Studies Department, Colby College

Thesis Director: Richard Smethurst, Professor, History Department

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Regina Caldart, B.A./BPhil

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Japanese GLBT appear to have always held a place in national media. From the the Edo period to the modern age, the Japanese people have constantly been exposed to different types of GLBT society, whether or not they realized it at the time. In this paper, I explore the representations of lesbians and transgenders during the Edo period (1600 to 1860) and in the modern and post-modern era (1868 to the present). I look at ukiyo-e from the Edo period and then Western-style theatre and newspaper stories from the modern era to grasp how lesbians have been portrayed through the years. Then I look at *onnagata* of Kabuki and modern-day new half in order to show how the concept of a transgender has changed over time in the media. Just how has the Japanese perspective changed after the mass introduction of Western culture and ideals during the Meiji period?

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, Western cultures have labeled those individuals who belong to the sexual minority under the heading Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) or GLBTQ, with the “Q” standing for Queer or Questioning. Around the same time America added these labels, Japan also adopted them as a means of describing these individuals. In this essay I want to show how the Japanese media past and present have stereotyped members of the Japanese GLBT. I focus specifically on Male to Female (MTF) transgenders and lesbians. Lesbians have been hounded through the years as being subjects of pornography. There was also an assumption that a woman who loves another woman is merely substituting for a man. MTF transgenders during the Meiji period initially based their identity on the *onnagata* of Kabuki before gaining exposure to Western images.

Sexuality world-wide has taken multiple steps to reach the level of acceptance it has obtained today. In Western regions, due in part to religion, laws against sodomy were established by governments. In modern times, some Middle Eastern countries have retained these laws, and being a homosexual is punishable by death. In the case of Japan, however, there was never such a law against sodomy, and thus the acceptance of homosexuals in that region is quite different from those in the West. Sexuality was generally assumed to be heterosexual centuries ago, possibly due to the need to procreate. Being a homosexual or a transgender interrupted this status quo of procreating to replenish the population. In recent years, though, the relatively stable

nature of the world has caused a shift in the views of sexuality. More specifically, as fairly peaceful times have proceeded, the number of open members of the GLBT have risen to the forefront of world society, in both private lives and in public media.

GLBT in media has evolved from a comedic outlook to a “magical negro” character to a much more human and relatable character. In Western television, the television series *Queer As Folk* has given rise to the more relatable gay man and woman, and reality shows such as *Transform Me* and *RuPaul’s Drag Race* are attempting to squash stereotypes of a gay male or transgender having something inherently wrong mentally. In Japan, steps have been taken to create a more relatable GLBT community, however there seems to be some uneasiness around the topic of lesbianism. Some have taken to calling the lesbian population of Japan an “invisible” one (Chalmers, 2002). Though *yuri* (lesbian, but more frequently girl x girl) manga is the most popular to make into an anime for children, *yaoi* (gay or boy x boy) manga is the most popular among young women but is not likely to be made into a television series. In novels, new half arise as being doting parental figures or “magical negro” types, while on television the gay males and new half remain the subject of several jokes. During a recent Okinawa episode of *Hexagon II Quiz Parade*, the token gay character was paired with a straight man to spend the night in a tent, and several jokes stemmed from this situation (“Okinawa spring trip,” 2010, March, 31). In Japanese media, these individuals are the source of comedic relief, and are infrequently portrayed as realistic individuals on cable television. I theorize that this treatment of GLBT in Japan has stemmed from years of stereotyping and enforcement of the stereotypes, and is slowly changing as lesbians become more vocal and transgenders more present in everyday society.

Japan, a nation with a rich history of cross-dressing and homosexual-related literature and art, has an ironic disconnect when it comes to accepting and respecting its lesbian, bisexual and

transgender population. Japanese people either perceive lesbians as women with problems who are going through a phase or dismiss them as entertainers in the pornographic industry. Like Westerners, the Japanese people rarely acknowledge female bisexuality; furthermore, Japanese culture mirrors American society by labeling transgenders, whether already transitioned or in the process of doing so, as “gay” or “freakish.” In this essay, I will focus on lesbians and transgenders in Japan; I exclude bisexuals from this study due to the difficulty of defining whether or not someone a bisexual and the paucity of literature on this subject. I assert that the Japanese media, despite devoting a large amount of attention to sexual minorities, distort lesbians and transgenders, thereby forcing these individuals into an entertainment niche.

This study stems from my multiple trips to Japan, including a nine month stay as a student and part-time worker. Not only did my experiences enrich my understanding of the Japanese language and culture, but they also connected me with a diversity of Japanese residents, including lesbians and transgenders. I discovered that these individuals bear little resemblance to their media counterparts, prompting my curiosity to explore the subject.

I began my research by speaking to multiple individuals during my time in Japan in order to better narrow my topic from simply “GLBT in Japan” to “Lesbians and Transgenders in Japanese Media.” I consulted multiple texts, and have read a few books and watched a few television shows in Japanese in order to best assess language nuances that may have been lost in translation.

In this paper, I begin with the past, first by providing a general overview of homosexuality in Japan and then moving to a more specific examination of Kabuki actors and Ukiyo-e prints. Once I build a foundation in the time periods up to Meiji, I move to the present by analyzing various articles and resources about the current status of and discourse around

lesbians and transgenders in Japan. Through this study, I hope to clarify how the Japanese stereotypes came to be and how they are continued to be expressed in today's media.

## 1.1 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Pre-modern Japan has a rich history of homosexuality. Despite the prevalence of plays, literature, scrolls and ukiyo-e prints that deal with homosexuality, my undergraduate status and my lack of Japanese linguistic knowledge make it difficult for me to access primary sources and translate these works. Thus, I must rely on secondary historical and academic sources that other scholars have either written in English or translated from the Japanese to English. Although I have discovered comparatively few resources for the historical portion of this thesis, the texts I have found yield interesting facts that add perspective to my paper.

Tales originating in secluded Buddhist monasteries provide the earliest documentation of Japanese homosexual encounters. A common 9<sup>th</sup> century legend attributes the origin of homosexuality in Japan to Kukai, a monk who brought the practice of homosexuality to Japan from China in AD 806 and who is also revered for introducing the *Shingon* teachings of Buddhism to the Japanese people. (Leupp, 1995) (Watanabe, & Iwata, 1989) The implication that these acts originated in China, a nation “outside” of Japan, suggests that the Japanese did not wish to acknowledge that homosexual acts had been present in Japan all along. Kukai, also known as Kobo Daishi, taught that through this sect of Buddhism, individuals can achieve enlightenment in their lifetime; because this teaching proved popular, the religious practice spread. Due to the secluded nature of the *Shingon* temples, human contact occurred only with the other inhabitants of the monastery. Therefore, human sexual instinct took control, resulting in

monk-acolyte pairings. *Shingon* Buddhism, which prohibits any form of sexual conduct, challenges this legend of Kukai. While Kukai, the Japanese figurehead of *Shingon* Buddhism, may have lived a celibate life, some monks chose to use an acolyte as a partner possibly because they considered a woman more impure than a male child. This attitude may stem either from the Shinto belief of women being dirty or from the genuine homosexual preferences of the priests.

The most common term used to describe these relationships between superior monks and their *chigo* (acolytes) was *nanshoku*. The word *nanshoku*, with the characters of “male” and “color,” is based on the “...Buddhist philosophy to the world of visually perceptible forms toward which lower beings, including humans, experienced desire, thus hindering their progress along the path of enlightenment.”(Pflugfelder, 1999) *Chigo monogatari* (acolyte stories), which frequently highlight a distracted monk, appeared as novels during the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and inspired plays and other tales. Several Noh dramas, such as the plays *Tanikou* and *Tsunemasa*, originated from *chigo monogatari*. (Watanabe, & Iwata, 1989) The ideal *chigo* in these stories is “part aristocrat (as evidenced, in most accounts, by his skills with poetry and musical instruments) and part deity (as shown by his knowledge of sutras and his ethereal beauty).” (MacDuff, 1996) These acolytes (demi-gods), sent to save a priest from lack of faith, are the ideal figures for both displaying the purity of their love in addition to showcasing the beauty of the child performer. Although these Noh plays are sometimes vague in their references, the play *Tsunemasa* “is a rather straightforward elegy to a former *chigo*.” (MacDuff, 1996) This play not only teaches about souls and the afterlife, but also emphasizes how male love can survive, even after death.

In addition to the enclave of the monks where they had a secluded space to practice *nanshoku*, the samurai also had a space with which to practice *shudouu*, or the way of the youths.

The development of the Samurai and Japanese society resulted in the evolution of Japanese homosexuality and homosexual relationships. As homosexual acts moved from the secluded monasteries to the more public towns, both the Samurai and commoners began to use the term *shudou* to describe the way of the youths. Because Samurai and their faithful trainees gained honor by their prowess on the battlefield, strength became a more attractive asset than physical beauty. These Samurai and their lovers, often enduring long separations from female companions, turned to each other for sexual gratification. Once the training period or battle ended, they returned to their heteronormative lives. Some men decided to classify themselves as *onnagirai* or woman-haters, but commoners, not the Samurai, more frequently took up this self-proclaimed title (Pflugfelder, 1999).

The early Edo period experienced a huge influx in Japanese literature pertaining to homosexual encounters. *The Great Mirror of Male Love* (1687) by Ihara Saikaku contains several tales pertaining to homosexual encounters experienced by both the commoners and the samurai class. The first 20 tales in the book describe Samurai and their practice of *shudou*, while the second 20 involve kabuki actors and their escapades with townsmen. (Saikaku, 1991) The tales from *The Great Mirror of Male Love* should not be taken as fact, however, since Saikaku wrote the novel to garner wealth and notoriety. That Saikaku considered writing about homosexuality, albeit in a comedic sense, says a lot about the discourse on homosexuality at the time and serves as a testament to this pre-modern “gay boom.” Saikaku demonstrated his comedic intention by claiming that male love existed for three generations before heterosexual love emerged. (Saikaku, 1991) The popularity of this text has lasted for centuries, from its publication in 1687 to the present, and is one of the few primary sources readily available in

English. The pre-modern discourse ranges from how-to books to more traditional novel formats, such as *Genji Monogatari*.

This brief survey suggests a certain amount of acceptance with male homosexual acts within pre-modern Japan. However, Japanese society historically coped with its lesbian and transgendered population. Though ukiyo-e prints depicted lesbians, the general public tended to dismiss real-life cases as nothing more than experimentation by young girls. Furthermore, many Japanese people considered (and still consider) lesbianism as a sexually deviant act for the male's amusement. Like lesbians, transgenders existed outside the accepted social sphere. In fact, the Japanese language did not include a word for transgender. As a result, many transgenders lived their lives denying that they existed in the wrong body. Starting with the ukiyo-e prints of women's sexuality and then moving to the *onnagata* of Kabuki, the following two sections focus on the pre-Meiji aspects of lesbianism and transgenderism in Japan.

## 2.0 PREMODERN LESBIANS AND TRANSGENDERS IN MEDIA

### 2.1 WOMEN'S SEXUALITY IN UKIYO-E PRINTS

Yoshiwara, the popular red-light district of Edo, not only attracted many men in pre-modern Japan, but also served as the source for many artistic revolutions during that period. From music to costume, from theatrical settings to illustrations and prints, Yoshiwara was a pivotal location for the expression of human sexuality. Furthermore, the creation of ukiyo-e, or pictures of the floating world, enabled the artists to not only mass-produce images of an impossible world existing outside of their confined, isolated reality, but to also produce dramatic “pornographic” prints for the masses.

First of all, to call these graphic ukiyo-e prints pornography is ethnocentric and fails to take into account the context of the images. It is difficult to apply the label of “pornography” to those images that existed prior to the creation of the word. Although the Japanese people initially considered *shunga*, the erotic subsection of ukiyo-e prints, as mass-marketed erotica, no laws existed at the time to censor this art form. Today, the Japanese people (and, of course, the rest of the world) accept *shunga* as art, not as “true pornographic” images; therefore, the current government does not impose its harsh censorship laws on *shunga*. (Berry, 2004)

An extremely small proportion of ukiyo-e falls into the category of *shunga*<sup>1</sup>; within this sub-division of ukiyo-e prints, I turn my attention to those prints that showcase a woman's sexuality. These prints include female encounters with men (of which the women always assume the passive role), depictions of female masturbation, and general erotic situational poses that range from realistic to the fantastic. The information, predominantly secondary sources, to which I had access, occasionally jumped to the conclusion that the images were replicas of private matters.<sup>2</sup> This is the equivalent of stating that every pornographic act produced by mass media in modern times mirrors how most people conduct themselves in the bedroom. Because private matters are difficult to substantiate, researchers often taint their findings with their own biases. For example, some subjects will say things they believe the researchers, based on their tone of voice or nature of questioning, want to hear (the Kinsey Reports<sup>3</sup> and the Margaret Mead scandal (Edles, 2002)<sup>4</sup> illustrate this phenomenon).

Female sexuality during the Edo Period in Japan remains a mystery due to the control emanating from the male-centric society. The men, who labeled women as second-class citizens, rarely made any reference to women in personal accounts except as “wife” or “daughter.” Because of this, the history of erotic art in pre-modern Japan “is a history of male sexual fantasies about female sexuality.”(Jones, 1995) Thus, rather than appealing to lesbians, female sexuality in erotic images acts as a marketing ploy to increase sales revenue in male

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<sup>1</sup> I did not find any actual percentages to substantiate this claim. I based this on research of museum online archives and also the fact that several images were repeatedly used in analysis in essays. Basically, it just seems that more pictures of mountains exist than sexual encounters.

<sup>2</sup> Leupp does this with the conclusions in his book *Male Colors*. Though there are prints remaining that showcase male homosexual acts, jumping to the conclusion that this was the case for most men in the era.

<sup>3</sup> There has been discussion about these reports and whether or not the findings are accurate. The main topics of debate are the systematic discarding of data and the “children’s sexuality” section, which based its findings from a single pedophile’s indiscretions.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Mead conducted research in Samoa during the 1920s in an effort to prove that culture encouraged sexual promiscuity. Her findings were later shot down by Derek Freeman when he found her subjects during the 1980s and was told that they lied to her, telling her what she wanted to hear

consumerism. Men found these images “...sexually arousing precisely because many of them dealt in the extraordinary, deviant, transgressive, or hidden,” as Chizuko Ueno argues in her article “Lusty Pregnant Women and Erotic Mothers: Representations of Female Sexuality in Erotic Art in Edo” (Jones, 1995).

A male-dominated society such as that of pre-modern Japan resulted in the majority of men buying erotic images and visiting the Yoshiwara red-light district. Due to its popularity with its male clients, the Yoshiwara district became the backdrop to many plays, several written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the “Japanese Shakespeare” of the love suicides. The courtesan, or *yuujo*, is one of the most commonly depicted characters. Because of her position as an indentured servant to the brothel, the pictures show her engaged in sexual acts that the public considered deviant. One picture, for instance, presents a three-way sexual that shows the courtesan lying passively in the middle while two men penetrate her (Leupp, 1995). Ironically, the courtesan suggests more than a sexual vessel; many courtesans were educated women, competent musicians, and skilled conversationalists. Some prints deviate from the courtesan norm. The *Eight Modern Views of the Interior* by Harunobu Suzuki shows non-courtesan woman, or *jionna*, in the context of a wife catching her husband cheating. The *Autumn Moon*, a shunga from the *Modern Views* set, portrays a married couple, not a husband and his mistress, engaged in foreplay. (Jones, 1995)

There is another instance of a husband and wife in the seventh of the *Eight Modern Views of the Interior*. However, I would like to focus on the maid that is outside the door and her apparent masturbation to the rather comical and awkward position of the husband and wife. (Jones, 1995) This brings me to the second section of female sexuality in *shunga* that I wish to discuss: the depiction of the woman masturbating, either by her own hand or at the hand

of some “other.” The purpose of this discrepancy of women masturbating while the men are out playing with their mistresses stems from the theory that a common woman, or a *jionna*, is banned from sexuality due to motherhood and marriage, whereas the courtesan, or *yuujo*, must commit the acts since it is her duty. (Jones, 1995)

Female masturbation in *shunga* is a heterosexual affair, and since the implication is that she is in need of a man, it is usually conducted in the absence of male genitalia. (Jones, 1995) As such, the men assume a sense of privilege in the ability to view such an event through the world of *shunga*. With such a male-centric view on female sexuality, specifically that it cannot truly come to fruition without a male, lesbianism as the modern world defines it did not exist outside of the realm of male fantasy. Furthermore, the use of the dildo during lesbian sex acts was seen as another surrogate man. (Jones, 1995)

I would classify both the dildo and any bestiality-related images as an “other” giving the woman pleasure. As Ueno points out in her analysis of a print of a diver woman being pleased by a giant octopus, the male gaze is still upon the woman, but this time the “pleasure belongs to her.” (Jones, 1995) This irony of the man not being substituted for by a hand or a dildo is ironic, and the importance of the need for a man becomes nullified somewhat in the shadow of the octopus’ eight tentacles.

The final category of female eroticism in pre-modern art is one that may be debatable, and that is the emergence of the mother as a sex symbol during the late-18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A pregnant woman or a nursing mother as an erotic figure, became rather prominent, the artists’ attempts to squash the concept of a desexualized wife (*jionna*), or attempt to merge both *jionna* and *yuujo* (courtesan) into the same character. (Jones, 1995) The popularity of this depiction could be attributed to a very stereotypical Freudian-inspired Oedipus complex, as the likelihood

of the men to imagine themselves engaged “in sexual activity in the guise of a child” (Jones, 1995) in the pictures of nursing mothers. Ueno argues that there is a triangle being formed with the mother and the offspring, either in the womb or at the breast. The man is necessary for both stages of a woman’s life, and as such is ever-present in *shunga*, though he may not be depicted. He is manifested as being either already in the mother in the form of a fetus, or as the baby who is being nursed by the mother’s swollen breasts.

Though I can understand the appeal of a mother nursing a child, the concept of a pregnant woman being a sexual icon is lost on me. With the child constantly being held to the mother’s breast, the man’s gaze falls to the child and he could, in a sense, be wishing to be the child in order to “pleasure” the mother. However, in regards to depictions of pregnant women and depictions of their on-going sexual lives, I have some trouble finding the argument for the fetish. True, it does push the limited understanding of female sexuality by encouraging that a woman’s sex drive does not end after marriage. At the same time, the popularity of this depiction as a subgenre of *shunga* is debatable, as I am unsure as to how many prints were made of this particular character.

Though the existence of these prints shows that there was a sense of the existence of female sexuality in pre-modern Japan, depictions of lesbian acts were written off as a woman’s need for a man. Whether or not there were lesbians in that era will remain a mystery, as the male-dominated sexual fantasies of the time reverberated through the *shunga* sexual prints. Even two women using a dildo was considered an image for the man’s pleasure, not considering the pleasure that it could bestow to the women using the instrument. Lesbian act could have been a genuine display of emotion, but due to the views on sexuality at the time, it most likely would not have crossed the society’s mind.

## 2.2 THE *ONNAGATA* OF KABUKI: EARLY TRANSGENDERS?

Not only did the male population of pre-modern Japan support the “floating world” of Yoshiwara, but it also was drawn to Kabuki’s *onnagata* – male actors that specialize in female roles. Okuni, a former shrine priestess (Leiter, 2002), founded Kabuki. The irony of this situation sheds a different light on the topic of the history of women in theater. The government banned women from the Kabuki stage in 1629. (Leiter, 2002) Though the government lifted the ban in 1877, this act did not immediately alter the cultural belief that Kabuki is strictly for men.

Kabuki Theater, at the time considered a theater for the commoners in regards to its comparatively raunchy story-telling and attractive actors, fostered the cross-dressing proclivities of the theater. Noh did have men performing the female roles as well, but due to the requirement of masks in Noh, the actors playing the female roles never revealed their faces. Mask-less characters, such as Atsumori, proved an exception to this rule by showcasing the actor’s face to an adoring crowd. Kabuki encouraged flexible definitions of gender through the men playing female roles. Furthermore, the *onnagata* lived their daily lives as women. (Dunn, 1969) As such, were *onnagata* an early and accepted form of transgenders in Japan?

In living as women, *onnagata* bathed in the women’s section of bath houses and paraded around in women’s garb. Since Kabuki in its early years may not have yet established the hereditary position of the *onnagata*, the *onnagata* in Kabuki may have acted as a source of liberation for those with an internal gender struggle. However, over time, Kabuki became a more refined art and the tradition handed down from father to son rose to prominence, such that not everybody who took the role of *onnagata* voluntarily. Perhaps, in some cases, a connection linked those who sought relief and those who trained to be *onnagata*.

I suggest that the Kabuki *onnagata* acted as an outlet for those who were transgendered due to the parallels between the *onnagata* and the modern day new half (a Japanese term for transsexual). Although the modern *onnagata* do not need to live out the duration of their acting career as women off-stage, the rest of their training remains true to tradition. The new half strives to be the most perfect woman in their mind's eye. This perception can take inspiration from a pop idol, a housewife, and everything in-between. Although a genuine female model inspires the performance of an *onnagata* in Kabuki, some discrepancy exists concerning the nature of this female form. Some *onnagata* may perform according to a certain type of woman, such as the "chaste woman" (*teijo*) described by Yoshizawa Ayame's theory on *onnagata*.<sup>5</sup> *Onnagata* received praised on their realistic portrayals of different women, since their "artistic status depended on the authenticity with which they captured the...essence of another gender..."(Leiter, 2002) Though perfecting the opposite gender may not be conceivable in the modern new-half world, the concept supports my argument that the *onnagata* acted as an early form of transgendered individuals.

Gender frustrations of the period were extreme, including but not limited to the banning of women from the stage and men having all the rights to which a citizens is entitled, while women had few to none. Even men dressed as women held more rights than a biological woman. This reflects how the Edo period subjugated its women. Prior to the inception of Tokugawa Ieyasu as the first Shogun of the Edo Period, women maintained a fairly prominent role in matters of politics, religion and other activities that occurred outside of the house. However, once the new Shogunate successfully established the Neo-Confucian policies, these policies bound women according to the following three obediences: 1) obedience to a father when not

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<sup>5</sup> Ayame was the keystone in the development of the *onnagata*. He himself was an *onnagata*, and his theories are still pertinent in several aspects of Kabuki performances. (Robertson, 1992)

married, 2) obedience to a husband when married, and 3) obedience to a son when widowed. (Leiter, 2002) Real women were trapped within their gender roles, though women of lower classes had some freedoms in regard to working part-time to help support the household. The *onnagata*, though occasionally performing a character that fit within these criteria, also played female roles in which the woman defies the accepted hierarchy and proves her own strength. This sudden assertion of independence in Kabuki meant that the woman must engage in some kind of recognized sacrifice, such as giving up her own life in order to save her lover. Despite the drastic actions associated with female independence, the idea of such independence must have appealed to the females in the crowd (Leiter, 2002).

In order to achieve the perfect balance of strong and dainty in the character, the *onnagata* begins training according to tradition around the age of four or five. However, early Edo Period regulations on Kabuki actors stated that only those individuals who had experienced the coming of age ceremony could enter the stage. In addition to this government regulation, Kabuki continued to undergo the transition from street theater to full-fledged art form, a transition Samuel L. Leiter illustrates in his essay “From Gay to *Gei*: The *Onnagata* and the Creation of Kabuki’s Female Characters” (Leiter, 2002). As Leiter points out, the Kabuki “ideal woman” began as a courtesan, for courtesans usually received training in conversation, dance and music. I also assert that the Kabuki courtesan, an indentured servant, achieved recognition due to her ability to illustrate the ideal of pure love and to accept her death in order to honor that love. In Japan during that time, I am under the impression that a courtesan was not permitted to love because of the nature of her profession. Furthermore, suicide and pure love always seem to be linked in Japanese stories, making the courtesan an ideal vessel because of the dichotomy of obligation and emotion. If she wants to love, she will have to die to achieve it. Moreover, the

patrons of the theater had an intimate understanding of the courtesan and her low class rank. The *onnagata* looked beyond the face value of the courtesan as the Yoshiwara figurehead and, instead, brought her to life as a culturally refined woman who embodies the ideals of femininity.

In the event that the Kabuki family line does not produce a male heir, adoption is a viable option. This is true in both pre-modern and modern times, with the modern example of an adoption into the family being Bando Tamasaburo V. The *onnagata* of Kabuki may have been selected due to the effeminate mannerisms that sometimes manifest in older children or due to acting prowess. If this logic occurred, then it would certainly be interesting to attempt to further expand this argument in a graduate school setting. However, this attempt to compare the Kabuki *onnagata* to the mannerisms of the modern-day new half will be further discussed in the section on new half and their evolution.

### 3.0 MODERN LESBIANS AND TRANSGENDERS

#### 3.1 MODERN LESBIANISM: PROBLEM WOMEN, TAKARAZUKA AND DAIKU

As the Westernizing Meiji Era (1868-1912) wore into Taisho (1912-1926) and Showa (1926-1989), the Japanese public became more aware that certain women did not conform to the standards set by heterosexual society and preserved by tradition. Society labeled those women who vocalized their uneasiness about oppression as “problem women.” Many people in Japanese society blamed this “so-called Women Problem (*fujin mondai*), a term coined around 1900 as a euphemism for issues related to females’ civil rights and the struggle of the New Woman (*atarashii onna*),” on the increasing Western influence upon the Japanese culture (Robertson, 1999). Although not all these problem women adopted a lesbian lifestyle, many of these women contradicted society’s view of femininity by donning pants or suits and behaving in a masculine manner (Robertson, 1999).

Despite the supposed modernization that Japan experienced during the late Meiji-Taisho era, such traditional theaters as Kabuki and Noh still prohibited women from professionally entering the stage, even when performing female roles. The theater schools argued for keeping alive the long-held tradition that prohibited women from performing.<sup>6</sup> In 1913, however,

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<sup>6</sup> This is no longer necessarily the case, as Noh and Kabuki actors have begun to train their daughters for the main stage in the absence of a male heir to the family line. Adoption is also a common practice for those without a male

Kobayashi Ichizou, president of Hankyu Railways, directly opposed the traditional theater by establishing the Takarazuka Revue.<sup>7</sup> He also envisioned it as a “state theater,” a means through which the state could express its ideals of state-sanctioned gender roles and patriarchal households (Robertson, 1992). Although Kobayashi created a theater that encouraged women to dress in a masculine manner and perform male roles, he ironically supported the conservative ideal of “good wives, wise mothers.” (Robertson, 1992) In fact, he abhorred the idea of the “modern girl,” the antithesis of the good wife ideal, and he enforced the ideal through his training of the Takarazuka actors, or Takarasiennes. Kobayashi “theorized that by performing as men, females learned to understand and appreciate males and the masculine psyche,” thus making them perfectly prepared for marriage (Robertson, 1992). Kobayashi also saw the theater as a lynchpin in “the construction and staging of gender [through] literally staging the...gender roles.” (Robertson, 1998) Kobayashi may have hoped that the females in his audience, by seeing the proper way to behave in a theatrical setting, would then live their lives according to the “good wives, wise mothers” civil code.

The idea of a Western theater and not a traditional Japanese one stems from a market clamoring to have more “modern” (i.e. Western) forms of entertainment. Despite the *otokoyaku* (male role-players) behaving in the same manner as “problem women,” the theater still enjoyed success. To this day, the Takarazuka Music School maintains a high, exclusive admissions policy; its graduates and retirees, many of whom were top stars in the Revue, later gained fame as instructors, actresses and even as the wife (Miyuki Hatoyama) of the current Japanese prime minister. However, men continue to head the Revue’s troops in managerial positions (Robertson,

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heir (Bando Tamasaburo V, the famous *onnagata*, was adopted under such conditions). Women still face an uphill battle to gain recognition for their work in a male-dominated field.

<sup>7</sup> The Revue is still under Hankyu control to this day, and the website includes the name in the address: [kageki.hankyu.co.jp](http://kageki.hankyu.co.jp) (*kageki* means “revue” in this case, but it can also mean opera troupe)

1992). This dichotomy of male managerial positions and female actresses remains an intriguing aspect of the Revue.

The world of Takarazuka sorts women into two groups: the *musumeyaku*, or daughter-players, and the *otokoyaku*, or the male players. Perhaps the female role-players lost the title *onnayaku* (woman players) because the *musumeyaku* represent the most feminine of the feminine. In a Takarazuka Revue performance, the *musumeyaku* use mannerisms that overly exaggerate the curtsy and other female mannerisms. Furthermore, the women who perform as *musumeyaku* adopt the vocal patterns and grammar structure of the Meiji-created *jyoseigo* (women's language). For example, they use the ending particle *wa* with the tone going up (unlike the Kansai *wa*, with the tone going down) and the personal pronoun *atashi/atakushi*. Unlike the *musumeyaku*, the women who play *otokoyaku* cut their hair short, wear masculine clothing and speak in masculine tones. *Danseigo* (man's language) consists of regularly ending a sentence with *da* in addition to the personal pronoun *ore* (a very masculine 'I'). Teachers in the Takarazuka Music School choose the actress to play a certain role depending on such variables as height (males are generally taller than females) and vocal tone (male voices are generally deeper than female voices) (Robertson, 1998).

By location his Takarazuka Revue *Daigekijo* (main theater) in the hot spring town of Takarazuka, the site where the Hankyu Railway begins, Kobayashi found it easy to advertise his theater. Posters of the latest Takarazuka performances still line the cars on the Hankyu Railway. The primarily female audience members not only frequented each performance, but they also developed feelings, sometimes arguably sexual ones, for the performers (Robertson, 1998). By the 1930s, cases came to light that showcased lesbianism as the main dilemma of these "problem

women.” These cases did not always entail Takarazuka stars and their lovers, though they did gain some press.

The popular Asahi Shinbun published a case, later studied by Jennifer Robertson, an expert on Takarazuka, describing an attempted double suicide (also known as a lovers suicide, or *shinjuu*) by a lesbian couple: Saijo Eriko, a *musumeyaku* from a troupe much like Takarazuka called the Shokichu Revue,<sup>8</sup> and Masuda Yasumare, a very masculine “problem woman” who also happened to be a huge fan of Saijo. The press would normally honor and praise a heterosexual couple that successfully commits love suicide because love suicides have historically played a huge role in plays and novels. Many Japanese people believed that this type of suicide showcased “the exquisite purity of their love,” hence the praise from the press and public (Robertson, 1999). However, in the case of this lesbian couple, the press offices received humorous poems that portrayed “their attempted suicide...as an act provoked by nihilistic anger, as opposed to visions of conjugal bliss in another life.” (Robertson, 1999) Whereas people considered love suicides as the ultimate expression of love for those heterosexual pairs who could not unite in life, they viewed the union of same-sex couples as undermining the values promoted by the state. The morally corrupt actions of the lesbian lovers damaged the values that women should embrace.

This is not to say that Saijo and Masuda’s case was an isolated incident, for it was a not uncommon headline in the newspapers during the early 1900s before the war. However, in their case, it was merely an *attempted* double suicide, leaving the media plenty of fodder with the living pair, focusing mainly on Masuda as the aggressive partner who led the feminine, and thereby weaker, Saijo to the idea of suicide. (Robertson, 1999) The butch-femme partnership,

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<sup>8</sup> As the Takarazuka Revue gained popularity, “impostor” revues also sprang up. However, they never gained as much notoriety as the original Takarazuka Revue. Shokiku Revue was founded in Tokyo in 1928.

also called an *ome* relationship (Robertson, 1999), comes with the implication that the more masculine of the duo is also the more manipulative, in line with the theory that women are weaker and more easily manipulated than men. Two months after the suicide attempt, the feminine Eriko published an autobiographical account of the affair, from its conception to the suicide. It seems as though Eriko was trying to downplay her involvement in the whole ordeal, especially as a willing partner. Robertson theorizes that this may have been an attempt to reduce the damage to her acting and modeling career, as she was one of the more prominently featured *musumeyaku* in fan magazines up until the incident (Robertson, 1999).

This case is interesting for me because a *musumeyaku* was the selected lover from the women's theater, and not an *otokoyaku*. Typically, *otokoyaku* are the most popular of all performers, embracing both attractive masculine qualities and a sensitivity worthy of romance novels. The *otokoyaku* are also the most stereotypical half of the butch-femme pairing. I find the case of Saijo and Masuda interesting because the actress was a *musumeyaku*, and because of her feminine training, she is sexually less appealing than the androgynous looks of the male role players. When moved to real-life butch-femme scenarios, the real-life counterparts of the Takarazuka characters behave in a somewhat different manner, sometimes in line with stereotypes assigned to them. When lesbians hold a conversation in the safe confines of a bar with like-minded individuals, the speech patterns turn more masculine, much like how some of the *otokoyaku* from Takarazuka frame their responses during interviews.<sup>9</sup>

Hideko Abe states that the terms lesbian and *onabe* (“pot,” the lesbian counter for *okama*) are distinguished by the fact that a lesbian knows she is a woman, behaves as one would expect a woman, and yet chooses a female as the sexual partner. This is very different from *onabe*, who,

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<sup>9</sup> This statement has been backed by research done by Hiedko Abe in her article *Lesbian Bar Talk in Shinjuku, Tokyo* (Okamoto, & Shibamoto Smith, 2004).

though female, see themselves as masculine and thus are the ones that utilize masculine speech the most often (Okamoto, & Shibamoto Smith, 2004). In the same section, an employee at a bar emphasizes that the two do not date one another, as an *onabe* truly wants to be seen as a man.

Personal pronouns, as mentioned in the transgender section, also come into play here as a means of identifying yourself. Three of the personal pronouns mentioned at the lesbian bar (*jibun* (myself), *boku* (a masculine “I”) and *watashi* (a neutral “I”)) come from female-to-male transsexuals (*boku*), self-identified *onabe* (*jibun*) and finally lesbians with the neutral *watashi* (Okamoto, & Shibamoto Smith, 2004). A later interview Abe conducts, this time with a lesbian in her mid-thirties and not a 20-something-year-old bartender, and the woman responds by saying that *boku* is used when she is making a false showing of power (Okamoto, & Shibamoto Smith, 2004).

However, there are cases where the woman falls under the category of Gender Identity Disorder (GID), choosing to dress and behave as if she were a man. As with the male-to-female transgenders (MTF), female-to-male (FTM) are not as well researched. The transmen (women that have not undergone sex reassignment surgery) that worked in the host industry, brother girls, had a range of attributes in order to best suit the preferences of their female clientele. From extremely manly to those dressed in suits to accentuate the feminine curves, these high-priced bars catered to women attracted to the same sex (McLelland, 2005). This situation is different from Takarazuka in that the females are living out their lives in a masculine manner, whereas the Takarazuka *otokoyaku* portray a masculine image only during performances and rehearsals. In a television special on the modern Takarazuka actress Mizu Natsuki in which she goes to her alma mater, every sentence she speaks is either neutral or slightly feminine (Mizu, 2009, October). On another television show called *Hexagon II Quiz Parade*, a panel of retired Takarazuka top stars

participated in the games ("Former takarazuka top," 2009, November, 25). Of the five on the show, four spent their Takarazuka careers as *otokoyaku*, and of those women, two still retain extremely masculine qualities and voices. Though the remaining two former *otokoyaku* may not fall in line with the stereotype, they were featured the least on the show.

Modern media in Japan tends to focus on stereotypical cases or characteristics of lesbian culture, such as very public attempted suicides with stereotypical butch-femme pairings and masculine former Takarazuka stars. Because of this focus, and also the pre-existing notion of lesbianism in erotic art, Japanese media does not showcase the variety of types that exist. In some forms of media, such as manga, lesbianism is touched upon but is shrugged off as being a phase the young female characters go through. Feminine halves of lesbian couples are weaker and therefore coerced into the relationship, and once an *otokoyaku* is trained as a man, they will forever behave as one. These stereotypes are hardly representative of reality, and yet they are all most Japanese have to go on.

### **3.2 TRANSGENDERS AND THEIR EVOLUTION**

The time period after World War II is crucial in the evolution of the transgender population in Japan. After surviving a war in which the government heavily enforced regulations and in which many men lost their lives in retrospectively meaningless battles, the Japanese people were more than eager to shed the rules and resume a normal life. This sudden sense of freedom encouraged a public discourse on sexuality and those subjects that fall under the category of "unusual." This discourse came to be known as *kasutori*, or low-level/pulp, culture (McLelland, 2005). Transgenders especially welcomed this cultural emancipation that led to an influx of modern

Western culture and loosened the sexual restraints imposed on the people by the Japanese government. Prior to this dramatic introduction of the Western images, many Japanese still relied on Kabuki *onnagata* as a means to best portray a proper woman. These new images allowed Japanese transgenders to see a world outside of that of the *onnagata* of Kabuki. Japanese GLBT members embraced homophile magazines that would face censorship in America (McLelland, 2005). These magazines not only introduced this population to the numerous categories of male homosexuality, but they also exposed the GLBT members to the diversity of kanji wordplay that emphasized the sexual orientation of words (McLelland, 2005).<sup>10</sup>

In addition, homophones from the Western languages added a sexual connotation to otherwise benign Japanese words. For example, the word *gei* in native Japanese means art, but with the introduction of the homophone “gay,” the word took on a broader meaning by applying to both effeminate homosexual males and male transgenders, usually with connections to the entertainment industry (McLelland, 2005).<sup>11</sup> In the 1950s, almost all references to transgenders, including the term *gei boi*, which had roots in show business (McLelland, 2005).<sup>12</sup> This perhaps establishes the stereotype of a transgender as representing the entertainment industry. The most visible of transgenders in Japan are typically the new-half (another word for transsexual), the modern-day evolution of the *gei boi* of the 1950s. Quite a bit of press focused on these *gei boi*; the mainstreaming of the *gei boi* caused Japan’s first “gay boom” in the 1950s and 1960s. The number of gay bars in Tokyo’s Shinjuuku Nichome increased threefold, and dialogue on the subjects of homosexuality and transgender became significantly more commonplace (McLelland,

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<sup>10</sup> One of these plays on kanji, *dansho* or cross-dressing male prostitute, was one of those modified. It was meant to be used interchangeably with *okama*, another term meaning an effeminate gay man.

<sup>11</sup> The term is male-centric and cannot be applied to women.

<sup>12</sup> The term was also used to describe effeminate singers and actors who were not necessarily transgendered.

2005).<sup>13</sup> Also at this time, various gay bars popularized “imitation girl contests.” During this period, Peter, one of the original *gei boi*, came to prominence. To this day, Peter appears on television shows and on stage, performing much as he did in the 1969 movie, *Bara no Soretsu*, albeit now dressing as an elegant woman rather than a cute, effeminate boy.

The evolution of the *gei boi* into the blue boy (*buru boi*) began in the 1960s and helped bring to the forefront sex-reassignment surgery as a means of physically turning a man into a woman. At the time, men who looked the most feminine received the most praise, but now the emphasis shifted to a surgically-created female form (McLelland, 2005). The debate surrounding sex-change surgeries had been around for some time and had even occurred prior to the arrival of Le Carrousel, the transsexual Parisian sensation (McLelland, 2005).<sup>14</sup>

Also during this time period, particularly in the 1980s, television talent Haruna Ai had her first exposure to the new-half culture (though at the time considered a relatively new phrase, only being coined in 1981 (McLelland, 2005)<sup>15</sup>):

When I had just become a fourth year elementary student, new-half appeared on a late night TV show called “11P.M.” Until then, because I had only seen unnerving new-half of which I could not distinguish the gender, frankly, I did not have a good impression of them. But, with the new-half that appeared on the show, Carousel Maki, my image of new-half completely changed because she was so beautiful. No matter how you looked at her, she did not look like a former

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that there was never any discourse prior to this time, as the Kabuki *onnagata*'s popularity over the centuries fostered a certain amount of acceptance for cross-dressing and/or effeminate males.

<sup>14</sup> The first Japanese male-to-female transition was that of Nagai Akiko in 1951, and several MTF and FTM transitions followed.

<sup>15</sup> Half (*hafu*) refers to an individual who is half Japanese and half another race, usually Caucasian. In the case of new half (*nyu hafu*), the person is half one gender, female, and half the other, male.

man. My eyes were fixed to this gorgeous person. The Carousel on the show confessed that her breasts were artificial and that she had had sex reassignment surgery. That was the first I had learned that, through surgery, even a man could become a woman. And, if I were to become a woman, I thought over what would happen. Maybe I can even say to a boy that I like him, and I could wear skirts to my heart's desire... Furthermore, could I have kids? (Ai, 2009)

In her autobiography, Haruna Ai had expressed at a very young age her desire to become a girl. Seeing Carousel Maki, however, made her realize for the first time that she could match her body with her mind. Like Haruna Ai, many modern new half have attempted suicide prior to the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID). One could imagine these modern new half spoke perceive the label GID as destructive as schizophrenia.

New-half, according to Mark McLelland, is much broader than just a male to female (MTF) transsexual. It includes individuals who are literally half male (lower body) and half female (upper body), those that have artificial breasts and those that grew them through hormone injections, and also those who have kept the penis (McLelland, 2005). Moreover, the term new-half generally implies work in the sex trade (*mizushobai*) and entertainment realms. However, as McLelland points out in his chapter "Transgendered Lives" in *Queer Japan: From the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, new-half that wish to be neither female nor male are exempted from necessary medical procedures and also from a form of respect from the public, as they do not easily fit into a category. In fact, most new-half acknowledge GID as a separate issue from the new-half issue, and as such should not be put into the same category (McLelland, 2005).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In Japanese, the word for gender identity disorder (*sei douitsusei shougai*) has an implication of the individual being disabled in some capacity, as the *shougai* portion can literally mean handicap in addition to disorder.

Prior to the debate on sex-reassignment surgery coming to the forefront, there were bars in Europe that had transgendered performers on a nightly basis. These performers and their shows became so well known that they eventually toured the world, eventually stopping in Japan. These performers were consistently MTF, as FTM operations were incredibly rare. If a FTM wanted to enter the private sector as a man, it was much easier for her to approach it from a transman angle than completing the expensive surgery. During my research, I did not encounter one instance of a fully-transitioned new-half entering the private sector as a woman. There was one documented case of a fully transitioned FTM who reentered the world as a salaryman in the 1950s (McLelland, 2005), but such an incident was rare at best. This is not to say, however, that no men managed to live out their lives as women, and vice versa. It may just be the case that such incidents went undocumented due to their convincing nature.

Through the media of the perverse press, a cross-dresser society was effectively established as a means for like-minded individuals to gather and for those interested to find them (McLelland, 2005). With the internet, the discourse could spread to anyone interested in knowing, and information previously available only to those within the subculture became common knowledge. This includes information on sex reassignment procedures, support groups for coming out to family and cheap places to purchase male-sized dresses. There are websites dedicated to encouraging gender bending if one is not sure whether they want to remain a male or a female. However, when older individuals attempt this style with little experience, they could become one of the “unnerving new-half” that Haruna Ai spoke of in her autobiography (Ai, 2009).

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However, the term for autism (*jiheishou*) has a less severe implication though the disease it does affect one’s mental capacity. The former characters for both psychological disorders are incredibly accurate in terms of the meaning of the kanji (*sei douitsusei* literally means sexual identity, and *jihei* has the characters for “self” and “closed”).

From the 1980s, new half have held a steady foothold in society. In the book *Kitchen* by Yoshimoto Banana, Eriko and her friend Chika speak in *joseigo* for the entire duration of the novel. Even though both characters used to be men, if Yuichi, Eriko's son, did not blatantly state the fact, I may have gone through the whole novel suspecting nothing. At one point, Eriko attempts to use *danseigo* in her last will and testament, but gives up and continues to use *joseigo*, stating that she is a woman, thinking like one and behaving like one, despite her previous gender.

Since the second gay boom of the 1990s, new half and gender bending television personas, known as "talents," have appeared regularly on programs. This could be for two reasons: 1) to get the "new half perspective" on the topic being discussed, much like the "foreigner perspective" and the "athlete perspective," or 2) act as a source of comedic relief. Since many new half and gender bending individuals are in the entertainment or fashion realms, they easily fall into the second category due to their easily-mockable natures. Haruna Ai appears on multiple news and game shows, making her easily one of the most visible of the new half. There is also a popular new half fashion model named Ayana Tsubaki who doubles as a college student. Tsubaki is probably the youngest new half I encountered during my research, born in 1984 and transitioning in 2006 in Thailand. She appears on Sunday Japon with Haruna Ai, though as a regular and not a guest.

New half in the modern period have undergone an evolution from mimicking the *onnagata* to effeminate boys to surgically created female forms. Though they still face some discrimination in their private lives, publicly it appears that they are accepted and even embraced. Yet so little is known about the ones that remain in the private sector and what types of scrutiny they face with more stereotypical new half in regular media.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

Japanese lesbians and transgenders have always been in the media, whether it be pre-modern prints and theatrics to modern television and western-styles of theater and novels. Because of the prevalence of stereotypical representations on national television programs, and also because of stereotypes deeply rooted in past perceptions, acceptance of lesbians and transgenders has been slow to change. Some people have viewed the lesbian as invisible due to the statistically insignificant figure of “out” lesbians, and the fact that the media tends to ignore them on the popular fronts of television and pop-fiction. With so many portrayals of what it means to be a lesbian or transgendered, stereotypes are often all the public has to go on.

As I have shown in my essay, pre-modern and modern Japan both have had different exposure to lesbians and transgenders. In pre-modern Japan, lesbians existed only in prints, and no data or personal recollections of such practices occurring exist. Transgenders consisted of the *onnagata* of Kabuki, living their daily lives as women while relaxing as a man in the secrecy of their own homes. In modern times, initial press about lesbianism portrayed it in a negative, and often nihilistic, light. Women dressing and speaking as men became the most obvious form of lesbianism the public could grasp. Transgender, on the other hand, went through stages in order to reach where they are today: prominently featured in multiple media outlets. Since there were no laws against homosexuality in Japan, the stigma surrounding GLBT is considerably less than other Western countries. As the years have progressed in Japan, the culture has gone from

relatively accepting to essentially homophobic to curious back to accepting. However, this final stage of acceptance is a relatively silent one in which people accept but do not seem to confront the issue as a whole. The progression has achieved this level in the same time frame as it took the West to guarantee rights to GLBT members. GLBT in Japan will soon reach a stage of being treated as regular members of society, not anomalies that exist purely for entertainment purposes.

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