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Philosophy and Aesthetics of Sexuality in JAPAN

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CONTENTS

Articles

SARAH REBECCA SCHMID	<i>Rotting Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Horror in Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan</i>	9
AIMEN REMIDA	<i>Dialectical & Beautiful Harmony. A Sexuality-based Interpretation of Reiwa 令和</i>	27
THOMAS SCHMIDT	<i>The Depiction of Japanese Homosexuality through Masks and Mirrors. An Observational Analysis of Funeral Parade of Roses</i>	45
GRZEGORZ KUBIŃSKI	<i>Dolls and Octopuses. The (In)human Sexuality of Mari Katayama</i>	63
LOUISE BOYD	<i>Women in shunga: Questions of Objectification and Equality</i>	79
JARREL DE MATAS	<i>When No Means Yes: BDSM, Body Modification, and Japanese Womanhood as Monstrosity in Snakes and Earrings and Hotel Iris</i>	101
	<i>About the Contributors</i>	117

Sarah Rebecca Schmid*

Rotting Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Horror in *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*

Abstract

The success that the kabuki play *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* enjoyed was not simply due to its spectacular stage tricks, but also because of the inescapably intimate (human) nature of the horror displayed on stage. Sexuality and gender in particular dominate the horror on stage. The central character Oiwa serves as a vehicle for gendered fears rooted in Edo-period attitudes towards sexuality.

Keywords

Kabuki, Theatre, Edo Period, Femininity, Ghosts

Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan

The kabuki play *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* 東海道四谷怪談, written by Tsuruya Nanboku IV 四代目鶴屋南北 (1755–1829), was first performed in the seventh month of 1825. It was an immediate and great success; it ran a record number of days and was frequently revived during the rest of the Edo period, both in Edo and Kamigata. The story of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* revolves around the central character Oiwa, a woman from the samurai class. She left her husband Iemon before the beginning of the play, but returns to his side during Act I to avenge her father's murder—without knowing that the murderer is her very husband. Iemon's satisfaction about the deception and return of his wife doesn't last long, however; by Act II, Oiwa

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has given birth to a son and remains weakened from the pregnancy, which aggravates their already difficult financial situation. When his rich neighbor proposes that Iemon marry his own (young, beautiful) daughter instead, Iemon agrees to get rid of Oiwa. Oiwa is poisoned, disfigured, abused, and when she tries to make herself up (usually referred to as *kamisuki*) and leave the house to face her tormentors, she is killed by a sword sticking out of a beam. In her determination to avenge her mistreatment, Oiwa returns as a hideously disfigured ghost. She tricks Iemon into killing his new wife and father-in-law on the wedding night, forcing Iemon to flee and go into hiding. In Act III, Oiwa returns to torment Iemon as a moving corpse nailed to a door he pulls out of the water while fishing (a scene known as *toitagaeshi*). In Act IV, she first seduces Iemon as a beautiful woman and then turns back into a disfigured ghost to torment him again. In Act V, Oiwa kills Iemon's mother and dramatically escapes from a lantern to haunt Iemon again (a scene known as *chōchin nuke*). The play ends with Iemon's death, though not at Oiwa's hand.

This short description hardly does justice to the play, which has a cleverly constructed storyline the product of repeated trial and error. The play stands at the end of a successive development in the oeuvre of Tsuruya Nanboku, one of the most prolific and popular playwrights of his time, but his success did not come early. His first major hit was the play *Tenjiku Tokubei ikoku banashi* 天竺徳兵衛韓漸 that was premiered in the summer of 1804, when Nanboku was already close to fifty years old. *Tenjiku Tokubei ikoku banashi* contains the elements that would eventually also ensure the success of his later plays: impressive special effects and supernatural occurrences, including the appearance of ghosts.¹ As with many kabuki plays, it was written specifically for one actor, like the later *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* too.

The historical background of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* (its *sekai* 世界) was the popular play *Kanadehon Chūshingura* 仮名手本忠臣蔵.² In fact, when *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* was performed for the first time, it was back-to-back with *Kanadehon Chūshingura*. Nanboku was adept at entwining different plots, usually historical *jidaimono* 時代物 and domestic *sewamono* 世話物. By interweaving the two plays, Nanboku showed two sides of the same coin: samurai heroism and loyalty in the *jidaimono* *Kanadehon Chūshingura* and

¹ Such as the use of real water, for example, or a fire-breathing giant toad.

² A *sekai*, world, refers to the defined sets of characters and events that make up the background of a kabuki play. *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* is set in the *sekai* of *Chūshingura*, which deals with the fictionalised events of the historical Akō vendetta. Oiwa's husband and father are both former retainers of Enya Hangan, the tragic hero of *Chūshingura*.

the life of those who fail to live up to these ideals and fall to the bottom of society in the *sewamono Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*. Nanboku is considered to also have been one of the spearheads of *kizewamono* 生世話物, “raw” domestic plays that focused on the lives of the lower classes and the criminal underworld. Instead of noble heroes, these plays are dominated by anti-heroes, villains, and people who have fallen on hard times. *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* is one of these plays. As the characters descend into their individual misfortunes, often caused by their own depravity, sexuality and gender play an important role in the horrors that they experience. The examples are numerous: pregnancy as a life-threatening health issue and source of economic hardship rather than familial felicity, the female body as a tool of seduction and source of horror, the Oiwa’s attempt at breaking with the idealized version of femininity in kabuki. Sex might not always be explicitly referred to, yet it is constantly present as an underlying theme. While other factors contributed to her success too, Oiwa worked so well as a terrifying haunting spirit precisely because she channeled the fears that the Edo-period audience held about sexuality and gender so well.

Performance of Gender

Different role types in kabuki have defined characteristics and purposes in the play. Yoshizawa Ayame I 初代吉沢菖蒲 (1673–1729), one of the most famous *onnagata* 女形, actors of female roles, was also one of the actors that was decisive in defining how women were portrayed on stage.³ In his published advice, *Ayamegusa* あやめぐさ, he cemented the characteristics considered essential for any *onnagata* role: virtue and softness. According to Ayame I himself, it is the *keisei* 傾城, the role type of the courtesan, that is the ultimate reference for an actor of female roles, as they are “the most feminine among women” (Shuzui 1954, 35).⁴

The courtesan is an immensely popular figure in all fields of entertainment and art, perhaps most notably in ukiyo-e, where many pictures of beautiful women, *bijin-ga* 美人画, celebrate courtesans, both fictional and historical. Courtesans were both renowned for their skills in music, song, poetry and literature as well as for their feminine charm and manners. These are the characteristics linking them to *onnagata*—as Ayame I has pointed

³ A detailed discussion of the impact of Ayame on kabuki can be found in Kominz (1997, 181–223).

⁴ *Josei no naka no joseirashisa* 女性の中の女性らしさ.

out, it is the softness of the courtesan that is her defining feature, a feature that marks her as the stark opposite of the often imposingly masculine heroes on the kabuki stage.

However, the courtesan has two more characteristics that usually go unmentioned: sexual availability and performance of femininity. It is the job of the courtesan to perform her role to the satisfaction of her customers: to be sexually alluring and at least theoretically be available to her ‘audience.’ She is conscious of her audience as she performs, and what the audience desires is femininity—or rather, an absence of masculinity.⁵ The *onnagata*, in Ayame’s understanding, has the same task. Consequently, the femininity on stage is one that caters to male desires and ideals more than female ones. As Thompson (2006, 23) has pointed out, “[...] ‘Femininity’—and indeed ‘Masculinity’—are constructed through voice, gesture and other performative codes which relate to (but may not be identical to) real-life gender stereotyping and real-life behavior. Gender itself, one might say, *is* performance: a cultural construct or system of learned codes.” This is certainly true for both *onnagata* and courtesans. Both strive not to emulate the ordinary woman that one might run into in the streets. Instead, they aspire to an idealized version of femininity, one that the average woman cannot hope to achieve. *Onnagata* and courtesans both sell a dream, a desire, through the performance of certain codified behaviors perceived as “feminine”—behaviors that are also tied to sexual availability.

Few performers have taken their performance as far as Ayame I. He stated that, in order to reach true mastery, it is necessary to keep up the female persona even in their daily life—which he did. This gives rise to the question how *onnagata* perceived themselves in terms of gender. Leiter argues that

[...] the original intention of Ayame and his peers was not to *act* as women but to be women, at whatever cost, in the interests of art. They were not necessarily thinking of themselves as men playing women but sought to be as true as they could to ‘women’ as they understood them. This was not a conscious observation but a lived experience (2006, 76).

However, Morinaga (2014, 44) challenges this view, citing three points in relation to gender and its economy: “(1) gender identity can be divorced from sex identity, (2) the gender dichotomy is actually based on the gender

⁵ Edo was notorious for its unbalanced ratio of male to female residents. Many men were likely not of the extremely well-mannered sort, so the wish for more gentle company from time to time is not entirely surprising.

spectrum, and (3) gender is presentation and not representation.” The first point has long become a focus in gender studies, for example with the topic of transgender or nonbinary people, whose gender expression or identity does not match one’s assigned sex. Morinaga argues that while *onnagata* like Ayame might have a gender identity other than male, their sex remained very much male. While Leiter (2006, 76-77) lists Ayame’s advice that an *onnagata* should blush when one asks him about his wife as evidence for the fact that Ayame saw himself as a woman, Morinaga (2014, 45-46) reads it as proof for the opposite. The fact that he was married to a woman and produced offspring was public knowledge, and at no point did Ayame deny that his sex was male—on the contrary, he explicitly refers to the bodies of *onnagata* as male in *Ayamegusa* (Shuzui 1954, 33-34).

Gender is often seen as a dichotomy, two mutually exclusive opposites, when in practice, it is anything but. Ayame, Morinaga argues, saw femininity as spectrum with gradations, which is why he championed the *keisei* over all other role types for being the “most feminine.” This also suggests that he thought of other role types as less (ideally) feminine. Ayame chose the *keisei* because she lacks any hint of masculinity. The *onnagata* however was a man who possessed male qualities (and a male body) from birth and therefore, he needed to consciously train his entire life in order to eliminate all masculinity for the sake of his art—at least in public (Isaka 2009, 29).

The third point, that gender is presentation (or rather, performance) and not representation, has already been touched upon.⁶ Leiter writes that *onnagata* like Ayame strived to be as true to women as they understood them. This, however, is proven incorrect by the fact that Ayame chose the *keisei* as the true embodiment of femininity, rather than any other category of women. The *keisei* herself is already a deliberate performance of femininity, a femininity that is performed with the (desiring) male gaze in mind.

This relatively rigid understanding of female role types started changing during the period Tsuruya Nanboku was active. One of the representative female characters in *kizewamono* plays, Dote no Oroku, first appeared in the play *Osome Hisamatsu Ukina no Yomiuri* 於染久松色読販 in 1813. She was originally written for the actor Iwai Hanshirō V 五代目岩井半四郎 (1776–1847), who contributed significantly to the development of the *akuba* 悪婆, the (not really) evil women role type. An entertainer dwelling at the bottom

⁶ To clarify the difference between presentation and representation: Presentation tries to achieve expressing an *idea*, while representation tries to achieve expressing the *truth*. Presentation can differ by upbringing, personal environment, and choice; representation is an imperative (i.e. women are weak, men don’t cry).

of society, she embodies all the characteristics of a *kizewamono* anti-heroine. Unlike the beautiful courtesans, she has a coarse appearance with a long ponytail and a short padded coat (*hanten* 半纏) worn over a checkered kimono, and has a sharp, direct manner of speaking. She was a great success with the audience and reappeared two years later in the play *Kakitsubata Iromo Edozome* 杜若艶色紫 as the main character. Both plays were written by Tsuruya Nanboku.

Oroku incorporates all the negative and positive qualities of the *akuba*: she is able to hold her ground in a fight and willing to resort to murder or fraud to reach her goals, but she commits her crimes for a larger cause, eventually revealing that she is a good person, loyal wife, and respectful daughter still. With characters like Oroku comes a development away from the rigid ideals championed by Ayame, adding variation to the cast of kabuki plays and giving female roles more, and more varied, opportunities. Without this development, Oiwa as the main character of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* would have been unthinkable. It is important to note, however, that even Oroku is still subject to expectations of filial piety, loyalty, and beauty, although in the way of a sexually mature woman who is acquainted with the hardships of life.

Women, Ugliness, and Ghosts

In kabuki, beauty and goodness are intertwined. Even the *akuba*, who is more morally ambiguous than other female role types, can infallibly be expected to be a sexually attractive woman. The only exceptions to this are women who are truly evil and actual antagonists of a play. Leiter (2002, 225) notes that “such murderous creatures are considered too treacherous to play for pure *onnagata* and are almost always cast with *tachiyaku* to underline their uglier qualities.”⁷ Once again, we see an implicit assessment of what femininity is supposed to be—these women are so diabolical and “ugly” (perhaps not on the outside, but certainly on the inside) that they are, in fact, excluded from the category of “femaleness.”

Barbara E. Thornbury (2002, 236) states that “the artistic process itself is based on the actor, who functions through a multiplicity of role and character interrelationships in a play: *yakusha*, *yakugara*, and *yaku*.”⁸ The actor, the

⁷ *Tachiyaku* 立役 being actors for male roles.

⁸ Meaning the artistic process of giving expression to the complexities of human nature and society.

general role type and the individual role portrayed are always simultaneously present as a kind of overlay on the stage. The audience is aware of this overlay, as can be seen by the regular calls of stage names by experienced spectators (Watanabe 1998a, 14-15).⁹ For this reason, the appearance of a *tachiyaku* actor in a technically female role is already a statement. Evil is coded as masculine rather than feminine. As Watanabe (1998b, 48) puts it, "Just like other villains, [evil women] are played by *tachiyaku* because more than femininity, it is tenaciousness that is most important." This suggests that these two qualities are, in kabuki terms, diametrically opposite. As a result, the casting of a *tachiyaku* also has a connotation in terms of agency. Evil characters usually have their fair share of agency, or tenaciousness, as Watanabe puts it, while female characters tend not to. Their fates usually lie in the hands of the men around them.

The preoccupation with ugliness and the difficult negotiation with femininity also becomes a theme in Nanboku's ghost plays. Nearly all the ghosts appearing in his plays are female. Shimazaki (2011, 229-230) states that many previous ghosts had been played by *onnagata* who refused roles that "disadvantaged their looks," but Nanboku's ghosts were now written for *tachiyaku*. While this is not entirely wrong, it is also not fully correct. Nanboku's ghosts such as Irohata in *Tenjiku Tokubei Ikoku Banashi*, Kasane in *Kesakake Matsu Narita no Riken*, 法懸松成田利剣 or Oiwa in *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* were written for and played by Onoe Shōroku I and his adopted son Onoe Kikugorō III 三代目尾上菊五郎 (1784-1849). Shōroku I was originally an *onnagata*, switching later to *tachiyaku* status. This switch is a transgression of sorts—Ayame had advised against such a change since he himself had failed when he tried his hand at male roles. Shōroku I succeeded in the change, and became a specialist in portraying female ghosts on stage at the same time. His pupil Kikugorō III switched between female and male roles, often even in the same play, a skill that earned him the reputation of a *kaneru yakusha* 兼ねる役者—an allrounder.

It would be wrong to conflate Nanboku's female ghosts with the category of the female villain, excluding them from the realm of femininity. Earlier female ghosts played by *onnagata* did exist; however, as Shimazaki (2012, 230) states, they had been confined to subplots. By using an actor who

⁹ Watanabe also mentions the case of Ichikawa Danjūrō IX 九代目市川團十郎 (1838-1903), who hated these calls. He insisted that during the performance, he was the role he played, not the actor. Traditionally, however, the actor has always been an enormously important part of the role (and promotion of the play) itself, as seen by the fact that many roles, such as Oiwa, were written for a specific actor.

would otherwise perform male roles, the female ghosts could take on a more active role in the plays. Yet while Shōroku I and Kikugorō III technically subscribed to the label *tachiyaku*, their activity on stage suggests that they were not coded as exclusively male. The casting of such actors as female ghosts is a comment on the role type, since the actors, too, neither fit into the realm of the feminine, nor were they exclusive to the realm of the masculine. Predecessors like Oroku as well as the actor that the role was written for made it possible for Oiwa's status to move outside of the kabuki gender spectrum as envisioned by Ayame, and it is this special status that gives her a larger scope of action compared to earlier female ghosts. Her death, it could be argued, eliminates the restraints of gender. Once dead, she strips off the pressure of the desiring male gaze too—as chillingly illustrated in the fourth act of the play, when Oiwa seduces Iemon as a young beauty, only to suddenly turn back into her hideous ghost form and turn his sexual fantasy into a horror show. At the same time, however, she still remains bound by the concept of femininity: the only person we ever see her lay a hand on is Iemon's mother. Iemon is the perpetrator behind nearly all other murders, and he is himself brought to justice by a samurai and not Oiwa herself. Even in death, the scope of her action is limited by her gender. She falls short of the actual agency of a *tachiyaku*.

The number of plays featuring ugly, disfigured women that Nanboku produced points towards a popular fascination with the hideous and the shocking. *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* is the crowning achievement, combining a collection of themes which appear in Nanboku's plays again and again, constantly altered and refined. Most of the misfortunes that befall Oiwa are not original. In the play *Kesa Kakematsu Narita no Riken* (1823), Kasane, gets possessed by her late father, who was murdered by her lover. The possession leads to crippling and disfiguration, the hatred towards her former lover turning her into a ghost of revenge after he brutally murders her. In the play *Kasane ga Fuchi Satemo Sono Uchi* 累淵扱其後 (1807), Kasane gets disfigured by mistakenly drinking poison, and is again turned ugly in the play *Okuni Gozen Keshō no Sugatami* 阿国御前化粧鑑 (1804) through possession by a ghost. The list of possible examples is long.

The spectacle and the emotions evoked by the play that are of utmost importance. For this reason, plot elements that engage and shock the audience, such as the disfiguration of a woman's face or a ghost hell-bent on revenge, can be easily reused in different plays. It is hence less the originality of the story that plays a defining role, but rather the choice of actors, context, role type, emotional impact, etc. *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*, it can be argued,

was not successful because it was a completely new type of play. It was successful because it managed to combine a range of elements, both old and new, particularly well, and because the audience could relate to the characters on stage.

The events occurring on stage might be fictitious, but the fears they invoke are anything but. While recent studies emphasize that there existed women with considerable influence and power (Lindsey 2007, 15), this does not mean that women were not put under considerable pressure. As kabuki and *bijin-ga* celebrated the beauty and sensuality of women, *jokun* 女訓, moral guide books aimed at women, took on a different tone: "Generally speaking, there are five bad qualities a woman can have: to be wild and disobedient, to act irate and vindictive, to rebuke the people surrounding her, to be jealous and to be of inferior intelligence. These qualities apply to at least seven or eight out of ten women. Men, on the other hand, do not have these bad qualities" (Köhn 2008, 232).

This is a very harsh assessment of the female sex, and has little in common with the soft and virtuous (yet still sexually appealing) maidens described by Ayame. *Jokun* such as the popular *Onna daigaku* discourage women from placing importance on their looks, and urge them to treat their husbands as their lords. In a similar vein, Buddhist teachings lay the focus of the female body and its inherent uncleanness. The *Blood Pool Hell Sutra* 血盆経 *ketsubon kyō* and mandala such as the *Kumano kanshin jukkai zu* 熊野観心十界図 illustrate how women would invariably fall into Blood Pool Hell after death because they menstruated and bled during childbirth, causing pollution to the earth and water. Their normal bodily functions were interpreted as a sign of inherent depravity and moral weakness that condemned them to a horrible fate (Moerman 2005, 226).

Another fine example from Buddhist art are *kusōzu* 九相図, paintings of the nine stages of a decaying corpse.¹⁰ As their name suggests, *kusōzu* illustrate nine stages of decay that happen after the death of a human being, from the time immediately after death until nothing is left but bones or dust. Usually, the body of a woman was used for this kind of enlightening practice, likely because monks were overwhelmingly male, and the purpose of the images was to help them renounce their earthly and fleshly desires by facing the ephemeral and gross nature of life, particularly their sexual desire for the female form. By the Edo period, the *kusōzu* had become part of a genre of books that were used for the instruction of Buddhist thought (Kanda 2005,

¹⁰ For an in-depth analysis of *kusōzu*, see Yamamoto 2015.

41). These books usually featured woodblock prints of the nine stages of decay, accompanied by poetry and, in some cases, additional commentary. They were used, just like the *jokun*, as guides for the moral education for women.

There have been arguments that *jokun* and similar texts were read by a limited number of people and therefore had little influence on society. However, samurai women and daughters of wealthy merchants did read such texts, and some daughters of peasants received a certain degree of education about these things if resources permitted (Tocco 2003, 206). With the use of lending libraries, communal reading and other means of dissemination, it is difficult to determine how limited the circulation of these texts really was. It is not difficult, however, to see the parallels between the rotting female bodies of *kusōzu* (Image 1) and the disfigured body of Oiwa slowly falling apart in Act II of the play (Image 2), and trace back where the inspiration for Oiwa's disfigurement likely came from.

The loss of Oiwa's physical beauty (and sexual appeal) in Act II is one of the most jarring scenes in the play. The act of deliberate poisoning and disfiguration is an act of ultimate cruelty towards a woman, stealing the one thing which she is usually celebrated for. When Oiwa tries to do her toilet in order to go out and face her neighbors after she realizes that she has been deliberately poisoned by them, she emulates a popular theme in *bijin-ga* but does so most wretched and distorted way possible. The prints show women gracefully combing their hair or blackening their teeth suggesting a sense of privacy and intimacy and containing a certain sexual allure. But as Oiwa combs her hair, it falls out in big, bloody clumps, and she smears the black for the teeth all over her lips, so that she now truly resembles a walking corpse reminiscent of the half-rotted corpses in the *kusōzu*. The audience experiences horror not just by the reversal of the usual sensual experience of a woman's personal grooming, but is also reminded of the Buddhist fate of humanity in general and women in particular.

The social status of women could not be compared to that of men. Even in marriage, that most defining event in a woman's life, a husband could unilaterally divorce his wife, while a wife had to request her husband to divorce her. Often, however, it was not the couple but the parents of the couple that had the ultimate say about marriage and divorce, as many legal cases concerning divorce show (Fuess 2004, 36). Marriage was generally considered through a rational or economical lens rather than through an emotional one, which usually lead to marriage inside of the same social class, as well as marriage arrangements that mutually benefited the involved families, espe-

cially among the higher social classes. This left women little room to make decisions on their own terms, and Oiwa both reflects the impossibility of choice as well as the desire to break this mold.

Beauty and ugliness also serve an additional purpose in the play, however. Toshio Kawatake (1990, 220-221) stated: "In order to beautify scenes featuring revengeful spirits, which should be essentially ugly, weird and frightening, recourse is had not only to the stylization of the spirit itself, but also to the technique of placing them beside completely opposite bright and beautiful scenes." However, beauty perhaps serves more as an intensifying contrast to the horror barely hidden under the surface. For this reason, we have the dark, despairing mood of Iemon's house juxtaposed with the liveliness and the brightness of the neighboring Itō household in the second act, and in between the *toitagaeshi* scene in the third act and the final scene on Snake Hermitage Mountain in the fifth act, we have the dream scene where Oiwa returns to her young, beautiful self, before she transforms back into her ugly ghost form. Beauty thus serves a dual purpose: First, it makes the audience sympathize with those who possess (and lose) it and them to face their own fear that beauty is at best temporary, and second, the juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness makes the scenes of torture and horror even more shocking. As the audience learns in the several instances (Iemon killing his new wife instead of uniting with her, Oiwa seducing Iemon as a ghost), sexual desire and horror are separated only by a thin veil and are two sides of the same coin.

Mother and Wife

The first two acts of the play heavily depend on Oiwa's femininity: her sexual attractiveness, her pregnancy and her motherhood—in short, she moves through all the steps a woman is expected to undertake in life. Unlike the femininity that Ayame imagined or that the *jokun* propagated, however, Oiwa's femininity begins showing cracks. While technically, Oiwa belongs to the role type of *nyōbō* 女房, the wife of a samurai, she is an uncomfortable fit from the very beginning of the play. The *nyōbō* has been described as often a little foolish, yet still meticulous and dutiful in her support of her husband or lover (Watanabe 1998b, 54ff). Oiwa is foolish and meticulous, but she has no loyalty for her husband. Her loyalty belongs to her father. From the very beginning of the play, Oiwa is not a woman fulfilling her duty as a wife, but instead a woman willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of her filial duty. With this, she breaks with the ideal of femininity found in the *jokun* that

commanded women to treat their husbands as their lords, as well as that commonly portrayed by *onnagata*; even Oroku, the *akuba*, only tried to chase her husband away in order to protect him. Oiwa, on the other hand, is not willing to suffer for the sake of her husband, quite unlike the majority of virtuous kabuki women, but as a woman, and especially a woman of samurai status and without money, her scope of action is very limited. There are strict social expectations placed upon her; however, she also takes pride in her elevated social status, despite her actual social and financial disadvantages. She feels compelled to avenge her father, even at the cost of her personal happiness—a feeling less tied to her gender than the fraught ideals of her social status. Shimazaki (2016, 112) quotes a playbill advertising *Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan* that refers to the play as “a farewell letter at the time of the divorce, written in a woman’s hand.” As we have established earlier on, it was the usual practice of men to write a divorce letter. Shimazaki connects this to criticism of samurai values in *Chūshingura*, but it also uncovers a struggle for agency by a woman beyond the fatalistic obeisance of her more “virtuous” predecessors.

Oiwa’s arduous birth that has left her ailing, making her fear of dying in childbed. For the audience, this fear was real too; since the mortality rate of pregnant women was more than sixty times higher in the premodern period than it is today, women were “bearing children while battling with the fear of dying” (Yokoyama 2008, 150). Since the possibility of dying during childbirth was high, so was the probability of becoming an *ubume* (“birthing woman”) after death, unable to rest because of the child they left behind. Men, on the other hand, did not have to fear this fate. For them, it was the fear of being haunted by a restless spirit which made the *ubume* so uncomfortable. Sexuality and procreation, in that sense, were intrinsically anxiety-inducing. This fear is accentuated by Iemon’s cruelty towards her and the child, making it clear that he sees the boy only as an additional nuisance and not as what it should ideally be seen as: the fulfilment of her duty as a woman and a wife. What should be a happy event is instead the start of a nightmare.

But when Oiwa appears as an *ubume* during the final act, any aspect of motherhood is negated. As she emerges from a burning lantern in front of Iemon, she does so cradling her child in *ubume*-like fashion, but when she hands the baby to its father, it falls to the ground and turns into a Jizō 地蔵 statue—a reminder that the child is dead.¹¹ This is of course a nod to tradi-

¹¹ Jizō being the Buddhist guardian of deceased children, especially those stillborn and miscarried.

tional *ubume* narrations where the ghost of a mother tries to pass off her child to travelers in order to ensure its wellbeing and it turns out to be a stone instead. Here, however, the mother hands the child over to the very father to remind him that it is dead. The scene is therefore not a faithful adaptation of traditional *ubume* imagery but again a woman in strong conflict with the femininity she is supposed to adhere to. Oiwa uses the child to torment Iemon, not because she is a mother.

Female Jealousy and Oiwa

The reason why it is women rather than men who turn into ghosts hell-bent on getting revenge during the Edo period has often been discussed. One of the commonly cited arguments is that women had less freedom and suffered from oppression, and that only death gave them the chance to overcome these limitations and take revenge on those who had made them suffer during their lifetime (Suwa 1988, 197).¹² Many texts, such as Shimazaki (2016, 150ff), which discuss Oiwa's motivations, come up with the ultimate verdict of jealousy or mention jealousy as a possible incentive. Jealousy is a specifically female motivation, which is rarely, if ever, attributed to men. While Shimazaki correctly identifies the *kamisuki* scene where Oiwa sheds her hair as a shorthand for a woman who suffers from jealousy, this might be the intended, but not the only possible reading of the scene. When Oiwa realizes her disfigurement, she cries: "Even when the wet nurse came, the destroying poison in her hand, to force me to my ruin, I clapped my hands in gratitude. Now each time I think of it, my heart fills with shame. They must laugh and laugh at me. Bitter, oh how bitter is this humiliation" (Oshima 1998, 476). The thought of humiliation is the first on her mind.

Margaret H. Childs writes:

The real issue for women enduring infidelity by their partner is insecurity, or anxiety regarding the stability of one's status or reputation. [...] Patterns of so-called jealousy provide evidence of what women really wanted, at least in the world that is depicted in these texts. Female characters in this literature are, in my view, not commonly truly jealous. They are, rather, often insecure. Female characters tend to show concern about women who pose a threat to their status (2010, 120).

¹² Suwa also adds, however, that this alone is still a weak motive. His argument is that women are naturally more connected with the Beyond. This is not entirely convincing, since for example the *onryō*, vengeful spirits, of the Heian period were mostly male. On the other hand, it is usually women who take on the role of a spiritual medium, so Suwa's claim is not completely unsupported.



Image 1: Kusōzu, Death of a noble lady and the decay of her body,
fifth in a series of nine paintings

Wellcome Collection, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/jwpjdf4v>



Image 2: No. 21 Oiwake Kisokaidō rokujūkyū tsugi no uchi (Sixty-Nine Post Stations of the Kisokaidō) by Utagawa Kuniyoshi 2008,3037.14721, AN587606001

British Museum, https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3277753&partId=1

Childs speaks about jealousy in the male-female relationships of Heian period court literature, where dynamics are obviously quite different from those of the Edo period.¹³ The notion holds true in the Heian period as well as in the Edo period, however: jealousy is often ascribed to women who show a type of behavior which does not benefit the men faced with it. It often happens—and not just in fiction—that a woman's extraordinary behavior is quickly ascribed to jealousy or general maliciousness. The *jokun*, as already mentioned, support this notion strongly.

The reading of Oiwa as jealous is well-established, but it also generally is a reading as established by men who had little interest in delving deeper into the psychology of seemingly irrational behavior. But Oiwa has no urge to keep Iemon, or his sexuality, for herself; rather, he is the means to give her agency, and the loss of that is what pains Oiwa much more than the loss of a husband. For at least a part of the audience in the kabuki theatre, this situation must have been familiar: abuse and humiliation suffered at the hands of those that were closest to them, and no means of resistance to this treatment available to them. Intentionally written by Tsuruya that way or not, Oiwa also serves as a vehicle for the abuse usually suffered by people in silence. Iemon's torment, viewed from this point of view, is cathartic (and frightening to those who usually hold the power in their hands for exactly this reason).

Conclusion

Oiwa is so successful and enduringly popular as a character precisely because her character and motivations can be seen from a variety of different viewpoints, and retain the fascination and interest of a diverse audience. She successfully invokes fears and conflicts present in Edo period society and acts them out on stage, in a controlled environment. Oiwa eclipses nearly all the fears that men and women have around the topic of sexuality—she touches on religious, social, and personal fears about pregnancy, marriage and the expectations placed on women. With the use of imagery such as the *ubume* or the rotting female body, the audience is faced with the same fears that they also know from religious and moral teachings, such as the *jokun* and the *kusōzu*. Unlike most female characters in kabuki like those that Ayame envisioned, Oiwa moves beyond a purely female space and into

¹³ Notably, in the aristocratic society of the Heian period, polygamy was the norm, while Edo period society worked more along monogamous patterns (excluding extra-marital activities for the men).

a more ambiguous place—one that simultaneously rejects and reinforces gender and sexuality. Oiwa's femaleness is uncomfortable and shocking because it does not correspond to common notions of femininity, and because it touches on some of the most reviled aspects of it. She escapes the curse of imposed sexual availability and performance of femininity and receives agency in return. Ultimately, however, she still remains caught within the established rules of kabuki, however: at the conclusion of the play, Oiwa's personal agency is negated once more as Iemon is defeated by a heroic samurai, and gender stereotypes are reinforced once more.

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Aimen Remida*

Dialectical & Beautiful Harmony. A Sexuality-based Interpretation of *Reiwa* 令和

Abstract

Reiwa, the name of the new Japanese era, is interpreted as a harmony of three perspectives, which have in common various aesthetical functions of sexuality. In section 1, the historical context of the formulation of the name is presented as an encounter of poetry and sexualized cosmogony. Section 2 offers systematic insights into the symbolic effects of sexuality as unity of elements from Shintoism & Taoism. Finally, the discussion of a dialectical perspective contributes in shaping a new interpretation of *Reiwa*, resting upon sexuality as an experience of creative and beautiful harmony.

Keywords

Reiwa, Sexuality, Harmony, Creativity, Dialectics

Everything is art. Everything is politics.

Ai Weiwei¹

Introduction

The naming of a new era in Japan as a declaration is a major historical event with far reaching political and cultural impacts. The ritual of this declaration of the *nengō* 年号, the Japanese era's name, is the culmination of a selection

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¹ The Chinese artist uses this motto as the leitmotif of his largest exhibition in Europe to date (Germany, from May 18 to September 1, 2019).

process, which has a long tradition.² “Era appellations (like “Genroku” 1688–1704 [or “Shōwa” 1929–1989]) were selected by scholars and astrologers who searched for auspicious two-character phrases in the Chinese classics. [...]. The *nengō* were considered to have important consequences for fortune and success, and usually required extensive negotiation” (Jansen, 2000, 99). The meaning expressed by the era-name did not only carry internal and external messages from political authorities, it was also a manifestation of the corresponding Japanese *Zeitgeist*, in all of its civilizational dimensions. Therefore, the focus on the actual era-name and its different interpretations could offer helpful insights towards a better understanding of contemporary Japanese self-interpretation. On May Day, 2019, a new era began in Japan with the accession of emperor Naruhito, the successor of the emperor Akihito, whose abdication, after 30 years, marked the end of the Heisei-Era. A nine-member expert panel selected the name of the new era, *Reiwa* 令和, which was announced one month earlier by the Japanese government. There were several interpretations of the meaning of *Reiwa*, as well as various reactions to its selection as the official name of the new era. This is related to the different meanings of the parts composing the name and to the fact that it is taken, for the first time, from a Japanese source and not from the Chinese tradition. In fact, the word *Reiwa* is composed of *Rei* 令 and *wa* 和: *Rei* means “beautiful” and “good” but can also mean “order” or “command.” *Wa* is usually translated as “peace” or “harmony.” These two components are extracted from the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集, an eighth-century anthology of poetry from the Nara period 奈良時代, 710–794 C.E. The lines mentioning the selected words are the following:

In this auspicious [*Rei*] month of early spring
 The weather is fine and the wind gentle [*wa*],
 The plum blossom open like powder before a mirror
 While the orchids give off the sweet scent of a sachet.³

² Cf. Ruoff (2001, 20): “The era-name system (*issei ichigensei*) was borrowed from China, where beginning in the Ming dynasty a system of one emperor, one reign name was employed. This system was reformed in 1868, as the Japanese government issued an edict requiring that years be counted according to imperial reigns. In 1872, Japan adopted the Western solar calendar, also referred to as the Gregorian calendar. Rather than adopting the practice of dating years according to the Christian era, however, the Japanese dated them according to the reigns of emperors. This was one of many efforts by the Japanese to maintain a distinct identity even if Japan borrowed heavily from the West.”

³ This is the “provisional translation” mentioned within the statement by Prime Minister Abe, on April 1, 2019. (https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201904/_00001).

One could identify two groups of interpretations of the historical decision. (i) The first, generally accepted, refers to the widespread positive understanding of *Reiwa* as beautiful harmony or good togetherness. (ii) The second is a critical attitude associating Rei with some authoritarian behavior, which could be easily connected to some conceptions of Japanese nationalism, implicitly evoked by the return to the local ancient sources. On the one hand, this distinction between an official and a critical interpretation of *Reiwa* is closely related to the distinction between the views of the actual Japanese government of Shinzō Abe, the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japanese history, and his party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and on the other, the critical voices warning against the nationalist and authoritarian orientations of that leadership.⁴ Thus, the two dominant readings of *Reiwa*, namely the official and the critical, could correspond to two attitudes towards the policies of the actual Japanese government: the first is the attitude of the government itself as well as its supporters and the second is the attitude of the *opposition*. In fact, at first sight, these two interpretations seem to present two opposite views: the official reading expresses a positive and optimistic attitude and the critical reading refers to negative and pessimistic expectations. Nevertheless, the very conception of harmony suggests the possibility of a unified new interpretation, which is a kind of reconciliation with the opposite views. I suggest to call this third way—which is an alternative reading of *Reiwa*, not reducible to any of the above mentioned opposite readings—the *dialectical perspective*, since it rests upon the fundamental character of dialectical thinking, whereby the term “dialectics” is understood in the broad sense as *the unity of the opposites*.⁵

html). In book V of the *Man'yōshū*, we find the selected lines within poem 815, which includes a Chinese introduction and 32 *uta*'s on plum-blossoms, with the following translation: “(2) The time was the beginning of spring and a good month, the weather was favorable and the wind mild. The plumblossoms unfolded a beauty like the powdered [face of a lovely girl] before the looking-glass; the orchids were fragrant like the little scent-bags that are kept under the *obi*” (Pierson 1938, 58).

⁴ Example of the critical judgments: “Abe led a government that was nationalistic, hostile to many aspects of the postwar settlement, including especially the 1947 constitution, and nostalgic for the imagined glories of a Japan that for most people had faded into the past” (Stockwin and Ampiah, 2017, viii). Further, there are very different types and levels of critique surrounding Abe's leadership, ranging from tackling “the enhanced authority and domination of the prime ministerial executive in policy making” (Mulgan 2018, 100) to considering Abe as “the pentagon's man in Japan, delivering much more on longstanding demands than all of his predecessors combined” (Kingston 2019, 167).

⁵ In the history of philosophy, there are countless interpretations of the term “dialectics” which correspond to various traditions and backgrounds. However, it is this het-

It is true that there are plenty of studies examining Japanese culture's relation to sexuality.⁶ However, to my knowledge, there is no interpretation that relates the name *Reiwa* to sexuality. Although the relation to aesthetic considerations is obvious and ensured through both the form (poetry) and the content (nature in spring), there is no direct indications in the poem, which could involve the theme of sexuality as a source of inspiration. The suggested new interpretation will investigate the kind of relatedness between *Reiwa* and sexuality, which goes beyond the association of spring, as a temporal framework, with fertility, as a natural phenomenon addressing the dynamics of the reproduction of organisms. In order to determine the features of that relationship, one might start with a historical investigation of the main cultural achievements in the Nara period in general and the genesis of the *Reiwa* poem in particular.

1. The Historical Perspective: Cosmogony, Poetry, and Sexuality

The phenomenon of sexuality is deeply anchored in human mythology, as reported in various historiographical sources. The Japanese case could be considered an exception, since the aesthetical and creative functions of sexuality constitute the main pillars of the mythological narratives that establish the roots of Japanese self-consciousness. It is true that many other cultures exhibit a central place of natural phenomena in shaping their first cultural achievements, which includes conceptions of the genesis of the universe and of the emergence of humankind as well as narratives about deities and their roles and activities.⁷ However, precisely within Japanese cosmogonic myths, sexuality plays a central role in explaining the material conceptualization of Japan as a multitude of historically united islands, which

erogeneity of the interpretations itself which reveals the common denominator: the universality—at least in its narrow sense of transculturality—of the idea of *the unity of the opposites*—regardless whether the focus is on epistemology, ontology or logic, on static, dynamic, finite or infinite aspects of processes etc.—is shown through the plurality of manifestations in both Eastern and Western thought systems, as well as within each one of them.

⁶ For the relations of sexuality to marriage, parenthood, ethics and laws see, for example, the different references to Japan in (Hoshii 1986). Further examples: sexuality and art, e.g. (Lloyd 2002); sexuality, ethnography and conflicts, e.g. (Alexy and Cook 2019); sexuality in a particular historical context, e.g. (Mihalopoulos 2011).

⁷ Within a transcultural investigation, one could for example examine the functions of natural phenomena in general and sexuality in particular in the mythologies of ancient Greece as described in (Hesiod 1988).

was created in two phases: in the first, the creation of Onogoro occurred by a *symbolic* act of the spear used by the deities Izanami and Izanagi, and in the second phase the other islands are the consequence of a sexual act between Izanagi, the male deity, and Izanami, the female deity. In fact, one finds in the book of *Kojiki* 古事記, or the Records of Ancient Matters, informative and detailed descriptions about the genesis of the cosmos, the appearance of deities and the formation of the first Japanese islands, whereby the interaction between two opposite principles is the source of creative processes. These principles are expressed according to different levels of abstractions, analogously to the plurality of interpretations of yin and yang in the teachings of Taoism.⁸ According to Chamberlain, whose translation of the *Kojiki* appeared 1882, the first indications of the two principles are formulated by the compiler Yasumaro as follows: "Now when chaos had begun to condense, but force and form were not yet manifest, and there was nought named, nought done, who could know its shape? Nevertheless Heaven and Earth first parted, and the Three Deities performed the commencement of creation; the Passive and Active Essences then developed, and the Two Spirits became the ancestors of all things" (Chamberlain 1932, 4). The two principles take a concrete form—capable of a sexual act—as it comes to the materialist creation of the land of Japan: among several others, two deities are precisely associated within a male and a female agent: the Male-Who-Invites (Izana-gi-no-kami) and the Female-Who-Invites (Izana-mi-no-kami). These two deities created the first island in a manner that could be easily interpreted as referring to the human sexual act:

Hereupon all the Heavenly Deities commanded the two Deities His Augustness the Male-Who-Invites and Herr Augustness the Female-Who-Invites, ordering them to 'make, consolidate, and give birth to this drifting land.' Granting to them a heavenly jeweled spear, they [thus] deigned to charge them. So the two Deities, standing upon the Floating Bridge of Heaven, pushed down the jeweled spear and stirred with it, whereupon, when they had stirred the brine till it went curdle-curdle, and drew [the spear] up, the brine that dripped down from the end of the spear was piled up and became an island. This is the Island of Onogoro (ibidem, 21-22).

⁸ The three perspectives of the suggested interpretation of *Reiwa* argue that the dialectical thinking, unifying the opposite, is a universal phenomenon, scientifically detectable in several human civilizations. The reference to the dialectical elements in Taoist thought, which emerged outside of Japan, as well as recalling the elements of dialectical thinking among pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (e.g. Heraclitus, Zeno of Elea), could lead to formulate the research question of detecting analogous dialectical elements among the native Japanese population, i.e. within the teachings of ancient Shintoism, as a further element to sustain the thesis of the universality of dialectics.

Within this metaphoric scene, the “spear” stands obviously for the masculine penis,⁹ the first “brine” for the feminine vaginal liquid and the second “brine that dripped down from the end of the spear” is doubtlessly the masculine sperm.¹⁰ The story of Izanagi and Izanami was also reported in the *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀, or the Chronicles of Japan, whereby the same references to the functions of sexuality in the Japanese cosmogonic myths in general and the conversation about male and female genitals in particular are to be found.

[Izanagi] inquired the female deity, saying: ‘In thy body is there aught formed?’ She answered, and said: ‘In my body there is a place which is the source of femininity.’ The male deity said: ‘In my body again there is a place which is the source of masculinity. I wish to unite this source-place of my body to the source-place of thy body.’ Hereupon the male and female first became united as husband and wife (Aston 2011, 13).

The *Kojiki*, the Records of Ancient Matters, was compiled in 712 C.E. and the *Nihon Shoki*, the Chronicles of Japan, in 720 C.E. Generally speaking, the first writings of Japanese history begun almost one century earlier, under the reign of Empress *Suiko* 推古天皇, 592–628 C.E. Her name “may be translated as ‘conjecture of the past’ and suggests that this posthumous title was bestowed on the empress because the writing of history was considered to be an outstanding event of her reign” (Tsunoda *et al* 1964, 1). The beginning of the eighth century witnessed the event of recording Japanese creation mythology, that is denoted by an essential, worthy of being noticed, function of sexuality: far from any *ex nihilo* conception, the Japanese sexualized cosmogony associates *creation* with *birth*, and considers birth in its literal meaning, as the result of a physical relationship between the male and female.

In the same historical period, the *Man'yōshū*, which means “Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves” and from which the *Reiwa* poem originated, was compiled. In fact, it is within this Nara period, that the written forms of Japanese poetry, *waka* 和歌, was fixed, enabling the establishment of a creative movement of literature and artistic activities. Among these creative activi-

⁹ In the comments to the *Nihongi*, one finds the following interpretation: “Hirata conjectures that the jewel-spear (*nu-boko* or *tama-boko*) of Heaven was in form like a *wo-bashira*. *Wo-bashira* means literally male-pillar [...]. That by *wo-bashira* Hirata means a phallus is clear” (Aston 2011, 11).

¹⁰ The story goes on with the birth of children and the creation of further islands, whereby several symbolic elements are mentioned, such as the following explanation: “[the children] were not good because the woman spoke first” (ibidem, 24).

ties, poetry enjoyed a particular blossom. In the *Reiwa* poem itself, there is explicit indications of the historical circumstances surrounding the elaboration of the text. The poem could have been written by *Ōtomo no Tabito* 大伴 旅人, 665–731 C.E., who was hosting a gathering in his garden in the beginning of the year 730 C.E., but it is also possible that the introduction was written by *Yamanoue no Okura* 山上憶良, 660–733 C.E. (cf. Pierson 1938, 23).¹¹ The common historical context of *Man'yōshū*, *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* (entailing elements of romantic poetry and sexualized cosmogony) could be sustained through various justifications, which are related to the central function of nature and natural phenomena in the history of Japanese thought. This central function of nature is not only a permanent attribute of Japanese culture since its origins, one could also assert that “the traditional Japanese love of nature is based upon the conceived identity between man and nature and this conception of nature forms an important basis for their aesthetic appreciation of nature” (Saito 1985, 240). In the *waka*-poetry, natural phenomena play a central role in the creation and conservation of cultural coherence and identity, whereby there are, among scholars, controversial assessments of the priority of “season” or “landscape” as the core of the poetic conception of “nature” (cf. Wittkamp 2014, 42).¹² Moreover, the genealogical records reporting “the creation of the imperial line gods representing the Sun, Mountains and the Sea each made an important contribution” (cf. Tsunoda *et al.* 1964, 12). Thus, the common historical context refers to a common spirit of cultural achievements, whereby the awareness of the necessity of harmonizing human experience with nature emerges as the result of complex interactions among various belief systems.¹³ The historical perspective of the interpretation of *Reiwa* combines the theme of sexuality, strongly present in the writings of the Nara period, with florescence of nature oriented poetry. The aesthetical dimension of litera-

¹¹ The introduction to the poem begins with the following phrase: “(1) On the 13th day of the first month of the 2nd year of Tempyō (730), there was a gathering at the house of the old man, the chief, who had prepared a banquet.”

¹² “‘Erschöpft sich die Natur in der Waka-Dichtung letztendlich nicht in der Frage der ‘Jahreszeiten’?, fragt er [Mori Asao]. [...] Somit nimmt die zentrale Rolle der Landschaft innerhalb der Waka-Dichtung deutliche Konturen an, und auch die Relevanz für die Erzeugung und Aufrechterhaltung von kultureller Kohärenz und Identität zeichnet sich ab. Die vorliegende Arbeit geht wie die genannten Forscher von der großen Bedeutung der Jahreszeitendichtung aus, ersetzt Moris ‘Natur’ jedoch durch den Begriff der Landschaft.”

¹³ It should be mentioned that the roles of elements from Buddhism and Confucianism have also to be considered. This must occur as a supplement to the analysis of the dialectical relations between Shintoism and Taoism (see section 2). Hence, the complete analysis refers to a matrix of four interdependent subsystems.

ture gains a naturalistic foundation and enables a romantic and intellectual functionality of sexuality, which goes beyond the materiality of its reproductive and creative functions. As a short, precise but intensively expressive form, the Japanese era name, *nengō* 年号, carries this poetic spirit across the centuries, which summarizes various historical, cultural, social, and aesthetic elements. The Japanese semiotics is in this sense a permanent source of fascination and inspiration for locals and foreigners alike, because of a series of attributes that combine simplicity of forms and depth of meanings in a single beautiful unity, which has been developing through various epochs of Japanese History. As far as poetry itself is concerned, the *haiku* 俳句, the very short form in three phrases, impressed for instance the French philosopher Roland Barthes, who once wrote in a work dedicated to Japan: “Or even the haiku: how many haiku are there in the history of Japan? They are all telling the same things: the season, the vegetation, the sea, the village, the silhouette, and though every haiku is in its manner an irreducible event” (Barthes 2014, 136).¹⁴

2. The Systematic Perspective: Sexuality, Aesthetics, and Symbolism

The analysis of the constitutive function of the aesthetics of sexuality in forging a complex interpretation of *Reiwa* exceeds the historical and mythological foundations to tackle the systematic aspects of a new conception of sexuality-based harmony. At this stage of the analysis, one might conceive two notions of sexuality: (i) the first, inspired by Shintoism, stresses the naturalist, biological and concrete characters of sexuality, and hence associates the phenomenon with the necessity of reproduction and relates it to specific Japanese challenges such as the demographical problem or the issues of national identity. (ii) The second, which could be connected to Taoism,¹⁵ considers the spiritualist, cognitive and universalist aspects of sexuality as

¹⁴ Own translation. For further assessments of haiku by Barthes, see also the pages 93-98.

¹⁵ “Daoism’s positive view is that humans and nature are united in a larger whole, the primordial *Dao*, from which everything originates and which courses through everything. Human knowledge, at its best, transcends the limits of percepts and concepts and intuitively the *Dao* directly. It is direct and immediate, not being dependent upon a false duality between the knowing subject and the known object” (Koller 2018, 267). Analogously, if—for instance—the duality of sexually acting humans and their sexual acts is deemed to be false, one is facing a particular conception of sexuality, which aims at transcending the perceived and conceptualized differences and oppositions.

a humanist unifying factor of heterogeneous agents, opposite principles or even antagonist civilizational elements within and beyond the Asian context. Having this distinction as a starting point, one could examine various parts of *Reiwa* poem in the light of the two cultural systems of Shintoism and Taoism and attempt to extract selected symbolic functions of sexuality, which might help with a reconsideration of the consistency of predefined paradigms of interpretative performance.

(i) There could be several associations of the details evoked in the *Reiwa* poem with elements from the Shinto tradition. For instance, the mirror evoked in the poem recalls the Sacred Mirror of the Ise Shrine, which was removed from the Imperial Palace by the legendary 10. *Tennō*, Emperor *Sujin* 崇神天皇. “It is the same Mirror which prompted the Emperor Meiji’s poem urging the people to look upon it as an inspiration to develop their own minds” (Mason 2002, 162). In an analogous manner, the mirror of the *Reiwa* poem, reflecting the beauty of a lovely girl, invites the Japanese young men and women to reflect about the fruitfulness of their physical and mental potentialities. The worldwide known natural beauty of the plum blossom is perfectly equivalent to the famous harmonious beauty of Japanese women, in both the material and immaterial senses. If the beauty of landscape could be compared to the beauty of human beings—as both are parts of nature—and without reducing the uniqueness of Japan to either its men or its women, one could detect an analogy between the physical beauty and the symbolic effect of flowers on the one hand, and the physical and spiritual attractiveness of women on the other. Although some foreign perceptions reduce Japan either to masculinity or to femininity, the mutual admiration of men and women for each other could be positively interpreted, as the respectful recognition of their particular properties (e.g. politeness, elegance etc.). In this sense, one could avoid the negative readings of particular statements, which seem to express a chauvinistic and colonizing attitude towards Japan, such as the claim that “[i]t is well established that foreign men find young Japanese women sexually attractive. It goes without saying that this attraction is physical and cultural, with both factors playing a very important role” (De Mente 2006, 83). As far as the metaphor of the mirror is concerned, and although it has a tremendous philosophical potential for far reaching interpretations,¹⁶ one could content oneself with the aesthetical approach to the issue of a self-determination of a harmonious Japanese identity.

¹⁶ The philosophical use of the mirror metaphor stretches along a large spectrum from Narcissus to Plato (e.g. *Phaedrus* 255d) to Richard Rorty’s *Mirror of Nature*. It recalls also

By consulting the general attitude towards Shinto in the first half of the 20th century,¹⁷ one notices a particular trend of the potentiality of misinterpreting Shintoism in extremist directions. This trend lies in the passage from admitting uniqueness to flirting with chauvinism. It is true that “Shinto has given to Japan the consciousness of self-reliance and confidence in action, and has stimulated the Japanese mentality to interest itself in every aspect of life, for all existence, to Shinto, is divine spirit” (Mason 2002, 17). Yet this function of Shintoism should be differentiated in light of its historical applicability. The distinction between State or Shrine Shinto (the official interpretation), *au contraire* Sectarian Shinto (the popular interpretation) (cf. Holtom 1963, 28) should not be neglected. Although Shintoism is considered to be among the earliest belief systems of the native population, it is not evident enough to speak about a pure local Shintoism, which can only exist as the core of Japanese exceptionalism. “Primitive Shinto embraced cults of exceedingly diverse origins, including animism, shamanism, fertility cults, and the worship of nature, ancestors, and heroes. In the course of time the distinctions between these various cults tended to disappear” (Tsunoda *et al.* 1964, 22). The heterogeneous and pluralistic nature of Shinto, which is in a harmonious accord with polytheism, does not refute the thesis of considering sexuality as a common basis for the different constituents of the Shintoist system. In fact, living in a close relation to nature and the search for a creative continuity within the natural environment speak for such a central function of sexuality. One could even formulate a sexuality-based interpretation of Shintoism: “Since constant re-creation is essential to have an ongoing world, fertility—the ability to reproduce—was therefore the heart of Shintoism. In simplistic terms, Shintoism was sex worship, cloaked, of course, in the guise of crop festivals and ancestor worship” (De Mente 2006, 20).¹⁸

(ii) A Taoist-based interpretation of sexuality is also plausible. The interpretation of basic ideas of Taoism as unity of opposite principles can take different shapes according to the specificities of the contexts and the implementation areas. The field of sexuality, as unity of masculine and feminine principles,¹⁹ was permanently present in the Taoist tradition, from its ori-

the realist correspondence theory of truth and the works of Hans Heinz Holz on the reflection theory (Widerspiegelungstheorie). An extreme interpretation may even lead to the realist school in international relations.

¹⁷ Cf. Chapter 13 (Shinto and Imperial Japan) in (Hardacre 2017, 403-440).

¹⁸ See also (Ploton 2010, 72): “In Shintoism, it is death and not sexual pleasure which is a taboo, a source of fear and an issue to be conjured” (own translation).

¹⁹ This definition could be also valid in cases of non-heterosexual contexts if one assumes a certain constructability of gender roles and identities, so that binary models could construct representations of femininity and masculinity.

gins among East Asian ancient civilizations, to the present days in contemporary China, Korea, and Japan. As Senda Minoru observed, several actual festivals in Japan have their roots in Taoism and show the strength of Taoist influence (cf. Senda 1996, 155).²⁰ Within these celebrations, the Taoist roots of some references to sexuality could be detected, too. “Tanabata, the Star Festival, which takes place on July 7, is based on a legend involving two lovers—Vega, the Weaver Maid, and Altair, the Cowherd—who are allowed to meet across the Milky Way only once a year. The lovers are slightly modified versions of the Taoist hermits Xi Wanmu and Dong Wanfu” (Senda 1996, 155-156). This last example could also recall the legend of Izanagi and Izanami, as far as a certain cosmological dimension of love might be concerned, and hence establish a common foundation of a dialectics-based understanding of sexuality, inspired by both Japanese and Chinese sources. Nonetheless, the similarities, based upon the transculturality of dialectical thinking, should not underestimate the reality of existing differences. While the very comparable traditional medical techniques or the similar types of martial arts in Japan, Korea, and China are manifestation of a harmonious common civilization, there still is—and should be—a wide range of specific local or transregional applications. Within this context, sexuality offers an effective framework for investigating the influence of Taoist thought beyond the borders of single national states. Indeed, “some of the followers of the way of Daoism developed a new school of Daoistic thought that incorporated a very strong sexual element. They surmised that in order for human beings, and again especially men, to stay in harmony with the cosmos it was necessary to expel on a daily basis all of the sexual energy that accumulates in the body” (De Mente 2006, 23). Further, there is an expansion of Taoist-based methods and practices in relation with the human knowledge of sexual energy.²¹ The focus on such research disciplines in relation to the Japanese context may lead to revolutionary innovative interpretation by avoiding the one-sidedness of prejudices, so that one could approve the assertion of Senda, who declares that “[e]ven the extent to which Shintō is purely Japanese is coming into question. Scholars are now finding Taoist elements

²⁰ This is the case of the placement of *kagami mochi* (“mirror-shaped rice cakes”) on the household altar on New Year’s Day, or a “month later, on February 3, Setsubun, when people scatter roasted soybeans inside and outside their homes to drive demons out and invite good luck in for the coming year.” There is also the Boy’s Festival on May 5, a day which marks—according to the lunar calendar—“the yearly shift from *yang*, the positive principle governing the universe, to *yin*, the negative counterpart.”

²¹ Several illustrations of the sexological potentiality of Taoism are presented in (Tur-lin 2007).

mixed with the indigenous animist beliefs and practices. It may become possible to confirm Taoism as the most fundamental base of Japanese culture" (Senda 1996, 151). In order to sustain this position, Senda enumerates various examples within Japanese culture, ranging from "the idea of a living god" and the related imperial rituals and narratives to the "contemporary festivals" and their folkloric practices, and shows their origins and counterparts in the Taoist tradition. He concludes that "a variety of institutions, beliefs, and practices once thought to represent the purely indigenous character of the Japanese and their culture, [...], are in fact derived from Chinese Taoism" (ibidem, 156).

3. The Dialectical Perspective:

Reiwa as Vital Creativity

The third perspective in the interpretation process of *Reiwa* is a unifying perspective, which attempts to harmonize the historical and systematic aspects of the functions of sexuality as a dialectical phenomenon. The unification takes into account the interplay of opposite views and antagonist positions in order to achieve new prospects for a harmonious common future, not only for Asian peoples (Japan, China and—why not?—a unified Korea) but also for all of humanity.²² This occurs by overbalancing the prevailing interpretations in favor of creative conceptions stressing a transnational dimension. Even though the current understanding of classical terms entails both specific and general contents, one has to conserve the progressive elements while paying attention to the risks of reactionary interpretations. The word *wa* in *Reiwa*, which signifies harmony has been often interpreted in a manner that primarily underlines specific sides and neglects the universal potentiality of generalizing its meaning. "The character for *wa* is used to identify something as Japanese, for example the 'wa' in 'washoku,' or Japa-

²² The suggested dialectical interpretation of *Reiwa* combines various historical and systematic elements and refers not only to the beautiful harmony of an isolated Japanese society: it takes into account the interdependencies of interiority and exteriority and hence extend the harmonious togetherness to the immediate neighborhood and to the entire globe. This extension of the philosophical perspective concerns not only the space, but also the time. The idea of a beautiful and harmonious future, as it could be inspired by the dialectical interpretation of *Reiwa*, should be related to the philosophical spirit of the *Aufklärung*, in the sense of *sapere aude!*, whereby the courage of addressing taboos is the first step toward positive change. In the *Reiwa* poem, there is a line formulating a crucial philosophical question: "(9) Between old times and present times, what difference is there?" (Pierson 1938, 58). One could analogously ask: Between present and future times, what difference is there?

nese food. It also connotes harmonious relationships with mutual respect or an equilibrium consisting of diverse elements. The word thus sums up the Japanese character. This word appears at the beginning of Japan's first legal code from some 1400 years ago, *Jūshichijo-kenpō*, which reads *Harmony is of utmost value*, meaning that it is most important that people should get along with each other harmoniously. Such acceptance of plurality and peaceful coexistence has forged Japan's unique cultural outlook" (Seino *et al.* 2014, 163). Although one would not deny that each culture manifests specific characteristics, which develop within the common history, social and economic life of its members, the philosophical concepts used to designate those kinds of specificities remain universal entities. This is the case of the multiform existence of transcultural conceptions: although terms like togetherness, creativity, intelligence, independence, dignity and of course, beauty and harmony could be differently understood according to different circumstances and backgrounds, the common denominator remains their status as human factors enabling various types of communication. In other words, it is true that there are different forms of values according to the concreteness of the cultural contexts, but the very existence of values and the plurality of that existence could be also considered as a universal value.

Hence, the elaboration of a dialectical perspective for a new interpretation of *Reiwa*, inspired by the concrete universality of the phenomenon of sexuality, should start with maintaining the uniqueness of the Japanese culture while refuting the racial superiority of Japan. By doing so, the value of justice is sovereignly introduced, since this requirement applies to all countries and all cultural spheres. Within the suggested dialectical interpretation of *Reiwa*, the attempt to create a beautiful harmony between Shintoism and Taoism (and even with Buddhism and Confucianism) starts with warning against the chauvinistic interpretations of Shinto, whereby it is firstly linked to national identity, then it becomes a new form of State Shinto, as within Japanese imperialism of the first half of the 20th century. The danger consists in a particular understanding of the Japanese exceptionalism, which could be instrumentalized to ground a negative effect of the idea of *Reiwa*. In fact, several interpretations were previously formulated within this conflict-oriented direction. For example, "Shinto has been defined as a racial psychology that has persisted throughout the vicissitudes of the entire national story. Japan has produced a superior and enduring culture because of the contribution of a special type of 'Japanese man'—a man furnished with a genius for acculturation, yet peculiarly endowed with the power of remaining 'forever Japanese'" (Holtom 1963, 198). There is also the reference to the

risk of sexism, since one notices that the discourse is addressed to men not women. The symbolic dimension of the hitherto practiced sexuality within patriarchal societies emphasizes this association of men with active attitudes and women with passivity and receptivity. In order to overcome one-sided views and reactionary clichés, it is necessary to rethink the genealogies, the structures and the features of several prevailing mechanistic associations, such as that between sexuality and warfare. “Along with the male’s greater aggression in other fields goes his aggression in the sphere of sexuality: males initiate sexual contact, and take the symbolically, if not actually, aggressive step of vaginal penetration [...]. Woman are psychologically, no less than anatomically, incapable of rape” (Oakley 2015, 77-78). All these facets of the negative interpretation—including the allusions to militarism and authoritarianism through the association of *rei* with *meirei* 命令, i.e. command or order—could be neutralized by a creative interpretation of Shintoism and its organic relationship to Taoism, whereby many prejudices about patriarchal and matriarchal conceptions could be critically reconsidered.

Conclusion

According to the spirit of the dialectical perspective, the sexuality-based interpretation of *Reiwa* means also a *Reiwa*-based interpretation of sexuality. Thinking dialectically about the different possible meanings of a beautiful harmony suggests an infinite program of examination of all possible connections between opposing elements, such as inner and outer perspectives, theory and practice or national and international oriented *Weltanschauung*. As far as sexuality is concerned, the crucial human phenomenon is conceived as a unity of material and immaterial elements, a philosophical harmony of matter and form. The soulful, aesthetically inspiring making love is at the same time the materialist foundation of biological and social life. *Reiwa*, as dialectical and beautiful harmony also refers to the function of feminist struggle for an equal and prosperous society, resting upon a critique of the historical shift from matriarchal to patriarchal structures.²³ In fact, the passage from the 6th to the 7th century corresponds not only to the establishment and the organization of the *Tennō*-system as a bureaucracy but also to the shift from the old conception of feminine power, with its functions of protection and conflict-solving, to the insignificance of women’s roles

²³ For a harmonious analysis combining historical and systematical perspectives of the feminist cause in Japan, see for example (Grössmann 1991).

(cf. Okano 1991, 39). By relating the interpretations of *Reiwa* to sexuality, the new Japanese era creates unprecedented opportunities to further emancipate Japanese women²⁴ and allow them to participate—as completely equal citizens—in the development of modern Japan. The historically exceptional status of the Japanese woman in the old times of sexual freedom and harmony should be the inspiration for a big change, which exceeds the national context. In this sense, “[i]t is time for Japanese scholarship to interest itself in the creative impetus of Japan’s own culture. [...]. The advantageous elements in [the] foreign cultures should not be abandoned; but Japan must seek fundamental inspiration for her future progressive development by original creative analysis of her cultural evolution and by self-conscious comprehension of its vital power” (Mason 2002, 169). This commandment is doubtless compatible with the endeavors towards international solidarity.

Accordingly, *Reiwa*, the creative and beautiful harmony, is the expression of the highly significant role of dialectical thinking in times of globalized troubles and recurrent systemic crises. The value of sexuality, as an implicit foundation of this concept of peaceful and productive harmony, is again emphasized by the union of the aesthetical and political dimensions of its very choice. The political functions of the appeal to sexuality are addressing the interpretation of *Reiwa* as a vital creative power in both the biological sense, which is essential for the healthy reproduction of a population, as well as the ideological sense of producing innovative solutions to economic, ecological, and geopolitical problems. Both senses are relevant while discussing a wide range of contemporary issues (anti-natalism, nihilism, the meaning of life, the future of democracy and capitalism etc.). The aesthetical functions of the use of sexuality are insofar equally present as the value of justice is enhanced permanently at all possible individual and collective levels. It is also vitalized through the actualization of an open cultural spirit, combining the elegance of art with the effectiveness of science. The beauty of the philosophy of *Reiwa*—and the philosophy of the beauty of *Reiwa* as well—is thus a consolidation of the humanist responsible attitude towards the challenges of a complex common future.

²⁴ The *sine qua non* condition for the realization of a beautiful-harmonious society is that all individuals experience an authentic emancipation of free and equal citizen. Although the situation of Japanese women is much better than the situation of women in many other countries, there still be several fronts within the feminist struggle in Japan, e.g. equal pay for equal work, a struggle that can only be explicitly supported by the emancipatory spirit of the suggested dialectical interpretation of *Reiwa*.

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Thomas Schmidt*

The Depiction of Japanese Homosexuality through Masks and Mirrors

An Observational Analysis of *Funeral Parade of Roses*

Abstract

Matsumoto Toshio's avant-garde documentary *Funeral Parade of Roses* (*bara no sōretsu*) depicts life in Shinjuku's 1960s underground culture. Using Sakabe Megumi's hermeneutical theory, the film's depiction of sexuality is analysed through its use of literal and figurative mirrors and masks. It is argued that sexuality is highly performative and that the film itself is structured like a play of mirrors, questioning the nature of reality by deferring hypostasis *ad infinitum*.¹

Keywords

Sakabe Megumi, Mirror and Mask, Close Viewing, Avant-Garde Documentary, Gender Performativity

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¹ In accordance with the logic of the film, I will refer to Eddie as 'she' and Peter, the actor, when 'out of character,' as 'he.' As for Eddie prior to becoming a *gei bōi*, I will use the socially assigned 'he.'



Fig. 1 – 36.16 min

Introduction

The best homosexuality is in America, like the best everything else, and California, where all national tendencies achieve their most hyperbolic expression, is a living beach of writhing male bodies.

Burgess 1979

There is a propensity among proponents of ‘global queering’ (Altman 1996) to treat Western attitudes towards homosexuality as the gold standard, ranking other communities according to their proximities to these standards. In my discussion of the avant-garde documentary film *Funeral Parade of Roses* by Matsumoto Toshio, I suggest a model that is dominated neither by global nor local attitudes but defines itself by an eclecticism drawing freely on both. I argue that *Funeral Parade of Roses* uses its central hermeneutical elements—the mirror and the mask—to create a fragmented reality in which identities are fluid and constantly displaced. First, I will introduce Sakabe Megumi’s hermeneutical theory of mirrors and masks. Second, I analyze key episodes of the film for their semiotic elements, pointing out the eclectic references it makes. While my description broadly follows the chronology of the film, it is framed by philosopher Sakabe Megumi’s theories, which are referred to where appropriate.

The Hermeneutics of Mirrors and Masks

Even in a casual viewing of *Funeral Parade of Roses*, one cannot help but notice the prominent place accorded to masks and mirrors within the film. Drawing on Sakabe Megumi's hermeneutics, I will show that these two elements are not merely accidental, but pervade the whole structure of the film. In articulating his particular view on masks, Sakabe expands on an essay written by Watsuji Tetsurō (1937), which examines traditional uses of masks in Japanese and Greek theatre. While Watsuji concludes that the mask ultimately refers to a subject, Sakabe allows no such inference and concludes, rather, that the mask displaces identity without ultimately pointing towards a real face.

Sakabe explains the interaction of mirror and mask, drawing on Nō theatre's *kagami no ma* (鏡の間, mirror room). In the mirror room, the main actor puts on their mask to transform into their character. Sakabe argues that "the structure of the face (面差し, omozashi) is the same as that of the mask (面, omote), in that it sees itself, it sees the other and it sees itself as another" (Sakabe 1989, 44-45). In Sakabe's example of the Nō actor, the actor sits in front of the mirror while putting on their mask, seeing themselves and the mask (i.e., the other), then seeing themselves transformed into the other in the act of putting on the mask. In this way, the mask becomes a new face with the same ontological status as the previous face. No distinction can be made between a supposed 'real' face and the mask; the two categories collapse into each other.

In this way, the mirror and the mask act in unison to displace self-identity. Throughout the film, ambivalent close-ups of landscape-like bodies precede the gendered performances of the very same bodies. This practice puts pressure on the idea of an ontologically prior reality (hypostasis) itself. The mask and the mirror are used to facilitate the emergence of gendered performances and, thereby, establish themselves from the start of the film as the aesthetic principles of its portrayal of sexuality. In the following paragraphs, I show how they appear consistently and create the dreamlike surface (*omote*) of the film itself. Ko (2011) and Raine (2012) already examined the film in terms of Matsumoto's own theory of neo-documentarism, which mixes elements of avant-garde and documentary filmmaking. I, in turn, will focus on various aspects of the depiction of homosexuality through the film's recurring aesthetic elements. In his own theory, Matsumoto also attributes a central role in breaking up dichotomous structures to the mask and the mirror (Inoue & Kerner 2014).

Funeral Parade of Roses

Matsumoto's avant-garde documentary follows Eddie (Ikehata Shinnosuke, a.k.a. Peter), a transgender bar hostess and small-scale drug dealer, through the 1960s Shinjuku underground culture. The film is composed of different episodes, interspersed with documentary-style interviews, and is connected loosely by a storyline referencing the myth of Oedipus. The plot proceeds in two movements. The first proceeds via flashbacks that Eddie experiences, which increasingly reveal her past. It hints at Eddie's troubled family history, in the course of which her father left the family and Eddie killed her own mother and her mother's lover. The second movement is the conflict over the running of Bar Genet and its owner Gonda, which develops between Eddie and Leda, the latter of whom is Gonda's favorite lover prior to Eddie's entrance onto the scene. Leda's suicide allows Eddie to take over the bar and become Gonda's exclusive lover, yet this also leads to Gonda's suicide after he realises that Eddie is his son.

Close Viewing

Performative Sexuality

Firstly, the film's title deserves some attention. *Bara* (rose) in *bara no sōretsu* (薔薇の葬列) was a derogatory term for homosexual men in Japan, implying effeminacy. Hosoe Eikō and Yukio Mishima were, to my knowledge, the first to appropriate the term artistically in their 1963 photo project *Ordeal by Roses* (薔薇刑, *barakei*), the efforts of which *Funeral Parade of Roses* continues. The film opens with a quote from Beaudelaire, "I am the wound and the dagger, the victim and the executioner," as Matsumoto saw 'gay boys' (*gei bōis*) as the wounds of society (cited in Nettleton 2014). I suggest that through the metaphors of the mask and the mirror, *gei bōis* become means for society to see itself and the arbitrariness of its own fundamental reality. Matsumoto achieves this by creating confusion between the mirrored and the real throughout the film and by showing the viewer masks, as convincing as faces that belie what they represent.

The film's first scene shows Eddie and Gonda together in bed, their bodies indistinguishable. Only when Eddie asks for his dress and Gonda shows off his muscles does the gendered performance begin. In answer to Eddie's (perhaps ironic) question, whether Gonda could lift one of the (not-heavy-looking) chairs, Gonda gets down on one knee and starts vigorously to raise

the chair over his head. They embrace and the camera turns, showing us the very same scene in a mirror Eddie was looking into before. Or have we been looking into the mirror and are now seeing the room directly for the first time? It is impossible to say; the reflection of reality is displaced by the reality of reflection.

Multi-Layered Filmmaking

Throughout the film, Leda, Eddie's rival for Gonda's love, is dressed in a kimono reminiscent of those worn by *kagama*, or male prostitute kabuki actors. Her appearance is the first hint at an older mode of homosexuality from the *gei bōi* culture Eddie represents, while their shared love interest, Gonda, clearly represents the traditional homosexual mode of the older male admirer (*nenja*). As Gonda and Eddie drive away from their hotel room, Eddie appears worried about Leda having seen them. Matsumoto cuts to the rear-view mirror view of Eddie, where he appears colder and almost calculating. The mirror serves as a new perspective that reveals a different facet of the protagonist's personality. At this time, the opening credits start rolling, telling us that Eddie is being played by Peter (ピーター), introducing yet another layer of personhood to the protagonist. In line with Matsumoto's theory of avant-garde documentary, the conflation of diegetic and non-diegetic identity pervades the whole film (Ko 2011).

The most striking instances of this conflation are the strewn-in interviews with the film's actors, the first one of which begins at 9.44 min. The first of these is with Ogasawara Osamu (playing Leda) in full costume in front of an arrangement of cherry blossoms. Asked about her motivation for being a '*gei bōi*', she responds that she likes to be and behave like a woman (*onna*). While not wanting to be a man again, she also does not want to become a 'real woman' (*honto no onna*), i.e., undergo a permanent sex change. Next, an unintroduced young man is interviewed. He is not cross-dressed, likes being gay (*gei bōi*), and identifies as having been born gay (*umare tsuki*). The interviews complement each other by highlighting the ambivalence of the term '*gei bōi*'. In investigating the question of whether there exists a gay identity in Japan, McLelland (2000, 460) points out that the term *gei bōi* was "used of transvestite male prostitutes", reminiscent of *kagama*. The kimono-wearing Leda corresponds to this description, and it is tempting to read Ogasawara's interview as supporting evidence for this view. The second interviewee, however, appears more closely aligned with Western ideas about homosexual identity. Both interviewees identify as *gei bōis*, yet

their definitions of the term seem contrary to each other. Rather than arbitrating, Matsumoto presents both in a layered fashion, frustrating reductionist approaches.

Another part of this multi-layered approach is Matsumoto's eclectic use of different cultures and narratives, which reflect the origins and trajectories of gay identities that are inexorably interwoven in Matsumoto's version of 1960s Shinjuku. The first time we see Bar Genet is a good example of this. Leda looks into a mirror and the room disappears until only Leda's reflection is visible. Matsumoto superimposes the evil queen's question from the Snow White fairy tale: 'mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?' (*kagami yo kagami kono yo de ichiban utsukushii hito ha dare?*). As Leda looks on, Eddie's reflection appears in the mirror, as if in response to the question. The symbolic function of this mirror episode goes far beyond implying that the ageing Leda (Ogasawara was 25 years old) is not the most beautiful woman 'in the land' anymore. If we recall the story of Snow White, her mother dies in childbirth and her father remarries the evil queen, who tries to get rid of the beautiful Snow White. Unbeknownst to Eddie, Gonda, whom Leda is dating, is Eddie's father, and the scene foreshadows the film's ending. Hence, Matsumoto freely borrows from Western and Japanese traditions, mixing them to create a new, in-between, reality.

Society and Its Outsiders

When Eddie walks through the city, she is heckled by a group of young men. They stop chasing her when a delivery man spills his noodles all over the street. The scene of the lying bike and noodles makes Eddie recall an image of a woman with a stab wound. Later, we learn she was Eddie's mother, whom Eddie killed. Eddie then collapses against a wall covered in posters of Pierre Paolo Passolini's movie adaptation of the myth of Oedipus (Oedipus Rex 1967). Eddie's collapse attracts another pursuer, whom Eddie evades by stumbling into an exhibition of masks. While Eddie is in the exhibition space, an audio recording elaborates on the metaphysics of masks.

While *Funeral Parade of Roses* predates Sakabe Megumi's philosophical writing on the topic by some 20 years, Matsumoto's use of mirrors and the scene with the mask exhibition seems to flow from the same source. The recording explores mask-wearing as a social performance through a number of dichotomies—some people wear the same mask all their lives, others switch masks frequently; some masks represent features accurately (*sugao no tokuchō wo kyōchō shita kamen*), others do not correspond to the

face; some are easily recognized as masks, others can hardly be distinguished from the real face. The recording goes on to explain that people always wear masks when facing other people and that only these masks are seen: Even when a mask is removed the face is seldom revealed; instead, the recording hints that there might be an infinite regress of masks. These masks are often taken to be persons. Consequently, emotions are also predicated on masks, rather than on persons.



Fig. 2 – 92.12 min

The film presents us with a world where masks structure the interactions of people and may even be indistinguishable from ‘real faces’ (*sugao*, lit. naked or uncovered face). This account diverges from Sakabe’s theory of masks only in so far as Sakabe openly questions the existence of the naked face itself. I want to suggest that Matsumoto, in the exhibit scene, hints at the very same result—if the statements of the audio recording are taken at face value, it seems that people’s faces are almost never encountered, and if they are, there is no way of knowing that they are. This leaves the concept of *sugao* as little more than a comforting illusion: it may well be that people are not hiding behind masks, but simply are nothing but masks.

When Ogasawara is interviewed, the interviewer first comments on how she looks “just like a real girl” (*honto no onna*) [9.40 min], and in this sense too, her style is reminiscent of the male kabuki actors playing female roles, who maintained their social performance of womanhood outside the theatre as well. Yet, Leda consistently surrounds herself with artificial roses in the

Bar and in Gonda's apartment. At her funeral her mourners mention that roses were her favourite flowers, but that they always had to be artificial [87.44 min]. Leda's style recalls a different time, when she would have had a designated place in society. Eddie, on the other hand, wears an obviously artificial mask, with exaggerated eyelashes and an aggressively modern way of dressing, almost as a form of protest. We never see Leda outside of Shinjuku's underground culture, whereas Eddie appears often in social situations in wider society. Eddie's obvious performance of sexuality questions more-muted performances of sexuality in wider society; Eddie's obvious mask questions the subtler masks of society, which are taken for faces. We might think of this affect as a variation on the uncanny valley concept introduced by Mori Masahiro as *bukimi no tani genshō* (不気味の谷現象) in 1970. Originally derived from robotics, the uncanny valley describes a phenomenon when a robot becomes more humanlike (and equally holds for images of human-like beings). While initially, empathetic responses increase with increasing likeness, there comes a point when all empathy drops away, after which point the previous relationship holds again. While normal people's masks are indistinguishable from faces (as opposed to theatrical masks, for example), Eddie's mask clearly looks like a face, yet it introduces an uncanny amount of artificiality into the practice of mask wearing. As such, it is a face that looks like a mask, or, which amounts to the same, a mask that looks like a face and questions society by openly collapsing the ontological distinction between the two.

A sudden cut shows us Tony, an American G.I. on leave, and Eddie drunk-enly walking down a street. As Tony hollers for a cab, a quick shot of seven naked young men seen from the back is inserted [25.41]. They stand in a row, facing a white background, and one of them has a rose clenched between his upper thighs, signaling his homosexuality, for which no other outward sign exists. Despite these young men all looking similar, one of them is clearly marked as an outsider by the rose. Similarly, while the burly black G.I. looks very different from the smaller Eddie, they share an intimate bond of community that bridges gaps of language, nation, and color. The love scene between Tony and Eddie is further introduced by a scene in which a filmmaker called Guevara tells his assistant Ichiyo to thread in a piece of film. The episode seems to suggest that the sex scene that follows is watched by Guevara and Ichiyo.

The scene resembles that of Eddie and Gonda making love in the very beginning of the film; the camera runs along Eddie's body, showing Tony's caresses only peripherally. Turning upwards towards the wall at the head of

the bed, we encounter a mirror reflecting the action. The camera's action also reverses then, traveling along the lovers' bodies, past their feet, coming to rest on the breast-pocket of Tony's shirt. Here we see a stack of photographs, the first of which shows Tony in full uniform with two blindfolded Vietnamese men, who are either dead or have been tortured. The pictures lend some context to an intertitle that appears in the mirror reflection [27.16 min] reading "what a cunning, mysterious artifice" (*nan to iu warugashikoi shinpi na takurami*). The photos point beyond the, so far, jolly-seeming G.I.'s demeanor in Tokyo, hinting at his conduct in the war in Vietnam. Before the mirror reflection, we see a couple in the throes of passion, with Tony's whole body almost eclipsing Eddie's. This one-dimensional image of the gay G.I. enjoying Tokyo's pleasure district is suddenly contrasted by the uniformed man posing with the two Vietnamese men. Tony's real identity cannot be resolved, as we see two masks: the G.I. in uniform and the naked, sensual man. Neither of these is more real than the other; they are both artificial, which becomes particularly clear after the next cut, where we see Eddie writhing in simulated pleasure in the middle of Matsumoto's film-set. Tony is sitting passively on the other side of the bed, watching. Again, Matsumoto breaks the uniform surface of the film with a radical intervention, this time to show how his own subjectivity shapes what appears to be a reality. While the scene shows Eddie, still acting, we are introduced to a third Tony, on set but not in action, and we wonder to what extent this is Tony whom we are still seeing, and to what extent it is Don Madrid, the actor.

Alternatives to Oedipus

When Matsumoto advances the Oedipal element of the main story line from 34.07 min onwards, we are introduced to Eddie's family. An empty hairdresser's shop hints at his mother's profession. We find Eddie and his mother at the table, her smoking and looking at a photo of a person with a burned-out expression. She mentions that Eddie's father left 12 years ago. Eddie tries to assume his father's place, but she only laughs at him for it. It is here that we recognize the stabbed woman to be Eddie's mother and the burned-out expression as belonging to his father. With the parallel to the myth of Oedipus often being advanced as an interpretative framework for the film, it is hard to ignore its explanatory power. PHILLIPS (2016) argues that this is somewhat misleading, since the parallels tend to overshadow the differences between *Funeral Parade of Roses* and the classical myth. For one,

we might take Matsumoto's remark that *gei bōis* constitute the wounds of society at face value and take the present scene as the depiction of a dysfunctional family. After the father leaves, his son is trying to take his place, not sexually, but as the head of the household. Eddie's family structure in *Funeral Parade of Roses* can be seen as the result of the downfall of the *ie* system, in which the grandparents, their son, his wife, and their children all live together in a house. With modernization, the *ie* system was expanded to the state's structure and the emperor became the head of household of all families (*ie*) (Kumagai 1986). However, the decline of the *ie* system, particularly in modern urban environments, eroded its socio-religious meaning, which Takeda (1973) locates in ancestor worship.

The parallels to Freud's reading of Oedipus and particularly to his idea that the family is a representation of wider society (or vice versa) are striking (Freud 1930). Yet the *ie* system does not bear being broken down in such a way. Rather than being a universal, unfalsifiable, theoretical approach, the *ie* system was a historic reality founded on conceptions entirely independent of Oedipus. It stands to reason that the pertinence of these references is based upon the viewer's own background. Whether the film is best read along the lines of Anti-Oedipus, as Phillips (2016) suggests, or as anti-*ie* is a matter of interpretation. I suggest reading it as an examination of a society renegotiating its own structures.

The shot of the hairdresser's shop places Eddie's family in the urban service sector, far from the rice fields of rural Japan. There are no grandparents, and Eddie's father has left. Eddie establishing himself as the head of the household fails, despite him being the eldest son; his mother's laughter signifies that the tradition of male household dominance is at an end. Unable to be a man, Eddie plays at being a woman, which displeases his mother too. As sexology changed the nature of sexuality and attitudes towards homosexuality, the family too underwent change. Eddie has no male role model; the classical structures are eroded. The members of the Shinjuku underground (*angura*) culture, apart from these traditional structures, constantly renegotiate various aspects of life, from drug-taking to filmmaking.



Fig. 3 – 28.36 min

Performing Womanhood?

After Eddie talks to her mother, we meet her again, going to a shopping mall with friends. The three of them are garishly dressed, to a point where it is unlikely that they wish to blend in as women at all—many passersby give them bewildered looks behind their backs. Unlike Eddie alone, the group appears unaware of how they are perceived. The scene ends when the three of them brazenly make a trip to the men's room and use the urinals.

As McLelland (2000) points out, the question of gay identity in Japan is by no means a trivial one. In *Funeral Parade of Roses*, the protagonists do not define themselves in terms of gender, not as either men or women. On the one hand, they perform a hypersexual form of femininity to the point of caricature; on the other hand, they have no qualms about using the men's room. As I have been arguing for Leda, the interviews blend character and actor to a point where no clear distinction can be made. The same is true for Eddie, whose actor Peter (Ikehata Shinnosuke) gives an interview [74.45 min] in which he compares himself to Eddie. He points out various similarities, and although he is still in costume for the interview, he never cross-dressed before his part in *Funeral Parade of Roses*. Indeed, he has since appeared in both male and female roles, acting, for example, as the fool in Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985).



Fig. 4 – 51.59 min

At 51.59 min we see Eddie prepare for an outing with a friend. As her friend enters, we see Eddie and the entrance through the large vanity table's mirror. Right behind her head, next to the door, is a poster of a sports car, emphasizing Eddie's masculinity [51.47 min]. While her transformation is under way, Eddie's friend eats a banana in a suggestive fashion, divulging a tale of sexual debauchery in which he successfully 'camouflaged' as a woman. As the camera turns to show both friends, we see the vanity table and the room's more feminine attributes: a small ornamental dress and a poster of a painting of a woman with exposed breasts. Poignantly, there is also a wooden mask hanging in the corner behind the mirror.

A Mirror Perpendicular to the Screen

In another scene, Leda, with her back towards Eddie, addresses Eddie through the mirror, which previously revealed Eddie's superior beauty to Leda. A brief flashback to the room in which Gonda and Eddie spent time together reminds us of what is at stake, before Eddie and Leda draw toy pistols to begin a Wild-West-style duel; Eddie even wears a cowboy hat for the occasion. A comical speech bubble confrontation ends in an ungraceful, sped-up, slapstick fight. In the fight, both try to strip each other of their female attributes. Eddie loses her bra and breast-padding and Leda's kimono knot comes undone. The confrontation ends with Leda hitting Eddie over

the head with a bottle. Tellingly, the loss of consciousness at the end of the fight predicated on unmasking the opponent transports Eddie back to the mask exhibition.

At the exhibition, Eddie is picked up by a friend named Guevara, and they go up Tokyo Tower. In the elevator, they have a conversation about the haziness of reality (*rinkaku ha nanke*) and the original non-existence of things (*hajime kara nakatta deshitara*). Guevara asserts that it is like a mirage (*shinkirō mitai*), while Eddie's question of what he ought to believe in (*dattara nani wo shinjiru no*) is left unanswered. Encountering children atop the tower leads Eddie to believe that she may have been there with their family before, but she does not remember. The encounter triggers a flashback of how she became a *gei bōi*: The young Eddie sits in front of a three-part mirror, and, after an intertitle cursing the day he was born (*waga umareshi hi horobi useyo*), starts applying make-up—being gay is not an identity from birth for Eddie, but rather an act of self-erasure. His mother, finding Eddie kissing the mirror, and unable to deal with or accommodate this behavior, starts feebly slapping him. Naturally, the transformation happens in front of a mirror, reminding us of Nō theatre's *kagami no ma*, where Eddie, the boy, sees a female version of himself and transforms himself into herself. While it is easy to focus on the mother's action as a form of transphobia, Matsumoto's comments on the breakdown of social structure (of which he thought *gei bōis* were a symptom) offer a different interpretation. The film includes depictions of transphobia, yet the problem it addresses is a more general fear of the 'other.' The ascription of transphobia is particularly difficult, as the concept of a *gei bōi* may or may not include cross-dressing or a desire to switch to another sex or gender. Generally, the imposition of trans-identity theory upon the Japanese context is problematic, as sexuality seems to have been less central to historical constructions of identity. This is also evident in Ko's (2011) approach. In relying on Sakabe's thought as an interpretative framework, we can sidestep these issues and make sense of Matsumoto's own claims about the work.

This is further supported when we see Eddie murder his mother and her lover. The second half of the film, after the fight between Eddie and Leda, generally mirrors the first half figuratively, as well as literally. Eddie switches from being predominantly a victim to being a perpetrator. In the murder scene, this change becomes clear, as well as later when she takes over Bar Genet. Her character develops within the film's story arc, rather than in linear time. The opening scene is shown again early on in the second half of the film, this time from Leda's rather than Eddie's perspective; Leda

sees Eddie and Gonda driving away. In the first half of the film, Eddie's distress at seeing Leda is the focus, whereas now Leda's powerlessness is easier to sympathize with. The repetition of the vanity table scene at 76 min is another clear case establishing the middle of the film as a mirroring axis. This time, not the car, but the breasts of the figure in the poster are reflected in the vanity table's mirror. Further, Eddie seems to have become left-handed. The room is literally mirrored.



Fig. 5 – 76.28 min

In Sakabe Megumi's terms, the idea of a true transformation runs counter to the notion of hypostasis. Sakabe draws up the example of the Nō actor's transformation, where the actor ceases to be for the duration of the play (Sakabe 1989). What guarantees the self-identity of things and people are their relationships to all other things and people. While transformation is possible during the play, the actor returns *'to him/herself'*—so to speak—through the relationships they have with the world, holding them in place.

In an interview scene [74.30 min], Peter identifies with his character, Eddie, in many respects, except for the incest. His comment foreshadows that Gonda is Eddie's father, completing the Oedipal formula. The film's minimal portrayal of the Oedipus myth extends no further than killing one parent and sleeping with the other, dispensing with many of the other elements of the story. In Sakabe's terms, Eddie's transformation is radical because she is trying to slip into another role. In this context, cross-dressing is part of her new self. This self is achieved by cultivating a new mask and erasing all old

relationships. In the logic of the film, Eddie's only ties to her previous life are the father she does not remember and the mother she killed. With this meagre grounding in the world, she is free to redefine herself.

Matsumoto's critique of the structural decay of society serves a similar purpose. With the relationships and structures that constitute society worn away, individuals are transformed and a new 'underground' society formed. This new part of society is still negotiating its own rules in contradistinction to old society. From the moment of differentiation, both can maintain their respective identities only by distinction from each other; both societies mirror and, thereby, ground each other.

The Oracle

Two small puppets are present at the site of Leda's suicide, one with a nail through the throat, the other with a nail in each eye. This refers to *ushi no toki mairi*, a traditional Japanese way to curse someone by nailing dolls to a sacred tree. In this case, the dolls foreshadow the fate of Gonda and Eddie, who will kill himself and blind herself, respectively. The doll ritual replaces the oracle's prediction in the myth of Oedipus—Matsumoto mixes his cultural references and appropriates the story to his context.

Leda's 'prophecy' is fulfilled when Gonda finds a book titled '*Return of [the] Father*' (*chichi kaeru*). After Gonda's suicide and Eddie's blinding of herself, Eddie walks out to the street through dark corridors, in a clear reference to Passolini's '*Oedipus Rex*' [97 min]. As she comes out to the street, a large crowd has already gathered. Eddie then serves as a mirror to society; without seeing herself, she is reflected by society—she became a mirror to society in the sense that society has, through its structure, allowed this tragedy to happen. The camera moves along through the crowd, presenting it as a unified front against that which does not belong: the blinded and blood-soaked Eddie, who still wields the knife, who *is* the knife, but who is also the wound.

Conclusion

As I have endeavored to show, *Funeral Parade of Roses* does not present a unified surface. Rather, each scene is like a fragment of a mirror that reflects the other scenes, the audience, and Matsumoto Toshio's own subjectivity. Matsumoto's eclecticism makes several interpretations pertinent, which

makes ambivalence itself the work's defining feature. The mirror and the mask as central hermeneutical elements make this palpable, as they are empty signs that take on meaning conferred onto them by the other. Their ultimate referents, however, cannot be identified, and the film thus avoids firm commitments. Matsumoto's way of filming is appropriate to his subject of the highly changeable underground culture of Shinjuku in the 1960s, which has since disappeared. I argued that Matsumoto's use of mirrors and masks foreshadows Sakabe Megumi's iteration of both as central elements to his hermeneutical theory and, consequently, that the dynamic reality of *Funeral Parade of Roses* can be fruitfully analysed in terms of these concepts. Matsumoto achieves a delicate balance of meanings that should not be reduced to any one aspect. For the present paper, my analysis was concerned mainly with different aspects of sexuality; yet an equally fruitful analysis might be given with regards to politics, filmmaking, or underground culture itself.

Taking a closer look at the sexual identities presented in the film, we invariably see them contradicting one another. There is no overarching *gei bōi* identity; rather, they are individuals who all have their own conception of what it means to be gay. In the West, this plurality of lifestyles has been replaced by quite strongly held, normative ideas of what it means to be gay, which tend to overshadow differences among and within communities. In Japan, for better or for worse, the same process has not occurred to the same extent. At the time of filming it may have seemed like a consistent gay identity was in the making, but that is certainly not what Matsumoto depicts. Rather than taking sides, he presents us with a complex and multivalent phenomenon, without reducing it to a stringent, unified notion. Much like the film's own eclecticism, gay identities in Japan draw neither exclusively on local traditions, nor do they merely follow Western ideals. They are a combination of the local and the global, arbitrated by the individual, and, in this regard, resemble Matsumoto's own concerns in aiming to break up the dichotomous through the use of mirrors and masks.



Fig. 6 – 104.22 min

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Grzegorz Kubiński*

Dolls and Octopuses. The (In)human Sexuality of Mari Katayama

Abstract

Japan is very often seen as a country of ambiguities and contradictions. The latest technology meets tradition here. In the popular culture of the West, Japan is also perceived as a disturbingly sensual country. This article is an attempt to combine elements such as Western technology and eastern sexuality based on the work of contemporary artist Mari Katayama. A number of proposals are presented how to interpret Katayama's work as a reinterpretation of sociosexual and bodily as well as corporeal norms of the past and present, and of the West and of the East.

Keywords

Body, Disability, Social Media, Inhuman, Sexuality

Contemporary societies operating in global networks of dependencies allow for the continuous redefinition of identity. Global tendencies and particular interests overlap, which renders the landscape of social reality highly diverse. The use of new telecommunication technologies and social media makes the negotiation of the identity of an entity possible, a negotiation that takes place in relation to a wide spectrum of social aspects which go beyond ethnic and racial boundaries. Simultaneously, private and intimate issues such as corporeality and sexuality also go beyond the boundaries of intimacy, becoming part of a wider narrative. In this article, I would like to propose an attempt to interpret the mutual relationships between corporeality and sexuality in the context of the intercultural works of a Japanese artist

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from a younger generation, Mari Katayama.¹ As a nearly thirty-year-old woman, she is not only an active creator, but also a participant and user of social media, which further intensifies her belonging to the contemporary global structure of reality. Katayama's works may be interpreted on many levels, but I suggest focusing on several elements that seem particularly interesting: technology, the body, and sexuality. These constitute a collection of media in her works, thanks to which she proposes a reinterpretation of the existing patriarchal and normative social standards.

The Incomplete Body

Katayama's body is not a normative body, which seems to be the most important element defining her art. She was born with a genetic condition called tibial hemimelia, a deficiency in which the major, larger bone of the lower leg is absent, which resulted in the amputation of her legs at the age of nine. In her art, Katayama engages in a dialogue with this very form of distinct corporeality—"ugly, obese, disabled, black, old, or simply unacceptable bodies of today" (Sturm 2014, 32). By her own admission, she made the conscious decision regarding the amputation when she was essentially still a child, faced with a choice between spending her life in a wheelchair and being dependent on others or having her legs amputated and using prostheses, which not only gave her a sense of independence, but would also become tools of her artistic expression later on. Thus, the artist's own body became her original medium of expression.

In one of her works, a photograph from 2014 entitled "you're mine #001," there are obvious clues used by the artist to negotiate the meanings between disability and having a different body, and social expectations that are not so much concerned with the body as such, but with the body of

¹ Mari Katayama (b. 1987) "born in Saitama and raised in Gunma, Japan. Graduated Tokyo University of the Arts after obtaining MFA in 2012. Suffering from congenital tibial hemimelia, Katayama had both legs amputated at age of 9. Since then, she has created numerous self-portrait photography together with embroidered objects and decorated prosthesis, using her own body as a living sculpture. Her belief is that tracing herself connects with other people and her everyday life can be also connected with the society and the world, just like the patchwork made with threads and a needle by stitching borders. In addition to her art creation, Katayama leads the 'High heel project' in which she wore customized high-heeled shoes specially made for prosthesis to perform on stage as a singer, model, or keynote speaker. The motto of this project is to take advantage of any means, including art and the disabled body, if it helps to expand the 'freedom of choice' for those in desperate need" (see: <http://shell-kashime.com/>). All discussed works and information about the artist can be found on the website <http://shell-kashime.com/> and <https://www.instagram.com/katayamari/>

a young woman in particular. "You're mine #001" is one of the many photographs/self-portraits created by Katayama, which may be treated as the most important form of her artistic expression. Since she works "with her" body, or even, works using "her" body, self-portrait photography seems to be a natural medium. The self-portrait "you're mine #001" shows Katayama dressed in a flesh-colored corset and underwear of the same color, on her legs she has stockings, one of which goes up to the hip, while the other goes halfway up the thigh, revealing a fragment of her naked body. The artist is lying on a few white pillows, supported on her right hand bent at the elbow; her left hand rests loosely along the body. The whole scene focuses on the figure of the model located in the center of the frame; a white, draped material serves as the background. This very simple composition carries with it meanings that are important for multiple interpretations. However, it seems that the artist's intention of sexualizing her own body is predominant here. By lying on pillows with her body curved in a delicate and sensual way, Katayama presents herself in the pose of a seductress. Her face is covered with heavy make-up which clearly highlights her eyes and blood-red lips. The contour of her face is emphasized by jet-black hair cut short. The sensuality, or even sexuality, of the Japanese artist's figure is emphasized by adopting many images from film stills, classical paintings and erotic materials of the pink industry, which are all used in a conscious manner.

The photograph, however, does not stun the viewer with vulgar sexuality or a pornographic close-up. Katayama presents herself as a study of a subtly stylized, very beautiful young woman in a very tasteful manner. At the same time, the presented body causes uneasiness in the target audience—Mari Katayama has no legs. What the viewer may initially interpret as stockings turn out to be medical compression bands, which become a paradoxical object. On the one hand they introduce a sense of erotic excitement, especially the band which runs halfway up the thigh, like a classic woman's stocking used in combination with garters. On the other hand, once the recipient realizes what these "stockings" really are, the feeling of anxiety and uneasiness arises. The artist's position, her provocative glance and her head tilted back, as well as the background of the photograph which evokes associations related to a boudoir, practically force the viewer to sexualize the depicted body. It seems, however, that one of the possible interpretational clues in this case would be the assumption that it is not only the artist's body that is the subject of the gaze, but also these very "stockings"—compression bands which become a liminal object or Winnicott's transitional object which differentiates "disability and monstrosity" as Michel Foucault depicted as follows:

The difference between disability and monstrosity is revealed at the meeting point, the point of friction, between a breach of the natural law-table and the breach of the law instituted by God or by society, at the point where these two breaches of law come together. Disability may well be something that upsets the natural order, but disability is not monstrosity because it has a place in civil or canon law. The disabled person may not conform to nature, but the law in some way provides for him. Monstrosity, however, is the kind of natural irregularity that calls law into question and disables it (2003, 64).

Medical compression bands work as “stockings” making an uncomfortable, but seductive ambivalence between Katayama’s “failed body” (Sturm 2014, 23) and the composition of the exposed, sensual body. At the same time, this little detail indicates the clear separation between disability and “monstrosity,” excluding Katayama’s body from the realm of the monstrosity and placing it into the space of marginalized but still human and socially inherent bodies.

At this point it is worth mentioning that this young female artist is an active participant in the world of social media, she has her own website and accounts on all the major websites such as Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook.² Seeing this type of photo on Instagram, the recipient may feel uncomfortable, because how can you show such pictures on Instagram, a place designed for the creation of an ideal reality? Is the use of this kind of medium something socially acceptable?

By mostly uniting women, in this case it seems that Katayama fits perfectly into the body positivity movement, which postulates the acceptance and even the affirmation of all physical differences.³ In social-media such as Instagram, which operate by using primarily images, an abundance of profiles belonging to disabled people may be found: people who are not artists but present different parts of their body. Moreover, in this online space there are many profiles of women with disabilities who use sexuality as a tool for expressing their identity or making people grow accustomed to otherness. I suggest considering the expression of sexuality or the indication of a different body that is sexually ready and open as one of the leading strategies

² Mari Katayama’s website presenting her artistic activity: <http://shell-kashime.com/> and more personal, but also open for the interested people Instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/katayamari/>

³ The positive body movement promotes unacceptable and socially marginalized bodies. These include, but are not limited to, photos of the bodies of disabled people, people with physical differences or visible illnesses. A positive body community flourishes mainly on social media like Facebook and Instagram. See: Bell, Cassarly, Dunbar 2018; Lupton 2016.

in familiarizing people with the “different conceptions of the erotic body” (Siebers 2011, 148-149, 160), especially women with disabilities.⁴ Throughout the culture, “women with disabilities traditionally have been ignored not only by those concerned about disability but also by those examining women’s experiences” and “the popular view of women with disabilities has been one mixed with repugnance, and they were perceived also as highly “passive and doll-like” (Asch, Fine 1988, 17). Katayama’s works show how this kind of “doll-like” passivity can be used to show and express the opposite side of disabled women’s bodies—sexuality and sensuality. When asked about the subject of her works, Mari Katayama answered, “The theme depends on what I feel for the moment. Because I believe being an artist is a job for those who live in the era they’re in. I feel like I respond to the currents or trends to create something that fits in this era” (Ogura, Lo 2017). She made it clear that despite its aesthetic qualities, her art is also socially engaged art. The physicality of Katayama’s non-normative body is therefore political when she shows “the body in all its purity, in its idiosyncratic deformations, and in its appealing rawness” and as she herself said, “[o]ne thing I know for sure is that beauty is not something good-looking or clean. I personally feel that anything that is alive is beautiful [...] I do not intend to create something beautiful in the first place” (Heron-Langton 2018). Using art and new media like Instagram, Katayama and many other women with disabilities use their sexuality as a tactic for the full expression of their femininity. On Instagram there are many profiles and pictures of women with disabilities expressing themselves in a very seductive and sexual way, exactly the same way, we can observe when looking at the “normal” female body.

For example, women with rare diseases, after amputation procedures, suffering from rare skin conditions or other skin lesions, women with an ostomy, burn victims, or finally the many women who are struggling with stretch marks, cellulite or obesity; they all showcase their bodies. At the same time, they supplement these images with descriptions such as “perfectly imperfect,” “flawless affect,” or “underneath we are women” as if to indicate the twofold nature of physical otherness. A random genetic illness or an accident appears as an undesirable element which, after some time, becomes an integral part of the identity of a given individual, and often this identity does not exist without this “defect” (Nussbaum 2000, 35-36).

⁴ Tobin Siebers proposed “a sexual culture” of disability based on “representing disability not as a defect but complex embodiment that enhances sexual activities.” In this conception of sexuality, mainly the sexuality of disabled bodies, it was perceived as “a political dimension that redefines people with disabilities as sexual citizens.” I assume this kind of thinking is strongly present in the Katayama’s works.

Katayama perfectly reflects the fundamental principles of this type of behavior creating and strengthening femininity against the conviction that disabilities (but also physical impairments) defeminize because “disabled women supposedly have no reason to reproduce and no reason to have sex” (Siebers 2011, 131). Disability becomes not only “beautiful,” but also sexy and sensual (McGlensey 2014). The compression bands that replace stockings direct the recipient’s attention not only towards the absent legs, a culturally accepted and desirable element of feminine sexuality, but also towards an uncomfortable question regarding her self-provocative act of sexual arousal itself. The absence of legs—the left one from the knee down and the right one from the ankle down—may trigger visual discomfort caused by looking at an ill person, or at a person who is a “cripple,” or more broadly, someone who should not be looked at “in this way.” In this case, the phrase “in this way” is a synonym of “these things” about which one shouldn’t speak out loud—sex, erotic desires, forbidden fantasies and sexual fetishes.

A society in the process of socialization passes normative behaviors onto its members in a very precise manner, including ways of looking at things or individuals. Jacques Rancière pointed out that the part of the body which one cannot look at seems to be the most interesting, and it is in this very place where we may encounter symbolic power which seems to say ‘disperse, there is nothing to see here!’ It is an order—an interpellation—from the authority to the crowd attracted by an unusual sight (Rancière 2007, 157). This order is extremely difficult to obey today, because individuals, as in the case of Katayama and women and men associated with the body positivity movement, consciously and consistently place themselves in the center of the online spectacle. The recipient, however, who is not accustomed to physical otherness, becomes not only a spectator, but a gawker and a voyeurist who does not look with their eyes wide open but stares—subconsciously and even instinctively—at the curiosity that has appeared before them. Katayama does not expose this staring in the context of otherness and sexuality as much as she juxtaposes both these dimensions against one another, thus making staring aesthetically legitimate, though morally equivocal. By means of subtle ambivalence represented by the replacement of stockings with medical accessories she establishes a space in which the viewer asks themselves not about the sexual value of the model but rather about their own sexuality and their own desires that he or she begins to fear. That is because, as much as a disabled or, to put it more aptly, a “crippled” woman who poses in negligee without her legs is indeed part of a certain artistic convention and the viewer is able to accept it to some degree. One may simply recall the armless and yet canonical Venus de Milo or the Three Goddesses from

the Parthenon. Simultaneously, the introduction of sexuality cannot remain unanswered. The problem, however, is that the answer cannot be given because, once it is given, the viewer gawking at Katayama will inscribe themselves into the context in which, until now, they have been situating the artist, into the space of otherness. That is because she presents herself in this space in a conscious manner. It remains unanswered whether the beginning of this lies in her having been bullied by her peers as a schoolgirl, or whether she was deprived of her sense of femininity at an incident during one of her singing performances, when a man's voice from the audience pointed out to her that, since she did not have her heels on (because she was wearing her prostheses), she was "not a real woman" (Katayama 2015).⁵

All of these experiences have probably become the canvas for her artistic activities, among which "you're mine #001" is one of the most expressive depictions. In the words of Elizabeth Grosz, an individual who is a freak "is thus neither unusually gifted nor unusually disadvantaged. He or she is not an object of a simple admiration or pity but is a being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening" (1996, 56). Freakiness it is not the lack of a limb or an unusual limb, but functioning in-between worlds, in-between realities overlapping in an ambivalent and inadmissible manner. This is why the physical otherness of Katayama as something that is enforced on the viewer does not lead to anxiety in and of itself. What is responsible is "the moment, the point which now belongs to the anticipatory structure of every aesthetic project" (Bohrer 2005, 98) which is the sudden recognition of the discontinuity of reality and its mismatched nature. Katayama's work does not indicate that the viewer is

⁵ Katayama, in her artistic project entitled "High Heel Project" (2011), focuses on the material aspect of the combination of her femininity, sexuality and disability. Looking for appropriate prostheses, the artist decided that they should not only be practical but that they should also express femininity through the possibility of them having high heels. This was not only a practical act, but also an expression of Katayama's feminine agency in this case through the ability to choose to wear whatever outfit/fashion she would like. As the artist said, "As I proceed the project to achieve my goal, I found what prosthesis users face. Users lack chance to choose, not only to choose high-heels, but also to choose to wear sandals, skirts, jackets... People don't even know that they can choose." By choosing the appropriate prosthesis to emphasize femininity and be an expression of her active construction of her own identity as a woman, Katayama gained the ability to freely dispose of her body and felt more accepted. As she said, "Regardless of how much I love fashion, I couldn't wear high heels. Leggings and skinny pants are cool because they show line of the body. If I wore them, they seemed uncool, because it was somehow unnatural. Maybe an emotion that I unknowingly suppressed was being released. Anyway, I think I wanted to express myself badly" (see: Ito 2012).

only and solely a gawker, some mindless participant in a mass performance in P.T. Barnum's "circus of curiosities," but that they are a lusty gawker and, at the same time, terrified by their desire. The sexualization of these types of bodies, which are a kind of glitch on the surface of culture, is much more important than the mere exposure of a physical defect.

As Elizabeth Grosz pointed out, it is the "simultaneity" of disgust and fascination that creates a space of otherness, but this simultaneity appearing in the sudden Now points to something much more disturbing, namely that "it is not gross deformity alone that is so unsettling and fascinating. Rather, there are other reasons for his curiosity and horror. It seems to me that the initial reaction to the freakish and the monstrous is a perverse kind of sexual curiosity. People think to themselves: 'How do they do it?' (Grosz 1996, 64). By interpreting Grosz's statement slightly differently, one may say that while looking at Katayama's work the viewer does not ask "how do they do it?" but rather "do I want to do it?" or, realizing that what they took for sexy garters is a medical item, they ask themselves "why does this excite me?", and finally "what is it that really turns me on?". The artist does not trifle with the recipient by using a sophisticated *trompe-l'œil*. Her presentation of both her incomplete body and feminine accessories is rather an anamorphosis than a simulation. It does not require the recipient to suspend the reality, nor does it introduce them into an unreal world. On the contrary, this clash with the actual reality at the moment of an anamorphic transformation of the garters into bandages triggers a sudden anxiety. Here, the photo acts like an aphrodisiac but, at the same time, it is not quite clear what the aphrodisiac is—whether it is the shape of the body that arouses, the lack of a leg, the lack of a foot, the blood-red lips or the stumps dressed in medical garments. What is more, the appropriative and dominant title of the work—"you're mine #001"—together with her assertive attitude as the model suggests that it is she who is the dominant party, she is the one who gives pleasure, and it is her sexuality that is to be satisfied. Katayama's otherness becomes a source of power and a space of untamed libidinal strength, combining the issues of femininity, sexuality and the non-normative nature of her corporeality, treated in the culture as ambivalently dangerous and desirable, and thus marginalized.

The Inhuman Body

Despite her Asian origins, Mari Katayama proposes an exhibition of a disabled body which may be analyzed by using interpretative clues that belong to Western culture. This type of inclination may also be found in her other

works, including one of her most famous, entitled “bystander #016” from 2016. The photograph, another self-portrait, depicts the artist lying on the beach on Naoshima Island, surrounded from her waist down with stuffed appendages, tentacles sewn from a bluish grey material resembling the limbs of cephalopods or deformed human arms. This work also contains a multitude of autobiographical threads—starting from her skill in sewing and crocheting that her grandmother and mother taught her. This emphasizes the significance of the idea of matriarchy by referring to amputated legs, the stumps of which are visible between the artificial limbs, and by finishing with an analogy to the artist’s left palm, deformed as a result of an illness.⁶ In the context of Western art, this work was intended to refer to Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*, however its center is occupied not by classical beauty, but precisely by a different, abject body. Nevertheless, attention should be given to a slightly different way of interpreting “bystander #016” as in the case of “you’re mine #001,”—a focusing on the aspect of sexuality which connects both the works. While sexuality does not appear to come to the fore in the work “bystander #016,” it still seems to be strongly present there.

Katayama suggests an interpretative clue, that the creative process was strongly inspired by the Japanese puppet theatre, in which the dolls moved by men directing their movements. One might seek the dialogical role of Katayama’s art in this aspect alone, exhibiting a non-normative body not only as a new canon of beauty appearing in the bystander’s center of attention, but also as a challenge to the patriarchal order of art, society, body, and sexuality. However, the artist drew attention to the peculiar form of *burnaku*—the Naoshima Onna Burnaku theatre, an all-female style of traditional puppet theatre. Such a way of presenting the narrative by using dolls where femininity is most strongly emphasized. In the context of these works, it is also important to recall that *bunraku* dolls have no legs. To be more exact, their legs are hidden and male actors direct the dolls in such a way as to express emotion by only using their upper bodies, faces and hands. In this context, “bystander #016” represents the liminal, hybrid character of a trickster, connecting not only the world of the East and the West, but also masculinity and femininity, power and submissiveness, and finally, sexuality and its necessary element suggested by Grosz, i.e. repulsive curiosity. Sitting on a beach with her legs spread out, Katayama attracts the gaze as an absolute Other, inhuman, half-animal shape that is appealing and fascinating, that simultaneously repulses with its otherness. Still, and this is where the artist’s

⁶ Katayama devotes other works and the book “The Gift” to this.

attire in the form of a feminine lacy petticoat comes into play once more, the viewer is not allowed to shake off the pesky question as to the sexuality of this "object."

In order to further underline the expression of "bystander #016," we may point to the tradition of Japanese *ukiyo-e* drawings, a term which literally means "floating worlds," mainly depicting scenes from the Edo and Meiji periods. Katayama refers to this Japanese art tradition with particular emphasis on the *shunga* genre which "means 'spring pictures,' embrace all erotic imagery, including prints, books and scrolls. In its specific usage, *shunga* comprise one of six genres in woodblock prints of the Edo and Meiji periods" (Singer 1999, 381). Paintings and engravings of this type depict erotic scenes, often exaggerated and humorous. When interpreting Katayama's works, one should take into account perhaps one of the most famous works "The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife" (1814) by Katsushika Hokusai (Uhlenbeck, Winkel 2005, 161). It depicts a young woman lying on a beach in an ecstatic, sensual pose, to whose womb and lips there adhere two octopuses which entangle the entire figure with their tentacles. Setting aside the story which serves as the painting's canvas, the analogy between *shunga* and Katayama's works seems to be enticing. Here, sexuality is depicted as the embodiment of feminine pleasure, but also as a lustful feminine body, crossing the boundaries set by social norms and patriarchal prohibitions in its quest for pleasure. Secluded places such as beaches or bays might simultaneously act as symbols of women's marginalization. Also the often forbidden sensual pleasure, which brings to mind the Western social ostracism regarding masturbation in relation to women as well, as an activity in which one indulges in furtively and on their own. Hokusai's *shunga* and Katayama's work show that this eternal sexualization of the female body has, in fact, been created both by Western and Eastern culture, marginalizing a woman, the absolute Other, namely a being that is dangerous in its sexual otherness.

But in addition, the female body does not have to satisfy the normative desires of the male gaze, but can present itself as sexually significant in its totality, including disabled, corporeal otherness. The absolute and disturbing otherness of female sexuality is also emphasized by the physical, sexual contact with non-human beings forming a community described, for instance, by Donna Haraway, so different in its essence from the patriarchal and rational or even scientific proposal of Bruno Latour.⁷ As Haraway said: "I re-

⁷ Bruno Latour's "action-network theory" known as ANT, proposes to include in the study of society not only human subjects but also material and immaterial objects. According to this concept, material and immaterial objects also have agency, an agency which has

member that tentacle comes from the Latin *tentaculum*, meaning ‘feeler’, and *tentare*, meaning ‘to feel’ and ‘to try’; [...] the tentacular ones make attachments and detachments; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others” (Haraway 2016, 31). Haraway and the work of Katayama definitely point to a more amorphous, corporeal, and above all, intimate relationship with non-human actors, while the indications of Latour, emphasizing a network of connections of non-living things, primarily operate on the level—one might say—of male rationality.

Katayama’s works refer to an ambiguous and liminal space, the baroque grotesque in which sexuality mixed with imperfect corporeality causes uncanny anxiety in the viewer with regard to their own sense of lust and fetishistic desires. It seems, however, that in the photographs discussed here, one may discover not only the chaotic fluctuations of the libidinal Real, but also the state of being static and in total submissiveness. Katayama’s work seems to confirm the intuition that a sense of repulsion withdrawn at the right moment in order to experience pleasure is essential in sexual ecstasy. Simultaneously, this feeling of aversion changes an entity into an object, which makes sexual pleasure possible to begin with. Making a sexual partner cease, even but for a moment, to be a human being, an active entity seems to be necessary for “these things” to happen. Forbidden and taboo sexual actions cannot be performed on or with an subject, you cannot crave a person as such in an animated and uncontrolled way, they should be turned into an object for a moment, literally made an object of pleasure around which lust is centered. This certain dose of dehumanization is necessary for the transformation of a human into a non-human, even if it is embarrassing or to be hidden, to satisfy the curiosity related to the question of “how do they do it?”.

The Incomplete Doll-Like Body

Such a suggestion for the interpretation of Katayama’s works may be confirmed in the works discussed above, once their static, dehumanizing aspect is exposed. It is not about simply indicating the connection between the animalistic *shunga* emphasizing non-human sexuality. Works by both Hokusai and Katayama also pay attention to the body treated as an ambivalent, inanimate object—a doll. In the Japanese tradition, a doll is not just a toy because it functions in the space of culture permeated with animism, it functions as a mediator between the worlds of what is real and fictitious, ani-

a real influence on human actions. In the context of the above, such non-human actors naturally also include animals. See: Latour 2007.

mated and inanimate. Without analyzing all the types of dolls and their role in Japanese culture, it is still worth paying attention to two types. One is the life-like doll called *iki-ningyō*, whose similarity to living people is striking. The other is those dolls thematically related to erotica, e.g. *shunga ningyo* and life-size ones, used for satisfying sexual pleasure called *shutsuro bijin* (“travelling beauties”) or *kōshoku onna* (“play women”), which are equivalent to the European *les dames de voyage* used by sailors during long cruises as substitutes for absent women (Pate 2008, 514).

The rich history of erotic prints and Japanese dolls has had a very strong influence on Western pop culture at least since the later part of the twentieth century. It is enough to mention the *anime* or *manga* genres, but also real dolls present in the West, that is, life-size sex dolls often very clearly stylized to resemble Japanese or, speaking more broadly, Asian women, although not only⁸. The gradually growing number of men who possess such quasi-human objects is quite visible in social media. For example, on Instagram, a medium Katayama uses, one can find many profiles of men sharing photos of their artificial “friends.” Not always, or rather, relatively rarely, are these pornographic or highly erotic pictures, but one can see many photographs in which dolls appear in roles sanctioned by patriarchy known from everyday life—cleaning, cooking as well as some more intimate ones—walking or eating together. In the work of Mari Katayama, it is possible to see the connections between her works as well as her presence and role of dolls in the sexual life of Japan and Western countries. In “you’re mine #001” discussed above, not only does the artist adopt a sensual pose, but the whole picture is extremely sterile and precise. The simple but classic and precise make-up and the positioning of her body is reminiscent of a shop mannequin or just a doll that may be interpreted as the other side of femininity—captured in a stereotypical, patriarchal and heteronormative context—as completely

⁸ It should be noted that sex-dolls have different forms. They are produced in a wide range of shapes and sizes, taking into account the preferences of customers. Companies such as Abyss Creation or 4Woods offer fully personalized sex-dolls, but in this text I only note their similarity to Japanese (pop)culture. Katayama's works may evoke associations with other dolls from Japanese culture like *kyūtai kansetsu ningyō*, presented also in Poland by Monika Mostowik-Wanat. However, in this article I have decided that the main point of reference for the interpretation of Katayama's works would be the European, Western perspective on her works. The proposed interpretation assumes that contemporary Western European culture is very strongly sexually oriented, but at the same time sex-doll-related motifs appear in it more and more often (e.g. the series *Humans* or *Better than Us*). Hence the attempt to combine a Western view with Japanese contemporary art in the context of sexuality and femininity, including a doll as a subject-object of sexuality.

objectified and submissive. The disabled body also fits this context well, pointing to a doll that is “faulty” and “broken,” but still fit for “use.”

The static and sterile nature of the photograph may simultaneously be interpreted as a metaphor of an intimate, forbidden space where these “things” take place, and because no one has access to it, the object of pleasure may not only be non-human but also “damaged.” In this case, it should be emphasized that Katayama puts the viewer on the side of the male gaze and it is precisely to him that the title “you’re mine” now refers, indicating the appropriation of a female, completely submissive, and vulnerable body. “Bystander #016” may be interpreted in a similar way, where it is indeed a man who is the dominant actor who is looking or, to put it more aptly, gawking at this strange being, unable to escape and worryingly sensual, thrown out onto the shore by the sea, a being which one may move as they please—just as in the case of the legless *bunraku* dolls. In her other works, Katayama summarizes the ways of interpreting suggested above. In the photograph entitled “Shell” from 2016, we see the artist, again as a model, sitting in a large, richly decorated chair in nothing more than her underwear, exhibiting her incomplete body, with her prostheses lying next to her. The entire space around the central figure is filled with a wide range of different small trinkets of everyday use.

Here, Katayama, akin to a large doll, sits in a beautiful chair amidst various baubles and shimmering knick-knacks that are gifted to her, supposed to complement her incomplete body, and which, in effect, become a golden cage or shell which surrounds the artist’s body, unique like a pearl. Katayama has said, “I don’t think I have learned to use my body. I use my body as material simply because it’s handy” (Ogura, Lo 2017). She uses her body as a certain form of object, just as in Heidegger’s “handiness” of the body. By situating herself, her body, among many objects, often intimate and at the same time ordinary, she inscribes herself in this commonplace routine. Katayama’s works, despite their austere style, are at the same time rich in detail and contain a large number of everyday objects. This everyday life is juxtaposed with an oversized, clearly exposed body, which remains in the ambiguous position of being both a subject and an object.

The artist’s work seems to explore this very space in-between intimacy and indifference, looking for a way to present her femininity through non-normative corporeality using traditional and contemporary means of artistic expression. Treatment of the body as an object, handy, but at the same time in a way “incomplete” and non-human is very clearly present in her works. In this analysis, it is after all mannequins and hand-sewn life-size dolls that are important elements of the artist’s work.

Conclusions

The photographs discussed here are not the only ones in which Katayama's body is transformed into an object, in this case a doll, an object of sexual desire, as "Katayama has referred to treating her body as a mannequin" (Elephant Art 2019). Of course, one can find works that address these topics in a more literal way, such as "Mirror" (2013), "you're mine #000" (2014), "This I Exist-Doll" (2015), the sculpture "Dolls" and "Dolls and Boxes" (2018) dominated by perception of the "body as a living sculpture that allows her to tackle themes of identity" (Battista 2019). Not only do all these works show the interchangeable use of the human body and the anthropomorphic doll, but also the doubling of the human body by the introduction of this inanimate object.

However, the selection of these photographs was a quite conscious one, because it seems that hiding within them are many possible meanings Katayama explores, such as sexuality, femininity and otherness. The utility of the body-object-doll is combined with the sensuality of the female body visible in the works presented here, which are extraordinarily intimate, feminine portraits. Femininity, despite its sexuality and sensuality, resides between desire and rejection, just like a liminal object, a doll. The former curator of the Tate Modern Museum, describing Katayama's works, said,

I first saw Mari Katayama's photos at the Unseen Amsterdam photo festival. I was there with some of my colleagues at Tate that are here with us today as well, and to me Mari's works looked just different from any other photographs that I had seen before. That's not because she is Japanese. It's on a completely different level. I think I felt that way because the photographic worlds she creates are so unique. And as we have all witnessed today, Mari's photographs have a rare kind of communicative ability. With the "voice" of photography that she has made her own, I guess she will easily surmount the differences between Eastern and Western cultures (Ida 2019).

Perhaps it is precisely this combination of elements that are so culturally saturated with senses and meanings such as lacquer, a "failed body," femininity and sexuality that makes the works of the young artist universal, combining elements of equal cultures.

The works by Mari Katayama discussed here present only a fragment of her rich output. However, the works presented in this article seem to be the closest to the interpretation suggested, i.e. showing how a non-normative body can serve as a medium not only to express the experience of physical otherness. What has been emphasized in the proposed interpretation is the

relation between physical difference and feminine sexuality in the context of a particular style. On the one hand, this style was developed by Katayama as a way of expressing emotions personally, on the other hand, it is inscribed in the language of Western pop-culture sexuality. Katayama presents herself in a series of self-portraits not only in her traditional, Far Eastern femininity acquired from home, where her mother and grandmother were reference points for her. And yet, this safe space of home is juxtaposed with the physical difference of the artist's body. She shows herself through her body, classifying it as a peculiar object, a doll that can be seen as well as possessed. It remains to the viewer's sensitivity to decide how to treat such an ambiguous body, whether in a familiar way, provoking sexual feelings, or as sensual, yet completely unknown and alien. The anxiety provoked by the artist's works is the tension between the intimate safety of traditional femininity and the cold, distant and empty sexuality of a body-doll treated as an object of desire.

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Women in *shunga*: Questions of Objectification and Equality

Abstract

The objectification of women in art and pornography is often seen as harmful. However, Martha Nussbaum's articulation of seven types of objectification shows how it can be benign or positive depending on the context. This paper utilizes Nussbaum's ideas to examine the objectification of women depicted in *shunga*, sexually explicit art created in 17th–19th century Japan, and how it differs from European art of the same period. It also explores related issues of equality, sexuality, and agency.

Keywords

Shunga, Sex, Art, Feminism, Objectification

'Lascivious pictures' was how *shunga*, sexually explicit Japanese art, brought to London in 1614 were categorized and, as such, they were confiscated and destroyed.¹ European attitudes towards *shunga* have changed significantly over subsequent centuries, but depictions relating to sex and sexuality are still the subject of debate. In *Eroticism and Art*, which analyses historic and contemporary works, art historian Alyce Mahon states that: "If we are to assess sexually explicit art critically—rather than merely react to it—then we must look to its social, historical and political contexts, its artistic intent, and its popular and critical reception" (2007, 16). This paper aims to follow Mahon's approach by drawing on and expanding my previous research

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¹ For details see Screech 2005.

on the history and reception of *shunga* (Boyd 2016). To gauge modern responses to *shunga*, which was mostly created in the Edo period (1603–1868), I carried out questionnaires with over 200 visitors to the British Museum's *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* exhibition, 3 October 2013–5 January 2014. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and reflected a high level of audience engagement. Notably, visitors frequently commented on the apparent gender equality and mutual pleasure shown in *shunga*, often with the implication that this differed from the depiction of women as passive objects of the male gaze as in most European art of the same period. Although those comments may reflect more on modern notions about art, pornography, and Japan than Edo-period ones, they raised questions that I want to explore further. Therefore, this paper considers the modern concepts of objectification and equality in relation to the depiction of women in 17th–19th century *shunga*. It is not intended to provide conclusive answers, but rather to engage with and contribute to on-going dialogues in various fields.

Firstly, finding appropriate terms to discuss *shunga* can be challenging since sexually explicit art is a polemical subject. *Shunga* is often labelled as 'erotic art' or 'pornography.' Discussions about objectification often center on the depiction of women in art and pornography and how this is 'harmful.'² Therefore, before addressing the issue of objectification, I will foreground some of the connotations of 'pornography' to show how translating or defining *shunga* in this way impacts on viewers' reception and understanding of *shunga*.

Secondly, Martha Nussbaum's classifications of objectification (1995) will be utilized to query to what extent women were objectified in *shunga*. Certain features of *shunga*, such as partial concealment of bodies, exaggeration of genitals, and the use of text, will be discussed to show how they affect perceptions of objectification.

Thirdly, the emphasis on mutual pleasure and the apparent equality between men and women in *shunga* will be examined to demonstrate how this can obfuscate notions of objectification. Equality is complex, but it is being treated here as a cluster term which can include some of the following and more: both people (and their feelings and experiences) matter; both have agency; both have a voice; both are treated as *people* and not just as things. To what extent depictions in *shunga* reflect gender (in)equality in Edo society will be considered, particularly attitudes towards sexuality.

² Dworkin, MacKinnon 1988; Haslanger 2012; Langton 2009; Mikkola 2019.

Finally, women's agency in *shunga* and the notion of consent in the Edo period will be questioned. Scenes of coercion are infrequent in *shunga*; however, as will be shown, the concept of choice in relation to sex was problematized by women's status in a patriarchal and highly structured society.

Defining *Shunga*: Sex, Art and Pornography

During the Edo period the production and dissemination of *shunga*, sexually explicit prints, paintings, and illustrated books, was acceptable in Japan in a way in which it was not in Europe at that time. Sex was a common theme, especially for artists of the popular *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world) school including Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770), Kitagawa Utamaro (1753?–1806), and Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849).

For simplicity, *shunga* is the most commonly used term nowadays, both within Japan and internationally. However, in the Edo period various terms were used (see Smith 1996) and these reflect the range of roles that *shunga* could fulfil. The uses for *shunga* varied over time and from viewer to viewer due to factors such as gender, status, sexuality, experience, or mood. As well as being art, *shunga* could also be used as pornography, for humor, seduction, economic purposes, or (as some claimed) for education or protection (see Boyd 2016, 65–72).

The literal translation of '*shunga*' is 'spring pictures,' however it is often defined as 'erotic art' or 'pornography.' To avoid the connotations and judgement implicit in these terms, I prefer the term 'sex-art,' as proposed by Tim Clark (2010). 'Sex-art' is more useful because it denotes the subject matter regardless of intention, reception or level of explicitness, and does not indicate a moral judgement. Like religious art, landscape or portraiture, the term 'sex-art' denotes a genre but not the form, style, or attitude towards the subject depicted. 'Sex-art' is a descriptive, but value neutral, term, which allows for the positive and aesthetic qualities of *shunga*. Author Peter Webb notes "The vast majority of sexually explicit works of art are produced as part of an overall desire to express the totality of human experience; very few artists have made sex their only motivation" (1983, 5). Additionally, as Ferdinand Bertholet, a collector of sexually explicit art from China and Japan, explains "They express a poetry that enriches human existence and brings the past to life" (2003, 52).

In contrast to the typical negative implications, in this paper 'pornography' will be used as a value neutral term based on Bernard Williams' definition of pornography as works which contain sexually explicit representa-

tions *and* have the function or intention of arousing (1980, 103). Pornography will be engaged with for two reasons. One, many discussions about objectification, particularly from feminist perspectives, focus on pornography as a central issue. Two, despite fervent debates in the field of aesthetics about whether pornography and art are mutually exclusive categories³, it was not an issue for visitors to the *Shunga* exhibition. Visitors referred to *shunga* and other sexually explicit works as art *and* as pornography; for them these terms are compatible.

Some may dispute the appropriateness of using modern concepts to discuss Edo-period art.⁴ However, whilst the term pornography is relatively recent, objects which were used for the same purposes existed in prior centuries. In the 17th–19th centuries, *shunga* fulfilled similar functions to modern pornography as it was used for arousal and masturbation. On the influence of modern concepts on the reception of *shunga*, Rosina Buckland notes “It is sometimes mistakenly believed, perhaps influenced by tendencies of Western pornography, that *shunga* depict male enjoyment and female submission” (2010, 39). This is significant because there have been several notable *shunga* exhibitions in Europe and America⁵ in the past few decades resulting in an increasing contemporary audience engaging with *shunga*, who unavoidably bring modern ‘Western’ notions such as pornography and feminism with them. Furthermore, the depiction and treatment of women has long been a topic of debate for feminists and for others before the term feminism was coined.

The assumption that pornography is inherently bad or harmful is at the center of moral objections. Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin claim that pornography degrades and demeans women by objectifying them. In their anti-pornography legislation for Minneapolis in 1984, they defined pornography as being sexually explicit *and* including some form of violence, subordination, objectification, or humiliation of women (Dworkin, MacKinnon 1988). Similarly, Gloria Steinem and Mahon argue that pornography is about male power over women whereas the erotic, whilst still sexually explicit, is about equality, both heterosexual and homosexual (Steinem 1980, 129-130; Mahon 2007, 15).

³ See Kieran 2001; Maes 2011; 2017; Maes, Levinson 2012; Mag Uidhir 2009.

⁴ Pandey addresses this issue in relation to Heian period literature (2016, 1-7).

⁵ Key exhibitions were held at Helsinki City Art Museum (Hayakawa *et al.* 2002; Shirakura, Hayakawa 2003); Kunsthal, Rotterdam (Uhlenbeck, Winkel 2005); the British Museum, London (Clark *et al.* 2013) and Honolulu Museum of Art (Eichman, Salel 2014). For overviews and information on *shunga* exhibitions see Ishigami 2015; Boyd 2016, 158-195.

Although Theodore Gracyk agrees that most pornography does objectify and demean woman, as Dworkin and MacKinnon assert, he claims their definition “fails because it overly simplifies pornography as a certain content” (1987, 104). Instead, he proposes the term ‘pornographic attitude.’ Gracyk clarifies that not *all* pornography has the pornographic attitude, but it is “singled out because it provides a highly visible example of the mistreatment of women. [...] A degrading attitude can and does occur in representations which are not sexually explicit [...] The pornographic attitude can be found in any number of representations or images that express contempt for women as sexually autonomous, equal persons” (1987, 115).

Similarly, Mahlet Zimeta posits that ‘pornography’ is used as a collective term for a variety of negative issues which occur across many different aspects of society and that pornography is a symptom of society’s problems (2011). She points out that the objectionable aspects of pornography, namely dehumanization, objectification, exploitation, and invasion of privacy, can all be found in acknowledged and celebrated works of art and literature, so these cannot be why pornography is problematic. Neither is it necessarily the sexual content that people object to, which can also be found in art and literature, but rather how pornography deals with it. ‘Pornography,’ in this sense, is not an object but a name given to an argument. To differentiate, ‘pornographic attitude’ will be used for works which objectify or degrade, negative aspects which are present in society in general and although commonly found in pornography are not specific to pornography. Not all pornography will necessarily display the pornographic attitude. In contrast, some sex art may objectify and degrade women, and therefore will display the pornographic attitude.

Objectification

Although feminism represents a plurality of voices rather than a homogeneous point of view, one prominent notion, as voiced by anti-porn campaigners MacKinnon and Dworkin (1988), is that pornography objectifies women and consequently is fundamentally harmful. On the other hand, anti-censorship and sex-positive feminists, such as Gayle Rubin (2011), believe that pornography is not inherently detrimental to women. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum specifies seven ways people can be objectified—treated as things—and how these *may* cause harm (1995, 256-265). She concludes that the context of the relationship is fundamental for determining whether objectification is benign or, as is more often the case, negative. For Nussbaum,

people are objectified when they are treated as a tool (instrumentalization), as lacking in autonomy and self-determination, as lacking in agency (inertness), as interchangeable (fungibility), as lacking in boundary-integrity (violability), as something that can be bought or sold (ownership), and as lacking experience or feelings (denial of subjectivity).⁶ She calls these “signposts of what many have found morally problematic” and explains that objectification is a “loose cluster-term, for whose application we sometimes treat any one of these features as sufficient, though more often a plurality of features is present when the term is applied” (Nussbaum 1995, 258).

Fig. 1. *Negai no itoguchi* (*Threads leading to desire*), no. 9, Kitagawa Utamaro, 1799.



Source: The British Museum.

Sex was largely absent from 18th- and 19th-century European art other than in implicit ways, such as the genre of the nude, which presented women as objects for the male gaze.⁷ Discussions about the nude in art overlap with discussions on *shunga*. Indeed, in the Meiji era (1868–1912) the nude seems

⁶ Langton adds three more features—reduction to body, reduction to appearance, and silencing (2009, 228–231).

⁷ The terms ‘nude’ and ‘naked,’ particularly in relation to ‘natural’ and ‘erotic,’ have been contradictorily defined in art history, notably by Kenneth Clark (1956) and John Berger (1972).

to have been conflated with *shunga* in both legal and unofficial censorship. However, in contrast to the Christian values of Europe, in Edo-Japan nudity and sex were not inherently shameful due to differences in religious attitudes and a history of communal bathing.⁸ It may therefore be surprising that the nude was not a genre in Edo-period art. Although *abuna-e* ('danger pictures,' risqué but non-explicit works) and bathing scenes could feature nudity, nudity in and of itself was not erotic. Apart from the attractiveness conferred on the nape of a woman's neck "*shunga* dismiss the erotic possibility of skin" (Screech 2009, 109).

Even in *shunga*, couples' bodies are often partially concealed rather than completely exposed, usually with the genitals visible for emphasis, as in fig. 1. The exaggerated size of the genitals also helps to draw attention to the *raison d'être* of *shunga* and symbolizes the strength of passion involved. This partial concealment, as well as potentially tantalizing the viewer and focusing their attention, uses clothing to frame and visually fragment bodies. This could be seen as visual violability: objectifying by segmenting and reducing people down to body parts, instrumentalizing their genitals as tools to be used.

Fig. 2. *Ehon warai jogo* (*The Laughing Drinker*), vol. 3, Kitagawa Utamaro, c. 1803.



Source: The British Museum.

⁸ See Pandey (2016) for a discussion of nudity and nakedness in pre-modern Japan.

However, for Nussbaum “the kind of apparent fungibility that is involved in identifying persons with parts of their bodies need not be not dehumanizing at all, but can coexist with an intense regard for the person's individuality, which can even be expressed in a personalizing and individualizing of the bodily organs themselves” (1995, 276). At the end of each of the three volumes of *Ehon warai jogo*, fig. 2, Utamaro portrayed a close-up of female sexual organs corresponding to the face of the woman on the first page and depicted each with their own characteristics. Although it is arguable that the women are types, Utamaro has attempted to individualize them for the viewer.

Similarly, in *Takara awase* (*Treasure competition*), c.1826, Kunisada humorously depicted Kabuki actors' penises personalized with the dramatic make up or hairstyle each was known for. Nussbaum's observation that “the genital organs of people are not really fungible, but have their own individual character, and are in effect parts of the person, if one will really look at them closely without shame” (1995, 276) corresponds with attitudes towards genitals in *shunga*, where they are shown individualized, in detail and without shame.

In *shunga*, genitals were often shown the same size as the lovers' heads. The equality of size and of pictorial focus on faces as well as genitals suggests that the mental and emotional aspects of sex were as important as the physical ones. This seems to encourage contradictorily both objectification and subjectivity. Of the seven aspects of objectification, Nussbaum identifies instrumentality as “the most morally exigent notion” (1995, 271). Indeed, instrumentalization, the reduction of women to objects, to their appearance, to body parts, to tools to be used, is the aspect most strongly associated with the term ‘objectification.’ Instrumentalization is seen as harmful because it strips women of their humanity.

Pornographic interest is often taken to mean objectification and dehumanization, and being “uninterested in the first-person perspective of the subject *represented*” (Kieran 2001, 42). However, Mathew Kieran argues that an interest in the subject is necessary for arousal (2001, 43). This is presumably one reason why in *shunga* the viewer is usually presented with a situation and characterization not just naked bodies without context. Moreover, in *shunga*, rather than objectifying women by denying their subjectivity, identification seems to be encouraged and subjectivity is emphasized, with the emotional experience of the participants conveyed through the focus on their facial expressions and gestures of pleasure, as in fig. 3.

Fig. 3. *Utamakura (Poem of the Pillow)*, no. 3, Kitagawa Utamaro, 1788.



Source: The British Museum.

Clothing, hairstyles and make up are often regarded as a form of instrumentalization; used to reduce women to their body or appearance. Rajya-shree Pandey examines the eroticism of clothing in 10th–14th century Japanese art and literature and notes that “clothes are inseparably aligned with the body and the self” (2016, 37). In Edo-period art, clothes and personal appearance can indicate marital and class status, employment, personal style, or age, and in this way serve as reminders of the person as being an individual and not just a body. For example, in fig. 3 the woman’s shaved eyebrows indicate that she is married. In *shunga*, these indicators of personal detail can enable viewers to contextualize the lovers and possibly identify with them.

This subjectivity and individualization in *shunga* seem to equate with what Nussbaum calls ‘narrative history’ and may help to prevent or counteract the instrumentalization and fungibility that is arguably present. Nussbaum asks, “in the absence of any narrative history with the person, how can desire attend to anything else but the incidental, and how can one do more than use the body of the other as a tool of one’s own states?” (1995, 287). In *shunga* narrative history can be implied by individualization, but it can also be seen in the couples’ surroundings, which gives a context for their intimacy, and it is sometimes literally provided by text within the image.

Shunga often include snippets of dialogue, giving the women depicted a voice—they are not just body parts but active, thinking, feeling, speaking beings. Through speech, women can express themselves and their subjectivity just as men in *shunga* can. Although text in *shunga* can be witty, or give information about the participants, it is also frequently ‘dirty talk’ and sounds of pleasure, for example the dialogue in Katsukawa Shuncho’s album *Koshoku zue juni ko* (*Erotic Pictures for the Twelve Months*), c. 1788. Regardless of the content, text allows couples to articulate their subjectivity and express their pleasure. This focus on the emotional aspects of a physical act allows viewers to connect with the participants, and establishes a balance of people being depicted as both physical and mental at the same time, avoiding the reduction of women to the physical as in much of European art, particularly nudes. European paintings did not include text, other than perhaps the title given to a work, and so the women depicted could not voice their sexual experiences.

The inclusion of text in *shunga* was another way to show communication and intimacy between the couple, their engagement and relationship to each other. For Nussbaum objectification can be neutral or positive due to respect and consent, she elucidates: “the difference between an objectionable and a benign use of objectification will be made by the overall context of the human relationship” (1995, 271). This type of contextualization or narrative history is a way of showing these qualities and is a key difference between the way women are objectified in *shunga* and in other art and pornography. The human relationship is often lacking in European nudes and erotic art: in nudes women tend to be on their own rather than engaging with a partner and in erotic art contextual elements are usually used to depict women as goddesses or mythological figures rather than as human beings. Even when women are depicted as human beings, as individuals, their subjectivity is denied: they are not permitted to express pleasure, and clothing and other status indicators seem to be included to invite judgment and criticism rather than to give a sense of a woman’s individuality.

An example of objectionable objectification can be seen in a large oil painting of Venus and Cupid, fig. 4, on which John Berger comments, “the way their bodies are arranged have nothing to do with them kissing. Her body has been contorted to present itself to the male viewer of the painting. The picture appeals to his sexuality, it has nothing to do with hers” (1972, 6). This instrumentalization, turning Venus into a body on display, as an object to be used to satisfy male desires, and the denial of her subjectivity is typical of the objectification of women in European art of this period. Yet, in *shunga*

contorted positions served other purposes, such as denoting the lovers' passion, drawing focus to their genitals, adding a touch of humor or displaying variety. Edo audiences loved novelty, and artists were always striving to provide them with something new or unusual. *Shunga* usually portrayed people as individualized human beings rather than as gods or allegories like Venus and Cupid, including husbands and wives, secret lovers, adulterers, young and old couples. Additionally, in *shunga* the focus is equally on men's bodies as it is on women's and, although it was created by male artists, it was bought and consumed by men and women. However, even if women and men are shown as equals in *shunga*, this should not be interpreted as an accurate reflection of relationships within Edo society.

Fig. 4. *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, Bronzino, c. 1545.



Source: National Gallery, London.

Gender Equality

In *shunga* women are shown as equal in the sense that they appear to have agency and are being treated as people whose experiences and feelings matter as much as their male partner's. Most notably, women's enjoyment is depicted as being as important as men's. Signs of female pleasure include curled toes, closed eyes, head thrown back, disheveled hair and the emission of sexual fluids, as in figs. 3 and 5. Berger explains the "European convention, of not painting body hair on women [...] because hair suggests power and passion, and the male spectator must feel these are his characteristics" (1972, 6). In contrast, in *shunga* there is plenty of body hair and passion on display by women as well as men.

Fig. 5. *Ehon tsuhi no hinagata* (Model couples), Katsushika Hokusai, c. 1812.



Source: The British Museum.

Was the depiction of women as equal and enthusiastic participants in sex an acknowledgment of women's agency and sexual desires? *Shunga*, like all artworks, are not documents, but if taken in context with other sources they can be used to learn more. Even though the focus on equality and mutual pleasure was not a reflection of society in the Edo period, the fact that male

artists continually depicted it in *shunga* shows that it was significant, nonetheless. As philosopher Rae Langton has noted, the desire for mutuality is “central to sexual life” (2009, 252).

Pornography is often said to be a ‘bad influence’ on men, in that the negative aspects of objectification—namely instrumentalization, fungibility and ownership—prevalent in the pornographic attitude encourages the (assumed) male viewers to treat real women in the same way. However, might the opposite be possible with *shunga*? Although it is not a simple matter of cause and effect, art can positively influence viewers.⁹ Could *shunga* color people’s views of real relationships in a positive way by depicting women as equals, with agency and subjectivity, rather than as objects?

On the other hand, it could be argued that despite the prominence given to the depiction of mutual enjoyment in *shunga*, some men were not so much interested in giving a woman pleasure as it was to feed their own egos. Male viewers would want to be able to identify with the man in the image; hence the surrogate man should be depicted as a good lover, as the viewer would imagine himself to be. Furthermore, a woman who looks uninterested and unaroused would not be appealing (to most) and could prevent men from projecting themselves into an image. If mutual pleasure is an illusion, it is one that is necessary for *shunga* to function as pornography.¹⁰

Nevertheless, *shunga* was used by men and women therefore it is possible that the depiction of mutual enjoyment is not solely for the benefit of male viewers. Instead of denying subjectivity, *shunga* encouraged it and women are shown experiencing agency and pleasure, perhaps to allow female viewers to identify with or project themselves into the image, in the same way that male viewers are assumed to do.

There is the possibility that sex was more egalitarian than is assumed from a modern perspective. In Japan, influenced by Chinese Confucianism, social harmony and balance between *yin* and *yang*, female and male aspects respectively, were important. On the other hand, as Ellis Tinois notes “In Edo-period Japan status inequality was regarded as an inescapable feature of all sexual relationships: the [male] youth was subordinate to and receptive of the man just as the woman was expected to be subordinate to and receptive of the man” (2005, 32). However, it should be remembered that hierarchies permeated Japanese culture in all aspects of daily life including work and family relationships, and not just sexual ones.

⁹ See Maes (2017) for a discussion of this.

¹⁰ See Langton (2019, 223-240) for her thought-provoking argument on how the affirmation of women’s autonomy can actually deny or violate that autonomy.

Sexuality and Equality

Sexuality is one area that undermines women's apparent equality in *shunga*. Male–female relationships were referred to as *nyoshoku* (lust for women or female love), which demonstrates the dominance of the male viewpoint in Edo society. Male–male relationships, referred to as *nanshoku* (male love), were common, however there was no term for female same-sex relationships. Depictions of female–female sex are rare, which is notable in contrast to the sizable quantity of extant male–male *shunga*. Although female–female sex was largely omitted from art, it does not mean that it did not occur, and this raises questions about *shunga*'s audiences. The lack of female–female *shunga* indicates that non-heteronormative female viewers were not catered to and this, in turn, raises the possibility that in general female viewers of *shunga* were not considered either.

Fig. 6. Scene from *Fumi no kiyogaki* (*Clean draft of a love letter*), Chokyosai Eiri, 1801.



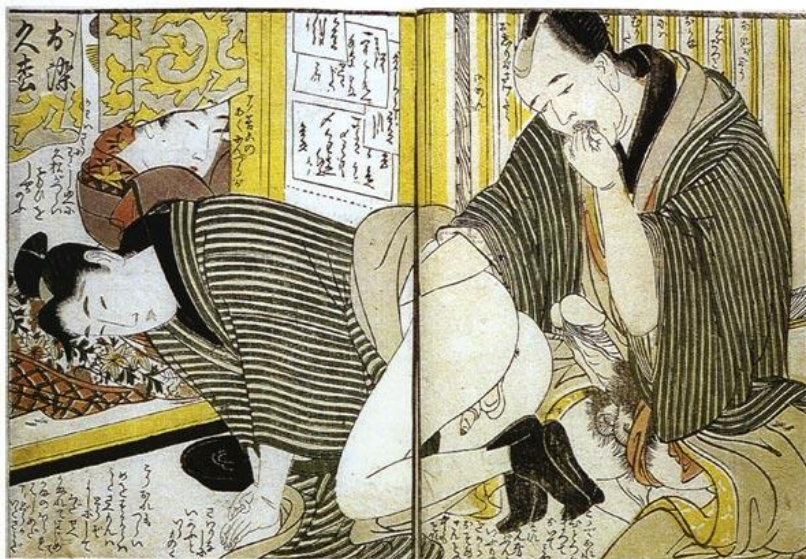
Source: The British Museum.

Alternatively, since female–female *shunga* was lacking, could depictions of women masturbating, fig. 6, have been created for female same-sex fantasies? They may represent genuine expressions of female sexual desires, but given the lack of focus on female sexuality, other than as a partner for men, it is likely that they were designed to satisfy male sexual desires and

instrumentalize women as objects to be consumed by the male gaze, as fig. 6 makes clear. However, if women masturbating were intended to titillate male viewers rather than for women to identify with or fantasize over, why are there not more depictions of female–female sex in *shunga*? Perhaps depictions of female–female sexual relations would have removed the opportunity for men to project themselves into the picture. Arguably the use of a sex toy could provide male viewers a way to ‘step into’ the picture, but it would involve men instrumentalizing themselves as being fungible in order to do so, which is unlikely.

Some men preferred male–male relationships and others male–female but in the Edo period these were not considered mutually exclusive and there was a fluidity of sexuality that allowed for participation in both.¹¹ For instance, there are numerous *shunga* examples of an older man penetrating a male youth whilst embracing a woman. However, sexual freedom seems to have been restricted to men as even when multiple women are depicted in *shunga*, they focus their attention on the man rather than interacting with each other.

Fig.7. *Nanshoku* or male–male scene, Kitagawa Utamaro, late 18th century.



Source: Ferdinand M. Bertholet collection.

¹¹ *Wakashu* (attractive, androgynous male youths) are sometimes considered a third gender, for more see Mostow et al. 2016 and Salel 2013. *Onnagata* (male actors specialising in female roles) also blurred gender categories.

It could be argued that *nanshoku* was given the same status as *nyoshoku* as male–male scenes were included with male–female ones in *shunga* sets, scrolls, and illustrated books. Furthermore, there were no artistic distinctions in the way male–male and male–female couples were depicted. However, equality was not represented within *nanshoku shunga*, which always involved a dominant older male and a subordinate youth, who was often depicted with a small¹² or flaccid penis, as in fig. 7. Unlike in other *shunga*, in male–male scenes mutual pleasure seems to be lacking, as Tinios notes: “The younger partner was not expected to derive pleasure from being penetrated” (2005, 32). In contrast to the small penis of penetrated youths, vaginas in *shunga* were enlarged to match the oversized penises of their partners giving the impression of equality between men and women. By matching the size and power of their genitals, women were depicted as equal participants in contrast to the power and age imbalance present in male–male *shunga*.

Agency and Consent

Consent is a key moral concern in relation to pornography. The focus of pornography is sex, but MacKinnon, and many others, conflate pornography with violence against women and rape. They argue that pornography teaches viewers that women should be, and want to be, objectified and used (Dworkin, MacKinnon 1988). The majority of *shunga* differs in its depictions of women from the stereotypes of pornography—or the pornographic attitude—to suggest that this is not the case. Usually, women in *shunga* are shown enjoying sex as active, autonomous participants rather than as objects being used and, crucially, when women have not consented their objections are made clear.

Despite the emphasis on mutual enjoyment, there were depictions of sexual aggression and rape in *shunga*. In scenes of coercion men are usually depicted as hairy and ugly as if the repulsiveness of their intentions manifests itself visibly, as though artists were judging men who forced themselves on women. For instance, through the character of Mane’emon, Harunobu expresses disgust at the calligraphy teacher forcing himself on his young pupil, and voices a preference for harmony in male–female relations (see Hayakawa 2001, 22–24). In non-consensual situations, women are not shown as victims or as inert objects, instead they retain agency by physically and verbally resisting, such as the woman in fig. 8 who struggles whilst exclaiming “Let go of me Rihei, you old fool!”

¹² In Haranobu's *nanshoku shunga* both men are usually shown with small, unexaggerated genitals.

Fig. 8. *Utamakura (Poem of the Pillow)*, no. 9, Kitagawa Utamaro, 1788.



Source: The British Museum.

Notions of consent are particularly problematic in relation to courtesans and are too complex to explore fully here but shall be briefly raised. To talk of choice or consent in relation to the women who worked in the legalized brothel districts is grossly misleading; courtesans were indentured sex-workers who were sold to brothels, usually as children. The customs of the so-called pleasure quarters appeared to give women of higher ranks a degree of autonomy and agency, and these along with the illusions of glamour and status of courtesans in art conceal the grim reality of women as possessions that could be bought and used as sexual objects.

Courtesans were a popular subject in art, and sex was part of their role. Consequently, there is a common misconception that *shunga* mainly depict courtesans and their clients, but the majority of *shunga* depicts 'ordinary' people. Significantly, when courtesans are shown having sex it is often with their secret lover rather than a client. Perhaps this romanticization is a way of circumventing the ethical issues inherent in sex-work by giving courtesans a semblance of choice and autonomy. This in turn may allow viewers to enjoy depictions of courtesans without having to address the accompanying moral concerns.

Although in Edo society women were not owned by their husbands (unlike in Europe where marriage was a form of ownership), they still lacked self-determination and autonomy due to the Confucian-based ideal that a woman must first obey her father, then her husband, and if widowed her son¹³. Due to this patriarchal structure, there was a power inequality in Edo marriages.

Fig. 9. *Fūryū enshoku Mane'emon* (*The Amorous Adventures of Mane'emon*), no. 10, Suzuki Harunobu, 1765–1770.



Source: Museum of Fine Art, Boston.

In *shunga*, women are often shown being interrupted by their husbands for sex whilst doing housework, breastfeeding, or at their toilette. Although *shunga* are not documents and should not be treated as fact, it would be reasonable to assume that given how frequently these kind of sex scenes occur that situations like these were not too far removed from reality. However, it is debatable whether women were acting on their own sexual urges

¹³ For more on women's role in marriage and family relationships in Edo Japan see Berry & Yonemoto 2019.

and were willing to have sex at any moment or, because society forced them to be subordinate to their husbands, they lacked a choice in the matter. For example, fig. 9 shows a woman trying to push her husband away and her dialogue emphasizes her reluctance to 'do it in front of the silkworms' (see Hayakawa 2001, 42). It is interesting to note that in many examples of what I term 'domestic interruption' *shunga*, one or both of the woman's hands are already occupied by her task, as in fig. 10, giving her no option to physically prevent her husband's sexual advances if they are unwelcome.

Fig. 10. *Komachi-biki* (*Tugging Komachi*), no.12, Kitagawa Utamaro, 1802.



Source: The British Museum.

At a time when marriages were frequently arranged for practical reasons—strengthening political or business relationships—rather than for love, it is plausible that many women would have had sex out of marital duty rather than choice. It could be said that choice and true consent was as lacking for women in domestic sex as it was for sex workers in the brothel districts.

Conclusion

This paper has considered some aspects of the vast and complex issues of objectification and equality in relation to women in *shunga*. Although there are inequalities relating to gender and sexuality, the use of context, narrative and individualization, as seen in specific works and as general characteristics of *shunga*, helps to avoid or mitigate some of the negative aspects associated with pornography such as instrumentalization and fungibility. In contrast to much of European art and pornography, *shunga* tends to show women as people with agency and subjectivity. In this way, *shunga* features less of the harmful objectification that anti-porn feminists associate with pornography. *Shunga* does not inherently objectify women, although it can and at times does. But it does so to a lesser or less harmful extent than is usually expected from the term ‘pornography.’

Due to multiple viewpoints and experiences dependent on gender, age, class, and sexuality, as well as geographic and historical distance, there is no verifiable ‘reality’ of sex or gender relations in Edo Japan. Nevertheless, insights into Edo society and its attitudes to women may be gained by questioning *shunga*. If equality and mutual pleasure existed only in *shunga*, why did artists choose to frequently present those particular illusions and why did viewers connect with them? The answers to these questions might suggest why *shunga*, and the perception that they emphasize women’s pleasure and equality, continue to fascinate modern-day viewers.

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When No Means Yes: BDSM, Body Modification, and Japanese Womanhood as Monstrosity in *Snakes and Earrings* and *Hotel Iris*

Abstract

This paper explores the representation of female monstrosity which are relied upon by two female Japanese writers to illustrate modern Japanese women's process of reclaiming power. Hitomi Kanehara in *Snakes and Earrings* and Yōko Ogawa in *Hotel Iris* depict women involved in BDSM relationships which shape how their characters are seen, how they view themselves, and how they develop their consciousness of the world. Although the female protagonists of each novel are presented in a submissive role to their male counterparts, they nonetheless embrace their passivity in order to reclaim their own unique sense of empowerment. BDSM is represented as warping the body in both novels. Through this warping, the women are able to negotiate spaces for themselves where they can derive their own pleasure from the supposed passive positions. *Snakes and Earrings* overlays BDSM with practices of body modifications in order to portray the changing attitudes toward female subjectivity in modern Japan. In *Hotel Iris*, traditional values involving familial authority clash with the sexual awakening of it's female protagonist as she navigates the socio-cultural stigma attached with acting outside what is considered normal. Through the analyses of both novels this paper highlights the changing conception of female sexuality and sexual practices in modern Japan. These changing conceptions speak to the evolution of female subjectivity and the gendered wrrestling of power through sexual activity.

Keywords

Japan, Sexuality, Modification, Monstrosity, BDSM

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The cliché of Japan as a land of contrasts, especially as it pertains to the Traditional and the Modern, has repercussions for the construction and maintenance of gender ideologies and sexual relations. Part of Japan's traditionalism is comprised of deeply ingrained patriarchal structures as well as taboo sexual practices, which serve to sublimate the expression of female desire. However, the novels being examined in this paper reconceptualize preconceptions of what constitutes appropriate female desire and sexual expectations of women through an evocation of monstrous sexuality. In *Snakes and Earrings* (2005) by Hitomi Kanehara and *Hotel Iris* (2010) by Yōko Ogawa, the traditional values of Japan compete with its own modern sexual values which—in emphasizing images of monstrous desire—deviate from tradition and orient the status of the woman away from one of subservience toward one of affirmation.

Each novel written by Japanese women, who focus on the experiences of Japanese female protagonists, draws attention to the changing representations of female sexuality and subjectivity. Kanehara and Ogawa push the limits of aggressions enacted on the female body as a way of negating the passivity traditionally assumed of women. Through descriptions of welcomed BDSM practices and sought-after body modifications by the female protagonists, the female writers challenge binaries of active and passive subjects, call into question how agency is defined, and—significantly—question who actually holds power. Although post-war Japan maintain the social, ideological, and literary remnants of patriarchal criticism in contemporary Japanese writings, *Snakes and Earrings* and *Hotel Iris* portray a counter-discursive reimagination of Japanese women, which allows readers to rethink previously held assumptions about female sexuality, sexual agency, and gender conformity.

In *Snakes and Earrings* Kanehara explores the incongruous relationship between love and violence with emphasis on the impact of male power inflicted on the female body. The female protagonist, nineteen-year-old Lui Nakazawa, becomes romantically involved with Ama, the Snakeman, who is nicknamed as such for having a forked tongue. When Ama takes Lui to the punk shop, Desire, to have her tongue pierced—because she also wants a forked tongue—she meets Shiba-san, the owner of the shop. Lui is immediately enthralled by Shiba-san which sets a tenuous love triangle in motion. As her visits to Desire become more frequent, she becomes sexually involved with Shiba-san whose sadism is encouraged by Lui. However, when Ama suddenly dies and Lui finds out that the murderer was Shiba-san, she decides to stay with Shiba-san because they have been equally at fault for Ama's death.

From the beginning of the story, Kanehara evokes sexual monstrosity through the emphasis on body modification. Three examples of body modification—Ama's forked tongue, Lui's tongue piercing done with Shiba-san's hands, and her subsequent tattoo—function as avenues for the expression of her sexual energy. In all three cases, the novel depicts an emphasis on bodily modifications and the satisfaction of desire. During an interview with Norimitsu Onishi (2004), Kanehara discusses her characters as "people who don't expect anything from society, that's why they are looking inward or to the people closest to them." *Snakes and Earrings* explores Lui's fatal obsession with altering her body, which is interwoven with her sexual obsession. As Ama, the Snakeman, discusses the procedure for getting a forked tongue, Lui watches and is "transfixed" by the way he "skillfully grasped his cigarette in the crux of the 'V'" (Kanehara 2005, 1). The act of placing the cigarette, a phallic symbol, within the "V", a yonic symbol, establishes the novel's overarching theme of pervasive sexuality. Lui and Ama become attracted to each other through the shared fetishization of body modification. Lui admits she "was addicted to stretching" and realizes that "he seemed to be enjoying himself" (4) as he talked about the pierce-and-tie process of splitting the tongue. Even as she recalls the day they first met, she remembers being "mesmerized by his slim, serpentine tongue" despite not fully understanding why it attracted her so much (15). Her description of her tongue piercing equates the procedure with sexual pleasure, at one point even providing a greater sensation than sex itself:

The next moment there was a clamping sound, and shivers much greater than those of an orgasm shot through my entire body. Goose bumps shot up my arms, and my body went into a slight spasm. My stomach tightened and for some reason so did my crotch, where I felt an ecstatic, tingling sensation (9-10).

The blurred line separating pleasure and pain is emphasized through Lui's commitment to altering her physical appearance. Lui's ability to convert pain into a pleasurable experience rewrites the narrative of women as physically weak, culturally subservient, and sexually modest.

To contrast Lui's sexual deviation, her friend Maki is described as "the epitome of the Barbie-girl" (19). The Barbie-girl metaphor introduces conservative femininity, which Lui conscientiously attempts to resist. Lui is aware of the incompatibility between a tongue stud, a camisole dress, and blond curls (19); however, she never had aspirations to be the perfect woman. Her resistance to the 'Barbie-doll syndrome' is Kanehara's way of exploring modern versions of the Japanese woman. Unlike Maki who

“think[s] tattoos can be cute” if it was “a little butterfly or rose” (19), Lui isn’t interested in the “cutesy stuff” (20). Lui thinks of getting tattoos of “dragons, tribal patterns, or ukiyoe woodblock prints” (20): images that are considered unsuitable for a Barbie-girl. When Lui gets called by the manager to work her part-time job at a companion party, she decides on her own terms how much of a stereotypical woman she will be. Kanehara’s exploration of the freeter, that is “someone who just picks up temp jobs here and there” (81), highlights Lui and girls like her as part of the growing modern phenomenon of Japanese women who are content to earn money doing unskilled work. Lui is comfortable with playing the role of a ‘respectable’ woman all the while knowing that she will never allow herself to become a Barbie-girl. She understands and exploits male desire, which makes her content in “playing the part of a pleasant, polite Japanese girl and receiving quite a handful of business cards” (56). Lui willingly sells her sex. However, she isn’t misled by the commodification of her body, noting that “it wasn’t really me they were giving the cards to. They were giving them to some character I played the part of just for the occasion” (56). Being a companion girl is one way through which Lui extends the capabilities of her sexualized body. When she visits Shiba-san to view designs for her tattoo, she uses her body for a more overt kind of exchange.

Shiba-san facilitates Lui’s body modification and her subsequent spiral into an addiction toward self-harm. According to Victoria Pitts (2003, 50), body modifications operate “as expressions of agency that potentially work against relations of power that oppress women.” Pitts goes on to say however, that such modifications may also “fail to reclaim the female body.” This conflicted outcome is represented by Kanehara. Where *Snakes and Earring* breaks the traditional representation of the Japanese woman as docile and reserved, Shiba-san’s exercise of power over Lui’s body reinforces stereotypes of women as being controlled by male desire. As with the tongue piercing, rendered in sexual imagery, Shiba-san’s tattoo design evokes a sexual response in Lui. She prostitutes her body for a tattoo. Whether it is because she has no money, or because she is sexually attracted to Shiba-san (the fact that she is a freeter would suggest the former), she agrees to have sex with him in order to pay for the tattoo—which will combine Ama’s dragon design with Shiba-san’s Kirin design. As much as she is drawn to Shiba-san’s artistry, she is drawn to his sadistic dominance. Before he climaxes, Lui notes that he said “Here it comes” in “the [same] way he had when he pierced my tongue” (Kanehara 2005, 39). Again, the pleasure in pain experience is emphasized as well as the equation of her body modification with an orgasmic experience.

The first sexual meeting between the two sets in motion their sadomasochistic relationship which ultimately leads Lui to become further estranged from her friends, Ama, and her own self. In the events starting with Lui's visit to Shiba-san, through the details of their sexual encounter, and ending with Lui's disdain for the child, Kanehara highlights the aimlessness of disinterested women such as Lui. Casual sex, body modifications, and a rejection of family values characterize the representation of modern Japanese women in *Snakes and Earrings*, whom Lui is meant to symbolize. The stereotype of women as being naturally maternal is overturned in *Snakes and Earrings*. Lui isn't just the anti-thesis to a Barbie-girl, she is also opposed to bearing children, or even being around them.

Preoccupied with the outer changes: the tongue piercing and then the tattoo, Lui neglects her health and the changes it causes inside her. Her impatience with the length of time required for the body modification highlights her addiction to the pleasurable pain it brings and a desire to have shock appeal. The way she wants her dragon-Kirin tattoo—without eyes—is a reinforcement of her non-conformity which continues to push the limits of what is considered acceptable for a woman in Japan. As the ink spreads over her body, and as the hole in Lui's tongue moves from a 10g through to a 6g, her mind becomes increasingly dispassionate. It produces sensual changes, which in turn stir explosive emotions: "On every day where I'd moved up to a bigger stud, I found I couldn't even taste anything for the rest of the day. The constant pain also made me irritable and made me wish everybody would just die" (80).

Kanehara describes Lui's rushed desire to have the forked tongue—and by extension to desperately belong to a subculture—as encouraging self-harm among Japanese girls. Lui's self-harm leads to her becoming anorexic. As her anorexia worsens the impact of Shiba-san's sadism becomes painful without the pleasure leading Lui to say "I felt as if his fingers were getting rougher each and every time we had sex. It was probably a sign of his passion" (92). The warped sense of romanticism accepted by Lui as a way of rationalizing Shiba-san's sexual aggression carries over to her consideration of marriage put forward by him. Shiba-san points out to her that she looks "sickly thin and totally pale" and "stink[s] of alcohol" (88). As she continues to stretch her tongue hole to a 4g, eating becomes a painful experience, not the pleasurable kind of pain that the piercing or the tattoo brought. Her resort to alcoholism for sustenance as well as to pass the time leads to a bodily modification she had not intended.

Kanehara uses animal imagery to highlight Lui's sickly physique which "looked like a crane fly" (88) and further draws attention to the warped Japanese female body when Lui admits: "I couldn't believe how grotesque I looked" (88). Lui's body modification—intentional and unintentional—creates an outward impression of her internal desolation. As Laura Miller (2006, 27) discusses, the "displacement of identity onto the body surface" in *Snakes and Earrings* highlights the damage done to Lui's internal and external capacity. Despite her frail body, she still submits to Shiba-san because his poking and prodding made her "grimace with pain and with pleasure" (Kanehara 2005, 89). She goes on to say that "the only feeling with the power to kick me back to life was the feeling of acute pain" (90). After another sexual encounter with Shiba-san, she returns home and inserts the 2g tongue stud as "blood started to run out straight away" (92). Her commitment to having a forked tongue maintains her addiction to pain which is necessary to remind her that she is in fact alive, despite feeling dead inside. By dramatizing the extent of pain Lui willingly endures to the point of self-harm, Kanehara evolves an understanding of the Japanese woman beyond notions of the female as naturally weak. The grotesque image of Lui suffering from fecal impaction highlights the mutation of her bodily functions which bears on the overall concept of body modification.

Through Kanehara's evocation of monstrosity to explore changing conceptions of the female body, Lui's body modification leads her to a nihilistic view of existence. In the words of Ryu Murakami (2000) in his essay "Japan's Lost Generation," Lui undergoes "hikikomori," a type of social withdrawal characteristic of Japan's lost decade. Lui's *hikikomori* comes as a result of her exasperation with life. Her rushed promotion to each smaller gauge parallels her gradual disenchantment with having a purpose in life. Early in the novel, although her focus is on completing the tattoo and finally having a forked tongue, she thinks of how her life had "no real possessions, no emotional ties, no hatred" (78). Her indifference toward these things makes her feel that "my tattoo, my forked tongue, my future, were all empty of meaning" (78). Lui, Ama, and Shiba-san epitomize a modern version of post-war Japan's lost generation. The passing reference to the "brain-dead variety shows and comatose documentaries" (45) Lui finds on TV emphasize the far-reaching scope of the present-day aimlessness. When Lui opens the newspaper she says, "all I really got out of it was that people were being murdered every day here in Japan, and that even the sex trade was feeling the pinch of the recession" (46). It is one of the very few indications given by Kanehara of a world outside of Lui's life. However, it is significant enough to parallel the protagon-

nist's disenchantment with living. The minor detail of a country plagued with socio-economic issues calls to mind Hideo Kobayashi's description of a lost attachment to the city. In his essay, "Literature of the Lost Home" Kobayashi (1995, 54) discusses the "Japanese spirit" and being overcome with spiritual exhaustion. In *Snakes and Earrings*, spiritual exhaustion takes place alongside a general exhaustion with living experienced by youth culture. The novel's focalization on Lui layers the experience of disorientation with a woman's control over her body, regardless of how dire the consequences. Especially at it relates to her body modification, *Snakes and Earrings* echoes Yumiko Iida's (2002, 232) claim of abandoning inner depth in order to "feel better about oneself by simple altering, for example, one's body shape or appearance by piercing, dying, or tattooing." When Lui reaches the "0g milestone" (Kanehara, 99), albeit without Ama to feel proud of her 'achievement', she realizes that she was "living a boring existence without Ama. A monotonous, sexless life" (108). The dependence on Ama to give her life purpose denies the level of independence Lui prides herself on having. Without the pain from the tattoos, piercing, and sex, Lui only has the loss of Ama to remind her that she is alive.

Kanehara moves beyond the physical effects of body modification, that is the outward changes inflicted on the body, to the mental effects of modifying the body, summed up by Lui's exhaustion with living. Her failure to find a new addiction leads her to believe that "no matter what I did, I always ended up feeling low" (81-82). Kanehara's vision of a dreary Japanese reality offers little room for her characters to imagine possibility away from the ennui of existence. Ultimately, Lui's nihilism goes beyond the simple interpretation of her actions argued by Mark Driscoll (2007, 182) who believes that Lui's primary concern is to locate new modes of sensation that will lift her out of a generalized post-bubble anomie." While Lui searches for new modes of sensation, it is not for the purpose of lifting her out of her anomie because, as Kanehara shows, escape is futile. By drawing attention to the psycho-somatic effects of body modification, for the most part enacted by a woman on her own body, Kanehara highlights the extreme effects on the body. The body modifications of the forked tongue and tattoo together with her masochism are the main ways through which Lui proves how strong she is.

The sadomasochistic relationship between her and Shiba-san is facilitated on her terms. During her first visit to Desire to get her tongue pierced, she says of Shiba-san, "I couldn't suppress my desire to let him do with me whatever he wanted" (13). If the sadist in Shiba-san is meant to portray the

aggressive masculinity meted out to women, Kanehara balances the relationship by having a female character derive pleasure from the aggression, depicted most notably in her willed painful experience of having a forked tongue but also in her masochism. Lui's resolve to endure marriage with Shiba-san extends her masochistic craving to be punished. It directs attention toward a determined female subject who willingly challenges the machismo of men like Ama and Shiba-san. Although *Snakes and Earrings* portray the self-destructive effects of body modification, the novel also highlights the ways in which a particular woman in postwar Japan takes control of her body and owns her sexuality in ways that absorb the male gaze and deflect patriarchal structures that attempt to confine a woman's desire.

In the same way that *Snakes and Earrings* emphasizes pleasurable pain as an important element in the way modern Japanese women challenge the patriarchal tradition, *Hotel Iris* explores a young woman's immersion in the pleasures of bondage and dominance (B&D) as crucial to not only her sexual enlightenment but also her resistance of filial piety. Both novels rely on non-normative sexual relationships to re-imagine the modern Japanese woman as deviant, not conventional, and weak. Where, in *Snakes and Earrings*, S&M was Lui's way of negotiating sexual dynamics on her terms, Yōko Ogawa layers a young woman's maturation with a sexual relationship that is seemingly destructive yet liberating in a way. Through B&D practices Mari is able to escape the confines placed on her by her mother, and the wider society—inclusive of its gender expectations and what it deems 'normal' sexual behavior.

Unlike the challenge to male aggression highlighted in *Snakes and Earrings*, *Hotel Iris* challenges Confucian ideas of duty toward one's parents. Ogawa portrays the sexual awakening of the seventeen-year-old female protagonist, Mari, whose consciousness of her subservience is aroused and simultaneously maintained in her relationship with the translator of the Russian romance novel, which coincidentally happens to have a female protagonist called Marie. As Mari becomes increasingly involved with the translator, she abandons her job as an unpaid concierge at her mother's hotel. When the translator's nephew visits him, Mari learns a dark secret the translator had been hiding. Her curiosity depends her insatiable desire for his companionship, which ultimately comes at a cost to his life. The novel ends with the translator's death and a void left in Mari's life.

As with the start of *Snakes and Earrings*, there is an evocation of monstrosity from the beginning of *Hotel Iris*. The monster under scrutiny is described as a "filthy pervert" (1), "disgusting old man," "scumbag" and an "im-

potent bastard" (2). He is the one who would later be known as 'the translator'. At first, the translator is described as a man "past middle age, on the verge of being old" (4). The imprecise age given at the beginning of the novel is indicative of the air of mystery surrounding him early on. Only late in the novel does Mari point out that "the fifty-year difference in our ages. You couldn't call it normal" (136). Additionally, he is only mentioned as 'the translator' due to the nature of his job, which further heightens his mysteriousness because he remains unnamed. The accusations are thrown by a prostitute who says that even he is "not fit to be with a woman like me" (2). Through the establishment of a boundary demarcating acceptable sexual practices, the monstrosity of the translator's sexual demands is emphasized.

Mari is immediately drawn to the accused because of his composure and a voice that was "powerful and deep [...] like a hypnotic note from a cello or a horn" (3). Her childlike curiosity feeds her newfound desire for the translator's perversion. The first indication of Mari's innocence waning comes when she tries to mimic his dominant aggression. She says, "the word 'whore' was somehow appealing. 'Shut up, whore' I tried repeating it to myself, hoping I might hear him say the word again" (4). Uttering the word 'whore' to herself because it brings a certain appeal foreshadows one of the reasons why she submits herself to the translator. He awakens a grotesque image of herself that she finds strangely attractive. Throughout the story she is seduced into accepting the monstrous version of herself induced by the sexual assertiveness of the translator. In the introductory scene to the novel, the translator's enticing vulgarity is used by Ogawa to tempt Mari into discovering more about herself as well as the nature of sexual relationships, of which she has no experience.

In *Hotel Iris* Mari is confronted with two projections of herself produced by her mother and the translator: the sheltered virgin and the shunned whore. In both cases she is objectified and made peripheral, while the adults in her life are central. Her mother and the translator, who treat her like a virgin and a whore respectively, define her by producing a one-sided description of her to which she is expected to conform. Her mother attempts to exercise control over her sexuality by exploiting her innocence for monetary gain. When a drunk guest accidentally touches Mari's breast, her mother tells her "If we play our cards right, we might even get a little something out of him tomorrow" (72). In the same way that Kanehara directs attention to the commodification of the female body with Lui's role as a companion girl, Ogawa highlights a similar act of commodification though in this case encouraged by an older woman, who extorts money from guests by pimping

her daughter. Lui and Mari learn to use their bodies as mechanisms for the assertion of their agency. The art of manipulation that Mari learns is used to keep her affair with the translator a secret. She pretends to be the deceptively innocent child her mother wants her to be in the same way that Lui pretends to be a Barbie-girl for the wealthy business men seeking companionship. However, the creative deception does not guarantee Mari immunity from punishment.

The mother and translator both inflict punishment on Mari though for different purposes, which in return yield different reactions by Mari. To dramatize the tensions between Mari's relationship between her mother and the translator, *Hotel Iris* draws attention to the contrast between the frustration of *kyōiku mama* and the pleasure of *enjo kōsai*. Where Anne Allison (1996) discusses the negative side of the *kyōiku mama* which involves a "condemning mother who relentlessly police[s] their children's study habits" (136), *Hotel Iris* portrays Mari's mother as increasingly impinging on her freedom to move around. Her mother's punishment is intended to correct her behavior, while the translator's punishment is intended to provide pleasure, which by the end of the novel awakens her sense of self, her sex, and people around her. The transactional nature of the relationship, *enjo kōsai*, between the translator and Mari—his sexual experience for her companionship—echoes Lui's work as a companion girl. In *Hotel Iris*, Mari gains a sexual awareness of herself, which is relied upon to challenge the relationship with her mother. For each kind of punishment dealt to her by her mother, there is an experience with the translator that counters her mother's attempts at control. Describing the ritualistic grooming of Mari's hair which turns into a disciplinary exercise, Ogawa highlights the extent of matriarchal control over a younger woman's body:

She still does my hair every morning. She sits me down at the dressing table and takes hold of my ponytail, forcing me to keep very still [...] if I move my head even the least bit, she tightens her grip (16).

The mother's aggression toward controlling Mari's hairstyle will later be matched by the translator whose sexual aggression provides a different pain, a pleasurable kind she had not yet experienced.

She is subservient to the pleasure induced by the translator, but not the subservience of labor demanded by her mother. However, unlike the orders which she wants the translator to give her, she finds her mother's orders bothersome. After hearing the translator shout the word 'whore', Mari is

drawn to his “beautiful voice” (4) which she prays will “someday give me an order, too” (42). The appeal of the translator’s orders contrasts with the annoyance caused by the orders of her mother, which she says always made me miserable” because it “robbed me of any happiness” (73). Through the illustration of her hairstyle, Ogawa portrays the contrasting ways in which Mari’s mother and the translator establish her innocence. During their first encounter, she describes how the translator “grabbed my hair and dragged me to the couch” (54). His aggressive treatment of Mari’s hair matches the aggression of her mother, who she says “pulled so hard on my hair that my eyes watered, but it didn’t hurt at all” (57). While similar acts of aggression are asserted through the control of Mari’s hair, the fact that it doesn’t hurt when her mother pulls it implies Mari does not allow her mother to have the kind of power over her that she surrenders to the translator.

The mother’s withholding of Mari’s dinner as punishment is a further act of violence against the body. However, as Mari is sent to bed with an empty stomach, she converts the painful situation into a pleasurable sensation by “tracing the shape of the man’s [the translator’s] back and ear over and over in my mind” (16). Through involvement with the translator, she is able to deny the matriarchal control which binds her to the hotel. She extends her learned submission through B&D to her duty as concierge. Thus, even as she notes that “there seemed no end” to the guests’ orders, she “felt it was important to be quiet” and therefore “tended to them all without a word” (59). The rebelliousness learned from her pleasurable challenge to B&D submission trickles into her creative defiance of her mother’s demands. She goes along with her mother’s demands in order to maintain an image of naiveté which in turn allows her to preserve her secret.

The cyclic process of the mother carefully styling Mari’s hair only to have it disheveled later by the translator reverts the innocent image created by the mother. As the translator dominates her body, she says “Mother’s neat bun fell in my face, the pins sticking out here and there” (54). When the translator cuts off her hair as punishment for having sex with his nephew it signals another example of control enacted on Mari’s body—specifically the ownership of her hair. Even when her hair grows back, she notes that “Mother no longer insisted on putting it up for me” (163). The psychological maturation of being in a relationship corresponds to her physical change of now being in control of her hair. When the translator dies, she says “I didn’t return to my duties behind the front desk” (163). Prior to meeting the translator, Mari had been confined to the hotel. When the translator dies, she knows that she can never return to a life that revolves around maintaining

her duty to her mother and therefore does not resume her hidden position behind the hotel desk. Like Lui, who becomes disenchanted with living, Mari is socially withdrawn after the translator's death.

Mari's escape from Hotel Iris toward the city, her movement within the city, and away from the city toward the island where the translator lives, is a quest for her liberation. Her escape to the translator's house leads to her involvement in a B&D relationship with him, which allows her to relinquish the tension built up as a result of the frustration with working at the hotel. She says of the translator, "On the island, he could do what he wanted with my body, and my soul" (92). Mirroring the ambiguity of her virgin-whore split self, the translator's house contains the duality of her freedom as well as her degeneration. The translator's room offers Mari a private space which allows her to escape the monotony of her duty in the public space of the hotel. His room functions in the same way as Shiba-san's tattoo parlor, appropriately named Desire because it is where Lui is able to act out her masochistic fantasies. Both novels portray women who need private spaces to fulfil their secret and for the most part taboo desires.

Through Mari's participation in B&D activity she not only matures physically but also mentally. While her emotions surrounding what she calls the "discovery of my secret desire" (43) are first conflicted because she is confused and ashamed, she eventually accepts her secret desire because it gives her the space and freedom to escape other limits placed on her, mainly by her mother. After her first sexual encounter, she describes herself as "completely changed" (52) partly because the pleasure derived from parts of her body, which she didn't know could produce pleasure, gives her a deeper awareness of her existence. She says, "I felt I was learning for the first time that I had shoulder blades and temples, ankles and earlobes and an anus" (52). Her awareness of her body comes as a result of its manipulation at the hands of the translator. In a similar way, the translator expresses how he relies on sex, "the desires of the flesh [to] confirm my existence" (66). The reliance on physical pleasure to confirm his existence recalls the way Lui immerses herself in meaningless sex in order to ease the ennui of her life. In both novels, Lui, Mari, and the translator pursue sexual relationships in an attempt to recover human contact and awareness of their humanity. However, they soon discover that sex alone is insufficient for restoring their human connection.

The grotesque detail used to describe each woman's altered bodies exaggerates the extent of male desire expressed through aggression in order to draw attention to old patriarchal structures, which have not changed but

instead mutated. At the end of each novel, although both women have developed maturity and independence, the plots indicate that the subservient status handed to women is damaging and demoralizing to their bodies. Thus, Mari's sexual awakening through B&D makes her dependent on that particular type of sexual practice to maintain her challenge to the status quo because "each new act had been reborn as something different" (84). The translator contorts her body into something she doesn't recognize, which appeals to her thirst for an altered version of herself which is radically different to her perceived innocence. The translator transfers his monstrosity to Mari. The image of herself is strangely appealing to her however, because it challenges her to step out of her innocence. The images of monstrosity are expressed through animal imagery. As she stares at the reflection of her "ugly body draped over the couch", she says she "looked like a dying insect, like a chicken trussed up in a butcher's storeroom" (55). The translator's sexual aggression is bestial in the sense of him being savage. He also evokes a bestial transformation of Mari, which she expresses through descriptions of animals in distress. In addition to the monstrosity of the translator's desire, Ogawa brings together the tightly woven strands of sex and death. Mari's description of her body dying through sex echoes a freeing of the body through orgasmic release. References to death will later act as a means of foreshadowing the death of the translator, who dies as a result of running away from the consequences of his sexual relationship with Mari.

Snakes and Earrings and *Hotel Iris* depict men and women being corroded by sexual indulgence even as they try to survive the chaos of their desolation. In doing so, each novel shares features of Japanese postwar writing by emphasizing pleasures of the physical body to overcome the oppression by the national body, which takes the form of ideological and socio-cultural oppression. The postwar sensibility places the female body under strain, but—as each novel highlights—it is far more dangerous to the male body. Whereas the men of the novels become cautionary tales through their death—Ama in *Snakes and Earrings* and the translator in *Hotel Iris*—the female protagonists, who played the submissive role in their BDSM relationships, learn to survive with experience and understanding of how to derive pleasure from pain. Kanehara and Ogawa destabilize stereotyped gender roles by having Lui and Mari simultaneously possess traditional characteristics associated with masculinity and oppose pre-assumptions of how femininity ought to be portrayed. As such, in both novels, Lui and Mari develop attributes of decisiveness and callousness that stand in contrast to a nurturing and docile role which women are expected to fulfil. Through the con-

trasting fates of men and women in each novel, Kanehara and Ogawa suggest that the female body resists the violence of the male gaze and becomes a site for liberation, however limited that liberation may actually be. While Lui and Mari, like Ama and the translator, turn to sex in order to fill their existential dread, the men ultimately suffer the most. Both Ama and the translator die in their respective novels. Although Shiba-san remains alive, he becomes self-alienated following the torture and murder of Ama.

Both novels focus on the ways in which their female protagonists negotiate bodily pleasure toward eventually finding their voice. The body acts as an important site for messages involving physical and conceptual issues that deny women a significant voice in relation to male counterparts. The focus on the discourses of the body in *Snakes and Earrings* and *Hotel Iris* makes visible the ways in which the body has been used in the production and maintenance of power relations. The emphasis on the physical effects of aggressive BDSM in both novels, does not appeal to the adoption of an aggressive identity in women to match that of men. Each novel does not propose a way for women's reclamation of a modern Japanese female subjectivity and centrality of a woman's place in a patriarchal society. Lui and Mari are not models for empowering modern Japanese women. Both are involved in BDSM relationships with men, who represent the structures of patriarchal power in modern Japan. The women of both stories, far from fulfilling a romantic ideal of escape and self-empowerment, remain sexual objects in the eyes of men. However, by appropriating aspects of gender-based power structures and by twisting them, at times collapsing them, and especially by exaggerating them, both writers make obvious the grotesque, outrageous, and actual dangers to women that are glossed over by political narratives of power paradigms. The focus on the bodily infliction of gender-based power on women results in the enactment of violent sexual activities. This is the intention of both writers. By taking conceptual ideas of gendered politics, those that are difficult to see, and placing them in the physical realm, what can be perceived with the eye, the writers expose the violence to women's bodies that stem from the maintenance of gendered power structures.

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