

TELLING HER STORY: NARRATING A JAPANESE LESBIAN COMMUNITY¹

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Abstract: This paper explores queer Japanese women's narratives of their own histories and the history of the "Japanese lesbian community," which has been constructed as a space outside the heterosexual mainstream, a space where queer women can find at least temporary refuge. It begins with the acknowledgement that the evolution and the shape of the community, along with the identities of the women who comprise it, are shifting and contested. This paper specifically looks at the long history of the lesbian bar scene as well as more recent history of lesbian dance parties; the early role of lesbian feminism and activism; lesbian community-based and commercial publications, paying special attention to the critical role translation has played in Japanese lesbian discourse and the construction of multiple lesbian identities; and, finally, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) pride events and film festivals, through which the larger LGBT community has been gaining increasing visibility. This paper argues that while some of the building blocks of the community are borrowed, from the "West" as well as from the Japanese gay community, there has also been creative translation, adaptation and resistance to these imports. The resulting Japanese lesbian community is a complex and local construct, an innovative bricolage firmly sited in Japan.

SHAPING A LESBIAN COMMUNITY

Lesbian translator Hara Minako (1996: 129) writes that if, in recent years, "it has become easier for women to love women ... it is because self-identified lesbians and bisexual women have emerged to work on lesbian issues." Hara, who, for her part, has been actively translating key lesbian works from English, suggests that lesbian activism has created spaces where lesbian desire can be acted on, and, perhaps more subtly, implies that increasing visibility has also been beneficial to this project. Whether or not they feel they have benefited from activists like Hara, other women find affirmation, not in activism but in socializing; and still others connect with women-loving women through the written word. This is, of course,

¹ This paper evolved from research I did for an annotated translation of a series of round-table discussions appearing in the lesbian magazine *Anisu* (*Anisu* 2001a: 28–57), for my M.A. dissertation at the University of Sheffield, UK (Welker 2002).

not to imply that these experiences are mutually exclusive. Indeed, each queer Japanese woman has experienced same-sex desire in her own way, and each has her own stories to tell. In telling their stories, these women are constructing both their own histories and their own identities. Scott Bravmann (1997: 9) asserts that, “the making of the modern homosexual” is not “fact” but “narrative” and queer histories, “[r]ather than simply describing an historical process, ... themselves help ‘make’ or ‘construct’ the fiction of the modern homosexual.” Collectively, these women-loving women, through the telling and re-telling of their stories—whether via, for example, a panel discussion at a lesbian weekend retreat, gossip between regulars at a lesbian bar in Shinjuku, or a personal ad from a teenage girl in a magazine ostensibly about beautiful boys—have narrated into shape a community in Japan grounded in lesbian desire. The construction of this community and its institutions exhibit strong influences from both queer communities abroad and the Japanese gay community, itself drawing heavily from the “West.”² Karen Kelsky (2001: 2) has asserted that “the turn to the foreign has become perhaps the most important means currently at women’s disposal to resist gendered expectations of the female life course in Japan.” Although the West has indeed offered queer Japanese women a physical and a psychic site where they may escape compulsory heterosexuality, I would like to argue that, while some of the building blocks of the Japanese lesbian community are borrowed, there has also been creative translation, adaptation, and resistance to these imports.

While I have chosen the expression “Japanese lesbian community” for the sake of simplicity, it is not unproblematic. The term *rezubian* [lesbian] is widely used in Japan, and specifically within the community, to refer to female-female desire and women who are sexually attracted to other women. It is that broad definition that I employ here, rather than making any implications about the identities of specific individuals affiliated with the community. Indeed, surveys of community members (*Anīsu* 2001a: 72–77; Yajima 1999; SICG 1998; Hirose 1994; Hirose and Rezubian Ripōto-han 1987)³ indicate a wide range of sexual and gender identities and sexual practices, along with the embracement as well as the rejection of a multiplicity of labels, lending credence to Martha Vicinus’ (1992: 473) assertion

² I use the term “West” here in a broad sense, reflecting the Japanese use of the terms *ōbei* (the Euro-American sphere) and *seiō* (the occident) to refer, as Kelsky (2001: 6) argues, not to specific countries but a “generic ‘West,’” standing in contrast to Japan, and with which America is “most powerfully associated.”

³ While the questions in Hirose and Rezubian Ripōto-han (1987) carry the assumption, that the respondents are all *rezubian*, it is worth noting that the recent surveys embrace a wider range of identities, showing a shift in awareness and an increased openness to difference within the community.

that “*Many* lesbian histories, contradictory, complicated, and perhaps uncomfortable, can be told” (emphasis mine). More so than being connected by a communal sense of *rezubian* identity or even an identity based on same-sex desire, what unites these women, a term which, again, I use problematically,⁴ is deviation from the expectations of Japanese society, where heterosexual desire and a gender identity that matches the sex listed on one’s family register (*koseki*) are assumed.

The terms *komyuniti* [community] and *gyōkai* [the business] are used by members to refer to the Japanese lesbian community, but its definition has long been in a state of flux, particularly in terms of inclusion and status within the community. Vocabulary lists run in the lesbian magazine *Anīsu* [Anise] from 1996 to 2001 defined the *komyuniti* as “indicating the whole of lesbian society (*rezubian shakai*), such as [Tokyo’s Shinjuku] Ni-Chōme bars and events, clubs, *mini-komi* [newsletters],⁵ etc. It has been constructed to include bisexuals and married people” (*Anīsu* 1996: 102 and 2001a: 33).⁶ The November 1995 issue of *Furīne* [Phryné], which had some of the same editors as *Anīsu*, ran a similarly phrased definition, one that did not include married women but did include women who had not yet realized their sexuality (*Furīne* 1995: 83). While articles on transsexual and transgendered people can be found in all issues of *Anīsu*,⁷ it was not until 2002 that “*toransusekushuaru* [transsexuals], etc.” were added to its definition (*Anīsu* 2002a: 216), indicating their continuing marginal status in the community. Although also marginal, some foreign lesbians have been both active and visible within the Japanese lesbian community (Izumo and Maree

⁴ A significant, if small, number of those affiliated with the community eschew the label “woman”, as is evidenced by the informants of Sei Ishiki Chōsa Gurūpu (SICG 1998) as well as the identities expressed in the personal ads in the 1980s in the magazines *Aran* [Allan] and *Gekkō* [Moonlight].

⁵ Japanese shorthand for *mini communication*; in contrast to mass media, *mini-komi* are a cross between newsletters and magazines, similar to what today are called *zines*. Keith Vincent (2002: 165) writes that “perhaps the most self-consciously gay, lesbian or ‘queer’ writing is to be found in the community-based alternative publications known as ‘*mini-komi*,’” which stem from the feminist movement.

⁶ The percentage of married women in the community is apparently decreasing. Approximately 12.4% of respondents to a survey taken in 1981 were married, and another 10.5% were divorced or separated (Hirosawa and Rezubian Ripō-to-han 1987: 157), while in a 1996 survey, 9% of respondents were married and another 8% divorced (SICG 1998: 126). However, 32% of the unmarried women in the latter survey felt familial pressure to get married (*ibid.*: 131).

⁷ This includes a regular column by male-to-female lesbian feminist transgender activist Mako Sennyō titled *Rezubian tte dare?* [Who Is a Lesbian?], which has run in most issues since summer 1997.

2000); however, the feeling has also been expressed by Japanese and foreign lesbians alike that, with language and cultural barriers acting as a major factor, foreigners have their own distinct community, overlapping with the Japanese lesbian community most visibly at lesbian weekend retreats (*uīkuendo*) (Peterson 1990; Izumo et al. 1997; Wakabayashi 2001).⁸ In general, women's participation in only certain segments of the community has created a plurality of overlapping social networks of queer women in various parts of Japan, making it in some ways more accurate to speak of multiple communities. I am thus using "Japanese lesbian community" as shorthand for the loosely structured system of social networks in Japan centered around lesbian desire, which have since the 1960s generated a bar scene, regularly held dance parties, social and political organizations, numerous formal and informal gatherings, a significant body of proudly lesbian books and periodicals, and an ever-increasing presence on the Internet.

While written histories of the Japanese lesbian community can be found, they are fragmented, often tentative, and seldom offer even a semblance of comprehensiveness. The broadest surveys of Japanese lesbian community history cannot be found in the form of books or even academic articles, but in the form of panel discussions printed in magazines (*Anisu* 2001a; Izumo et al. 1997; Ōya, Shirakawa and Nakahigashi 1995). While describing the history of the community, panelists are telling their own very personal histories, exposing their own preferences and biases, including, excluding, embellishing and, sometimes obviously, erring. Two recent ethnographic studies of females who do not identify as heterosexual women (Yajima 1999; SICG 1998) and an increasing number of personal narratives⁹ reveal a broader mosaic of the community. Such history telling may be ultimately more revealing of the nature of Japanese lesbian community than formal historiography. Bravmann suggests that,

The varieties and specificities of lesbian and gay experiences ... demand a mode of writing history that is contingent, mutable, and ultimately ... self-conscious of its partiality, for ... all history writing is al-

⁸ As Wakabayashi (2001: 8) notes, foreigners attending weekends are predominantly white English-speaking women in their 20s and 30s, with for example, only one woman from elsewhere in Asia attending the May 2001 weekend.

⁹ Collections of personal narratives and surveys can be found in Toyama (1999), Yajima (1999), SICG (1998), Kitao (1997), Hirose (1994), and Fukunaga (1982). Ikeda (1999), Sasano (1995), and Kakefuda (1992a) might be called lesbian coming out books, *kamingu auto* being a term used by all three authors. Personal narratives can also be found in English in Chalmers (2002) and Summerhawk, McMahon and McDonald (1998).

ready and inescapably partial, perspectival, and interested. An integral part of such work must be to offer critical histories of the ways we ... [as] queer historical subjects ... have accounted for and sought to construct identity, community and politics in relation to our deviant sexualities and our multiple differences and to explore those specific histories' legacies for various futures. (Bravmann 1997: 126)

Through both description and analysis, the panel discussions and interviews appearing in community and mainstream publications often self-consciously further the revelation, exploration and construction of lesbian histories and communities. They also serve as a way to introduce local and imported academic theories to a readership that might not be inclined to read about them in an academic format. The relatively frequent combination of lesbian, gay and other queer panellists (Asada et al. 1997; Kakefuda and Fushimi 1994; Ogura et al. 1999) along with collaborative works (Kuia Sutadizu Henshū linkai 1996, 1997; *Gendai Shisō* 1997) highlight the differences between the communities, their construction and their histories, while simultaneously establishing a sense of a larger lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) or queer community, such as is reflected in cooperative events discussed later in this article.

Thus, the evolution and the shape of the Japanese lesbian community and the identities of the women who comprise it are shifting and contested. In this paper, I explore the construction of this community as revealed by queer women narrating both personal and community history and assert that, while some of its elements have indeed been imported, the resulting lesbian community is a very real, local, and historic bricolage in which many Japanese lesbians, bisexuals and transgender women are able to find a sense of belonging and identity.

SOCIALIZING AND SOLIDARITY

In 2001, *Anīsu* ran a special feature (*Anīsu* 2001a) celebrating thirty years of the Japanese lesbian *komyuniti*, which the magazine dates back to the 1971 establishment of the group *Wakakusa no Kai* [Fresh Green Club].¹⁰ Lesbian activist Izumo Marou (Izumo et al. 1997: 58) similarly argues that at least from the standpoint of activism, Japanese lesbian history dates from the 1970s. Contemporary lesbians looking for their roots have, how-

¹⁰ This translation of the group's name comes from members Ishino and Wakabayashi's (1996: 95) English-language description of the state of lesbian life in Japan. The group's name might more literally be translated "young grass club."

ever, claimed early twentieth-century activists, writers, and translators such as Hiratsuka Raichō, Yoshiya Nobuko, and Yuasa Yoshiko as *rezubian senpai*¹¹ [lesbian foresisters]; and lesbian desire among schoolgirls and young women throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century has attracted recent academic attention (Honda 1991; Furukawa 1995; Robertson 1999; Hiruma 2003). Regardless, the first manifestation of a sense of “*resubian*”¹² community can be seen in the Japanese lesbian bar scene and nightlife.

The mid-1960s found a small number of bars scattered around Tokyo where the minority of clientele who were lesbians might meet each other or, presumably, the *onabe*¹³ [drag kings] bartenders. Owner of the historic Kikōshi in Tokyo’s Roppongi district, Mizuno Makiyo described the clients at Meme, where she once worked as manager, as 80–90% people who enjoyed being around women in drag; among these costumers were “mamas and hostesses from Ginza clubs, geishas and models, female pro-wrestlers, people from Takarazuka and SKD,¹⁴ and rich married women” (cited in Toyama 1999: 218; see also *Gekkō* 1985b; Shiba 1993, 1997).¹⁵ Lesbian bar owner Sunny (qtd. in *Anīsu* 2001a: 42–45) notes that in the era before “*hosuto kurabu* [host clubs],” where women can today be flattered by handsome young men serving them drinks, many women enjoyed fre-

¹¹ Witness their presence in seminal books by and on Japanese lesbians (Hirosawa 1987a; Wada 1987; Higuchi 1993a, 1993b, 1993c; see also Sawabe 1996; Izumo and Maree 2000).

¹² It seems likely that *resubian*, rather than *rezubian*, was the term used in the early years. *Resubian* is, for example, used in a 1969 panel discussion involving participants in the bar scene (*Aien* 1969). As McLelland (forthcoming) shows, popular sexology magazines from at least 1960 most frequently employed the terms *resubosu ai* [Lesbos love] and *resubian*, followed a decade later by *rezu* [lez]. *Rezubian* appears to have come into favor in the community with the rise of lesbian feminist activism in the early 1970s.

¹³ *Onabe*, which Kitredge Cherry (1987: 115) translates sardonically as “honorable pan,” is the female version of the older term *okama* [honorable pot], that has been used to refer to homosexual men.

¹⁴ SKD stands for Shōchiku Kagekidan [The Shōchiku Review], an all-female theater troupe described by Jennifer Robertson (1998: 6) as “a ‘lowtown’ theater appealing to a blue-collar clientele” in contrast with the “uptown” and also all-female Takarazuka Review.

¹⁵ This gender blurring phenomenon, wherein ostensibly heterosexual women enjoy being served by women dressed as men, resonates in the popularity of Takarazuka (Robertson 1998) as well as the *shōnen ai manga* of the 1970s, discussed below, wherein beautiful boys often look and act like girls. For a discussion of gender representation in *shōnen ai manga*, see Matsui (1993) and Ōgi (2001).

quenting places where the employees were dressed similarly to the *otoko-yaku* [trouser role performers] of the Takarazuka Review. At Kikōshi, on the other hand, “*nōmaru* [normal]” middle-aged men made up 40% of the customers—at least in the mid-80s (Nawa 1987: 106). Lesbian bar owner Sunny remarks that such places are all but gone, whether because their owners grew too old and quit or due to “various incidents or accidents” including double-suicides (ibid.: 43), echoing the suicides that drew female homosexuality to the public’s attention in the early decades of the twentieth century (Robertson 1999; Hiruma 2003).

As descriptions of their clientele indicate, such bars were not aimed at lesbians, but merely functioned as spaces where they could meet. Indeed, while “queer” spaces, they were occupied by and tailored to the heterosexual majority. Reflecting long-term cooperation between the lesbian and gay communities, it was, in fact, at the gay bar Matsuri, run by Itō Bungaku, publisher of the gay magazine *Barazoku*, where the first “women-only” parties were held, starting in 1982 (Nawa 1987: 102f.). The first full-fledged lesbian bars to operate without the staff in male drag—Ribonne (Ribonnu) and Mars Bar—opened in 1985 in Tokyo’s well-known gay district of Shinjuku Ni-Chōme. In the early years, the *tachi/neko* [butch/femme]¹⁶ dynamic was very strong at *onabe bā* and *redisu bā* [ladies’ bars],¹⁷ so much so that many women felt compelled to perform one or the other of these roles (Chalmers 2002: 28). Recent issues of *Anīsu* list over a dozen bars in Tokyo and dozens in a handful of larger cities around the country that are either *redisu bā*—catering exclusively to women—or “mixed bars” which draw a large lesbian crowd.

In Japan, as in other countries, “bars [have] offered a place for lesbians to meet, to form networks of friendship and support, and to gain a sense of themselves as members of a *group*” (D’Emilio 1998: 186; emphasis original). It is important not to underestimate the significance for an individual of having a space where others see her as “one of us,” in contrast to the world outside where she is likely mistaken for “one of them.” “T,”¹⁸ for instance, explains that Ni-Chōme is a comfortable space for her because people don’t assume she is heterosexual (SICG 1998: 260). As surveys of the community indicate, for many women bars have acted as an important, sometimes initial, point of contact with the community, offering, in addi-

¹⁶ For more on the *tachi/neko*—also sometimes referred to as *butchi/femu* [butch/femme] dynamic—see Chalmers (2002: 27–29).

¹⁷ *Redisu bā* are also called *rezu bā* and *rezubian bā* both inside and outside the community.

¹⁸ Respondents in SICG (1998), Yajima (1999), and Chalmers (2002) used pseudonyms, which I have indicated with quotation marks.

tion to friendship and a sense of lesbian solidarity, a space where women can meet other women whom they might desire and who might desire them in return.¹⁹

While parallels with lesbian bar culture in other countries are easily drawn,²⁰ Japanese lesbian bar narratives give little indication of overt cultural borrowing in the construction of the bar scene. Such is not the case, however, for lesbian dance parties and similar events. A Tokyo-based women-only event producer who uses the moniker Don King Chigalliano explains that the exuberance she felt at a women-only dance party in London was the inspiration for the 1991 creation of a regularly held party now known as Goldfinger (*Anīsu* 2001a: 48).²¹ Today there are women-only discos “where it seems natural that two girls kiss” (Chigalliano, qtd. in *Anīsu* 2001a: 49) being held in Tokyo, Nagoya, Kyoto and Osaka and occasionally in other cities. Whether queer-only, women-only, or lesbian-only, these kinds of events are acts of collective resistance against the heteronormative boy-meets-girl paradigm, and regardless of who is let in the door, these discos allow for a feeling of connectedness with other lesbian-inclined women—even if they are so inclined just for that evening. Lesbian dance parties thus provide women with another space where they can feel their sexual and gender identities accepted, helping them find affirmation regardless of how they define, or refuse to define, themselves. As an environment many young women are already familiar with, discos further act as a less threatening space at which to make one’s *komyuniti debyū* [community debut].²²

¹⁹ One quarter of respondents in SICG (1998) said they do or would look for a romantic partner at a lesbian bar, though only 8.5% reported having met their current partner, 5% their first female sexual partner, and 0.3% their first female love interest at one (ibid.: 52f., 57f.). However, over 23% of respondents in the *Anīsu* survey (*Anīsu* 2001a: 75) reported lesbian bars being the first lesbian space they went to.

²⁰ Consider the depictions of early North American lesbian bar culture offered in, for example, Faderman (1996 [1991]), Chamberland (1993) and Kennedy and Davis (1993).

²¹ The first lesbian disco was apparently Space Dyke, which began in 1983 (Cherry 1987: 116; *Anīsu* 2001a: 29).

²² Thirty-one of the 148 respondents in a recent *Anīsu* survey (*Anīsu* 2001a: 74f.) said that dance parties and clubs were their first step into the lesbian world. While only 8% of respondents in SICG (1998: 53, 57f.) met their current lover at a party or social event, and 6.4% their first female sexual partner, over a third indicated they would use such events to find a partner (SICG 1998: 53, 57f.).

LIBERATING LESBIANS

As *Anīsu* (2001a) shows, the 1971 founding of Wakakusa no Kai marked a turning point in terms of lesbian community building in Japan. While some women who went to its meetings were looking for partners rather than a community, the group's founder Suzuki Michiko (1983: 340) explains that other participants just wanted to engage in "completely ordinary (*goku futsū*)" chat in a space where it was acceptable to be a lesbian, echoing the oft-repeated need for a space where one can withdraw, however briefly, from the heterosexual world. The 1970s were also a watershed for lesbian feminism and lesbian organizing, through which many other women developed a sense of lesbian community. Tsuruga Minako (1995: 46), member of lesbian organization Regumi Studio (Regumi Sutajio),²³ describes the Japanese lesbian movement itself as having begun within the broader feminist movement. Similarly, long-time lesbian activist Wakabayashi Naeko was involved in women's liberation both in Japan and the US before becoming active in the lesbian liberation movement (*Anīsu* 2001a: 39f.; Summerhawk, McMahill and McDonald 1998: 184–186). Like feminists in other countries, the almost invariably all-women environments created a fertile, though not necessarily welcoming, space for women to discover or develop same-sex attraction. While, however, "[lesbian] women have been among the most radical feminist women in Japan" (Lunsing 2001: 294), lesbian activist Kakefuda Hiroko has argued that "feminism in Japan is a very heterosexual oriented movement, and a lot of the time it doesn't consider lesbians" (qtd. in Chalmers 2002: 34). Sharon Chalmers (2002: 36) believes that it was the frustration caused by being denied acknowledgement and support that led to the creation of the lesbian weekend retreats.

Tension was not exclusive to lesbian-heterosexual relations, however. Primarily a social club, Wakakusa no Kai was criticized by lesbian liberationists (*ribu-kei rezubian*), among other things, for not working to improve the rights of lesbians and for helping to perpetuate the patriarchal paradigm through the butch/femme dynamic that was prevalent at its gatherings (Izumo et al. 1997: 59; see also Hirosawa 1987b: 115f.). Women who chose lesbianism as a rejection of men and the patriarchal system were not always welcome in spaces created by what Izumo describes as *nētiou rezubian* [native lesbians].²⁴ She notes that it was around the time of Wakakusa no Kai creating the *mini-komi* [newsletter] *Subarashii Onnatachi*

²³ The establishment of Regumi Studio Tokyo and its publication *Regumi Tsūshin* (Regumi Communication) are discussed in Hisada (1987). See also Tsuruga (1995).

[Wonderful Women] that Japan saw its first “lesbians by political choice” (*seijiteki sentaku toshite no rezubian*). Conflicts between the “natives” and the “lesbians by choice” led to *Subarashii Onnatachi* disappearing after just one issue, and the appearance of two new *mini-komi*, neither of which lasted long (qtd. in *Anīsu* 2001a: 55; see also Mizoguchi, Saeki and Miki 1995: 239–242).²⁵ Hara (Izumo et al. 1997: 63) indicates that this politicization put undue pressure on some women to declare their sexuality, noting that in the beginning some women who called for information about the lesbian weekends were asked outright, “Are you a lesbian?” Such a direct question was doubtless jarring at best for women unsure of their sexuality or uncomfortable with the word *rezubian* and made the term a shibboleth for entrance into the retreats.

While not all women have felt welcome at all times, these lesbian weekend retreats have played a fundamental role in the establishment of the community. However they found the retreats in the first place, most participants describe them in very positive terms, finding in them solace and a temporary respite from heterosocial norms and pressures. Depicting them as “one avenue where the notion of ‘community’ has been developed in contemporary Japanese lesbian practices,” Chalmers explains that

[T]hey have become historically significant for two major reasons. First, they have filled a cultural void for both the women who attend and for those who simply employ the knowledge of their existence as a reference point. And as a result of this, a second generation of lesbians has emerged who already have a loose network in place [...]. (Chalmers 2002: 135)

The lesbian weekend retreats thus offer tangible confirmation of Hara’s assertion that lesbian activism has made it “easier for women to love women.”

MAINSTREAMING LESBIAN REPRESENTATION

Until the so-called 1990s “*gei būmu* [gay boom]” and the subsequent growth in the use of the Internet, most women found it extremely difficult,

²⁴ In Izumo et al. (1997: 65), Hara uses the term *nekkara* [from the root] to describe women who feel intrinsically lesbian. See also Lunsing (2001: 296f.).

²⁵ Izumo’s role in *Subarashii Onnatachi* is briefly discussed in Izumo and Maree (2000: 69f.). The rift in the community and the subsequent publication of the *mini-komi Za Daiku* (The Dyke) and *Hikariguruma* (Shining Wheel) are discussed by Izumo in Izumo et al. (1997: 58–62).

if not impossible, to find information on lesbian desire. Interviewees in Chalmers (2002: 39–43) recall futilely searching through everything from the mass media to medical dictionaries to find out about themselves and to connect with others like them. What little information there was, albeit negative, had a significant impact on some women. For instance, several women, such as “Inaba Ayumu,” remark what a lasting impression was made by the 1980 scandal surrounding celebrity (*tarento*) Kathy’s (Nakajima Kyashī) declaration that she and singer Sagara Naomi were having a lesbian affair (Yajima 1999: 198).²⁶ While the scandal taught “Satō Kahori” the word *rezubian* (SICG 1998: 72), “Marō” recalls merely how much the word *rezu* [lezzie] was bandied about (Chalmers 2002: 38). In spite of the notoriety assigned to lesbianism in the heterosexual mainstream portrayals of the scandal, or perhaps because of it, the event ultimately assisted some women in finding the community.

In marked contrast, during the *gei būmu* dozens of mainstream magazines, television programs and films began to deal with the subject of homosexuality, albeit predominantly male homosexuality, in somewhat more positive terms (Hall 2000: 42; McLelland 2000: 32f.; Buckley 1994: 174). While much of the mainstream coverage of gay and lesbian culture has been intended to titillate heterosexual readers (Izumo and Maree 2000: 120f.; Hall 2000: 42; Ishino and Wakabayashi 1996: 100), at least some of it was actually written by members of the larger LGBT community and/or people sympathetic to them and has fostered a greater awareness of the community (*Anīsu* 2001a: 35–37). Indeed, for some, including a number of respondents in Sei Ishiki Chōsa Gurūpu (SICG 1998) and Yajima (1999), the mass media was where they first learned about the existence of the Japanese lesbian community. As gay writer and editor Ogura Tō (*Anīsu* 2001a: 36) has observed, while some people looking for information about the community might feel unable to buy—and take home—a lesbian or gay publication, buying a mainstream magazine that just happens to have a feature on lesbians and/or gays was not a problem (see also Lunsing 2001: 234). And Wakabayashi (2002: 2) recalls that the 1986 inclusion in mainstream women’s magazine *Fujin Kōron* of a report about attending a lesbian conference in Geneva (Hirosawa 1986) led a large number of lesbians from around the country to contact Regumi Studio, and many to subscribe to its *mini-komi*, *Regumi Tsūshin* (Regumi Communication).²⁷

²⁶ See SICG (1998: 79, n6), Ishino and Wakabayashi (1996: 100), and Lunsing (2001: 251f.).

²⁷ Ōe Chizuka (*Anīsu* 2001a: 39), for one, recalls that reading the same article helped her on the way to joining the community. While an article on Wakakusa no Kai and their self-published magazine *Eve & Eve* appeared in *Fujin Kōron*

Shōjo manga [girls' comics] and its often pornographic big sister, *redisu komikku* or *redikomi* [ladies' comics], have, in a different way, been very influential in shaping lesbian identities and contributing to lesbian community building. Due in no small part to the limited number of lesbian narratives in *manga*,²⁸ in the 1970s and 80s other gender-bending *manga* such as *Berusaikyū no bara* [The Rose of Versailles] (Ikeda 1994; 1st ed. 1972/73)²⁹ and *shōnen ai manga* [boys' love comics] narratives were far more influential to women seeking affirmation for their lesbian desire. Though ostensibly about love and/or sex between male characters, the representations of boy-boy love found in *shōnen ai manga* and *yaoi*,³⁰ its more pornographic counterpart, have been influential to young women dealing with their own homosexual desire. One lesbian explained that while hiding her feelings for other students at the all-girl high school she attended, she read *yaoi* simply "because they were about homosexuals (albeit only male)" (Summerhawk, McMahill and McDonald 1998: 138; see also *Anīsu* 2001a; Yajima 1999; SICG 1998). While *June* and related "cult of aesthetes" (*tanbiha*) magazines *Aran* [Allan]³¹ and *Gekkō* [Moonlight] were ostensibly for readers, presumably girls and young women, who enjoyed looking at *bishōnen* [beautiful (male) youths], either as *manga* characters or real people, these publications recognized their lesbian readers with features such as the special lesbian is-

three years earlier (Suzuki 1983), unlike Hirose's article it did not include contact information for the group.

²⁸ The 1970s and 80s saw lesbian narrative *manga* such as Ikeda Riyoko's *Futari potchi* [Just the Two of Them] (1976; 1st ed. 1971) and *Oniisama e* [To My Big Brother] (2002; 1st ed. 1974), and Yoshida Akimi's *Sakura no sono* [The Cherry Orchard] (1994; 1st ed. 1986). In the 1990s, the science fiction worlds of characters Sailor Moon (Takeuchi 1992–97) and Utena (Saitō 1997/98) also depicted, if not celebrated, lesbian desire.

²⁹ This work has been given additional lesbian significance through multiple and immensely popular interpretations performed by the all-female Takarazuka Review. See Buruma (1984: 118f.), Schodt (1986: 100, 253–257), and Robertson (1998: 74).

³⁰ *Yaoi*, which stands for *yama nashi* [no plot], *ochi nashi* [no punchline], *imi nashi* (no meaning), refers to the sub-genre of *shōjo manga* which features loosely connected male-male sex scenes for the voyeuristic enjoyment of teenage girls and young women. See Ōgi (2001), McLelland (2000), Fujimoto (1998), and Matsui (1993). For the lesbian appeal of *yaoi*, see Mizoguchi (2000, 2002).

³¹ *Aran* was published bimonthly from October of 1980 to June of 1984, soon after the demise of which, its former editor Nanbara Shirō began publishing a similar magazine, *Gekkō*. The first of what might be described as lesbian personal ads appeared as marginalia in the August 1981 issue (*Aran* 1981: 55f.), and a full-fledged "lesbien [sic] only" personals section began in October 1982. *Gekkō*'s personals were not specifically lesbian but from the mid-1980s through at least the early 1990s, half or more of the ads were lesbian-related.

sue of *Gekkō* (1985a) and their personal ads section, which in the case of *Aran* was “for lesbiens [sic] only.” Such magazines thus demonstrate a blurring between *shōnen ai* and lesbianism, and between commercial and queer media; and represent a space where young women have been able to find others like themselves. Emerging much later, *redikomi*, such as Sakurazawa Erica’s *Love Vibes* (Sakurazawa 1996), have offered bolder portrayals of lesbian sex, and, at least in the case of Tsukumo Mutsumi’s “Moonlight Flowers” (Tsukumo 1991), a lesbian manifesto.³²

FROM MINI-KOMI TO THE MASSES

The *mini-komi* and other publications created by groups such as Wakakusa no Kai and Regumi Studio were privately produced and distributed. It was not until the 1990s that the first commercial periodicals could be found in a limited number of bookstores, beginning with *Furīne* in 1995, followed by *Anīsu* in 1996 (*Anīsu* 2001a: 35, 37), and *Kāmira* [Carmilla] in 2002. From the mid-1990s onward, an ever-increasing number of web sites has complicated this picture and certainly increased exponentially the amount of lesbian communication in Japanese. To be sure, Japanese lesbian histories (e.g., *Anīsu* 2001a; Ikeda 1999; Yajima 1999; SICG 1998; Izumo et al. 1997) clearly show the essential role community-produced and commercial publications have played in identity and community building.

While Ōe Chizuka (*Anīsu* 2001a: 39) first read about the community through the mainstream press in 1986, it was *Onna wo ai suru onnatachi no monogatari* [Stories of Women Who Love Women] (Bessatsu Takarajima, 64, 1987) that pushed her, and many others like her, to find a place in it (see Yajima 1999: ii). As the first book of its kind, *Onna wo ai suru* has been described as a “bible” for a generation of lesbians and bisexual women (Tenshin 1996). Many women say that reading this book was the first time they were aware of the extent of the lesbian community—and for some, its existence. An interviewee in Lunsing (2001: 232f.) explains that, after moving from Okinawa to Tokyo she happened to find *Onna wo ai suru*, through which she contacted Regumi Studio; her subsequent social involvement helped her accept herself as a lesbian. Other women have come across “coming out” books, such as those by Kakefuda (1992a), singer Sasano Michiru (1995), and high school teacher Ikeda Kumiko (1999), and have found in these books affirmation and the motivation to accept their sexual

³² For more on the influence of *redikomi*, see *Anīsu* (2001a); see also Yajima (1999), and SICG (1998). For a general description of *redikomi*, see Schodt (1996: 124–127).

attraction to women, develop an identity as lesbian or bisexual, and to connect with others like themselves.³³

TRANSLATING LESBIAN SEXUALITIES

From the groundbreaking 1894 translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*,³⁴ translation has played a key role in leading Japanese to reexamine, redefine and reconstruct their sexualities, making possible the establishment of Japanese queer identities and communities in their current form. That is, using borrowed but quickly localized words, concepts, and ideologies, some Japanese have constructed their own identity, whether *rezubian*, *gei* [gay], *baisekushuaru* [bisexual], *toransusekushuaru* [transsexual], *toransujendā* [transgender], *kuia* [queer], or *heterosekushuaru* [heterosexual]. Even seemingly indigenous words for homosexuality such as *dōseiai* [same-sex love], and earlier variants, including *dōsei no ai*, *dōsei no koi* [both also meaning same-sex love] and *dōsei seiyoku* [same-sex sexual desire], are in fact translation words that—based on imported notions of sexual perversion (Furukawa 1994, 1995)—represent a shift from seeing (male) sexual desire in terms of “color”, *joshoku* [female color], desire for women, and *nanshoku* [male color], desire for men. Perhaps due to the number of loanwords or the distinctions that are often confused in public discourse about gender, sex and sexuality, many queer publications, including every issue of *Anīsu*, contain lists of queer vocabulary.³⁵ These lists also serve to inculcate prescribed (imported) forms of queer discourse, deepening a sense of community.

The words most commonly used today related to female-female sexuality in Japanese are *rezubian* and *rezu*, both of which retain pornographic nuances based on their use at least since the 1960s in Japanese pornography (McLelland, forthcoming). Chalmers (2002: 39) remarks that “[t]he connection of lesbianism with pornography is so strong that most women on first hearing or seeing the word *rezu* (*lezzo*) associate it with pornography [...] denying lesbians a psycho-sexual identity in which to claim a social space in which to move.” Much as lesbians elsewhere have reclaimed

³³ E.g., “Morinaga Glico” in SICG (1998: 40f.).

³⁴ Pflugfelder (1999: 249) notes that while the original translation, titled *Shikijōkyō hen*, was soon banned, a 1913 re-translation, titled *Hentai seiyoku shinri*, was permitted by the authorities.

³⁵ Other lists for the lesbian community include Bessatsu Takarajima, Ex. (1993: 157) and *Furīne* (1995: 83); for the LGBT community in general, Bessatsu Takarajima (1993, back cover), SICG (1998: 318–323), and Sunagawa (2001: 210–218); and for the gay community, Fushimi (1998: 10).

the word *dyke*, and many LGBTs have reclaimed *queer*, however, there has been a movement in Japan to reclaim the word *rezubian*. An outspoken lesbian activist, Kakefuda made a conscious political choice to use the word prominently in the title of her “coming out” book, “*Rezubian*” *de aru, to iu koto* [On: Being “Lesbian”] (Kakefuda 1992a), to combat its negative associations (Chalmers 2002: 123); and the term *bian*, derived from *rezubian*, simultaneously acts as a code word perhaps unrecognized by those outside the community and as a proactive effort to reclaim *rezubian* by “put[ting] the *bian* back into lezu [sic]!” (Izumo and Maree 2000: 108).

It is not, however, mere words that are being borrowed and translated in the construction of the lesbian community. A perusal of writings in Japanese about lesbians—and sexuality in general, for that matter—reveals that a significant amount of written Japanese lesbian discourse has been translated from or is based on seminal lesbian works in English and other languages. Indeed, from the 1990 translated collection *Ūman ravingu: Rezubian ronsōsei ni mukete* [Women Loving: Towards the Creation of Lesbian Theory] (Watanabe et al. 1990)³⁶ and the largely borrowed or translated writing and ideas in the special lesbian issue of *Imago* (1991)³⁷ to translations of Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (Faderman 1996, English 1st ed. 1991)³⁸ and Pat Califia’s *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* (Califia 1993, English 1st ed. 1980), Japanese lesbians have been looking to their sisters abroad for solidarity and ideology. A good deal of lesbian fiction has been translated into Japanese, as well, from classics, such as *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall 1952, English 1st ed. 1928), and *Rubyfruit Jungle* (Brown 1980, English 1st ed. 1973) to more recent works, such as Barbara Wilson’s lesbian detective novel *Gaudi Afternoon* (Wilson 1999, English 1st ed. 1990). The status of Western lesbian imagery is clearly shown in Kakinuma Eiko and Kurihara Chiyo’s bibliographic study of literature on homosexuality (Kakinuma and Kurihara 1993), in which the first forty pages of the “lesbian literature” section (*ibid.*: 235–321),³⁹ are devoted to

³⁶ *Ūman ravingu* is a translation of six articles from *The Lesbian Issue: Essays from Signs* (1985), along with an introduction, an epilogue, and a brief summary of lesbian activities in Japan.

³⁷ While only four of the seventeen articles are direct translations from English—including essays by or about the ideas of lesbian theorists Monique Wittig, Susan Gubar, and Diane Hamer—just three of the remaining articles could be said to be focused on Japanese lesbian life, rather than global or more specifically Western lesbian life.

³⁸ The choice to translate the title of *Odd Girls* as *Resubian rekishi* [lesbian history], rather than, for instance, “American lesbian history,” positions the “lesbian history” contained therein to be read as part of the larger Japanese lesbian history, regardless of the obvious cultural differences.

Western lesbian literature, starting with the poetry of Sappho. Keith Harvey (2000: 147) asserts that translated texts are fundamental to “both internal identity formation and imagined community projection [...] In short, the space of literature—including, crucially, translated literature” offers queer women readers the freedom to imagine a lesbian community. Whether or not individual members of the community themselves read translated lesbian novels or theoretical works on lesbianism, these books are being read and their ideas disseminated—through, for example, new Japanese writing and at workshops (such as at *uīkuendo* and lesbian centers like LOUD, Lesbians of Undeniable Drive, and Regumi Studio), as well as in more casual settings. Much as the ideas of the early German sexologists worked their way into public discourse about sexuality, these concepts have become widely understood and used in the Japanese lesbian community and help construct both the community itself and the very notion of what it means to be a lesbian in Japan.

While the ratio of translated to locally written books has been changing in favor of books produced within the community,⁴⁰ lesbian writing from abroad continues to be translated, sometimes by individuals and sometimes as a community project. The Rezubian Shōsetsu Hon’yaku Wākushoppu (Lesbian Novel Translation Workshop) is currently being run by Kakinuma at the lesbian space LOUD in Tokyo (RSHW, internet). As the workshop’s manifesto states, “More than just being motivated participants in the workshop, absorb all you can and give it back to the *komyuniti*” (qtd. in Curran and Welker, forthcoming), expressly articulating the notion of translation as a community-building act.

PURAIIDO AND BIJIBIRITI

The influence of Western lesbian and gay culture and a sense of connection to the larger LGBT community both within Japan and globally is nowhere more visible than in the lesbian and gay film festivals and pride (*puraido*) events. Takashi Toshiko, producer of the first and second Tokyo Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals, explains that the festivals function as an important

³⁹ While the lesbian section in Kakinuma and Kurihara is subsumed by the ostensible subject matter of the book, namely gay literature, this work again illustrates a strong lesbian presence among fans of *shōnen ai*.

⁴⁰ In contrast to the picture painted in Kakinuma and Kurihara (1993), noted above, in a recent reading list in *Anīsu* just two of the eleven lesbian-themed novels are translations, as are seven of the 22 non-fiction works on sexuality and/or gender (*Anīsu* 2001a: 176f.).

“chance for gays and lesbians to do something together” (qtd. in *Anīsu* 2001a: 53). The “cooperation” with queer communities abroad comes about via borrowing, largely from the West. Even “queer” films coming from Asia and elsewhere are still marked at least in name and classification by Western queer influence. Takashi remarks how—similar to Chigaliano (above)—she decided to bring back something from her lesbian experience abroad and make it available to Japanese lesbians. Her experience at such a festival in New York was “so enjoyable, that [she and her colleague] knew [they] definitely wanted to do the same thing in Japan” (qtd. in *Anīsu* 2001a: 51). Kakefuda (1992b: 278), both embracing and rejecting Western influence, effusively recounts her experience at the 1992 New York lesbian and gay pride march she attended and then comments that such events could not be reproduced in Japan. Whether or not the comparatively small-scale pride events currently held around Japan come close to recreating her New York experience, they clearly demonstrate the successful import of concepts such as LGBT pride and the importance of visibility (*bijibiriti*).

Much like the books collectively translated so that lesbians in Japan could learn about lesbian culture and communities in other countries, importing lesbian-themed films has shown members of the community various queer possibilities being explored abroad, possibilities that may be adapted or simply adopted by queer Japanese women. Chalmers (2002: 99) recounts, for example, that she was able to use a film shown at the 1994 International Lesbian Gay Film & Video Festival to help her interviewees to reflect on the idea of institutionalized and non-institutionalized marriage for same-sex couples. Moving from words to actions, according to “Nagae,” the film festivals inspired the creation of local queer films, including an increasing number of lesbian films (*Anīsu* 2001a: 52).

Taking this visibility to the streets, Tokyo parades, replete with rainbow flags, outrageous drag queens, bare-chested women, and gaggles of topless gym-built muscular male bodies in skin-tight shorts, and leather galore, could be from pride parades anywhere. One major difference is the scale—just a few thousand participants at most, sometimes a hundred or fewer—compared to pride events in other major cities, such as New York, Sydney, and Berlin, where participant numbers sometimes reach tens, if not hundreds of thousands. While links could be drawn between drag queens and “muscle Marys” and Japan’s history of crossdressing (e.g., *kabuki* and *Takarazuka*) and ultra-masculine gay men (e.g., Mishima Yukio and the *samurai* tradition), the Japanese vocabulary used to talk about these marches and events is as borrowed from the Western LGBT world as the events themselves: *parēdo* [parade], *puraido ibento* [pride event], *reinbō māchi* [rainbow march], *puraido māchi* [pride march], *daiku māchi* [dyke

march], *sekusharu mainoriti māchi* [sexual minority march], and Nagoya's own "Lesbian & Gay Revolution."⁴¹ Claiming American LGBT history as its own, a book commemorating the Tokyo Lesbian & Gay Parade 2000 (Sunagawa 2001: 186) begins its reflection on the history of the Tokyo parade by looking back to the uprising at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, remarking that it was this event that gave "explosive energy to the gay/lesbian liberation movement." Explaining the events leading up to the first Tokyo Lesbian Gay Parade in 1994, Izumo talks about how inspired she was by Sydney's Mardi Gras, speaking effusively about how thrilling it was to be a part of such a vibrant crowd of fellow members of the LGBT community (*Anīsu* 2001a: 55–56). Clearly, as Claire Maree comments, they had "something like Mardi Gras" in mind when organizing the dance number by International Bians United (Kokusai Bian Renmei) in the 1994 parade (Izumo and Maree 2000: 108f.; see also Ōya, Shirakawa and Nakahigashi 1995).⁴²

Much like their counterparts in other countries, these events help build solidarity among members of the Japanese LGBT community, as well as to some extent to raise the profile of the community in Japanese society at large, making it easier for others to find them and increasing for some a sense of pride and belonging. The lesbian group, International Bians United, which formed to participate in the 1994 parade, was soon inspired to begin other activities to increase lesbian visibility and monitor the media to make sure the images they portrayed of the community were positive (Izumo and Maree 2000: 108–118; Ishino and Wakabayashi 1996: 96f.; and Ōya, Shirakawa and Nakahigashi 1995). Izumo makes it clear that, at least for some lesbians, it is difficult to overestimate the significance of holding such events in Japan:

I've been doing things with Japanese lesbians since the sixties and I am enormously happy that the parade has become a reality in my lifetime. No matter how wonderful the parades are in other countries, if I can't participate in them in the place I'm living, it's meaningless. [...] If you look at this historically it's amazing. (qtd. in *Anīsu* 2001a: 57)

⁴¹ Since its 2001 establishment as "Nagoya Gay Revolution," the name has remained written exclusively in Roman letters. In 2002, the event was transformed into Nagoya Lesbian and Gay Revolution, but the addition of lesbians seems an afterthought. The events at the recent 2004 festival still seem balanced largely in favor of male interest, a balance reflected in the paucity of queer women attending.

⁴² Sometimes the borrowing is more tenuous: Koyama Yūko (1997: 1) credits the coming out episode of the American television series *Ellen*, which has never been broadcast in Japan, as the impetus for the first *daiku māchi* in 1997.

Thus, as Izumo acknowledges, while its inspiration may come from abroad, or from the Japanese gay community, it is the local lesbian construct of community which is most meaningful. While the Japanese lesbian community has not emerged as rapidly or on the scale of its male counterpart, Japanese lesbians have, through translation and borrowing, but most importantly through telling their own stories created a viable and vibrant lesbian community. As Chalmers (2002: 135) writes, “Although marginalised, Japanese lesbians are neither inside nor outside Japanese society but rather work in a variety of inter-locations within mainstream discourses.” Somewhere in the liminal space between visible and invisible, mainstream and lesbian, the “West” and Japan, Japanese lesbians and bisexual women have constructed identities and a community of their own.

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