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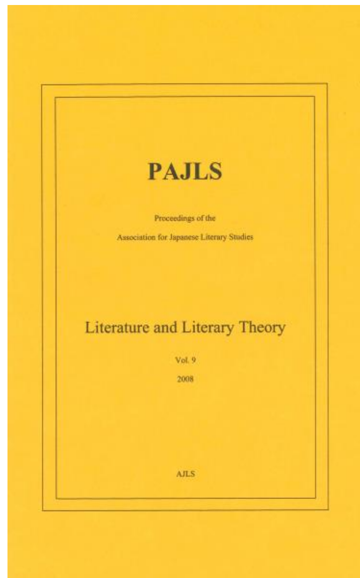

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Eroticizing the Other Woman: What Queer Theory Can(not) Tell Us About Japanese Women's Writing

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In 1960, a young college student of French literature at Meiji University named Kurahashi Yumiko published a wickedly satirical piece of short fiction called "Parutai" that took the literary world by storm, earning her both criticism and censure, and ushering in a new era of writing by women that challenged conventional notions of both "femininity" and "feminine" writing.[1] Many of the women writers who debuted during the 1960s, like Kurahashi and Takahashi Takako, had received prestigious university educations thanks to postwar coeducational reforms, and were well aware of literary and theoretical trends both at home and abroad, giving their fiction a cerebral quality that marked a radical departure from the more "traditionally" lyric and sentimental prose of their female forebears.[2] Others such as Kōno Taeko, who like Takahashi and Kurahashi was an avid reader of both Japanese and Western literary classics, borrowed the decadent romanticism of writers like Tanizaki Jun'ichirō to produce shockingly perverse depictions of feminine sexuality that troubled gender norms during a decade when women were increasingly exhorted to subsume their sexuality to the twin projects of conventional marriage and motherhood.[3]

All three of these writers became known for pushing the boundaries of the "feminine" mode of writing well beyond the bounds of propriety, particularly through their employment of explicit depictions of sexuality from a woman's perspective that included extramarital sex, partner-swapping, incest, sadomasochism, and female homoeroticism. Their attention to themes of sexual attraction and love between women is particularly interesting, because in terms of their personal histories and known behaviors, all of these authors are considered to be heterosexual as the term is commonly understood in both Japan and the United States now.

However, it is important to note that clear distinctions between hetero- and homosexuality, which imply that the two terms are opposite and mutually exclusive subject positions, are relatively new to Japanese culture, by most accounts dating from the 1970s.[4] Furthermore, the meaning attached to various sexual activities and experiences changed repeatedly over the course of these women's lives. While in their own youth passionate friendships between young girls were considered to be a common, if not normal, stage of development to mature womanhood, female same-sex relationships in the latter decades of the

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[1] For information on the controversy surrounding Kurahashi's debut, see Atsuko Sakaki, "Kurahashi Yumiko's Negotiations with the Fathers," in Rebecca Copeland et al., eds., *The Father-Daughter Plot: Japanese Literary Women and the Law of the Father* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

[2] On the characterization and history of the term "women's literature" (*joryū bungaku*) in Japan, see Joan Ericson, "The Origins of the Concept of 'Women's Literature,'" in Paul Gordon Schalow et al., eds., *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 75.

[3] On marriage and motherhood as feminine norms in the postwar period, see Kathleen S. Uno, "The Death of 'Good Wife, Wise Mother'?" in Andrew Gordon, ed., *Postwar Japan as History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[4] Mark McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 12.

twentieth century gradually came to be understood as "lesbian" in the sense that this is commonly meant today.[5] For these reasons, it is difficult to categorize any of these authors as "lesbian" or to characterize their writing as "lesbian literature," if one understands this to mean a (pardon the term) "straightforward" expression of the sexual identity of the author. It is for this reason that I advisedly use the word "homoerotic" rather than "lesbian" to describe these texts.

This project is motivated by an attempt to understand the function of female homoeroticism within these works by ostensibly straight women writers through the lens of queer theoretical paradigms that allow us to envision both "gay" and "straight" outside the strictures of a binary opposition between these terms. Before delving into the theoretical implications of these texts, I will discuss some examples of the way homoerotic themes manifest themselves in this literature, and then contrast this with what Teresa de Lauretis characterizes as specifically "lesbian" artistic expression, while underscoring some of the problems inherent in any attempt to make strict distinctions between the two. Finally, I will conclude this paper with some observations on the applicability of queer theory to Japanese literature produced by women during the specific historical and cultural milieu of the 1960s.

In the literature of Kōno Taeko, homoerotic desire frequently takes the form of erotic substitution of one woman for another through partner-swapping arrangements that allow for women to experience physical intimacy indirectly, by sharing the same man. In the story "Yoru o yuku" (1963), for example, the protagonist Fukuko fantasizes about exchanging husbands for a night with Utako, a friend she has known since childhood and with whom she shares a particularly intimate bond. This idea titillates her in part because it excites her to think of her own husband doing the things to Utako that she enjoys—in this case sadomasochistic sex play: "How shocked Utako would have been, holding out her arms to embrace Murao, only to have him grab them to pin her down. With that lithe, supple body, one yank and her wrists would be crossed at the base of her spine and bound firmly."[6] It is notable that in visualizing this scene, Fukuko's fantasies are concerned primarily with the physical and emotional responses of her friend Utako, who serves as an object of both desire and identification for the protagonist. Likewise, in the story "Rojō" (1964), the protagonist, Tatsuko, enjoys playing the role of masochist vis-à-vis her husband, Kanō. When her younger sister Kimiko expresses a desire for Kanō, Tatsuko begins to fantasize about her own death and replacement by her sister in this sexual play:

> Tatsuko often dreamed of death. Bound ever tighter by the rope, when her body would fall over with a thud, or when she felt her fingertips—the only part of her body that she could still move—grow cold behind her back, she felt as though she experienced the pleasure of death. . . . She lost herself in dreaming of the pleasure of a death bestowed upon her by Kanō. She would definitely die young. Then perhaps Kimiko really would marry Kanō. But the only way Tatsuko would set him free would be if she met that kind of end. Thinking about that, Tatsuko felt warmly towards Kimiko. But if Kimiko knew how she had died, she might

[5] Gregory M. Pflugfelder, "'S' is for Sister: Schoolgirl Intimacy and 'Same Sex Love' in Early Twentieth Century Japan," in Barbara Molony et al., eds., *Gendering Modern Japanese History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[6] Kōno Taeko, "Yoru o yuku," in *Toddler-Hunting and Other Stories*, Lucy North trans. (New York: New Directions, 1996), 24. All other translations are mine.

> hesitate to marry Kanō. . . . Pursuing such thoughts endlessly, Tatsuko's eyes glinted ever more fiercely in the dark.[7]

The fantasy of a substitute allows Tatsuko to imagine having it both ways, taking her desire for pain to the point of death yet not really dying. The possibility that Kimiko would take her place therefore gives her a sense of endlessly renewable pleasure. In each case, the body of the other woman serves as a medium for the protagonist's own pleasure, albeit expressed through a triangular relationship with her husband. Replacement by the other woman is actively desired by the protagonist, a desire that is both devoid of jealous impulses and connotes a fascination with the body of the other woman as an extension of the protagonist's own sexual subjectivity.

Kurahashi and Takahashi also have produced texts that employ themes of erotic substitution of one woman for another in relationships with men in ways that involve an identification of one woman with another through a merging of their sexual subjectivities.[8] However, in other texts they take the homoerotic trope one step further by portraying the sexual desire of one woman for another more explicitly, through scenes of erotic gratification between women that do not involve the mediation of a man. In these texts, too, the other woman frequently appears in the guise of a doppelgänger or alternate self for the protagonist, once again highlighting the mutual imbrication of identification and desire in these narratives.

In Takahashi's "Majiwari" (1966) the protagonist, known only as "Watashi" (I), is walking aimlessly through town when she encounters a mysterious woman with whom she feels a strange connection. The woman seems to know much about Watashi already, and though Watashi's attempts to learn more about her are consistently thwarted, she senses a light within the woman that is similar to her own. The other woman declares that there is "no greater love" than the one they share, and until the very end of the story, their intimacy seems to offer the purest and most complete type of love imaginable between two people, a relationship based on absolute equality between self and other. The bond between the women is so profound that they are able to achieve intercourse, and climax, through even the slightest physical contact, like the touch of a hand on the other's shoulder. However, the story ends in tragedy as Watashi's desire for knowledge of her lover prompts a violent climax to their lovemaking that destroys the other woman:

> "When I first saw you on the street, I had this nostalgic feeling like I'd seen you somewhere before, or rather, I had the impression that there was no one in my life more familiar than you. The person I feel closest to, the person I know better than anyone, for some reason that was how I felt about you. Who are you?"
>
> I pulled out a knife I had slipped into the sleeve of my kimono. "At least let me tell you my name. Let me carve my initial into your brilliant white shoulder with this knife." She was still trembling with pleasure. I cut the letter F deeply into her white left shoulder. The pleasure of giving and receiving pain converged beneath the tip of the knife as if inscribed there. Instantly blood spurted out, coloring the letter and the woman's skin red. Before my very eyes a

[7] Kōno Taeko, "Rojō," in *Kōno Taeko zenshū*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1995), 20-21.

[8] I have written about such triangular relationships in Takahashi's literature at length in Julia Bullock, "Fantasizing What Happens 'When the Goods Get Together': Female Homoeroticism as Literary Trope," *positions: east asia cultures critique*, vol.14, no. 3 (2006).

> mist the color of blood rose and quickly grew dense. As my vision grew foggy, our friendship dissolved like a receding tide.[9]

Watashi's attempts to force a convergence of self and other, first through the relentless pursuit of knowledge about her double, and then through the inscription of her own identity upon the body of the other woman, irrevocably destroy the harmony between them.

Kurahashi's "Warui natsu" (1966) likewise depicts an erotic relationship between the protagonist and her double, who in this case manifests as a younger version of herself. The protagonist, L, is an established writer of around forty years of age who becomes enamored of M, a young woman in her late teens who has just made her debut in the literary world. She takes upon herself the dual roles of both lover and mentor to the girl, and the text is quite explicit about the sexual nature of the relationship between the women. While L seems to harbor a profound distaste for members of her own sex, having cast off her own gender in order to pursue a career as an androgynous intellectual, she is fascinated with M precisely because the girl embodies those qualities of seductive femininity that she had to renounce in the process of becoming a writer. It becomes increasingly clear that M represents a vision of herself at the age before her transformation into the sexless creature that she is now, and her inability to fully possess M as a lover is implicitly attributed to the incomplete nature of that transformation:

> L was aware that women tried to become artists not through love of art, but through love of artists, which in the end came close to the common opinion that women could not become real artists. Certainly L had become a poet through her discovery of love for a poet. But this love was not directed at those parts of man that were made from clay. If L had not succeeded at stripping her spirit from her flesh through love—and this was something that was essentially difficult for the female sex to accomplish—her "transformation" [into an artist] would probably have failed. By renouncing her sex, she had liberated her spirit and her imagination. From that time on L had not loved another man. . . .
>
> However, now circumstances had changed. At a time when L had neared the end of her life, she had begun to love M. Of course, given that M was not a man, this didn't really constitute a sudden and inexplicable change in the fact that L could not love men. And what about M, who was bundled up in L's love? One afternoon, M lay her head on L's back, who was lying face down on the beach, and suddenly declared, "Hey, are you really a woman? I wish you were a man." Chewing on her own hair, M turned her head to peer at L's face. Clearly she realized that she had wounded L's love, and her posture indicated that she was prepared to flee quickly if L lashed out in anger at her.
>
> L asked gently, "What do you mean?"
>
> "If you were a man, I would let you inside of me. It's a shame you aren't a man."
>
> L resolved never to speak to M again.[10]

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[9] Takahashi Takako, "Majiwari," in *Hone no shiro* (Kyoto: Jinbun shoin, 1972), 163.

[10] Kurahashi Yumiko, "Warui natsu," in *Kurahashi Yumiko zensakuhin*, vol. 6 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1975), 171-172.

The other woman in this story, then, represents the protagonist's own inadequacies and anxieties about her ambiguously gendered position in society, due to the tension inherent in the apparently contradictory relationship between the two halves of the term "woman writer." As in Takahashi's text, "Warui natsu" ends violently, with an image of the rape and murder of the protagonist by a group of young delinquents that seems to forcibly reinscribe her into the heterosexual economy.

In each of these texts, the protagonist and the other woman are bound together by a complex of emotions that blurs the distinction between desire and identification. Whether this is expressed through envisioning the other woman as a surrogate or replacement, as a complement to oneself, or as a more perfect vision of the self that one might have been, the protagonist simultaneously sees herself in the other woman even as she desires her as an other that is external to the self, and in no case is she successful in either possessing or internalizing her. The other woman therefore serves as a figure of desire that can never be fully satisfied, a fantasy of wholeness and fusion that is perpetually frustrated, highlighting the boundaries that separate women even as they struggle to bridge the gaps between them.

I see this tension between self and other, or desire and identification, between women in these texts as aligning these works with emerging feminist discourse that sought to reconcile the need for female solidarity with the very real differences between women that troubled the coherence of "woman" as a meaningful category. While these stories were written during the 1960s, in advance of the women's liberation movement of the following decade, many of the problems that later feminist activists sought to address in explicitly political terms already occupied writers of literature in the 1960s. By appropriating female homoeroticism as a literary trope, these authors were able to work through some of the possibilities and problems inherent in relationships between women whose desire for same-sex intimacy ran aground on the class, educational, experiential, and institutional boundaries that divided them.

In her book *The Practice of Love*, Teresa de Lauretis clearly distinguishes such examples of "woman-identified" narratives from explicitly "lesbian" texts. According to her employment of this terminology, the former portray female intimacy from the perspective of a heterosexual logic, whereas the latter attempt to represent female homosexual identity from a position within the lesbian community.[11] Her project is motivated by an explicit desire to escape the paradox of what she terms "sexual (in)difference," or the problem of "thinking lesbianism cleanly outside the discursive-conceptual categories of heterosexuality, with its foundation in a structural difference (masculine-feminine or male-female) that for all intents and purposes sustains a social indifference to women's subjectivities."[12] De Lauretis' term "sexual (in)difference" clearly has its origins in what has come to be known as "difference feminism," a line of feminist argument that wishes to posit an understanding of feminine gender outside of a strict oppositional relationship to masculinity. In other words, rather than understanding women as everything that men are not—what Luce Irigaray refers to as a "logic of the same"—we should understand women on their own terms.[13] De Lauretis wants to apply this line of reasoning to the heterosexual/homosexual binary, such that lesbianism can be seen and understood outside of an implicit contrast with heterosexuality.

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[11] Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. See Chapter 3, particularly 120-123.

[12] De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, 6.

[13] Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 74.

Her argument relies heavily on a contrast between cultural texts (such as novels and films) that portray intimacy between women from a heterosexual standpoint, and texts produced from a position within the lesbian community. She describes these as fundamentally different because the former concern themselves primarily with identification rather than desire, such that any desire expressed by the female protagonist for another woman is not explicitly sexual—i.e. it devolves around a desire to be like the other woman, rather than to possess her in an erotic sense. Examples she gives of such "woman-identified" texts include films like *All About Eve* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*, where one woman pursues another not to achieve erotic gratification but out of admiration for her.[14] She also takes feminist theorists like Julia Kristeva to task for "heterosexist" representations of lesbian desire that confuse homosocial female bonding—such as love between sisters, friends, and mothers and daughters—with "lesbian love."[15] De Lauretis argues that such feminist attempts to appropriate the trope of lesbian sexuality for their own political purposes amount to nothing more than "a popular feminist fantasy which projects onto female sexuality certain features of an idealized feminist sociality."[16]

I see de Lauretis' argument here as both productive and problematic for understanding the female homoeroticism in the texts by Japanese women writers that I have described above. Certainly I agree that none of these authors can be said to speak from within a lesbian community. In fact, the notion that female same-sex desire constituted a politicized sexual identity that was specifically "lesbian" seems not to have emerged in Japan until the women's liberation movement of the 1970s.[17] This is not to say that women with such desires did not exist before this time, but that the identity-politics logic that motivates de Lauretis' work appears to have not yet been operative when these texts were written. In fact, recent research indicates that as late as the 1960s, the term "S," which denoted the kind of passionate friendships between girls that characterized prewar Japanese girl culture, was still commonly in use.[18] Thus, the same-sex desire expressed in these texts, as I have suggested above, may be less an expression of personal sexual identity than a literary trope for working through problems of intimacy between women, something that de Lauretis clearly finds problematic given her own project of detaching lesbianism from a heterosexual logic in order to view it on its own terms.

However, it is intriguing to me that while none of the "woman-identified" texts she cites include depictions of actual sexual contact between women, many of the texts I have encountered by Japanese women writers do. While Kōno's narratives of female intimacy mediated by a male can be said to be characteristic of this "heterosexist" vision of same-sex love, de Lauretis' argument cannot account for the erotic nature of the desire between women expressed in the Kurahashi and Takahashi texts above. In other words, her argument seems predicated on a fairly simplistic assumption that any text that includes explicit sexual contact between women must be "lesbian," whereas any text that does not must be "heterosexist."

In making such an argument, she seems unfortunately to reinstate the very binary logic that she decries elsewhere for reducing all difference to a logic of the same. That is to say, just as there may be as many differences among women as there are between women and men, there

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[14] De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, 120.
[15] De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, 184.
[16] De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, 185.
[17] Beverley Curran and James Welker, "Translation and Japanese Lesbian Identities," in Mark McLelland et al., eds., *Gender, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 68; see also Chapter 5 in McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*.
[18] Pflugfelder, "'S' is for Sister," 174-175.

are likely as many differences among lesbians, and among straight women, as there are between lesbians and straight women. Underscoring the instability of binary oppositions like "straight" and "gay" in favor of emphasizing a broader range of possible desires, sexualities, and identities seems to me to be precisely the point of queer theory, and its most theoretically productive aspect. And yet de Lauretis seems profoundly uncomfortable with the ultimate implications of this categorical instability, invested as she is in the project of legitimizing a space for lesbian sexuality as a specific type of social, sexual, and political identity. While this is fine within the specific context of the gay rights movement in the United States, it ultimately places limitations on the potential of queer theory to operate outside of this framework of argument. In other words, it becomes difficult to read texts that incorporate homoerotic imagery or themes as anything other than an expression of the sexual identity of the author, director, character, or perhaps even spectator. It therefore limits the usefulness of queer theory when applied to texts produced in other cultures, eras, or environments where the logic of gay liberation is not operative.

In conclusion, I find these texts by Japanese women writers to be emphatically queer in the way they trouble easy distinctions between identification and desire, and ultimately, hetero- and homosexual, as well as the way they trouble the integrity of the category of "woman" itself, emphasizing as they do the fact that differences among women can be just as insurmountable as the differences between women and men. However, they are not "lesbian" in the sense meant by de Lauretis, even if one considers the possibility that these ostensibly straight women writers might indeed have had desires that cannot be easily subsumed under the category of "heterosexual." Ultimately these texts offer a number of challenges not only to queer theory, but also to our understanding of the development of both feminist discourse and sexuality in Japan during the 1960s. Perhaps desire and identification are far more mutually imbricated than de Lauretis would like to think. Perhaps the specific conditions of Japan in the 1960s, before "lesbian" came to mean a specific sexual identity as it does now in the U.S., allowed for a more fluid expression of same-sex desire that defied easy categorization as either hetero- or homosexual.[19] Perhaps the categories we use to describe "types" of sexuality are more porous that we can possibly imagine. I think this way of envisioning sexuality otherwise is precisely what queer theory has to offer Japanese literary analysis, provided that we employ it in ways that highlight, rather than obscure, the historical, social, and cultural specificities that produced these narratives.

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[19] As James Welker notes, there clearly were some individuals in Japan in the 1960s, and before, who understood their same-sex desires to be of a fundamentally different "category" than opposite-sex attraction (personal communication; see also Mark McLelland et al., eds., *Queer Voices from Japan: First-Person Narratives from Japan's Sexual Minorities* [Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007]). It is unclear to me to what extent this knowledge would have been available to those, like the authors represented in this study, who were outsiders to these emerging lesbian communities. Much research remains to be done on the question of precisely when the term "lesbian" came to denote a sexual identity that was widely considered to be clearly distinct from and opposite to "heterosexual."