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Epilogue

Gender, Substance, Fantasy: Undisciplined Observations on Gender Presentations in Japan

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To think about gender in the context of fieldwork, whether one's own or others', is an unsettling experience. No theory of gender is attenuated enough to grasp the minute nuances of gender presentations in everyday life and the myriad contexts in which it becomes relevant. Gender is the ultimate paradox: it is highly malleable, artificial and socially constructed; and at the same time it is normative, predetermined and inescapable. Gender is one way in which the researcher is drawn into the field, as their presentation of gender is made sense of, commented on, corrected, interrogated or embraced. Editing the chapters in this volume with Gitte Marianne Hansen has transported me back to many of my own encounters with gender and gender presentation in Japan: how the difference that I experienced helped me make sense of my own difference as a gay man, and how this difference, when brought home, created a sense of alienation from my own milieu, which threw into sharper relief the arbitrary contours of the social world to which I no longer wholly belonged. This is the reason you can never entirely come back from the field. In this spirit I wrote the following kaleidoscopic observations. They are undisciplined because they refuse to form a coherent theory of gender in Japan. Instead, they offer glimpses of scenes, encounters and experiences that speak to the chapters in this volume.

I Under the Sign of Gender

My first exposure to Japanese understandings of gender came at the age of 14, when Ikeda-Sensei, my Aikido teacher, chided a bearded, middle-aged man with the words: 'You look like a woman!' Eddy had started the new beginner's class only a few months before and was now wearing the white training uniform, the *keiko-gi*. The *keiko-gi* is unisex and the only faux pas that Eddy had committed was to tie his white belt over his belly button. While we, the bystanders, knew that the belt in martial arts is worn around the lower abdomen to support breathing, we were quite surprised that a difference of about ten centimetres should turn somebody who presented so obviously as a man into a woman. It was a powerful illustration of the ways in which gender presentation is based on signs – such as the height of the belt in an otherwise unisex white uniform – and of how these signs are often given more

importance than to what we understand to be the biological markers of gender – such as dense facial hair, in this case. Especially in the performing arts (and I would count the martial arts among them), the semiotic system of gender eclipses any concern with the 'truth' of underlying bodies.

I remembered this incident more than ten years later when I was backstage at the National Theatre in Tokyo to visit the mentor of a close friend of mine before a performance of traditional Japanese dance (*Nihon-buyō*). Over the space of an hour I observed the transformation of this established academic and author in his late 50s into a young *geisha*, with the help of several of his assistants and students. I was interested in the transformative aspect of clothing and wanted to ask him what clothes say about the 'truth' of the body. While the standard kimono is a semiotically rich garment whose colour, decoration, materials, dyeing and weaving techniques speak to the gender, class, occupation and social status of the wearer – even down to their state of mind, when we include the black kimono of mourning or the white kimono of the terminally ill – the cut of the fabric itself is unisex. It envelops the body like a tube and mutes differences of shape rather than highlighting them – unlike a codpiece or a bodice, for example. What gives the body its erotic charge is not to be found in the body itself, but in the dialectic relationship between covering and revealing. The kimono is part of a semiotics of gender that creates a distance between the presented gender and the underlying body. But while it has often been remarked upon that the kimono restricts movement and thus free expression for those who wear it in the way prescribed for those in female roles (both on stage and in everyday life), it does not accomplish the work of gender by itself. While thick layers of white make-up were being applied to his face, he explained to me how the wearer must master a repertoire of bodily movements that are, in their turn, gendered: one can expose one's neck for added sex appeal (the experienced assistant does this with a single yank), or one can hitch up the bottom seam to allow for the swagger of a masculine role. While wearing a kimono is initially restricting and the possibilities of committing a faux pas are considerable, it also gives the wearer a reassuring sense of the extension of his or her body in space, a sense of compactness and presence that is heightened by the limitations it places on one's gestures; it feels as if one's body was cut out of the space surrounding it with great precision. When he finally got up, decked in full regalia – the complicated belt tied at the appropriate height – he turned to me and said, 'Don't I look like a fabulous drag queen?'

II Pornographic Encounters

An exchange year at a Japanese all-boys' high school in the 1990s introduced me to pornography. Among the members of the high school sport clubs, VHS tapes were surreptitiously circulated as a kind of underground currency. Lucky the boy who had an older brother at university! Our black school uniforms prevented us from making excursions into the cordoned-off area at the local video rental store. The bulky, unmarked VHS tape that was eventually handed to me after *kendo* practice in the dank clubroom, with suppressed giggles, came with instructions: 'Make sure you watch it alone. *This* is Japanese culture!'

I did eventually take a furtive look under the cover of night on my host family's VHS deck. I remember to this day what I saw: a scene in which a female police officer was raped by two masked men. This was so shocking and discordant with my everyday experience of the polite Japanese way of life that it was difficult to process at first. Much sexual innuendo and bravado were on display among my classmates, but at the much-anticipated school festival, the only occasion when it was possible to meet students from the all-girls' school, the loudest boys turned bright-red and could hardly stammer a word. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the hardcore content, genital areas were pixelated (see also Kodaka in this volume). When I asked the classmate who had given the tape to me why it was pixelated when everything else was so explicit, he grinned and said: 'So there is some mystery left when you see the real thing!'

As I learned to read Japanese, I noticed that this mystery is also reproduced in print. Even in pornographic publications the slang term for 'vagina' is written with a 'double hole' ◎ in the middle, reproducing, typographically, the miniature shock of encountering an unspeakable word, of reading something you should not read. There was nobody I could ask about how to read it. This illegibility reproduced the unspeakability of the word: both a means of censoring and of heightening the erotic frisson of imagining what the word gestures towards. Even now, this term for 'vagina' is one of the few words that may not be broadcast. Unsurprisingly, the same does not apply to the penis, a bodily appendage that even has its own popular festival, the Kanamara *matsuri* in Kawasaki.

The pixelation of obscene material, specifically of pubic hair, the vagina and the penis (but excluding the anus) is an artefact of modern censorship and stands in strong contrast to the

explicit depictions of sex scenes in erotic woodblock prints in early modern Japan (*shunga*, literally 'spring pictures'). Here penetration is highlighted and even magnified: almost three-dimensional, engorged penises and pink vulvas are the focal point, in contradistinction to the featureless, white void of the bodies, leading some to conclude that '*shunga* dismiss the erotic possibility of skin' (Screech 2009: 109). Even in these depictions, the kimono is rarely taken off completely; apart from the social and gendered semiotics, its pattern is used to structure the picture and to fragment the body into different zones of engagement: the faces exquisitely inward-looking, the bodies unmarked and placid, the genitals exhibiting their own liveliness as if belonging to an independent and impersonal reality of desire. While there is little doubt that the 'spring pictures' were consumed as masturbatory aids, they were also often included as part of a bride's trousseau – as if to say 'here, this is what you can expect to happen, this is the reality of conjugal relations'.

The digital censorship of pornography has the opposite effect of mystification. The "mosaic", as it is called in Japanese, hides and entices at the same time: the viewers know there is something worth watching because they cannot see it. The mystery of the real is thus perpetuated rather than addressed. The architect Rem Koolhaas argues that the mosaic signifies the rapprochement of virtual and real worlds. The effect is almost poetic:

> Emerging from the pure abstraction
> of the censored zone:
> jets of sperm –
> white squares that turn into small blobs
> and land on real flesh. (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 103)

III The Great Reveal

For many upwardly-mobile Japanese men of my generation, the quintessential experience of a 'genital reveal' happened in a DX strip theatre, where the female performers, usually on a slowly revolving stage, spread their legs for the male audience to take a close-up look, finally without pixelation. The atmosphere in such moments is marked by a tense curiosity and even a sense of reverence; the act itself is called *go-kaichō* (lit. 'the honourable opening of the curtain'), a term that is otherwise reserved for the rare display of a hidden Buddha statue. But what kind of 'truth' is revealed in such a moment? As the vagina, garishly illuminated by the

stage lights, becomes the focus of the gaze of the rapt spectators crowding around, the woman herself retreats into the background and the organ that is displayed assumes a life, a meaning, a reality all of its own, curiously separate from the person.

How to describe a pornographic scene, something meant to arouse people, in a way that does not become pornographic itself? The Swiss author Adolf Muschg has tried to grasp the atmosphere in such a venue and what happens when the salarymen start to join the performers on stage one by one, egged on by their peers. His writing reproduces the sense of disorientation, the attempt to create some kind of distance out of which this scene – at once erotic, burlesque and surreal – makes sense. The comparative frame constantly shifts, inducing a cognitive vertigo in the reader: he is reminded of a gymnastic event, a school class in front of a particularly mesmerizing exhibit, a medical procedure, a fun fair, eager but inept students in a dance class, mothers who tenderly look after their overgrown children, a factory floor 'where robots, camouflaged as naked women, sheathe, defuse and unclamp male parts in a fully automated process' (Muschg 1995: 61). Here too, as in many of the earlier chapters in this volume, it is the monetary transaction that delimits and contains the emotions and affects aroused by the body: 'Respectable people come here to palpitate the body with their eyes, to penetrate it with their desires. They paid at the entrance to not feel any shame about it.' (1995: 48–49)

Donald Richie, who acted for many years as a kind of concierge for the Western intelligentsia in Tokyo, delighted in taking visitors to the local DX theatre, where patrons could voyeuristically enjoy others having sex and indulge in intercourse themselves. In a diary entry from 1989, he describes the reaction of the photographer Richard Avedon and his agent, Norma Stevens:

> Dick and Norma were astonished by this, as most foreigners are. The experience offers no handles; it is so smooth and featureless, so practiced, so benign – it is the last thing that the Christians and the Jews expect from sex. When I took Susan [Sontag] she said it all: 'Well, I guess it is sexy but it is about as erotic as a cake bake-off.' Richard thought of Kindergarten; Norma thought of a day-care centre. They also thought it very 'sad' – which is a common reaction from liberal Americans. This tells more, however, about their assumptions than it does about the Japanese DX theatre. They found it sad. I found it matter-of-fact. But then I think that Americans believe

that being matter-of-fact about sex is sad. One must make it special: either celestial or infernal. (Richie 2004: 234)

IV Hoarding as Gender Failure

My PhD fieldwork on hoarding in Tokyo was initially focused on notions of mental health rather than on gender (Gygi 2019). I quickly noticed, however, that hoarding was understood in two different registers, depending on whether the hoarder was described as male or female. In short, men were considered to be naturally 'untidy' and in need of female help; women who displayed tendencies towards untidiness were, on the other hand, considered to be pathological. They were labelled *katazukerarenai onna* ('women who cannot tidy up') and became the object of a moral panic. Were they unable to tidy up, too lazy, or even unwilling to do so? What fascinated me about this was how the materiality of gender went beyond the body and how material environments – cluttered and disordered rooms – could become gendered themselves. The excess of material accumulation and disorder was often understood to be a lack on the part of the female hoarder, a failure to perform gender properly.

Two kinds of gender work are pitched against each other here: the mundane act of tidying up and caring for one's own and other people's things; and the process of meaning-making that links the mundane disorder back to the women – wives, mothers, office lady colleagues, self-identified career women – from whom it is said to emanate. One could say that the former is driven by the fear of the latter: linking domestic spaces to feminised labour carries with it a particular notion of national femininity. Failing to be disciplined, caring and selfless is failing both at being a woman and at being properly Japanese; disorder is cast as an unpatriotic sin of omission.

This particular construction of gender is not unconscious or hidden; on the contrary, it takes place in the public sphere, where women who refuse to care for other people's disorders are chided and disciplined. A well-established psychiatrist, fairly advanced in age, laughed when I asked him about why women were singled out for hoarding behaviour, and said: 'Look at me, I can't tidy up, all my personal affairs are in disorder. But I have [female] staff who do this work for me, and therefore you cannot tell that I am the source of the chaos.' Self-important voices like these drowned out the voices of my interlocutors, who often felt they had nothing interesting to say; for how can you articulate your resistance to the monolithic

edifice of gender in the mundane language of housework? This work of articulation was made even more difficult by the re-enchantment of housework that took off at the same time: Marie Kondo and the endless flow of magazines and books and TV programmes that exhort us to magically transform our environment by eliminating everything that does not 'spark joy'.

V Sex Work

At a well-heeled private university in Western Japan, where I took up my first academic position, I occasionally overheard male students talking about visits to brothels. 'I cannot but think of the girls at the brothel as gentleness personified (*yasashisa no katamari*)', a member of one of the university sport clubs said after a seminar, offhandedly. There was something about the phrasing that stuck in my mind. *Katamari* literally means a lump or a clod, something that by way of crystallisation attains a fixed form; metaphorically, it can mean personification or embodiment.[1] There was an odd tension in the objectification of female sex workers – equating them to a 'lump of gentleness' – and the deferential awe with which the phrase was uttered. I was not sure what particular service was provided by the women described in these terms, but as the soliciting of vaginal intercourse is technically illegal in Japan, I assumed that the topic of discussion must have been some kind of sexual service short of penetration. I was wise enough by then not to ask any questions, knowing well that such a conversation would quickly derail into inappropriate territory and probably end with a jocular invitation for me to join them. The topic had come up before at an after-seminar drinking party, and when I innocently asked why young, athletic men would pay for sexual services, the answer was unanimous: '*Sensei*, these girls are *professionals*!'

Later I learned that the service provided consisted of the man lying passively on his back, while the female sex worker with the aid of liberal lubrication put power to her elbow; a precise reversal of the standard image of heterosexual penetrative sex, during which the active male partner arouses, manipulates, and generally manhandles the reactive female partner (the mainstay of straight pornography). The fact that this is a service offered for pay justifies the active–passive role reversal: while procreative penetrative sex is implicitly

[1] Two different characters are used to mark the semantic difference: 固まり is used for the concrete, material sense of the word, while 塊, combining the radical for 'earth' with the character for 'soul', is more abstract.

understood by men to be ‘work’, this kind of sexual relief is construed as *iyashi*, as ‘healing’, because the active work is undertaken by the female sex worker. Providing sexual relief, in other words, is providing relief from having to be active and dominating in all areas of life; but such a reversal has to be isolated from the everyday domestic sphere lest it should undermine the patriarchal conception of the head of the household. By turning sexual relief into a paid-for service, and thus cutting off any relationship that such intimate contact is bound to create, male sexual desire[2] is contained, compartmentalised and kept from contaminating and destabilising present and future domestic arrangements. This is part of a long and venerable tradition in Japan of keeping sexuality as procreation and sexuality as play in separate spheres. Because the service is paid-for and impersonal, the female workers reveal themselves to the customers as gendered substance, literally: professional gentleness personified, without the need for care, consideration or reciprocity.

VI *Ari-no-mama*

The pervasive nature of the sex/gender system becomes visible in the most mundane of contexts: a master maker of Japanese dolls tells me that he receives many requests to perform ‘sex changes’ on antique dolls. Most of the requests are about transforming male Ichimatsu dolls into female ones. This involves a change of hair (boy dolls have shaved heads), but also changing the rudimentary genitals that most dolls have. Despite the fact that boys were traditionally more cherished because they continued the family household, in the current climate of cutification female dolls are considered to be more desirable and have thus become more valuable.

However, when I ask the maker of dolls how he carries out such requests he replies: ‘Oh no, I do not carry out such requests. The dolls were made as male and female and I am not authorized to change that.’ He frames his reply in terms of resistance against interfering in another doll maker’s work for monetary gain; but he uses an expression that is strangely familiar: *ari-no-mama*, meaning ‘the way things are, what is given, what is there’, here perhaps also ‘the way things were made’. This was the phrase I used to come out to my Japanese host parents, years after my homestay with them: with a plea to be accepted the way

[2] That all men have voracious sexual appetites is taken for granted in the world of water business, where examples to the contrary are hard to come by for obvious reasons.

that I am. *Ari-no-mama* was a crucial part of the Japanese rhetoric of gay and lesbian coming-out in the 90s. While there are semantic parallels with the idea of 'nature' (the Japanese translation of the English word 'nature', *shizen*, is a Sino–Japanese way of expressing a similar notion of given-ness: *onozukarashikaru*), *ari-no-mama* is an appeal to one's given, ontological state, but not therefore to something that is fixed. 'Nature' is always malleable, but to form it requires constant work. In that context, the plea to be accepted *ari-no-mama* is a plea to be relieved of this work of presenting as straight, of conforming to the expectations of having a family, of creating and maintaining a straight persona. This is not to say, however, that presenting as gay is less of an acquired style of gender, as Francioni shows in his chapter in this volume.

VII The Limits of Gender Presentation

Queer or not, there is pleasure to be had in doing the work of gender with relish and in enjoying the performance as performance rather than as referencing some kind of underlying 'nature'. Gay friends would sometimes share anecdotes, gleefully recounting the giving of Valentine's Day chocolates and their return on 'White Day' (March 12), and the intricate manipulation of heterosexual office politics that this entailed. A lesbian friend who worked at a maid café took pride and pleasure in performing as an object of male desire, precisely because for her the stakes were so low and she was an excellent performer. 'Passing' in this context is not a kind of deception, but part of the work of gender, in that the performance is both artificially natural and deeply superficial. It is sincere, but not authentic, and it is precisely because it lacks authenticity that it entails a degree of freedom.

Experimenting with gender presentation, however, has its socially upheld limits. I used the first-person pronoun *boku*, used by boys and younger males in a social hierarchy, throughout my high school and university days. A few years ago, my Aikido teacher jokingly referred to me as *boku*, as if it were my first name. I took this to mean that maybe my time as a *boku* had come to an end and shifted to the more neutral and formal *watashi* from then onwards. I even experimented with the more informal masculine *ore* at a drinking party, but this created so much cognitive dissonance that at the end of the night a female senior took me aside and said: '*Ore* does not sound like you at all.' I don't think I have ever used it since then.

In this sense, gender is presented – linguistically, sartorially, habitually – but it is also given by those to whom it is presented. This gives the 'audience' of one's gender presentation the power to normalise it – although of course this audience may change from one context to another. This work of normalisation that the foreign body is subjected to can take a number of forms: being physically corrected or shouted at, being excluded from proceedings, being shunned or joked about, or being rendered the material of countless anecdotes. But it can also be expressed as fantasy: an acquaintance of mine, a rather highly-strung lawyer, still tells others that I have a hidden zip at my back that would open up and reveal a Japanese person hidden inside; this is his creative way of reducing the cognitive dissonance of interacting with a foreign body in a familiar idiom.

VIII

Gender presentation is, as we have argued in the introduction with reference to Judith Butler, a practice of improvisation within a context of constraint. What counts as improvisation and what as constraint may, however, change radically, sometimes in a short period of time. We are witnessing many of these changes first-hand and it is sometimes tempting to describe this development as emancipation and progress. Goalposts may have been moved, but normative ideas about what is permitted and what is not have not moved with them. The reader may think that we live in slightly more tolerant times in 2022, but you only need to walk down an ordinary London street in broad daylight in a mildly androgynous outfit to see what colourful invective members of the public will feel entitled, nay compelled, to hurl at you.

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