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# From Sailor-Suits to Sadists: Lesbos Love as Reflected in Japan's Postwar "Perverse Press"

Mark J. McLelland

*University of Wollongong*, [markmc@uow.edu.au](mailto:markmc@uow.edu.au)

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# From sailor-suits to sadists: "Lesbos love" as reflected in Japan's postwar "perverse press"

Mark McLelland

## Introduction

"Women's same-sex love" (*joshi dôseiai*) was a topic frequently discussed in the Japanese press from the early decades of the twentieth century. These discussions often concerned the "spiritual" love relationships which were considered to be developing between older and younger women in Japan's new school and factory dormitories as well as the more shocking topic of the dual suicide of female couples.<sup>1</sup> While such discussion was muted during the war years, Japan's postwar press saw an explosion of interest in "perverse sexuality" (*hentai seiyoku*), both female and male, hetero- and homosexual. During the 1950s, at least five "perverse magazines" (*hentai zasshi*) dedicated considerable space to the topic of "Lesbos love" (*resubosu ai*), encouraging women readers to write in and share their experiences as well as running regular columns supposedly written by women with "Lesbos experience." Unlike discussions in the prewar press, these magazines were more frank about the "carnal" (*nikutaiteki*) aspects of women's same-sex love and offered some startling accounts of "Lesbos techniques" which would have been unthinkable in Anglophone magazines of the period (Streitmatter 1995). While much of this interest was prurient and clearly aimed at the titillation of a male audience (as was the genre of lesbian pulp fiction emerging at the same time in the US), there are moments when women's experience is visible.

Although Japanese gay critics and scholars<sup>2</sup> have begun to delve into this material when writing their accounts of gay male culture in the postwar years, surprisingly little use has been made of the perverse press in lesbian history writing in either Japanese or English. This paper looks at the discourse about "Lesbos love" as it developed in the perverse press between the end of the war and 1960 and asks how Japanese women might have related to these representations and what role this material should have in helping us understand the history of women's same-sex love in Japan.

## Discussion of "perverse sexuality" in Japan's prewar culture

Given the prominence that "lesbian love" was to achieve in male pornography in the postwar years,<sup>3</sup> there is surprisingly little representation of women's same-sex desire in Japan's premodern culture. While instances of same-sex sexual acts between women are recorded in a variety of literary, artistic and other sources, unlike sex between men such acts were not codified into a *dô* or "way" of loving.<sup>4</sup> While male same-sex love developed a sophisticated vocabulary for discussing the various roles taken on by the male partners as well as the different contexts in which male same-sex love was practiced, love between women, although acknowledged, was not subject to similar elaboration and consequently there was little discussion of (or terminology for) women's same-sex love at this time.

What discussion does exist suggests that the polarized, role-based style that structured sexual interactions between men was not duplicated in relationships between women, although, as Leupp points out,<sup>5</sup> many of the incidents involving women's same-sex love in the literature do involve women of different status, such as mistress and servant or paying client and courtesan. Significantly, while *nanshoku*, made up of the characters for "man" and "eroticism," was a general term covering a variety of forms of love practiced between men, *joshoku*, made up of the characters for "woman" and "eroticism," actually referred to love relationships between *men* and women. No concept existed at this time which referred in a general sense to women's same-sex love and there was no way of cognitively linking both male and female "homosexuality."<sup>6</sup> Such a cognitive linking was not able to take place until elements borrowed from western sexology made it possible to group together male and female same-sex acts as equal instances of "perverse desire" (*hentai seiyoku*) in the Meiji period (1868-1912).

Although the exact date of the introduction of the concept remains unclear, by the early Taisho period (1912-26), *dôseiai* (same-sex love) had emerged as an approximate translation of the European concept of "homosexuality".<sup>7</sup> For the first time in the Japanese language, a category became available within which a variety of female same-sex sexual acts could be grouped and it also became possible to speak of

both male and female same-sex desire as dimensions of the same phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> While both male-male and female-female same-sex practices were considered equally perverse, there was a qualitative difference between them in that same-sex love between women was considered to be more psychological, emotional and spiritual (*seishinteki*), whereas men's desires were considered more carnal (*nikutaiteki*). In part, this was an accident of the translation of "homosexual" as *dôseiai*, since *ai*, the character chosen to represent love, was more emotional in tone than *koi*, an alternative character which would have had a stronger erotic charge, and thus the term came to be more often associated with love between women than love between men.<sup>9</sup>

This "love" between members of the same sex seemed to describe well the widely reported schoolgirl crushes which occurred in the dormitories of Japan's new educational establishments for girls. Spoken of as "S" relationships in which the "S" stood for *shôjo* (girl), sister or even sex, these crushes, albeit considered morbid, were not taken too seriously since they were regarded as temporary aberrations, something that the girls would outgrow.<sup>10</sup> Although the association of female same-sex love with the poet Sappho and the island of Lesbos was sometimes made<sup>11</sup> [ILLUSTRATION 1], the *katakana* version of the noun "lesbian" (*resubian* or *rezubian*) did not become current until the early 1960s, making it difficult to speak of "lesbian identities" in the prewar period.

However, female homosexuality (*joshi dôseiai*) was often discussed in the press in the prewar period. Donald Roden<sup>12</sup> has pointed out that the 1920s, in particular, was a decade characterized by an iconoclastic spirit and a fascination with gender ambivalence in many of the world's capitals including Berlin, Paris, New York and Tokyo.<sup>13</sup> This interest was evident not only in the prevalence of cabaret and other stage acts, including the all-female Takarazuka revue whose *otokoyaku* or male-role players had a considerable fan base among young women<sup>14</sup> but also in the avant-garde art world. It was during the 1920s that the prominent Japanese theater and art group MAVO began to play with cross-dressing in their stage and installation work.<sup>15</sup> Radical political groups, too, such as the feminist organization Seitô were experimenting with a variety of hetero and homosexual relationships.<sup>16</sup>

During the early Showa period (1926-1988), Japan developed a significant publications industry devoted to the discussion of sexuality - in the 1920s at least ten journals were founded which focused, in particular, upon perverse sexuality. These included *Hentai shiryô* (Perverse material, 1926), *Kâma shasutora* (*Kâma shastra*, 1927), *Kisho* (Strange book, 1928) and *Gurotesuku* (Grotesque, 1928). These journals specializing in sexual knowledge, as well as articles and advice pages contributed to newspapers and magazines by a newly emerging class of sexual "experts," frequently discussed "perverse sexuality," albeit usually diagnosed as a problem. The result was that *hentai* or "perverse" become a widely recognized term<sup>17</sup> which had numerous valances depending upon who was using it and in what context. Despite the fact that *hentai* (perverse) was often invoked as the opposite of *jôtai* (normal) - it was perversion, not normality which was obsessively enumerated in popular sexology texts, thus giving "the impression not only that 'perversion' was ubiquitous, but that the connotations of the term were not entirely negative."<sup>18</sup> Above all, these magazines were preoccupied with *ryôki*, a new compound word made up of the characters "hunt" and "strange" which can be translated as "hunting for the bizarre" or "curiosity seeking." The term *ryôki* first appeared in dictionaries in the early 1930s and, as Angles points out, "involved a scopophilic desire to uncover strange and bizarre 'curiosities,' especially ones having to do with the erotic, so that the onlooker might experience a degree of precarious excitement and even titillation."<sup>19</sup> Roden points out how the authorities were not able to contain this proliferation of perverse discourse or people's interest in it and "what started out as prescriptive literature quickly lost the blessings of educators and police and thus descended into the underground culture."<sup>20</sup>

The experts who wrote these articles and analyzed the perverse desires of their correspondents did so in a popular medium which appealed to a readership far wider than the medical community and, importantly, they offered readers the opportunity to write in and describe their own perverse desires; one unforeseen side-effect of this process was that the perverse themselves were given a voice. As Fruhstuck points out, by the middle of the Taisho period rising literacy rates and the proliferation of cheap newspapers and magazines meant that reading had become a favorite leisure activity of the working classes, allowing for a "low scientific culture" to develop.<sup>21</sup> While Meiji-period sexology had been the province of the elite, the Taisho period saw what Matsuzawa describes as a "*hentai* boom,"<sup>22</sup> the first of several explosions of interest

in perverse sexuality that would sweep the Japanese media over the next half century.<sup>23</sup>

Although public interest in perverse sexuality probably did not diminish, it became more difficult for writers to justify their interest in this topic during the 1930s as Japan entered the "dark valley" of militarist expansion; from this point on, those considered to have transgressed public morals (*fûzoku*) could find themselves in trouble with the police. As the government introduced increasingly severe austerity measures, and the price of paper soared, writers whose work was not directly supportive of the war effort ran the risk of seeming unpatriotic. Finally, the outbreak of full war with China in 1937 saw the suspension of publications of a sexual and frivolous nature altogether. Since, from now on, the government controlled the paper supply, it was able to allocate rations on the basis of a publication's "quality," that is, the extent to which it endorsed official ideologies. A 1940 Cabinet report stated that "the best policy is to abolish harmful and useless newspapers and magazines and to support the development of healthy newspapers and magazines which are equipped to aid the government as it moves toward its national destiny,"<sup>24</sup> a policy easily achieved given the government's control of paper supplies. As a result, discussion of perverse sexuality, including women's same-sex love, largely ceased during the war years, only to re-emerge with increased vigor in the immediate postwar period.

### **Japan's postwar "perverse" culture**

A new sexual culture arose surprisingly quickly after Japan's defeat and occupation by US forces. Street prostitutes sprung up everywhere "like bamboo shoots after the rain"<sup>25</sup> and there was a boom in the pedaling of amateur pornography. Intellectuals such as Sakaguchi Ango<sup>26</sup> wrote about the sense of "release" (*kaihô*) from hegemonic gender and sexual norms that Japanese people experienced at the war's end. Rubin points out that "the Japanese were sick to death of being preached at constantly to be good, frugal, hardworking, and self-sacrificing" and were consequently attracted to "a decadence that was simply the antithesis of prewar wholesomeness."<sup>27</sup> Many people were keen to forget the past and looked forward to the beginning of a new and newly private life in which eroticism was flaunted as an important symbol of liberation.

The immediate postwar years saw the development of a *kasutori* (low-grade, pulp)<sup>28</sup> culture which Dower describes as "a commercial world dominated by sexually oriented entertainments and a veritable cascade of pulp literature."<sup>29</sup> Japanese writers were now free to dispense with the "wholesome" preoccupations of earlier literature and instead explore more "decadent" themes,<sup>30</sup> including a whole genre of "carnal literature" (*nikutai bungaku*) in which the physicality of the body was emphasized over more ideological concerns.<sup>31</sup> Various *kasutori* magazines evidenced the reemergence of *ryôki* or "curiosity seeking" (in erotic matters) and had much in common with the 1920s fad for publications specializing in "erotic, grotesque nonsense."<sup>32</sup> Developing out of these fly-by-night publications, from the early 1950s, a range of more high-brow magazines appeared that allowed readers to indulge their interest in "perverse desires" (*hentai seiyoku*). Of particular interest is the freedom with which these magazines discussed people who in English were politely spoken of as "sex deviants" or "sex variants," but in common parlance were more usually referred to as "queers" or "perverts" (Streitmatter 1995).

The Japanese perverse press of the late 1940s and 1950s offers a remarkable resource for the study of post-war minority sexualities unparalleled in English and probably in any other language in the world.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, these "perverse" or "mania" magazines, as they were termed, had an extremely wide range of interests and, purporting to offer true accounts, drew upon anecdotes from Japan's feudal past as well as stories from European and Asian societies, often relying on anthropological reports. Significantly, these early magazines did not segregate the material into hetero- or homosexual-themed publications, as became standard in the 1970s, but featured a wide range of "perverse desires" (*hentai seiyoku*), including practically any type of sexual activity other than "ordinary sex (*futsû no sekkusu*) between a man and a woman."<sup>34</sup> The most long lived was *Kitan kurabu* (Strange-talk club) published between 1952 and 1975 which, albeit mainly focusing on sadomasochism,<sup>35</sup> included discussions and illustrations of a range of "abnormal" (*abunômaru*) topics including homosexuality and male and female cross-dressing. Other magazines which included information about homosexuality and transgender phenomena included *Ningen tankyû* (Human research; 1950-53),<sup>36</sup> *Amatoria* (1951-58), *Fûzoku kagaku* (Sex-customs science; 1953-55), *Fûzoku zôshi* (Sex-customs storybook; 1953-55), *Ura mado* (Rear window; 1956-65) and *Fûzoku kitan* (Strange talk about sex customs; 1960-1974).<sup>37</sup>

The "experts" who wrote for the perverse magazines of the 1950s were different from those writing in the prewar sexology publications in that few claimed any kind of medical or psychiatric training. Referred to as *sensei*, most writers were more literary in bent, and their authority derived from their extensive reading about both Japanese and foreign *fûzoku*<sup>38</sup> or "sexual customs" which included sexological and psychoanalytic works but also anthropological, historical and literary treatises. While a familiar repertoire of theories from sexology and psychoanalysis such as "inversion," "arrested development," "fetishism," "narcissism" and "penis envy" were rehearsed in these articles, more literary theories deriving from writers such as Gide, DH Lawrence and Genet were also discussed, as was Kinsey's recently published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* which had been translated into Japanese in 1950.

Unlike the *kasutori* magazines that sprung up immediately after the war, several early 50s publications attempted to project a more cultured approach to their subject matter. *Ningen tankyû* acknowledged on its cover that it offered articles on "sexual science for cultured persons (*bunkajin*)," pointing out in an editorial that so long as sex education remained "incomplete," sex could never be truly liberated. *Fûzoku kagaku*, too, offered its readers "a unique gathering of sex-customs researchers," and, in an attempt to benefit from the new cachet of the English language, it also featured the line "for your sexual customs study" on many of its covers. *Fûzoku zôshi* also described itself on the cover as "a new interest magazine for contemporary persons," suggesting that its subject matter should be of concern to modern-thinking people. Indeed, many contributors to these magazines referred to themselves and their readers as members of the "intelligentsia" (*interi*), among whom interest in sexual perversity was held to be particularly keen. To an extent then, *hentai*, or "(sexual) perversity" was re-figured, not as an anomaly which needed to be identified and eradicated, but as a potentiality inherent in all human desire which was in need of intellectual analysis and elaboration. In these magazines, debate about perversity was also democratized, with a broad range of "intellectuals" (including readers themselves) speculating on the topic, not just a narrow band of medical or legal experts as tended to be the case in Anglophone discussion.



The breadth of reference in these magazines and the fact that readers often wrote letters and contributed longer descriptive pieces about their own "perverse desires" meant that pathologizing medical, criminal and psychoanalytic theories did not establish such a firm hold on popular discourse about transgenderism and homosexuality in Japan as was the case in Anglophone, particularly American popular writings, at this time. Indeed, the magazines relied on contributions from readers for a substantial percentage of their copy and actively recruited confessional stories. Self-confessions had a well established place in the history of sexuality; the early German sexologist Krafft-Ebing had relied on them to provide many of the case studies for his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, first published in 1886. However, the fact that the perverse magazines were published on a monthly basis and featured letters columns, gave readers the opportunity to engage with and sometimes contest the theories of the experts. While the vast majority of readers letters and contributions were from men, there exist also numerous accounts purporting to be from women experiencing same-sex desire - although the fact that "Lesbos love" was a fantasy trope for many heterosexual men means that these are rather ambivalent documents that need to be approached with care.

### **Representations of "Lesbos love" in the perverse press**

While the main focus of the perverse press was upon the male subject and his desires, whether heterosexually oriented as in discussions of sadomasochism, fetishism, masturbation and sex techniques or homosexually oriented as in the many articles on male homosexual meeting places, women's sexuality was not overlooked. Indeed, compared with prewar writing which tended to deny women's sexual agency, the postwar press recognized that women were as liable to sexual perversity as were men although the framework within which women's same-sex love was discussed was unrelentingly "masculinist,"<sup>39</sup> that is, dependent upon categories derived from male same-sex paradigms by a professional body of male experts.

Despite the fact that there were fewer articles discussing female same-sex sexuality, "Lesbos love" was a subgenre of considerable extent, created by writers using both male and female pen names. Some of these writers, at least, attempted to approach the subject of women's same-sex love seriously, albeit within the narrow parameters

available at the time, whereas others produced works of fiction quite as prurient as those seen in the US genre of lesbian pulp which also sprang up after the war.<sup>40</sup> In these graphically illustrated stories [ILLUSTRATION 2], the "sadistic" lesbian was a figure that evoked fascination in both men and women alike and with titles such as "Under my elder sister's whip",<sup>41</sup> "Torture delicate skin"<sup>42</sup> and "Inflamed skin"<sup>43</sup> the purportedly female writers left little to the imagination.

Yet, despite the existence of these documents, searching for actual lesbian experience in the postwar period is rendered problematic by the fact that many heterosexual men were interested in fantasizing about lesbianism and it is difficult to distinguish between fantasy writing in which lesbian desire was scripted (either by male or female writers) so as to appeal to a heterosexual male readership and that which was written by women themselves who experienced same-sex desire and wrote to the magazines in the hope of making contact with other women. Certainly by the mid 1950s *Kitan kurabu* was regularly featuring stories about lesbian love which were scripted in terms of male fantasy as is suggested by the illustrations of high-school girls dressed in their sailor-suit blouses<sup>44</sup> and the "perverse" nature of some of the articles such as "Lesbos and enemas."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, by the late 1950s lesbianism had become a central fantasy trope in male pornography and was closely associated with sadomasochism, an association which has been maintained till the present day.

However, in the early post-war years there does appear to have been some attempt made to include women's same-sex experiences and perspectives in the perverse press. While the idea, common in the prewar literature, that women were more liable to develop "spiritual" love relationships with other women unlike the more "carnal" interests of men, the postwar perverse press recognized that "Lesbos love" ranged from schoolgirl crushes to full sexual relationships between adult women. An unsigned article in the December 1953 issue of *Fûzoku zôshi* entitled "Various phases of Lesbos love," for instance, mentioned that "*resubosu*" (Lesbos) ranged from such "insignificant" things as the exchange of love letters between schoolgirls to more serious matters "which would make men blush," going on to describe the various ways in which women had historically pleased themselves and each other, deriving examples from ancient Greece, Muromachi period Japan (1333-1568) and colonial Africa.<sup>46</sup>

As well as providing examples of Lesbos love, analysts were also keen to offer explanations of its genesis. Some writers followed sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing, who argued that "masculinized" women with small breasts, little subcutaneous fat and narrow pelvises who spoke with "sonorous voices" were likely candidates for same-sex love.<sup>47</sup> However, in line with prewar discussion of young women's sentimental same-sex relationships, homosexual feelings were more often understood to be situational, likely to occur in all-female environments such as girls' schools and dormitories for nurses and female factory workers.<sup>48</sup> These desires were not considered permanent but something that would be outgrown once the women got married.

The conflation of these two lines of thought about the origin of "Lesbos love" is put to considerable (but probably unintended) comic effect in an unsigned article in the September 1954 edition of *Fûzoku kagaku* which purports to be a conversation between an eighteen-year-old high-school girl and her home tutor.<sup>49</sup> During the conversation, the young woman confesses that the reason she has been spending so much time away from home is, as her tutor suspects, because she has taken a lover. Her tutor asks what kind of man he is, to which she replies "A man? What are you talking about?" The conversation continues:

Tutor: I'm shocked. Do you mean to say the partner you are hot for is of the same sex? In other words are you saying it's a matter of Lesbos (*resubosu*)?

Girl: That's right, so you needn't worry.

Tutor: Not at all. Hearing that it is Lesbos makes me worry all the more... Getting involved in homosexuality (*dôseiai*) is unnatural and abnormal.

Girl: You say it's abnormal?

Tutor: ...Yes, don't you know the cause of Lesbos? It became popular in the shogun's harem. It was a sexual outlet for women in a place where there was only one sex... Nowadays it happens in factory dormitories and women's prisons.

Girl: Oh how unpleasant!

The conversation proceeds with the young woman telling her tutor more about her lover, a twenty-seven-year-old school teacher. The teacher had run away from her husband on her wedding night and was now living in a nearby boarding house so that the two could spend more time together. The tutor asks "Is this teacher by any chance on the tall side, muscular, with small breasts and hips and does she speak in a sonorous voice?" To which the girl replies "Yes, that's absolutely right, it sounds as if you've met her!" The tutor then goes on to explain that the girl's teacher is clearly a member of the "intermediate sex" (*chûsei*) but that the girl herself is simply going through a phase of "spiritual" (*seishinteki*) love directed toward the more masculine elements of an older woman, one which she will outgrow. His last words are "Once your passion for this teacher has cooled, you ought next to exert yourself wholeheartedly and discover the good things about men." Whether his young charge takes this advice is, however, left unclear, making this an ambivalent document.

While the articles described above were most likely written by men or women aimed at attracting an audience primarily of men, some discussions of Lesbos love do claim to be based on the experience of actual women. For instance, from its April issue of 1953, *Fûzoku zôshi* began an intermittent column entitled "Lesbos Communication" (*Resubosu tsûshin*) which was described as "A secret love salon for women only." While the column was headed by a person using the name Sonomura Keiko, a woman's name, the actual gender of the writer is probably best left undecided since Keiko's eager rhapsodizing about the beauty of women's bodies seems suspiciously close to male fantasies of lesbian desire. For instance, she describes herself as a "man hater" (*otokogirai*)<sup>50</sup> because of the manner in which "bestial" men "take beautiful young women by force" and, unlike Keiko herself, pay no heed to the natural delicacy of "young virgins." Keiko is adamant that her caresses are different from those of men and that only under her ministrations can tender maidens reach satisfaction.<sup>51</sup>

There are also other problems with Keiko's personality as it is expressed in her column, particularly her use of language which is rather chatty in tone and employs a substantial number of feminine markers such as the sentence finals "*wa*," "*no*" and

"*kashira*." This gives the impression that the writer is self-consciously attempting to create the persona of a woman, rather than express the sensibility of an actual woman. While not wanting to deny that communication between lesbians, like that of gay men, can be camp and playful, there are several instances when Keiko's tone is distinctly coquettish - but she seems to be playing to male and not female fantasies. For instance, in her September 1953 column, Keiko responds to various queries supposedly sent in by readers (although the letters themselves are not reproduced). Her response to "A-*sama*" seems sexually provocative and tailored to stimulate the prurient interest of men:

Asking me such a question is in really bad taste. It's embarrassing. I don't know what to say. I've never seen that kind of thing. I don't use them. They're scary. You've destroyed my peace of mind. If I were to explain that kind of thing to a young girl, then afterwards I'd reproach myself. Why is it that men have interest in such things I wonder?<sup>52</sup>

Quite what Keiko's interlocutor had in mind is left up to the readers' imagination.

It is also not possible to identify the persona of Keiko as that of "a lesbian" since neither the transliterated terms *resubian* nor, the more recent *rezubian*,<sup>53</sup> appear in her column and were, in fact, rarely used in the perverse press until the early 1960s. Rather, Keiko speaks of her interest in "Lesbos love" and of her "Lesbos experiences" suggesting, it could be supposed, that she may later be redeemed for heterosexual love in a manner that would prove impossible for male homosexuals who were more often understood to be "innately" (*sententeki*) perverse. Indeed, it seems to have been widely held at this time that female homosexuality (*joshi dôseiai*) was easier to cure than the male variety on account of it being more of a "spiritual" (*seishinteki*) than a "carnal" (*nikutaiteki*) desire. For instance, an advice columnist writing in *Amatoria* in 1953 advises a husband afraid that his wife may be having an affair with another woman that she can easily be "cured" by him creating a more romantic atmosphere in the home, taking her on hiking trips and, most importantly, paying more attention to foreplay.<sup>54</sup>

Suspicions about the real audience for Keiko's column are also raised by an advertisement calling for correspondents. Although initially asking for letters from "women only" concerning the "delicate" feelings that women share, as well as "deeper" questions concerning physical relationships, letters are also welcomed from "men who have an interest in the love of Lesbos" which Keiko offers to answer. In the magazine's August 1953 column, Keiko answers one such letter. In response to an inquiry about what, exactly, she finds most attractive about the same sex, Keiko demurs, finding it difficult to come up with an explanation other than that "while riding in the train, when I see the nape of the neck of a young female student, I'm overcome with the desire to kiss her." The fact that in the next month's column (September 1953) Keiko elects to answer a letter from a 17-year old high-school girl, enabling her to adopt the role of "big sister" (which in this context has erotic overtones) further fuels the suspicion that "Lesbos communication," in this magazine at least, is being carried out between men. This impression is further heightened by an essay on "Lesbos techniques" contributed by Keiko to the Autumn 1953 special edition of *Fûzku zôshi* where she again chooses schoolgirls to illustrate the delights of Lesbos love. She writes, "Embracing (her partner) while sitting on her lap, red lips touch red lips; the lips of young girls exude the odor of milk" This description is immediately followed by a section concerning "finger play."<sup>55</sup>

The fact that descriptions of Lesbos' love in the pages of the perverse press were more than likely tailored for a male readership does not, however, mean that they were never read and enjoyed by women. Given the paucity of other contexts in which women's same-sex desire was discussed in the 1950s, many American lesbians, for instance, purchased lesbian-themed pulp novels aimed at men but "had to read between the lines and ignore the homophobic or moralistic storylines".<sup>56</sup> However, without corroborating evidence from women who read and responded to these magazines, it is extremely difficult to know to what extent, if at all, the perverse press impacted on the lives of same-sex desiring women in Japan.

While numerous letters from homosexual men were printed in these magazines testifying to the value of the information offered, there were far fewer letters from women reflecting on their own feelings about "Lesbos love." What letters were published, such as a contribution entitled "Beautiful maidens please get in touch" in

the June 1954 issue of *Fûzoku kagaku*, tended to be from women asking the magazine to put them in contact with other like-minded women. Some of the lesbian-themed stories in *Fûzoku kagaku* were followed by a few brief comments purportedly from women readers. Almost without exception, these readers mention how much they enjoyed the articles and ask the magazine editors to include more. In the April 1954 edition of *Fûzoku kagaku*, one woman, signing herself as Homoko (-ko being a common character used to write women's names and "homo" a contraction of the transliteration *homosekushuaru*), complains that "since you mainly print articles about perverse love among men, it seems that you think that perverse love between women is extremely rare but in fact I think that it is very common...Please will the editors include many more articles about female homosexuals (*josei no homo*)." Another woman, signing herself as Hyacinth, writes in to the same edition to say that "I'm a twenty-seven-year-old office worker and since my girlhood have never had any interest in men...it seems from reading your magazine that there are a large number of articles for men with no interest in women but please consider that there are many other women like me. How about including...many more articles that would satisfy women like me?" In both cases notes from the editors promise to include more discussion of women's same-sex love.

There is good reason to consider such comments as genuine. The February 1955 edition of the magazine, for instance, printed a letter asking the magazine to establish an "association for female homos" (*josei homo no kai*)<sup>57</sup> similar to an organization it had sponsored for men.<sup>58</sup> This does suggest there was a female readership for the magazine and that the editors made a genuine effort to respond to this readership by printing the letter. The (apparently female) letter writer, who signed herself Yume Miruko (Ms Dreamer), pointed out that while numerous coffee shops and bars exist where "male homos" can meet, no such venues existed for women. Since it was difficult for women to socialize with like-minded peers, she asked the magazine to organize occasional meetings such as trips to the "cinema, jazz clubs and hiking" that would be suitable for women in search of female partners. Unfortunately, the magazine folded soon after this letter was printed and it is unknown whether such meetings ever eventuated.

Another article which suggests a genuine attempt on the part of the magazine's editors to engage women readers was printed in the March 1955 edition of *Fûzoku kagaku* under the title "Female homos here we go."<sup>59</sup> The discussion was organized as a round table or *zadankai*, a common academic mode of discourse in Japan, the results of which are often transcribed and published. It is considered to be a useful, non-hierarchical way of approaching a topic that allows for the voicing of a variety of opinions and was to become a staple form of communication in lesbian and gay organizations of the future. The participants are identified as a male writer who is a "researcher of male homosexuality," a male chairperson representing the magazine, and three women, one identifying as the madam of a bar and two as office workers. Despite the participation of three women in the discussion, the dominance of the male chair, who is always the one to ask the questions, inscribes a masculinist bias in the interaction. However, as the discussion unfolds, it is evident that the women are able to an extent to deflect attention away from male paradigms and models.

The discussion opens with the chairperson explaining that there has been a long tradition of "male homos" in Japan but that the homosexual experience of women has largely been overlooked. He mentions that many women readers of the magazine had written in to ask that the editors include discussion of women's homosexual experience and that other letters asking the magazine to set up a social club for female homosexuals, similar to one it had sponsored for men, had also been received. After a discussion of the contents of some of these letters, the chair moves on to discuss whether female homosexuality, like male, can be understood in terms of the "innate" and "acquired" typology discussed earlier. The chair asks the women "Is it the case that you innately hate men?"

This rather reductive inquiry proves problematic in this instance since the bar madam (who identifies herself as being much older than the two office workers) mentions that she was brought up in a family consisting mainly of men and had at one time been married, consequently while she did not think men particularly charming, she did not dislike them either. However, all three women were unanimous that this "constituent" (*yôso*) of their personalities was present in their childhood and that advances from young men were not welcomed. They point out that women's romantic feelings for each other are not particularly unusual and that such relationships are common among



all-female theater groups, students at girls' schools and among female factory workers who live in on-site dormitories, as well as among women working in the entertainment trade. The chair agreed that "as you'd expect, female homos are by no means uncommon," citing an incident he witnessed of two women kissing in a bar late at night on his way home from a year-end party.

As mentioned, the terms of the discussion are largely determined by the chairman who relies upon notions framing male homosexual experience when posing his questions. However, the female discussants seem uninterested in pursuing comparisons with male homosexuals. Although the bar madam agrees that among "female homos" there are many who adopt "male" (*dansei gata*) and "female" (*josei gata*) roles, there are also many women who do not, including those present at the discussion. The female participants in the discussion also point out that contrary to male homosexuals, women are more liable to "fall head over heels in love" (*chi michi wo agete shimau*) with actresses and female singers in an "entirely spiritual" (*zenzen seishinteki*) manner - recalling the prewar notion that women were more predisposed to "spiritual love," a capacity which men were supposed to lack.<sup>60</sup> Yet, while some women may be satisfied with this kind of relationship, the participants acknowledge that it does not satisfy all.

The women are also asked if they experience a "vagina envy" (*yoni naido*) similar to the "penis envy" (*fuarusu naido*)<sup>61</sup> supposedly common among male homosexuals - a question which they initially fail to understand since they do not recognize the terms *yoni* or *phallus*, one woman exclaiming "Speak Japanese!" This leads to a discussion of whether or not the size and shape of the vagina is of erotic interest for women - it being decided that women's breasts and skin are, for most women, more important sites of attraction. It is also pointed out that another important difference between male and female homosexuals is that the "professional" and "semi-professional" categories of sex worker common among male homosexuals are not part of the women's scene.<sup>62</sup>

It is difficult to know how to read these lesbian-themed articles in *Fûzoku kagaku*. On the surface there does seem to be a genuine attempt to engage with actual women's experience and yet, despite the stress on the more "spiritual" side of women's same-

sex love, the round-table discussion was illustrated with two suggestively posed bikini-clad western women - a gesture to the prominence of western notions of female beauty which became widespread in Japan under the Occupation. Under the caption "women's heaven," one of the models says "I'm calling you" and the illustration can probably be regarded as much an address to the magazine's male readership as it is to a potentially lesbian audience. Yet, such tactics should not necessarily be read as alienating a female readership. Bannon, for instance, points out how same-sex desiring American women reclaimed the raunchy covers of lesbian-themed pulp fiction of the 1950s by reading them "iconically."<sup>63</sup> The existence of male-oriented lesbian pulp fiction notwithstanding,<sup>64</sup> it should also be remembered that the publication of such a positive portrayal of lesbianism would have been quite impossible in an English commercial magazine at a time when the very mention of the word "lesbian" could be considered obscene.<sup>65</sup>

Both *Fûzoku kagaku* and *Fûzoku zôshi*, the two perverse magazines that seemed to most genuinely attempt to engage women readers, both folded in 1955. Discussion of "Lesbos love" did, however, increase in succeeding ventures such as *Ura mado* (1956-65), *Fûzoku kitan* (1960-1974) and the many SM magazines that appeared in the late 1960s and early 70s, reversing the balance of the earlier magazines where it was male homosexuality that was of most interest. Yet a male voice and audience is clearly discernable behind these later publications and "Lesbos love" is reduced to a male fantasy trope. For instance, the men's pornographic magazine *SM Fan* ran its own "Lesbos Communication" (*Resubosu tsûshin*) column from February to June 1973. Intriguingly, this column was attributed to a person writing under the female name of Sonoyama Keiko which differs by only one character from Sonomura Keiko, the author of the original 1953 column.<sup>66</sup> This is surely no coincidence, yet whether the later author was writing in tribute to the earlier or was even the same person remains unknown, as does his or her actual gender. Given that during the 1960s the image of the lesbian became and has remained a common staple in male pornographic magazines, it is unlikely female names relate to actual women writers or that these writings express female subjectivities.<sup>67</sup>

During the 1960s "Lesbos love" was gradually replaced by the term *rezubian*<sup>68</sup> and by the end of the decade this had been further reduced to *rezu*<sup>69</sup> - both terms strongly

associated with sadomasochism and male pornography. A look at the authors of these many articles shows that the vast majority are writing under male names, with only a handful of writers using female designations. Given the difficulty of establishing whether or not in the context of these magazines female names represent actual women, it is probably safe to assume that despite early efforts, "Lesbos love," in the perverse press at least, was primarily a conversation carried on between men.<sup>70</sup> If and how lesbian women made use of these narratives remains unclear.

## **Conclusion**

Accounts of lesbian history written by Japanese and western writers alike tend to take the establishment of the women's movement in 1970 as year zero for the development of a modern lesbian consciousness.<sup>71</sup> Attempts that have recently been made by individuals from Japan's male gay community to reclaim the perverse press as part of postwar gay history<sup>72</sup> have so far not been made in the context of lesbian historiography. While interview data relating to older gay men's memory of these magazines has been collected by Fushimi and others, testifying to the immense importance that the perverse press had upon the development of male homosexual subcultures in the 1950s, such memories have not so far been recorded from older lesbian women in Japan and we have no first-hand testaments as to how these narratives might have been received and deployed in a process of lesbian self-fashioning.

Nevertheless, I think there are moments, especially in the early 1950s magazines, in which women's experience is visible. The many letters contributed by female readers asking the editors of magazines such as *Fûzoku kagaku* and *Fûzoku zôshi* to print more articles of interest to practitioners of "Lesbos love" signifies that there was already an audience for such material. Similarly, the inclusion of female participants in round-table discussions, despite the masculinist bias of the magazines, did provide opportunity for women to speak in their own voices and to challenge the male paradigms which were deployed to interpret their experience. Above all, the fact that there were communities of same-sex loving women who were easily identifiable and who could be enticed to participate in such collaborations suggests that lesbian

networking was alive and well in Japan well before the impact of second-wave feminism.

The lesbian erotic fiction presented in these magazines is more difficult to interpret. Part of the problem is that it is not possible at this remove to know who, exactly, was producing this genre. Was Keiko an actual woman with same-sex desires who, like Ann Bannon, was constrained to write within the narrow confines of a masculinist discourse, or was she a female persona created by a male author? The reading I offer above leans toward the latter interpretation but even this does not discount the value of the narratives offered for some same-sex desiring women who may have been able to incorporate these stories and images in their own erotic fantasy life.

Despite the lack of first-hand accounts of how these images and narratives were received, I hope that I have been able to show that there was at least some attempt on the part of the early 1950s perverse press to engage an audience of same-sex desiring women and that this attempt was accepted in good faith by some female readers. I hope that other researchers will be encouraged to give a more thorough reading of this body of material so as to help increase our understanding of the lives and loves of women-loving women in Japan's early postwar period.

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**Mark McLelland** is a research fellow in the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland. He is the author of *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan* (RoutledgeCurzon 2000), *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age* (Rowman and Littlefield in press) and the co-editor of *Japanese Cybercultures* (Routledge 2003) and *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan* (Routledge in press).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Wu, "Performing Gender," and Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire*, 285, 303.

<sup>2</sup> See Fushimi, "*Gei*" to *iu keiken*.

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- <sup>3</sup> See Chalmers, *Emerging Lesbian Voices*, Hattori, "Heterosexism and Women's Lives in Japan," and Ishino and Wakabayashi, "Japan."
- <sup>4</sup> See Leupp, "'The Floating World is Wide...!'"
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> See Wu, "Performing Gender," 68 and Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire*, 23-4.
- <sup>7</sup> See Furukawa, "The Changing Nature of Sexuality."
- <sup>8</sup> See Wu, "Performing Gender," 68 and Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire*, 248.
- <sup>9</sup> See Furukawa, "The Changing Nature of Sexuality."
- <sup>10</sup> See Robertson, *Takarazuka*, 68.
- <sup>11</sup> See for example *Hentai shiryô*, 73.
- <sup>12</sup> See Roden, "Taishô Culture and the Problem of Gender Ambivalence."
- <sup>13</sup> Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds*, 109, for instance, draws attention to a 1931 advertisement for a book entitled *Tôkyô ero on parêdo* (Tokyo eros on parade), which claimed to be the definitive guide to sex establishments in Tokyo. Intriguingly the advert appeared in the in-house journal of the Home Ministry, opposite a notice for a new legal dictionary.
- <sup>14</sup> See Robertson, *Takarazuka*, and Roden, "Taishô Culture," 47-8.
- <sup>15</sup> See Weisenfeld, *Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde*.
- <sup>16</sup> See Wu, "Performing Gender," 78-9.
- <sup>17</sup> See Matsuzawa, "Meiji, Taishô, Shôwa, kindai fûzoku shuppan no rekishi," 55.
- <sup>18</sup> Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire*, 287.
- <sup>19</sup> Angles, *Writing the Love of Boys*, 183.
- <sup>20</sup> Roden, "Taishô Culture and the Problem of Gender Ambivalence," 46.
- <sup>21</sup> Fruhstuck, *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan*, 103.
- <sup>22</sup> Matsuzawa, "Meiji, Taishô, Shôwa, kindai fûzoku shuppan no rekishi," 55.
- <sup>23</sup> Japanese media were later to undergo two "gay booms" - the first in 1958 occasioned by the new visibility of transgender stars such as Miwa Akihiro and the second in the early 1990s due to the increased activism of Japan's sexual minorities. The late 1990s saw a boom in interest in the new category of "transgender." See McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*.
- <sup>24</sup> Cited in Mitchell, *Censorship in Imperial Japan*, 311.
- <sup>25</sup> Shimokawa, *Nihon ero shashinshi*, 172.

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<sup>26</sup> For a philosophical reflection of postwar decadence, see Sakaguchi's "Discourse on Decadence," originally published in the monthly magazine *Shincho* in 1946.

<sup>27</sup> Rubin, "From Wholesomeness to Decadence: The Censorship of Literature under the Allied Occupation," 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Kasutori* is literally a poor quality wine distilled from sake lees. Drinkers were supposed to collapse after only three glasses - just as these magazines tended to fold after their third issue. See Matsuzawa, "Meiji, Taishô, Shôwa, kindai fûzoku shuppan no rekishi," 59.

<sup>29</sup> Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, 148.

<sup>30</sup> Rubin, "From Wholesomeness to Decadence: The Censorship of Literature under the Allied Occupation," 72-3.

<sup>31</sup> See Kerkham, "Pleading for the Body: Tamura Tajirô's 1947 Korean Comfort Women Story, *Biography of a Prostitute*," 325-335, and Igarashi, *Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970*, 55-61.

<sup>32</sup> See Bessatsu Taiyô, *Hakkinbon*, 198-199, and Fukushima, *Zasshi de miru sengoshi*, 92-3.

<sup>33</sup> See McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, for an in depth analysis of the genre and the local social situation that made such discourse possible.

<sup>34</sup> Shimokawa, "Hentai no sôgô depâtô *Kitan kurabu* kara *SM serekuto* ga ubugoe wo agerumade," 53.

<sup>35</sup> See Kitahara and Saotome, *Kitan kurabu no hitobito*, and Matsuzawa, "Meiji, Taishô, Shôwa, kindai fûzoku shuppan no rekishi," 60-62.

<sup>36</sup> Designating the exact dates at which these magazines began and ceased publication is difficult. These approximate dates are based on the collection held by Tokyo's Fûzoku Shiryôkan and my own search of online databases provided by second-hand booksellers.

<sup>37</sup> *Fûzoku kitan* changed its name in November 1974 to *SM Fantajia* (SM fantasia), the last issue of which was published in September of 1975.

<sup>38</sup> During the Meiji period *fûzoku* or "customs" was used in magazine titles to refer to contemporary customs or popular trends, but before the war began to be used as a circumlocution for sexual customs, as a means of avoiding the censor's gaze. See Matsuzawa, "Meiji, Taishô, Shôwa, kindai fûzoku shuppan no rekishi," 61-2.

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- <sup>39</sup> See Blackwood and Wieringa, "Sapphic Shadows: Challenging the Silence in the Study of Sexuality," 44-5.
- <sup>40</sup> See Zimet, *Strange Sisters: the Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction, 1949-1969*.
- <sup>41</sup> Narushima, "Onesama no muchi no shita."
- <sup>42</sup> Kita, "Yawa hadae wo semete."
- <sup>43</sup> Wada, "Tadareta hadae."
- <sup>44</sup> Hanamura, "Resubosu no ki."
- <sup>45</sup> Hamura, "Resubosu to kanchô."
- <sup>46</sup> See *Fûzoku zôshi*, "Resubosu ai no shujusô," 299.
- <sup>47</sup> QR, "Josei no dôseiai ni tsuite."
- <sup>48</sup> See Ôta, *Dai san no sei: sei no hôkai*, 398, and QR, "Josei no dôseiai ni tsuite."
- <sup>49</sup> *Fûzoku kagaku*, "Musebi naku jotai: resubosu."
- <sup>50</sup> This echoes the Edo-period term *onnagirai* or "woman hater" used of men who preferred the love of youths over that of women.
- <sup>51</sup> Sonomura, "Resubosu tsûshin," July 1953.
- <sup>52</sup> Sonomura, "Resubosu tsûshin," September 1953.
- <sup>53</sup> Both the 1974 and 1993 editions of *Kenkyûsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* list only *resubian*. The 2003 edition, however, lists both: *rezubian*, followed by *resubian*.
- <sup>54</sup> Nishijima, "Dôseiai keikô no tsuma to seikan."
- <sup>55</sup> Sonomura, "Resubosu tekuniiku," 215.
- <sup>56</sup> See Zimet, *Strange Sisters: the Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction, 1949-1969*, 21, and Weismann and Fernie, *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*. One example of Japanese lesbians reading against the grain occurs in the context of 1970s and early 80s "boy love" comics such as *June* and *Allan*; some lesbian biographies offer accounts of how women readers identified with these androgynous same-sex couples. See McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*.
- <sup>57</sup> *Fûzoku kagaku*, "Josei homo no kai," February 1955, 37.
- <sup>58</sup> For a discussion of the men's "sodomia" discussion society, the FKK Club, see McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*.
- <sup>59</sup> Saijô, "Zadankai: josei no homo makari tôru."
- <sup>60</sup> See Fruhstuck, *Colonizing Sex*, 126.

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<sup>61</sup>The Japanese *naido* written with characters suggesting "yearning" seems to be a borrowing from the German *Fallus Neid* meaning penis envy. I am grateful to Wim Lunsing for pointing this out. When applied to male homosexuals, it obviously does not refer to a yearning for the absent penis, but for the supposedly bigger and better penises of other men.

<sup>62</sup> While this is perhaps true of the 1950s, there did develop a subculture of masculine-role playing women working in the bar world who were available as paid companions for other women. See McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*.

<sup>63</sup> Bannon, "Foreword," 12.

<sup>64</sup> See Zimet, *Strange Sisters: the Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction, 1949-1969*.

<sup>65</sup> As Zimet, *Ibid*, 20, points out, it was an important convention of the lesbian-pulp genre that "the lesbian go crazy in the end - otherwise the post office might seize the books as obscene." Even pulp novels written by lesbians themselves were constrained by regulations requiring an unhappy ending since lesbianism was not to be "promoted as something to be admired or desired."

<sup>66</sup> I suspect wordplay here. Leonie Stickland pointed out to me that if the interchangeable characters of Sonomura and Sonoyama Keiko are removed, we are left with a near homophone for *sono keikô* (that tendency), a euphemism for homosexual desire.

<sup>67</sup> Furuda, "Dôseiai senmonshi," 96, notes that when the editor of *Fûzoku kitan* was approached about starting a magazine solely for homosexual men in 1970, he refused because he did not think there was a sufficient market. Although *Fûzoku kitan* continued to print a few articles about male homosexuality, its two staples were lesbianism and SM - both clearly directed at a heterosexual male market.

<sup>68</sup>The first instance of the use of *resubian* (with an s) I have found in the *title* of an article is in the August 1960 special "Resubian no seitai" (Lesbian way of life) edition of *Fûzoku kitan*. *Rezubian* (with a z) appears in the title of an article in the January 1961 edition of the same magazine.

<sup>69</sup> The first instance of the use of *rezu* in the *title* of an article I have come across is in the April 1969 edition of *Kitan kurabu* after which it becomes extremely popular, outstripping both "*resubosu ai*" and *rezubian*.

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<sup>70</sup> Writing on lesbianism was not the only context in the postwar period in which women's experience was appropriated by male writers. Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory*, 123, analyzes several pulp novels published in the 1950s which purport to expose the sexual exploitation of Japanese women by foreign men. While the authors' names and the narrative voices in these texts were female, they later turned out to have been written by men. These texts' eroticization of rape is similar to the manner in which lesbian sex was eroticized so as to appeal to a male readership.

<sup>71</sup> See Anisu, "Komyuniti no rekishi 1971-2001: nenpyô to intabyû de furikaeru," and Chalmers, *Emerging Lesbian Voices*. Chalmers does attempt to find traces of lesbian history in the 1960s but all she finds is, intriguingly, an informant who discovered American lesbian pulp fiction.

<sup>72</sup> See Fushimi, "*Gei*" to iu keiken.