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# Interpretation and Orientalism: Outing Japan's Sexual Minorities to the English-Speaking World

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# **Interpretation and Orientalism: Outing Japan's Sexual Minorities to the English-Speaking World**

**Mark McLelland**

## **Abstract**

The growing visibility of Japanese gay men and lesbians who articulate their identities in a manner similar to activists in the west has been heightened by two recent English books *Queer Japan* and *Coming Out in Japan*. While acknowledging the need to listen to a plurality of voices from Japan, this essay critiques the manner in which the coming-out narratives in these books have been framed by their western translators and editors. In the introductions to both books, Japan is (once again) pictured as a feudal and repressive society. In their efforts to let the homosexual subaltern speak, the translators fall into the common orientalist paradigm of once more homogenizing the Japanese people even as they attempt to use the stories of their homosexual narrators to break down the myth of Japanese homogeneity.

## **Introduction**

Edward Said's Orientalism has little to say about Japan. This is largely because the focus in that work was upon Europe's perception of its most proximate "others:" the cultures and inhabitants of the "near" or "middle" east (naturally understood from a Eurocentric perspective). Yet Japan, the furthest country of the "Far East," which was "about the last such elsewhere located" (Geertz 116), has long been inscribed in narratives that highlight its otherness. Ruth Benedict, for instance, in her war-time monograph designed to explain the Japanese to the American occupying forces as well as to a wider public[1], declared that the Japanese were "the most alien enemy" the United States had ever fought (Benedict 1). Geertz has noted that Benedict's seminal text represents the apogee of a certain kind of ethnographic writing that relies for its rhetorical force upon "the habit of contrasting an 'as we know' us with an 'imagine-that' them" (Geertz 117).

Orientalist representations of Japan that stress the difference between everything Japanese - whether it be food, management practices or sexual behavior - and a normalized west are very common and have been perceptively critiqued by many scholars (Minear, Yoneyama, Sardar, Allison, Morley and Robins, Hammond). It is not the purpose of this essay to review these criticisms - instead I wish to point out how the representation of Japan as a strange and ultimately less-evolved society is still being perpetuated, particularly through the deployment of Japanese minority voices whose marginalized experience is appropriated by western writers in a rhetorical attack on the health and wellbeing of Japanese society as a whole.

Said has noted that a constant theme in western representations of "the Orient" has been Eastern societies' supposed sexual license. This sexual othering or fetishization of the Orient is so conspicuous that, as Said argues, "the Orient becomes a living tableaux of queerness" (Said 103). The sexual othering of Japan has been a persistent trend in western writings, from the time of the early Jesuit visitors (Cooper), through to modern-day journalists. The popularity of images such as *Madame Butterfly* and of geisha, despite the fact that geisha have long since become marginal and exotic figures for the Japanese themselves, is evidence of a fundamental tendency to view Japan as sexually exotic (Kelsky 69). Since the 1980s, when Japan's manga (comic-book) culture drew attention in the western media, these texts have become overdetermined representations of a kind of abiding Japanese perversity. As Sharon Kinsella points out, "images from Japanese animation and manga presented in television shows and magazine reports on the phenomenon in Europe and America have...generally been edited to emphasize violence, sex and strangeness" which fit snugly into "pre-existing notions of Japan as a cruel, sexist, strange and repressed society" (Kinsella 14).

Japan's perversity is frequently rehearsed in the media under an assortment of eye-catching headlines. In 1996 Newsweek ran the front-page headline: "Japan's Dirty Secret: Schoolgirls Selling Sex," going on to describe Japan as "a spiritual wasteland." In 1999, it was the turn of Time magazine which ran the headline "Japan's Shame," confidently asserting that "[Japan] is awash in child porn, and there's little attempt at hiding it." So pervasive is the western perception of Japanese weirdness and so hyperbolic is the media's treatment of Japan's supposed sexual difference, that truly

astonishing (but inaccurate) reports about Japanese sexual license repeatedly find their way into print.

A clear example of this trend can be seen in the articles of James Fallows, who is typical of many journalists who deliberately highlight Japanese perversity. For instance, in an article tellingly entitled "The Japanese are different from you and me," Fallows characterizes the Japanese as "a tight-knit, almost tribal society" (Fallows 35); in so doing he relies upon what Yoneyama refers to as "normative and naturalized perceptions of American 'we-ness'" (Yoneyama 72) which privilege the supposedly "normal" reader over the perverse object of inquiry. A key focus in Fallow's article is Japanese people's questionable sexual ethics. He finds especially disturbing the "prominence of pornography in daily life," particularly the "graphic nastiness of its themes." Fallows moves on from a discussion of pornography in comic books to suggest that these representations are characteristic of the sexual attitudes of the society in general, arguing that "a half-conscious, low grade pedophilia" is Japan's "underlying social motif." His evidence for this startling comment is hearsay from "one advertising man who has been here for ten years and makes his living from understanding the Japanese psyche" and an unsubstantiated article in the Far Eastern Economic Review that, apparently, states "A director can shoot an act of sodomy or rape for a TV drama for the dinner hour with impunity so long as he allows no pubic hair to be shown...particularly...if the female star of the scene is prepubescent." This claim is, of course, absurd and the fact that it could find its way into a mainstream US magazine at all is due to the underlying motif of Japanese perversity so conspicuous in western representations.

A further example of the discourse highlighting Japan's sexual otherness is Arthur Golden's best seller Memoirs of a Geisha, the surprising success of which has generated a plethora of reprints of other books about geisha. Golden's own expertise in Japanese Studies (he has degrees in Japanese art and history) and the assistance he received in writing the book from Japan anthropologist Liza Dalby, cited in the acknowledgements as "the only American woman ever to have become a geisha," (Golden 434) are often mentioned as elements adding to the book's "authentic" tone. Allison, in a critique of the book and of readers' responses to it, wonders how so many could be struck by the book's authenticity despite the fact that it was written by a

white American male speaking in the voice of a Japanese geisha. Allison argues that the book is "orientalist in the Saidean sense of treating the 'Orient' as innately different from the 'West' whose culture homogenizes as well as differentiates 'them' from 'us'." (Allison 382). While acknowledging the success of the novel as a work of fiction, she expresses concern at the role an "outsider" plays in "shaping this story as well as its mass appeal in the United States" (Allison 382), a point to which I shall return below.

Golden took as his base the experiences of an actual geisha, supposedly shared with him by an informant, which he then used to construct an "authentic" tale about Japan that was successful largely because it so graphically confirmed assumptions that many readers already entertained. Below, I want to look at another instance of the role western interpreters of Japanese sexual culture have played in shaping another story about Japan. I argue that a similar process takes place in two recent books about minority sexualities in Japan which present "authentic" life stories in such a manner as to confirm widely entertained orientalist prejudices.

### **Queer in Japan**

Earlier, I suggested that Japan is represented as a sexually perverse society across a wide range of media. Yet, consistent with orientalist treatments of other Asian societies, in other writings Japan is represented as censorious and sexually repressed, particularly where the lives of women and sexual minorities are concerned. In recent years a wide range of sexual minorities in Japan - gay men, lesbians and transgenders - have gained unprecedented exposure in the Japanese media and their stories have come to the attention of western researchers. As a researcher myself, who has been an active participant in and observer of Japan's gay scene for over ten years, I have been alarmed at the way in which the life stories of members of these minorities have been framed by their western translators and interpreters. In the narratives introducing and contextualizing these stories for English readers, Japan is frequently pictured as a feudal and repressive society in which sexual difference is denied, excluded and repressed. As Said points out, representing Asian societies as simultaneously sexually perverse and sexually repressive is characteristic of orientalist narratives (Said 188-190). In the terms of these idées reçues (Said 189) Japan is caught in a double-bind: it

is sexually "different" from the west in all the wrong ways. Japan is represented as permissive where the west requires constraint and repressive where the west requires freedom.

Before looking at the two texts in question, however, it is first necessary to discuss what it might mean to be queer in Japan. The term "queer" translates well into Japanese as hentai - carrying both the sense of strangeness and (sexual) perversity. However, as Lunsing (2001: 342) points out, the use of this Japanese term actually predates the use of "queer" as a catch-all for non-mainstream sexual identities in the Anglophone world. Prior to the advent of specifically gay-oriented media in Japan in the early 1970s, there were a number of hentai-zasshi or "queer magazines" catering to the public's interest in a wide range of paraphilic activities such as bondage, scatology, cross-dressing and male and female homosexuality [2]. The first magazines directed exclusively at gay men appeared in the early 70s, although the six nationally distributed magazines today are primarily pornographic and have so-far contained scant, if any, reference to gay identity, activism or lifestyle (McLelland 2000a: 127-134). There is, however, a tradition of gay activism in Japan dating back to 1971, when Tōgō Ken made his first unsuccessful bid for a seat in the national Diet as an openly gay man. However, these early campaigns were driven primarily by Tōgō and a small band of supporters; it was not until the late 1980s that more organized gay pressure groups styled along western lines began to develop throughout the country (Lunsing 1999). These western-oriented groups soon found themselves in conflict with earlier activists who argued that these groups' preference for narrow identity politics and imported English terminology cut them off from their Japanese roots (Lunsing, 2001: 343; Fushimi [ed.] 2002).

The Japanese media themselves have, within restricted boundaries, provided a place for gender nonconformist men (less so women) to express themselves. Popular transgendered tarento (media "talents") include Peter, Miwa Akihiro, Mikawa Ken'ichi and Carrousel Maki [3] who regularly appear on television shows in feminine attire. The media critics Ōsugi and Piiko, camp but not cross-dressed, often feature as discussants on panel shows and have been publicly open about their homosexuality. Dōsōkai, the first television soap in Japan to take Tokyo's gay subculture as its central theme, aired in 1993 and was in many ways more progressive

in its representations than gay-themed serializations that had been shown in the US, Australia or the UK up to that time (McLelland in press b).

During the early 1990s the mainstream media saw a "gay boom" (Lunsing 1997, McLelland 2000a: 32-37) in which popular magazines and journals and to a lesser extent TV and film began to take an interest in Japan's gay subculture, thus making information about gay meeting places and lifestyles more widely available. From this time, lesbian and gay rights organizations that were modeled more on the activist style prevalent in Europe and the US began to multiply. One of the most prominent of these has been Ugoku gei to rezubian no kai (also known as AKĀ or OCCUR) which launched and won a well-publicized anti-discrimination case against the Tokyo Municipal Authority in 1994 [4]. For the first time, this widespread media interest enabled gay men and lesbians who were not "talents" within the entertainment world to present their own coming out narratives to a wider audience. Books published in the early 1990s included Fushimi Noriaki's Private Gay Life, Kakefuda Hiroko's On Being 'Lesbian' and Itō Satoru's Two Men Living Together: My Gay Pride Declaration. These writers discussed English terms such as "gay" (gei), "lesbian" (rezubian), "gay pride" (gei puraido), homophobia (homofobia) and "coming out" (kamingu auto) and the interest paid to their stories ensured that these loanwords concerned with homosexuality were widely reported in the media. This terminology exists along side traditional indigenous concepts as well as more recently coined Japanese terms; although, as I have argued in other work, these terms are not understood - or deployed - in the same way by all Japanese people (McLelland 2000a: 7-12). Arguments about the appropriateness of indigenous versus imported or traditional versus new terminology for discussing sexual difference are also common within Japan's increasingly fractious gay scene (Lunsing 2001: 297-8, 343; Fushimi [ed.] 2002).

The gay boom also coincided with the development of the Internet in Japan and the Net is now host to tens of thousands of sites with a wide variety of gay and lesbian related information as well as sites dedicated to other sexually non-conformist minorities such as transgenders, transsexuals, bisexuals and a whole range of fetishists (McLelland 2000b, 2002, in press a, b). These sites include Sukotan Plan [5] a gay-rights Internet page run by Itō and Yanase. Indeed, Itō and his partner Yanase, who

have published several books in Japanese about the problems they experienced when coming out and setting up a home together, have become Japan's most famous "gay couple" (gei kappuru) and are regularly cited in Japanese media as spokespersons for the Japanese gay community. Itō is also becoming known in the west as Japan's most high-profile gay activist due to his exposure in English-language media. This has included the appearance of a brief essay by Itō in Summerhawk et al.'s book Queer Japan, interviews with Itō in Japan's English-language press [6] and the release of Itō and Yanase's book Coming Out in Japan by Trans Pacific Press.

However, one drawback to Itō's new English-language visibility is that he is but one of many queer voices represented in the Japanese media, who has a very specific agenda on homosexual rights and reform. His insistence on the necessity of adopting western models of gay identity and coming out have brought him into conflict with other activists such as Fushimi Noriaki and veteran campaigner Tōgō Ken [7]. Unfortunately, nothing is said in either Queer Japan or Coming Out in Japan about the complexity of Japan's gay scene, its long history, nor of the variety of speaking positions available within Japan for discoursing about sexual identity. The impression given in both books is that homosexuality is a taboo topic, but that has certainly not been the case since the early 1990s and fails to recognize the extensive media discussion about sexually ambiguous "talents" dating back to the early 1960s. In highlighting only the voices of those activists who confirm the western editors' own preconceptions about gay identity, and using these voices to speak of the "backwardness" of Japan, I suggest that both books unfortunately reinforce orientalist understandings of Japan that have a long tradition in English-language reporting.

### **Interpreting Queer Japan**

Francis Conlan, the translator of Coming Out in Japan, and Barbara Summerhawk, Cheiron McMahill and Darren McDonald, the translators and editors of Queer Japan, through making available to English readers the first texts to offer contemporary first-person narratives from sexual minority groups in Japan, have played an important role in interpreting these narratives for western readers. At first glance it may seem that Conlan and Summerhawk et al.'s books are rather different from the texts produced by Golden and Fallows, discussed above, in that they reproduce, albeit in translation, the

voices of actual Japanese people. However, the issue of who has been selected to speak in these texts and the extent to which these individuals have a franchise to speak on behalf of others is not addressed. Furthermore, both books are framed by commentaries offered by Conlan and Summerhawk that predispose the reader to approach the texts in a certain manner.

One problem shared by both texts is that a very specific and narrow range of subjects are offered the opportunity to speak on behalf of all members of Japan's sexual minority groups. The narrators featured in both Queer Japan and Coming Out in Japan are predominantly either gay activists or members of feminist and activist organizations and it is not surprising that their stories describe scenes of conflict since activists in any society are liable to experience tension in relation to established authority. The tendency to generalize the experience of these particular narrators has resulted in the lives of members of all sexual minority groups in Japan being represented as a constant struggle for individual freedom against an almost totalitarian regime. However, I suggest that the very specific experiences of a narrow range of individuals presented in these texts are used to make general points about "Japanese society" and "the Japanese psyche" that have much in common with the orientalist paradigms described earlier.

For instance, Conlan tells us in the introduction to Coming Out in Japan that Japanese people are characterized by their "Confucianist mentality, which favours uniformity and authoritarianism," (Itō and Yanase xv) and that "traditionally held conservative, mainstream attitudes are so deeply ingrained in the Japanese psyche that they are virtually sacred" (Itō and Yanase xvi). Needless to say, these "feudal values" (Itō and Yanase xvi) are the main reason that non-conformity is "held in contempt" (Itō and Yanase xvi) and that "bringing about social change is even more difficult in Japan than in the west" (Itō and Yanase xv). Tellingly, Conlan comments that during a recent trip to Japan he was struck by "the imbalance between levels of technology and social attitudes" (Itō and Yanase ix), the latter having moved forward in Japan, if at all, "by a negligible amount" (Itō and Yanase xiii). Here, Conlan is basically arguing that Japan, despite its status as a technological superpower, lags behind the west in terms of social and moral development. This approach is typical of what Johannes Fabian has termed "the all-pervading denial of coevalness" (Fabian 35) underlying

western encounters with "other" societies, an assumption that he refers to as "the West-and-the-Rest complex" (Fabian 155).

Like the prose of Fallows, mentioned earlier, Conlan's writing, too, is susceptible to hyperbolic flights of fancy as when he claims that "[a]n astoundingly negative image of gay men is commonly portrayed and gays are openly pilloried in public arenas" (Itō and Yanase xvi). There are certainly no incidents described in the book that could confirm this picture and, as discussed earlier, the Japanese media do, in fact, contain positive representations of gay men. While there are representations in the Japanese media where sexual minorities are parodied and made fun of (McLelland 2000a: 43-58) - just as there are in western media - if the ranting of the US's Jerry Falwell, the UK's Mary Whitehouse or Australia's Fred Nile is borne in mind, Conlan's description is actually more fitting of these western societies. In Japan, sexual minorities are seldom singled out for condemnation by political or religious authorities as they so routinely are in western nations. As Lunsing comments "at worst it [homosexuality] meets with indifference...Japan has no Jesse Helms, no Pope, or any person who is clearly homophobic and has the power to harm the rights of gay men and lesbian women" (Lunsing 2001, 340).

Despite being a university lecturer in Japanese, Conlan refers to no texts, incidents or studies that might authenticate (or problematize) his position. Particularly striking is his lack of reference to the numerous historical works that have recently been published on Japanese attitudes to homosexuality. Explaining Japanese people's supposed negative attitude toward homosexuality in terms of their "feudal" mentality is, for instance, particularly ironic given that male-male homosexual relations were not only common throughout Japan's feudal period (1600 to 1867) but were, in fact, highly valued in certain circumstances (Ikegami, Leupp, Pflugfelder). Indeed, recent research shows that antagonism toward homosexuality, such as it exists in the Japanese media, is a characteristic of modern Japan and deeply tied in with notions of "civilization" and "modernity" which Japan appropriated from the west during its period of rapid modernization in the Meiji (1867-1912) and Taishō (1912- 1925) eras (Pflugfelder, Robertson, McLelland 2000a).

Despite Conlan's introductory material that stresses the difficulty of being gay in

modern Japan, a close reading of the text itself does little to confirm this position. Coming Out in Japan is basically the narrative of the problematic relationship between two Japanese gay men, Itō Satoru and Yanase Ryūta, who become lovers and subsequently face a variety of difficulties when living together. Despite the very real psychological trauma that coming to terms with their homosexuality obviously caused both Itō and Yanase, the positive results following on from their coming out to various people in their lives causes the reader to wonder why they suffered such anxieties. For instance, when, after many years of soul-searching, Itō finally came out to his mother, her response was not to throw him out of the house but to say that she had suspected for a long time and that it was important for him to live in such a manner as to bring him happiness. Yanase's coming out, too, met with a similarly positive reception from his mother and sister. Indeed, when Itō and Yanase decide to live together as a "gay couple" both mothers met and exchanged similar sorts of pleasantries as would normally accompany a heterosexual engagement. Yanase's mother even began to give him cooking lessons. In fact, much of the trauma caused by moving in together seems to have been caused by fights over the use of the washing machine, the sharing of household chores and the inability of either partner to cook or clean.

Again, Itō (who was a schoolteacher) went through considerable anxiety about using his own name in his first book about homosexuality. Would he or wouldn't he lose his job? Would he or wouldn't he be rejected by his colleagues and students? Yet, after he finally presented a copy of the book to his school principal, declaring that not only was he a homosexual but that he lived with a same-sex partner, Itō writes that "I am delighted to be able to report that he accepted this as being a personal matter and assured me that he would not fire me on the basis of my sexuality"(Itō and Yanase 223). The expected negative responses from colleagues and students consistently fail to materialize. The reader therefore looks in vain for examples of non-conformity being "held in contempt" (Itō and Yanase xvi) as Conlan suggests is the case in his introduction. Indeed, quite the opposite impression is created. For instance, when the mother of one of Itō's private students expressed anxiety about him visiting Itō in his home, the youth took her to charge, pointing out the high esteem in which he held Itō and the many ways he was indebted to him. Itō reports that "This message seemed to get through to his mother. From then on she was happier seeing him off whenever he

came to visit me than she ever had been before" (Itō and Yanase 263). If anything, Itō seems to gain, not lose respect, in the eyes of his associates after the publication of his first book about homosexuality.

Given the largely positive responses that Itō received after his declaration of homosexual identity, including from the media, it is odd to find the translator picturing Japan as a feudal society that is peculiarly resistant to change in his introductory remarks. A careful reader would therefore find Conlan's introduction puzzling rather than enlightening since his negative remarks about Japanese responses to homosexuality (which he sees as symptomatic of structural deficiencies in Japanese society or even in the psyche of the Japanese people) are not really supported by people's reactions described in the text.

Summerhawk, in her introduction to Queer in Japan, relies upon similar rhetorical strategies as Conlan to develop her argument positioning sexual minorities in Japan as the hapless victims of a repressive regime. The same process of homogenization characteristic of Conlan's text is particularly apparent; also conspicuous is the same freedom with which sweeping judgments are made about Japan with no evidence. Summerhawk's claims seem to rely upon what we already "know" about Japan rather than upon any actual engagement with Japanese society. For instance her claim that "a person who remains single is at risk of being an outcast" (Summerhawk et al. 5) seems odd when it is considered that Koizumi Jun'ichiro, Japan's prime minister, is divorced and remains single. Indeed, his official Web page is upfront about his divorced status, making much of his maverick, independent image (Mackie). Even more hyperbolic is the claim that "not being the traditional patriarch or the submissive wife puts one on the outside of a society very structured in its interrelated sets of obligations and responsibilities" (Summerhawk et al. 6). This claim seems to relate more to the prewar "Japan" of The Chrysanthemum and the Sword than the cosmopolitan (post)modern nation where the marriage age is rising, the birth rate falling, and where the percentage of both men and women who remain unmarried is increasing in tandem with the divorce rate (Lunsing 2001, 339-340) [8].

Having herself created the picture of a one-dimensional, almost totalitarian Japanese society in which people who fail to conform are forced to live unhappy lives at the

margins, it comes as no surprise to find out that "a majority of Japanese gay men live in contradiction, a constant struggle with the inner self, even to the point of cutting off emotions and the denial of their own oppression (Summerhawk et al. 10-11)."

Summerhawk's willingness to speak for "a majority of Japanese gay men" based solely upon the small and extremely specific selection of interviewees chosen for her collection once more is indicative of an orientalist bias. Summerhawk's arguments about the "oppression" of sexual minorities in Japan ought to be held up to the same scrutiny as those of middle-class feminist writers from the first world who have been criticized for reducing the complex lives of women in postcolonial nations to lives characterized solely by oppression, as discussed by Mohanty among others.

Moreover, Summerhawk's argument leaves little space for same-sex desiring men who do not fit the "gay identity" model to articulate their desires and denies the validity of other models of sexual expression. The result of this somewhat violent rhetorical strategy is that those who fall outside the identity model are disenfranchised, their experience silenced by the criticism that they are "in denial."

Like Conlan, Summerhawk's assumptions about Japanese society override any dissenting voices or alternative perspectives that derive from the texts that she is supposed to be introducing. For instance, one of her informants comments that:

Japan has a very different history when it comes to discrimination...I have never had to face termination of employment because I was gay...I have never come across talk of someone being thrown in prison because he was gay...there is no religious concept of homosexuality as a vice, drawing out a sense of self contempt as [in] the Christian religion...Because of all this, I think it is more difficult to recognize and understand the concept of gay rights. For me personally in Tokyo, subscribing to this concept is like carrying around someone else's baggage (Summerhawk et al. 153).

Reading lesbian and gay lives in Japan simply in terms of oppression, as both Conlan and Summerhawk tend to do, is not only insensitive to the incidents described within their texts that trouble such a black-and-white approach but is also completely out of touch with recent trends in Japanese society. Japanese media do, in fact, often feature frank, nuanced and intelligent discussions of sexuality, including matters relating to homosexuality and gay rights. High-brow journals such as imago and Gendai shisō

have featured favorable discussions of gay rights in Japan and the popular press regularly profiles a variety of queer-identified people. The treatment is sometimes insensitive and sensationalistic, but this is also true of mainstream media representations of gay people in western societies. Gay media, too, are booming. Queer Japan [9] (not to be confused with Summerhawk et al.'s book of the same name), a new glossy lifestyle-oriented magazine primarily aimed at gay men was launched in 1999 and is available in mainstream book stores. Also, even a cursory glance at the thousands of Japanese Web sites created by members of sexual minorities is sufficient to dispel the misconception that queer-identified Japanese are somehow voiceless or that their experience is primarily one of neglect, disenfranchisement and oppression (McLelland 2000b; 2002; in press a; in press b).

Nowhere in the introductory matter to either book is the nature of the experience described by the Japanese narrators subjected to scrutiny. I do not mean to suggest that the life stories are somehow false or mistaken but, rather, that "experience" cannot be taken as a given. As Scott argues "[e]xperience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation" (Scott 37). She goes on to criticize the reductionist manner in which experience is often utilized as a touchstone for reality, a means of establishing knowledge that is "unassailable." However, as she points out, this is only possible to the extent that "the processes of identity production...and the politics of its construction" are overlooked. This is a particularly important point to bear in mind when discussing notions of "sexual identity" which are notoriously difficult to pin down. The notion that lesbian and gay identities are universal or that they are necessarily liberating is problematic, especially when accounts written by lesbian and gay Asian North-Americans and Australians (Hanawa, Park Hagland, Fung, Ayres) are taken into account. Despite the fact that Conlan and Summerhawk both clearly recognize continuity between western lesbians and gays and individuals in Japan who speak from these subject positions, lesbian and gay Asian Americans have written about the problematic nature of these cross-cultural identifications. Hanawa, for instance, comments that "As impossible as it might seem to those of us who live at least our ethnic and sexual lives in English, it may not always be possible to make a coherent connection with those historical subjects that we recognize as 'like us'" (Hanawa 481). She sees the notion of a "sexual identity" (her emphasis) as a specifically Western project, noting that "to identify as a lesbian may actually betray

the inherent privileging, not only of sexuality and identity, but of the notion of a coherent subject, as categories of analysis" (Hanawa 480). Hanawa argues further that "it is crucial that we understand the construction of sexual identity in a social-cultural context such as Japan, where the very idea of identity raises so many vexing questions" (Hanawa 480). It is precisely this that Conlan and Summerhawk fail to do in their introductions - both editors clearly view Japanese sexuality through models developed in the west and, finding both mainstream values as well as the identities of sexual minorities to be lacking, hold up western role models as a necessary future.

It is clear that, as Yoneyama points out, the "critique of Japanese society and culture often results in justifying and romanticizing present conditions...in the U.S." (Yoneyama 71) and this is particularly the case with the two texts under discussion (albeit Coming Out in Japan uses Australia as its reference point). Yet Asian-Americans have spoken out about the extreme marginalization they face within "mainstream" lesbian and gay communities in the west. Park Hagland, for instance, complains about "the 'social imaginary' of the gay white world in which Asians are imagined and then reified as the 'exotic other,' limiting and marginalizing their presence in the LGBT communities and excluding from view those who do not conform to the reified image" (Park Hagland 277). With these criticisms in mind, the celebratory approach adopted by both editors toward the liberatory potential of sexual identity politics seems naïve at best and fails to take into account the fact that sexual identity politics have developed from a very specific trajectory in Anglo-American and north-European societies over the past three decades.

Recently, a great deal of research has been published which points both to the constructedness and cultural specificity of sexual identities. In his book Gay Lives: Homosexual Autobiography from John Addington Symonds to Paul Monette, Paul Robinson looks at the various ways in which men who are sexually attracted to other men have narrated this desire in the context of their life stories. Over the course of a century of writing, he traces a movement from diversity to uniformity in the ways in which homosexual desire has been explained, discussed and represented, culminating in the post-60s "coming out story." Robinson argues that "coming out" has become the controlling factor in the narrative structure of the "gay life" and represents a kind of conversion narrative in which "phoniness versus authenticity, nothingness versus

life" (Robinson 393). Ken Plummer, too, in Telling Sexual Stories argues that "stories of 'homosexuality' have recently changed" and increasingly focus on "coming out" which he terms "a dominant narrative" (Plummer 81).

However, recent developments in Queer Theory, taking on board the historically specific, constructed and narrative nature of "sexual identities," have tried to move beyond the evolutionary (and exclusionary) paradigms created in the early years of lesbian and gay liberation. Researchers working with Asian and postcolonial societies have utilized these perspectives, questioning the universalizing rhetoric of "lesbian and gay liberation" in relation to non-western indigenous constructions of sexual identity. Chiang comments that "proclamations of an 'international' lesbian and gay movement risk subsuming heterogeneous forms of sexuality under a gay identity that is implicated in a specifically Western and bourgeois construction of subjectivity, with its themata of voice, visibility and coming out" (Chiang 386). Manalansan also complains that western models of identity are often represented as more progressive or evolved than indigenous constructions, the result being that "all same-sex phenomena are placed within a developmental and teleological matrix that ends with Western 'gay' identity" (Manalansan 428). Barnard, too, criticizes the prevalence of "lesbian and gay organizers in the United States who judge the level of 'progress' another country is making in the arena of lesbian and gay rights by the uniquely U.S. trajectories of Stonewall, coming out and identity-based civil rights" (Barnard 136).

With these criticisms in mind, the main failing of Queer Japan and Coming Out in Japan is that the translators simply assume that the way minority rights are conceptualized in western societies can be held up as a template for Japan. They therefore privilege the stories told by their narrators over other, less politicized narratives that also exist on Japan's gay scene. However, in doing so, they overlook the particular, local differences that exist between Japan and countries in the west. After all, much of the protest made by lesbian and gay activists in the US, UK, Australia and European societies was directed against laws which made male-male sex illegal. However, despite Summerhawk's mistaken claim to the contrary (Summerhawk et al. 6), except for a brief period between 1873 and 1881, Japan, has never criminalized sex between men and consequently does not impose unequal age of consent laws relating to hetero and homosexual acts as has been common

throughout Anglo-Saxon cultures (McLelland 2000a: 27-32). Today, Japanese gay men who meet together for sex in both semi-private (gay bath houses) and "public" venues (such as parks) are considerably less likely to come under police surveillance (McLelland in press a) than are men in Anglophone societies where male homosexuality is still subject to specific laws and regulations that are not applied to sex between men and women [10]. Just as Japanese gay men and lesbians are starting from a rather different position than that experienced by many western gays in their attempt to gain increased visibility, it can also be expected that the end point reached will also differ.

### **Conclusion: Japan "After Orientalism"?**

Coming Out in Japan and Queer Japan present the reader with a selection of very specific stories about Japanese sexual mores that are simply too neat in their binaries to correspond to the complexities of actual life. In the translators' respective introductions, Japanese society is homogenized as uniformly "oppressive" while gay people are simultaneously homogenized as all equally "oppressed." When Japanese society is acknowledged as making progress, it is only to the extent that Japanese individuals have accepted the identities and strategies already pioneered by gay and lesbian activists in the west.

Moreover, the manner in which the stories in both books are framed is remarkable for its denial of coevalness - Japan, despite its economic power and technological strength, is still somehow "behind" the west in terms of personal freedoms and individual dignity. Lesbian and gay activists, whose mode of self-representation closely accords with that of similarly "out" gay people in the nations of the west are pictured not simply as victims of Japan's repressive sex and gender regime, but more importantly as somehow being in advance of their peers. Lunsing perceptively points out that the assumption that "gay identity among the Japanese must be strengthened...implies that Japanese gay people must become like Americans" (Lunsing 284). It is no surprise that the mode of subjectivity that is highlighted as the most "authentic" (and therefore progressive) by both Conlan and Summerhawk is that of the "out" gay person and that this state is pictured in evolutionary terms - a state supposedly achieved by gay people in the west that Japanese people are still inching

towards. Summerhawk clearly states that "Itoh and his partner Yanase represent not only a role model for other gay men, but also a source of 'hopes and dreams' to those wanting to escape the arrogant Japanese myths of homogeneity and harmony" (Summerhawk et al. 14; my emphasis), suggesting that they have "mapped a way" for others to follow. The preface to Coming Out in Japan, also speaks of Itō and Yanase's story as "courageous, inspiring and necessary" (Itō and Yanase 1; my emphasis) and as "a manual for others to follow" (Itō and Yanase 1). However, the extent to which Itō and Yanase, or the narrators in Queer Japan are able to speak on behalf of all sexual minorities in Japan is never addressed. Summerhawk's statement that "the situation for Japanese gay men is not entirely one of gloom and doom; support groups and political efforts to change things for the better do better exist" (Summerhawk et al. 13) clearly relies upon the assumption that Japan is on some kind of evolutionary path toward modes of individual expression and community organization already developed in the west. This assumption, despite a wide range of alternative possibilities discussed by other Japanese gay people not represented in either collection, relies upon those fundamental orientalist tropes which still underlie western interpretations of Japan. Those aspects of Japanese society that most closely approximate western ways of doing things are signaled out for praise, held up as symbols of Japan's advancement along a path already opened up by western peoples, however those aspects of Japan's culture which the western onlooker disapproves of are used to signify how far Japan still has to go. "Feudal," "Confucian" but most tellingly, "arrogant" - in these two texts Japan is yet again denied coevalness with the west, suggesting that twenty-five years after the publication of Said's Orientalism, the issues raised there are still very relevant today.

Please note that all Japanese names in the text appear in Japanese order - surname first.

## Notes

1. Caffrey, in her biography of Benedict, mentions that "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword came out in the fall of 1946 with an immediate impact on the general educated public at which it was aimed, including policy makers within the U.S. government and occupation forces in Japan" (Caffrey 322). It is important to mention that despite

the book's continuing popularity as the explanation for Japanese behavior during the war, Benedict did not speak Japanese and never visited Japan.

2. These included Kitan kurabu (Strange-talk club; 1952-1968), Fūzoku kagaku (Sex-world science; 1953-55), Fūzoku sōshi (Sex-world storybook; 1953-4) and Fūzoku Kitan (Strange talk about the sex world; 1960-1974). Japan's first specifically homophile publication, Adonis, was published from 1952-1960.

3. Peter starred as a transgendered male prostitute in Matsumoto Toshio's 1968 film Bara no sōretsu (Funeral procession of roses). A transgendered Miwa starred in Fukasaku Kinji's 1968 film Kuro tokage (Black lizard). Mikawa is a regular on panel shows and always performs in spectacular drag (for the men's team) in the annual New Year's Eve television spectacular Kōhaku uta gassen (Red and white song contest). The singer Carrousel Maki is a transsexual woman whose sex-change operation in 1972 was widely publicized by the Japanese media.

4. For an account of this case see Summerhawk et al.'s Queer Japan pp. 206-211.

5. <http://www.sukotan.com> (17 September 2002)

6. These include: 'Gay pair lecture at schools in bid to nip prejudice in bud,' The Japan Times, Saturday September 28, 1996, available at:

<http://www.sukotan.com/shinbun.html#anchor> (17 September 2002), and 'Academic Crusade for Homosexual Rights,' The Daily Yomiuri, 15 August, 2000, available at: <http://www.sukotan.com/yomiuri.html> (17 September 2002).

7. Itō became embroiled in a very public debate with Tōgō over the use of the indigenous term okama as a self-referent. Okama, originally a slang term for the buttocks, is used to refer to gay men and has something of the nuance of the English word "queen." Tōgō, who, like Quentin Crisp, is an effeminate homosexual, is quite happy with this designation and did not take kindly to Itō, many years his junior, criticizing him for using "discriminatory" language. Itō himself prefers the term dōseiaisha, the Chinese-character translation of the English noun "homosexual" - but this term is rejected by many older gay men who consider it to have a medical and therefore pathologizing nuance. See the discussion in Fushimi Noriaki (ed.) 2002.

8. The 1990s actually saw a resurgence of interest in Japan's women's movement as well as the rapid development of a men's movement in which "traditional" gender roles and expectations were critiqued. These developments were widely (and positively) reported in the mainstream press. See for example Nihon keizai shinbun's series of articles "Onnatachi no shizukana kakumei" (Women's quiet revolution) that

ran throughout January 1998; Asahi shinbun, "Otoko to onna kawaru ai no katachi" (The changing shape of love between men and women," 1 January 1998, p. 24; Asahi shinbun, "Damenā otoko de nani ga warui ishoku no rentai hiragaru" (What's wrong with being a good for nothing man? A novel solidarity is expanding [among men]) 8 January 1998, p. 38. Also at this time the Internet was rapidly developing as a site for gender resistance and debate, see chapters by Dasgupta and Onosaka.

9. This is the brainchild of Fushimi Noriaki whose writings on homosexuality and its intersections with feminism, consumerism and the transformation in gender relations in contemporary Japan are rather more nuanced than those of Itō.

10. In the UK, for example, the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 only partially decriminalised male homosexuality, making it permissible between only two men in private. Sex between more than two men or sex in semi-private areas (such as the backrooms of bars) is illegal and not infrequently prosecuted. See Bell for instances of prosecution. These restrictions do not apply in Japan where gay sex venues, like heterosexual ones (fūzoku kanren eigyō) are registered with the police.

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