Ink and Intimacy: Erotic Somatic Narratives of Transgender Characters in Japanese Manga

On October 25, 2023, the condition of sterilization for changing one's legal gender marker was deemed unconstitutional by the Japanese family court. This is only one element of a highly medicalized process for legal gender change, as ordered by the Gender Identity Disorder (GID) Special Cases Act of 2003 "for sake of the country's order" (Reid et al. 2019, 13, 17, 35). While sterilization—by not having gonads or the ability to reproduce—may no longer be required, the Act still requires one to be a legally single adult without minor children and with genitalia resembling that of the opposite sex. Indeed, despite the recent ruling, processes of legal and social recognition continue to emphasize external performance by requiring clean sexual dimorphism and adherence to the gender binary.

The historical circumscription of non-normative gender expression to the entertainment world is reflected in various forms, such as religious ritual, theater performance, sex work, and literature. As cultural historian Mark McLelland explains, the mythological progenitors of the Japanese people, the brother-sister god couple Izanagi and Izanami, set a precedent for obtaining spiritual power through the amalgamation of sexes, a concept often embodied by priests and priestesses ritualistically adopting opposite-sex characteristics (McLelland 2012, 205; Dale 2019, 61). This spiritual practice transitioned into the realm of entertainment, most notably in Kabuki theater, where gender nonconforming male actors engaged in prostitution as part of their preparation for female roles. In this context, gender nonconformity was considered an "occupational category" rather than reflective of an actor's sexuality, identity, or lifestyle practices. These actors "were understood to have become transgendered for professional purposes," positioning their gender identity in relation to heterosexual norms and facilitating the

accommodation of their clients' sexual orientations (McLelland 2012, 206). Thus, gender was emphasized as an external performance, overshadowing internal identity or desire (McLelland 2012, 208). Post-WWII Japanese sexual counterculture spread through “perverse” and “carnal” literature, which prioritized physicality of the body over internal subjectivity (McLelland 2012, 208). Rising literacy rates among the working class, along with the proliferation of cheap newspapers and magazines which contained such literature, led to what scholars have termed “hentai booms,” or spikes in public interest in sexuality (McLelland 2008). Manga as a medium also emerged during this time, serving the dual functions of easily-circulated entertainment for youth and sexual literature for adults. Influenced by queer and transgender sexual subcultures of the 1970s and 1980s, physical, erotic expressions of gender nonconformity became more commonplace in manga (Alban 2022, 127; McLelland 2012, 209-214).

In this essay, through analysis of four manga published in the years 1996-2020, I will argue that manga subcultures, which have historically reflected changes in post-WWII Japanese sexual counterculture, made visible the expected crystallization of non-normative gender identities into one of two normative binary genders, when invoked by sexual or romantic interest from a cisheterosexual person. The erotic reasoning for the collapse of non-normative genders into the gender binary reinforces the cisheterosexual social matrix in contemporary Japan. The following manga serve as case studies: *Deborah is My Rival* (1996), *All About J* (2004), *Boy Meets Maria* (2017), and *Transjitter* (2020). Each features a main character, high school or college-aged, who takes on transfeminine gender expressions for personal reasons, sometimes with the addition of occupational reasons. Each character also has at least one romantic or sexual pursuer, whom they may or may not desire in return. The works vary with regards to the point of view used and the role of the protagonist. *All About J* and *Transjitter* have transgender

protagonists; in the other three works, the protagonist is a cisheterosexual person who desires the trans character. *Transjitter* is told in first person, *All About J* in third-person omniscient, and the others in third-person limited point of view, narrated by protagonists who are not trans.

The bi-erotic potential of characters with non-normative genders is constructed through slippage of sex, gender, and sexuality. While embodying femininity, these characters may have a sex, gender identity, or sexuality which disagrees with their visual characterization as a (cisgender) woman by their pursuers, enabling them to potentially assume either male or female erotic roles. Protagonist Asayo of *Deborah is My Rival*, a cishet woman, characterizes Deborah as a man upon seeing her in masculine clothes, then as a woman based on the pitch of her voice, and finally settles on okama, an effeminate and possibly gay man who crossdresses for jobs in nightlife. Deborah is rude and sassy and enjoys hobbies such as tea ceremonies, which she says are "perfect for bringing out your feminine side." She professes to be "just like you," to Asayo, characterizing her gender as being derived from her sexuality: since she has no interest in women, she is a woman (Tada, Ch. 1). While *All About J* is characterized as a yaoi/boy's love manga by fans, it is not clear if the titular J is a man, trans woman, or something in between. She works as a Marilyn Monroe impersonator and bar singer, as an okama might do, but she calls herself a woman and dresses femininely in her everyday life (Nakamura, Ch. 1, Ch. 6). Arima from *Boy Meets Maria* and protagonist Shunichi of *Transjitter* are both men who are coerced or forced into transitioning (Eguchi, Ch. 4; Saku, Ch. 1). Arima, a theater performer since grade school, is forced into feminine habitus by his abusive mother, who wished to exploit the greater entertainment value associated with women; Shunichi develops "isomerism," a medical condition common in the world of *Transjitter* that induces a spontaneous and irreversible change in sex.

This frequent discontinuity between trans characters' self-identification and characterization by their pursuers extends to the reality that these characters' genders are not defined by who is attracted to them. Rather, they express their own erotic roles and show anguish when those roles are invalidated, similar to gender dysphoria. For example, Shunichi vomits immediately upon seeing his new female body. He cuts himself all over his body, weeping, "What I wanted, isn't this body" (Saku, Ch. 1, Ch. 3). Shun is a gay boy, for whom gender and sexual orientation are tautological: he is a boy attracted to other boys, so his gender is defined by those he is attracted to. He has a crush on a cishet male classmate named Yamagishi, who has never looked his way; Shun is not even on a first-name basis with him, which shows closeness between peers in Japanese culture. Shunichi's best friend Yuka, a cishet girl, has a crush on Shun, which has never been reciprocated despite her persistence. Completing the love triangle is Yamagishi's interest in Yuka. Yuka undergoes isomerization the same night as Shun, becoming male, and begins to identify as a man. However, Shun continues to refuse Yuka; while in a female body, he cannot be a man 'as a man' (Saku, Ch. 1-3).

These characters are also objects of (unreciprocated) romantic or sexual interest. Through this objectification, the characters' gender nonconformity is coercively crystallized into a binary gender role. Asayo, in her pursuit of Deborah, denies the latter's gender identity to justify her attraction. Similarly, protagonist Taiga of *Boy Meets Maria* at first denies that Arima is male and identifies as a boy, continuing to call him by stage name "Maria." However, Asayo and Taiga deviate in their approaches to their crushes' gender identities. Taiga spends all of Chapter 1 trying to resolve his attraction to Arima by confirming that he is female, and upon failure, spends all of Chapter 2 denying Arima's gender identity. He tells a classmate, "I've always thought that it's normal for men to like women, but when I look at Arima, I don't really think about him as a

man or woman. I'm starting to think that maybe I shouldn't get fixated on something like that." He seeks out Arima and yells across the classroom, "I still like you! Even if you have a dick!" Taiga, while he still refuses to separate expression of femininity from sex or gender, is open to nuance in his sexual orientation. Contrast with Asayo and Deborah: Deborah, who denies her own identity when convenient—mostly in the context of maintaining her position as heir to a wealthy family—decides to identify as a man in order to accommodate Asayo's desire. In line with her previous statement that because she has no interest in women, she is a woman, Deborah reasons that if she desires a woman, she must not be a woman. Putting the validity of that logic aside, Asayo never has a similar shift in her sexual orientation to accommodate Deborah's gender identity. Of course, Taiga's approach is not without flaws. Throughout the volume, Arima grapples with whether he is a girl or broadly comfortable with femininity because his mother forced it on him in his childhood; or if he is a boy who has shunned masculinity due to his mother's friend sexually assaulting him in a men's restroom. Taiga unintentionally undermines Arima's processing of his own gender identity by meeting his tentative femininity with a very traditional masculinity: he assumes he needs to be a hero, rather than an active listener.

Thus, the somatic narrative of transgender expression is disrupted by sexuality, since cisheterosexual pursuers consider their sexual orientations immutable, or otherwise unnecessary to interrogate. Rather than resolve their orientations' contingency on gender, pursuers coerce the gender expression of their objects of desire to align with their sexual orientations. This trend builds off early 1970s mainstream *shojo* manga, literally "girls' manga," and its "melodramatic" depictions of romance and sexuality. Sex for the female lead is "often the ultimate form of self-sacrifice, where she must prove the truthfulness of her love by 'overcoming' the fear and pain associated with the act," independent of her enjoyment (Saito 2011, 173). In this way, these

transfeminine characters are expected to submit to the desire of their cisheterosexual others, independent of their own desire, gender identity, or sexual orientation. While not all of the trans characters discussed have explicitly identified as transfeminine—Shunichi has not consented to gender nonconformity at all—framing the ontology of their gender identity through submission to cisheterosexual desire places them into a female role. The cisheterosexual characters' expectation of submission reflects the popular expectation that trans people must alter their gender nonconformity to maintain a guise of cisheterosexuality. As the aforementioned GID Special Cases Act requires that trans people seeking legal and social recognition of transness may not have marital partners or children, as their transness would void their family members' abilities to uphold the cisheterosexual nuclear family. Moreover, the expectation that trans people must have genitalia resembling that of the opposite sex prior to recognition sets a condition of cisheterosexuality on private expressions of sexuality unrelated to a family structure: trans people must pass as cisheterosexual if they wish to be recognized as transgender.

By centering the physical and social transformation of the characters, these transgender narratives become transition narratives, in line with Japanese society's long-standing interest in their personal experiences of transition. Vera Mackie argues that transgender narratives which are practical in their depictions of transition, independent of being deeply personal and introspective, are most popular for audiences who hold an "elaborate fixation on surgical procedures" and the "external acts of transformation" leading up to it (Somers 2012, 226). The "becoming-procedures such as purchasing of gender-specific clothing or applying make-up" are central in J's narrative, and to an extent, Arima's narrative as a performer when he dresses as a woman (Nakamura, Ch. 6-7; Eguchi, Ch. 4; Somers 2012). This suggests a potential alignment with a cisgender Japanese perspective that prioritizes the crystallization of gender nonconforming identities into a binary

gender identity. The somatic narrative of being transgender then focuses on the practical implications of sex reassignment and shifts attention away from the internal subjectivity of trans characters, which may comprise more than just a simple male-female duality (Somers 2012, 226).

These manga, produced in a medium that has historically reflected societal themes and personal experiences of gender and sexuality, respond to and further sociopolitical discourse around transness, establishing a tautological relationship between the manga and public opinion (Alban 2022, 116, 120, 123). As McLelland writes,

> "Japanese society is increasingly accommodating transsexuals who, after gender reassignment, re-enter society as a 'normal' member of the other sex, while leaving the hetero-normativity and gender polarity of the overall sex and gender system unchallenged" (2004, 15).

Thus, people who "construct bodies that refuse to fit into categories of 'male' or 'female" threaten to "deconstruct" or "reconfigure" the social order of gender conformity (McLelland 2004, 15; McLelland 2012, 226). Indeed, these manga correspond to public opinion, reflecting the popular response at the time of the GID Special Cases Act that full physical transition is optimal to the preservation of the cisheterosexual social matrix (McLelland 2012, 226). This prevailing attitude rejected long-term or everyday performance for personal reasons, deeming it "institutionally awkward" and incompatible with integration into cisheterosexual family structures and broader society (McLelland 2012, 226; Somers 2012, 230). It follows that fictional characters with non-normative gender expressions would be expected to also conform to the binary. Narratives centered on clear gender transition sustain this societal framework by advocating against non-normative genders and thus the social reproduction of these gender

structures. Simultaneously, they emulate heterosexual relationships by literally constructing a heterosexual body and relationship (Dale 2019, 64). “Binary tales of clear gender transition” therefore maintain this matrix by promoting the collapse of non-normative genders to prevent social reproduction of these gender structures, while imitating heterosexual relations through the literal construction of a heterosexual body and relationship (Dale 2019, 64). This coercion of binary transition is a political tool of postwar Japanese neonationalism, a conservative turn in politics that emphasized social and political unity during efforts to rebuild the country after the war. Indeed, conservative groups argue that efforts to decenter gender or negate gender differences have the potential to “destroy the traditional culture and family structure of Japan,” invoking what Perper and Cornog, sociologists and historians of Japanese popular culture, call “perceived political and demographic necessities” to “bypass individual desire and pleasure” in the construction of the cisheterosexual social matrix (Chizuko and Shockey 2010, 326-7; Perper and Cornog 2007, 211-213).

While trans characters in these manga are still expected to conform to cisheterosexuality, their very existence suggests a gradual improvement in the recognition and protection of trans rights in Japan, reflecting a broader societal shift towards greater inclusiveness. With the increasing visibility of gender nonconforming people, such as through the legalization of the “X-gender” gender marker—representing a gender identity that is not identify strictly as male or female—and more diverse representation in manga, the awareness and acceptance of alternative identities and ways of living may grow to challenge traditional gender norms within Japanese culture and acknowledge the bodily autonomy of transgender individuals.

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