Queer identities across languages & translation as queer methodology:

Reading Kawano Megumi's *Blue* (2023)

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Abstract

Kawano Megumi's *Blue* (2023) is a delicate, grounded, and nuanced tale of queerness seen through the eyes of Masago/Masawo, a high school/university student in contemporary Japan. Through analysing and translating several moments in *Blue*, I discuss how the text demonstrates the unique ways in which queerness is linguistically rendered in Japanese, and how queer translation can be employed as a methodology to expose, question, and unsettle normative notions of gender that are embedded in both English and Japanese. My analysis of *Blue* is primarily focused on queer language, medical terminology, and the metaphor of the mermaid. My translations are multiplicitous, indeterminate, and imperfect; they aim to demonstrate both the power and limitations of language, and the possibility for multiple, simulatenous meanings that refuse a single definition – like queerness itself.

Introduction

Kawano Megumi's novella *Blue* (2023) was originally published in Shueisha's literary magazine *Subaru*, in a special edition titled 'toransujendā no monogatari.' The Japanese word 'monogatari' can be translated to English as 'stories,' 'tales,' or 'legends.' The particle 'no' indicates possession. It would then be easy – and tempting – to translate 'toransujendā' to English as 'transgender.' The front cover of this edition of *Subaru* makes this choice, featuring a bold, capitalised 'TRANSGENDER' alongside the Japanese title. Would it be right, then, to say that *Blue* is a 'Transgender Story'? To what extent does this translation convey the meaning of 'toransujendā no monogatari'? When a Japanese speaker hears or reads the word 'toransujendā,' the way that they engage with this term – as well as the historical and cultural context behind this engagement – is different to when an English speaker hears or reads the word 'transgender.' English loanwords have been a part of Japanese queer vernacular since the middle of the 20th century (McLelland 2004; McLelland et. al 2007), but it would be dangerously Anglocentric to assume that each of these terms (rezubian/lesbian, gei/gay, bai/bi, toransujendā/transgender, etc.) has been carried over into Japanese without any alteration of nuance and meaning. It would suggest a false equivalence that refuses to acknowledge the distinct forms of queer expression that emerge in different cultural and temporal contexts. It would also obscure a rich history of Japanese queerness, and falsely suggest that queerness exists in Japan as a Western import. I wish to emphasise, instead, how queerness is rendered uniquely in Japanese – the fact that it 'does not do gender in the same way' as English (Epstein & Robert 2017, 2).

How, then, does queerness manifest in the story of *Blue*? In the first act of the novella, the protagonist Masago – assigned male at birth – is living their life as a girl ('jyosei toshite,' Kawano 2023, 186), and is rehearsing to perform as the titular 'Little Mermaid' in their high school drama club's re-working of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid*. In the second act, set three

years later, Masawo (who previously went by Masago) struggles with their gender identity, and explores the queer possibilities of existence contained within the image of the 'mermaid' ('ningyo'). Through this use of metaphor, Kawano Megumi is able to destabilise and deconstruct the gender binary, and asks what lies *beyond* the terms defined by legal, political and medical institutions. When Masawo first reunites with their high school drama club friends in the second act, they announce to the group: 'onna no ko, yamechatta' (Kawano 2023, 195). Due to the ability in Japanese to omit subjects without obscuring meaning, there is no first-person pronoun in this sentence. In most of the text, Masago/Masawo uses the more formal and feminine first-person pronoun 'watashi,' but there are a few moments in the second act where they choose to use the more traditionally informal and masculine 'boku.' Here, there is no first-person pronoun to indicate Masawo's self-conception (or self-fashioning) of their gender identity in this moment. Then, the use of 'onna no ko' has specific cultural implications. The noun can be literally translated to the English word 'girl' or 'young woman,' but 'onna no ko' suggests culturally specific expectations of girlishness and femininity that cannot be fully contained within this English term. Finally, the verb in this sentence – 'yamechatta' – can be translated in mulitple ways: have (regrettably) stopped; have given up; cannot go on. So, what does this declaration mean, and how can we render it in English? Here are some possible translations of this phrase:

I've given up being a **girl**.

(I) have stopped being a **"girl"**.

watashi/boku cannot go on being **onna no ko**.

Choosing one translation over another could (un)intentionally align Masawo's identity with a label (such as 'toransujendā' or 'transgender'); it could reinforce specific ideas of what a 'girl' or 'onna no ko' is; it could arbitrarily claim to define the extent to which a person can exert agency over their own gender identity (i.e. 'being' a certain gender). However, it is also through translating this phrase that we can highlight and intensify the complexity of Masawo's expression. It is, in fact, when we compare the ways in which gender is expressed in English and Japanese – when we struggle to find direct equivalents – that we can most clearly see, and expose, the fact that gender is a socially and culturally contingent construct (Epstein & Gillett 2017, 1-2). We are forced to contend with the fact that there *isn't* an English equivalent for the term 'onna no ko,' and the fact that the gender-neutral first-person pronoun 'I' *can't* convey the same information that first-person pronouns can in Japanese. It also leads us to question terms such as 'toransujendā' and 'transgender' – how narrow or broad are the definitions currently in place, and in what ways do these meanings overlap or contradict one another? What does it mean to translate a Japanese transliteration of an English term into English, and what are the power dynamics at play between these two languages? It is through translation, and specifically a queer translation, that we can question and critique the words currently available to us in both of the languages we're handling. It allows us to see the multiple possibilities *between* and *beyond* languages.

What, then, is a queer translation? According to B.J. Epstein and Robert Gillett, queer translation 'demonstrate[s] how conventional categories are themselves incoherent and chaotic and make sense only as an operation of power,' and highlights the 'hybridity, in-betweenness and indeterminacy' of language (Epstein and Gillett 2017, 4). Willian J. Spurlin suggests that queer translation is about 'producing new, hybrid forms of meaning and new knowledge,' and that paying attention to the transgressions, slippages and differences when we work across languages and cultures is a queer praxis (Spurlin 2017, 173). Meanwhile, Pauline Henry-Tierney points to

the etymological link between 'queer' and 'translation,' stating that both terms are characterised by 'their relational quality to a perceived original but also, by their departure from it,' and goes on to say that the translation is engaged in 'traversing from one mode of being to another' in a way that is 'often performative, marked by theatricality and flourish, an unmasking of both linguistic and social norms' (Henry-Tierney 2020, 255). I want my queer translations, too, to be hybrid, in-between, indeterminate, new, transgressive, different, self-aware in their performativity and theatricality, and aimed at unpacking and unmasking language. I, like these scholars who came before me, believe that translation can be – and is – a queer practice, a space to defy normative expectations. Whilst we are usually subjected to the 'tyranny of language' that 'fixes people and things in place artificially but securely' (Halberstam 2018, 7-8), queer translation is a way to expose this 'tyranny,' and is an opportunity to open up new possibilities of existence, new modes of being, *between* languages. Whenever we write something down, we risk temporarily consigning it to one stable meaning – what Claire Maree refers to as 'momentarily fixing what is fluid' (Maree 2003, 1) – but the *process* of translation is itself unstable, disentangling, and freeing. If translation 'calls forth linguistic resources to *reinforce* or *unsettle* ideologies embedded in language' (own emphasis, Kim 2015, 165), queer translation calls forth linguistic resources with the aim to critically *question*, *expose*, *unsettle*, *dismantle*, and *deconstruct* ideologies embedded in language.

With regards to the structure of this project, I will first contextualise my work with a literature review. Then, I will discuss the concept of 'queer language' in a Japanese context, and how *Blue* exists in dialogue with this. Next, I will provide literary analysis of some key moments in *Blue*. Whilst the text encapsulates a multitude of linguistically and culturally significant themes, my analysis will focus on the uses of medical terminology in the novella, and the uses of 'ningyo' ('mermaid') imagery as a defiance of binary perspectives. Finally, I will provide some brief examples of queer translations that are possible in the text. In a similar fashion to the example

provided in this introduction, these translations will be purposefully multiplicitous, and discussed alongside one another. To emphasise differences between each translation, as well as highlight word choices I wish to discuss, I have emboldened some words (there is no emboldened text in the original). Due to the protagonist of *Blue* going by two different names in the novella, Masago and Masawo, when it is applicable I will use one of these names, and elsewhere I will use the two together (i.e. Masago/Masawo). All Japanese quotations are written in romaji. All translations of *Blue* are my own.

Literature Review

My analysis and translations of *Blue* exist within a broader context of feminist and queer scholarship that discusses the reciprocal relationship between language and gender, as well as feminist and queer translation scholarship that is concerned with how translation intervenes in the relationship between language and gender *between* and *across* languages.

My project is informed by Judith Butler's definition of gender as performative, in the sense that gender is constituted through '*a stylized repetition of acts*,' and that the identity these acts claim to express are '*fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means' (Butler 2007, 185). That is to say, there is no essential or 'true' gender of an individual, but a series of repeated acts and gestures that create – and maintain – an illusion of a 'gender core' (Butler 2007, 186). Language, then, can be utilised to enforce cis-gender heteronormative conceptions of gender – i.e. the idea that being a straight cis-man and or straight cis-women are the only 'natural' and 'acceptable' modes of existence – and is thus one root of queer oppression. But it can also be 'the way beyond that oppression' (Butler 2007, 158). If we accept that gender is not innate, but created through acts and utterances, then we can create new, queer modes of being through language. Equally, as William J. Spurling argues, we can apply Butler's conceptualisation of gender to translation, as translating a text exposes the myth of an 'original' textual body, and is itself a performative act which is 'already influenced by culture and not reducible to the textual body' (Spurlin 2017, 176). In short, if we can accept that gender is not a stable, concrete concept, we can show that language is not stable nor concrete either. With regards to this project, I am interested in how gender is discursively maintained in Japanese, and how queer expression challenges and disrupts these normative forms of language. I view my translations, too, as performative acts irreducibly influenced by cultural and temporal factors.

Similarly, Jack Halberstam's critique of the 'tyranny of language' will inform my work, as Halberstam highlights the way in which language 'fixes people and things in place artificially and securely,' and how our reliance on 'nonce taxonomies' – 'categories that we use daily to make sense of our worlds' – makes it difficult for us to recognise and critique them (Halberstam 2018, 7-8). Through my project I hope to show how translation can be used as a method for exploring and exposing these 'nonce taxonomies,' as we can see them more clearly when we attempt – and fail – to carry them across to a different language. In *Female Masculinity* in particular, Halberstam aims to detach masculinity from male bodies and 'maleness,' and presents various examples of alternative masculinities embodied by queer people (Halberstam 2018). This framing of masculinity, and by consequence femininity, is especially pertinent to my discussion of the concept of 'women's language' and 'men's language' in Japanese. As scholars such as Momoko Nakamura and Mizue Sasaki have pointed out, the history in Japan of perpetuating a gender divide in language – in education, literature, media, academia and so on – has created the false illusion that such a divide is 'natural' and is a result of the inherent femininity of female bodies and masculinity of male bodies (Nakamura 2014; Sasaki 2000). However, if we employ Butler's assertion that gender itself is 'an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality' (Butler 2007, 186), and engage in Halberstam's prying apart of masculinity from 'maleness,' we can challenge the reciprocal relationship between ideas of 'natural' or 'inherent' gender and notions of 'women's language' and 'men's language.' This is a project that I believe *Blue* is already engaged in, and I hope I can develop through my analysis and translations.

Consequently, my project is also informed by scholars who have challenged normative conceptions of 'women's language' and 'men's language' in their research, including those who have studied the various ways in which young people in contemporary Japan utilise supposedly

gendered language (Ochs 1992; Miyazaki 2023; Okamoto 1995), as well as those who have studied gendered language in the context of modern-day Japanese queer communities (Abe 2001; Abe 2023; Maree 2003; Maree 2020). In particular, I will be utilising Elinor Ochs philosophy that 'few features of language directly and exclusively index gender,' but rather indirectly index traits that have otherwise become associated with a specific kind of gender expression, e.g. coarseness as an indicator of maleness; delicateness as an indicator of femaleness (Ochs 1999, 340). This will be useful in both my analysis and translations, as I want to avoid suggesting that any one language pattern consistently and directly indexes a specific form of gender expression. In this way, I will also be engaging with the field of queer linguistics, defined by Rusty Barrett as 'a means for beginning to understand the ways in which people actually construct and produce markers of queer identities and deal with the ambiguity of identity categories and communities that are imagined differently by different community members' (Barrett, 1997, 198). I am not aiming to create a definitive grammar of queerness; I want to analyse language-use within context, and acknowledge the unique ways in which Kawano Megumi has utilised language to convey specific facets of different characters' identities in *Blue*. Whilst my project is a predominantly literary one, I will be providing historical context to both my analysis and translations, as the real world always 'hover[s] on the margins' of the textual one (Bullock 2016, 9). Therefore, my project is built upon the work undertaken by queer historians such as Mark McLelland, S.P.F. Dale, Jennifer Robertson, Maki Isaka, James Valentine, Iona Fotache, and Win Lunsing (McLelland 2004; Dale 2020; Robinson 1992; Isaka 2009; Valentine 1997; Fotache 2019; Lunsing 2005). These historians have assisted in my understanding of the history of specific queer terminology, as well as the lived experiences of queer people in Japan.

With regards to my approach to translation, my work is informed by multiple scholars' research into the overlap between queer studies and translation studies, and the possibilities of

queer translation as methodology, including the works of Brian James Baer, B.J. Epstein, Robert Gillett, Pauline Henry-Tierney, Emily Rose, and William J. Spurlin (Baer 2017; Baer 2021; Epstein & Gillett 2017; Henry-Tierney 2020; Rose 2017; Rose 2021; Spurlin 2014; Spurlin 2017). However, there is still limited scholarship on how these concepts operate in a Japanese context. Some exceptions to this are Jeffrey Angles' work on the difficulty of translating queer stories from the 'Gay Boom' of the 1990s (Angles 2015) and Beverley Curran's work on the issues found in translating various media, including the manga 'Otouto no otto' ('My Brother's Husband') (Curran 2020). Equally, Miyako Inoue's research on 'women's language' in the context of translating Japanese literature into English (and vice versa), and Jiyoung Kim's approach to gendered language in the English translations of Tanizaki Junichirō's *Naomi* and Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* have informed my own approach to analysis and translation (Inoue 2003; Kim 2015). Inoue's identification of 'women's language' as something that has a profound effect on 'the materiality of specific speaking bodies' whilst itself being a 'disembodied language' is crucial to my project (Inoue 2003, 316-8). With the knowledge that 'women's language' is a concept primarily disseminated and reinforced in fictional contexts – and yet has a tangible effect on the real world – I aim for my translations to be conscious of the gendered stereotypes they may be reproducing, and I aim for my literary analysis to acknowledge the specific conditions of gendered language in a written, literary context. Likewise, Jiyoung Kim's discussion of the character of Eriko – a transgender woman – in *Kitchen* highlights the importance of a nuanced, careful approach to gendered language in Japanese. Kim not only addresses the possibility that Eriko's speech functions as a form of 'onē kotoba' (literally 'older sister speech,' a hyperfeminine style of speech used in the queer community), but points out where Megan Backus' translations of Eriko's speech succeed and fail in conveying Eriko's linguistic gender performance, including how Eriko's negotiation of the 'heteronormative linguistic structure based on the binary opposition between

male and female' is 'flattened' in the English translation (Kim 2015, 164). In my own analysis and translations, I wish to avoid flattening the complex linguistic gender performances of the characters in *Blue.*

I hope that my project can not only contribute to scholarship in the realm of queer theory, and queer translation theory, but that it can encourage more scholarship focused on translating queerness, and implementing translation as a queer methodology, in a contemporary Japanese literary context. Whilst the popularity of translated Japanese fiction continues to rise in the UK, the lives and rights of queer people are under constant scrutiny in both the UK and Japan. I believe that now, more than ever, it's important to pay attention to how the concept of gender is discursively maintained or challenged in literature, and in the translation and distribution of that literature. Through analysing and translating *Blue*, I hope to uncover new ways of reading and writing gender, and as a consequence, reading and writing queerness.

What is Queer Language?

To answer what queer language is in a Japanese context, it might be easier first to ask what is *not* queer language. That is, to ask what has been considered the dominant, normative form of Japanese, and how it has been split along gendered lines. Japanese is not a gramatically gendered language – it doesn't feature gendered nouns or verb conjugations that feature heavily in romance languages. However, Japanese does have a complicated history of what is referred to as 'men's language' and 'women's language,' composed of defining features such as: first- and second-person pronoun usage; sentence-final particles; and use of honorific prefixes (Maree 2003; Nakamura 2014). 'Women's language,' in particular, has been characterised by the use of 'polite' and 'elegant' speech, an indirect way of speaking, and an avoidance of Chinese words (Nakamura 2014, 202). Momoko Nakamura shows in her research how 20th century linguists constructed a historical narrative around the idea of 'women's language,' claiming that it was a natural consequence of 'nyōbo kotaba' or 'court-women's speech' – created by women working the imperial palace since the fourteenth century – and 'yūjogo' or 'play-women's speech' – used by women in the licensed quarters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Nakamura 2014, 3). This historical narrative was – and is – used to legitimise the idea of modern-day 'women's language' as inevitable, and as fact. In reality, it is a sociolinguistic construction. As Inoue Miyako states, "female" final particles,' such as *wa, wayo, noyo, dawa, kashira,* actually mark softness, uncertainty, and other 'weak' affect, and that they have come to be gender markers of femininity 'as a consequence of women complying with the socially-accepted and culturally-constituted gendered demeanor,' thereby creating a 'logically closed circuit of indexical relationship between gender and affect' (Inoue 2003, 320). In other words, the construction of 'feminine' speech reinforces the idea of a 'female' body, and this constructed way of speaking eminating from a 'female' body reinforces the idea of 'feminine' speech, in a cyclical relationship with no true origin. Claire Maree concurs, stating that

'within much of popular culture women's language and men's language are imagined to be mapped onto bodies gendered in opposition,' and thereby 'an *original* and *biological* sex is seen to correspond directly to gendered bodies who speak in a specific style' (Maree 2020, 4). However, if we look to Judith Butler's conception of gender as performative, we can instead suggest that such language maintains the *illusion* of such an 'original and biological sex.'

Equally, as Inoue argues, this form of gendered language is heard 'not so much from living bodies of Japanese women, as from imaginary voices,' making it a 'disembodied language' that exists almost entirely in the context of written literature (Inoue 2003, 315-6). In the first act of *Blue*, the prose is interspersed with excerpts from the high school students' re-writing of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid,* in the form of a script. Interestingly, it is only within this meta-text that the reader is exposed to specific linguistic forms most closely associated with this concept of 'women's language.' For example, Mia (the Little Mermaid) on three occasions uses the hyper-feminine sentence-final particle 'kashira' (Kawano 2023, 171, 192), and Margret (the human princess), Mia, and Mia's sisters all on multiple occasions use the hyper-feminine sentence-final particle 'wa' (Kawano 2023, 169, 170, 172, 182, 191, 192). These two grammatical forms are never voiced outside the context of the play's script. This seems to be a deliberate choice, to separate the speech of the fictional women of *The Little Mermaid* from that of the 'real' women and queer people in the novella. By contrasting these two worlds, Kawano makes the meta-text stand out as *extra* fictional, adding an ironic layer of remove for the reader. This extra distance allows the reader to be critical, and to see the sociolinguistic construction of 'women's language' more clearly. It is something that should be – and has been, in this case – relegated to the realm of fiction, as it doesn't actually reflect the variety of ways women express themselves in the real world.

Ultimately, what 'men's language' and 'women's language' claim to index directly – i.e. gender, masculinity/femininity – do so *indirectly*. As Elinor Ochs has stated, 'the relation between language and gender is mediated and constituted through a web of socially organized pragmatic meanings (Ochs 1999, 341-2). What may at first glance be considered a language form that indexes gender could instead be indexing other qualities such as occupation, age, intimacy between the speakers, urban or rural environment, among a host of other qualities about an individual. For example, Shigeko Okamoto's research revealed the fact that some young women who used 'men's language' viewed it instead as 'wakamono no kotoba' ('young people language') (Okamoto 1992, 313), and Ayumi Miyazaki's research showed how some Junior High School students believed that 'boku' indicated weakness and cowardice, stating that it was a first-person pronoun reserved for 'weak boys' or 'mama's boys' (Miyazaki 2023, 265). This indirect relationship between gender and language presents an opening, an opportunity for queer disruption. Queer individuals can unsettle the seemingly 'natural' and irrefutable relationship between language and gender, taking advantage of what the language *indirectly* indexes (e.g. coarseness, directness), instead of what it claims to directly index (i.e. gender along binary lines). In other words, they can utilise queer language.

For example, in *Blue*, first-person pronouns are used as a method for distinguishing between each of the characters' speech in the novella, but not along binary gendered lines. We are introduced to our five main characters – Masago, Minase, Takigami, Kuribayashi and Udai – through a fairly fast-paced dialogue in the opening of the novella (Kawano 2023, 160-3). This dialogue, whilst not part of the *Little Mermaid* meta-text, is presented in the form of a script, with each character's name appearing before each of their respective 'lines' of speech. Each character uses their own distinct first-person personal pronoun: Masago uses 'watashi;' Minase uses 'uchi;' Takigami uses 'boku;' Kuribayashi uses 'washi;' and Udai uses 'ore.' Kawano Megumi seems to

be purposefully playing with the traditional concept of first-person pronouns indicating the gender of the speaker, especially within the context of literature. In an interview with 'Words Without Borders,' Motoyuki Shibata calls upon this traditional conception, arguing that if you write "*I* am tired" in English, there is no indication as to the type of person saying the phrase, meanwhile if you write "*boku* wa tsukareta" in Japanese, 'readers immediately get the idea of a young man or boy' (own emphasis, Shibata 2017). In *Blue*, Takigami using 'boku' or Udai using 'ore' doesn't tell us that they are young men or boys. Instead, they reinforce other aspects of their identities, personalities and physical appearance. Takigami is very opinionated and forthright, often going off on rambling tangents, yet is also described as small and cute ('chicchakute kawaii,' Kawano 2023, 172). Udai is more shy, has romantic feelings towards Takigami, is tall, androgynous-looking, and struggles with the feminine aspects of their own appearance, such as their large chest ('kyōbu [...] ga shuchō shite shimai,' Kawano 2023, 174). These aspects of their selves aren't solely and entirely conveyed by the use of 'boku,' or 'ore,' but are enhanced by such usage. Their distinct first-person pronouns convey their individuality, their unique navigation of femininity and masculinity – and ultimately, their queerness.

Takigami's use of 'boku,' and how it affects the ways in which they are perceived, is addressed directly in the second act. When the drama club students first reunite, Masawo's internal dialogue is focused on Takigami's self-presentation – specifically her clothing and hair. Masawo says that Takigami looks like a 'kyasha' ('delicate,' 'dainty,' 'elegant') and 'hiriki' ('powerless,' 'helpless') '<onna no ko>' ('girl,' 'young woman') (Kawano 2023, 194). Then, Masawo admits that they're disappointed in themself for imagining that Takigami would wear more 'chūseiteki' ('androgynous,' 'genderless,' 'neutral') clothing, or street fashion, purely because they use the first-person pronoun 'boku' (Kawano 2023, 194). In this way Kawano highlights what is considered to be key aspects of an '<onna no ko>' (i.e. being delicate, dainty, elegant, powerless,

helpless), placing it in brackets to emphasise the fact that this term is a social construction – something that claims to be fixed and stable, even though it is abstract and malleable. At the same time, Kawano disrupts the idea that supposedly 'masculine' first-person pronouns like 'boku' directly index a specific form of masculinity, i.e. a masculinity attached to heteronormative conceptions of maleness, something that could not be embodied by an '<onna no ko>'. In short, Kawano shows the functionality of queer language, how one linguistic strategy can be utilised in various ways, to index 'a multitude of social meanings including multiple femininities and masculinities that may both contradict and support hegemonic gender discourses' (Maree 2003, 4).

Kawano, throughout *Blue*, highlights that there is not one singular way in which queer people utilise the masculinity or femininity indirectly indexed by 'men's language' and 'women's language,' nor is there only one form of masculinity or femininity that they are trying to index. As Hideko Abe highlights in their research into the speech of lesbian women in Tokyo, use of masculine linguistic forms does not indicate that lesbians want to be identified as men, nor is it simply the case that 'butch lesbians' are 'speaking like men' (Abe 2023, 218). Instead, they are 'marking their difference in speech' in a way that supports their identities as lesbians (Abe 2023, 218). Equally, in Claire Maree's study of the documentary *Shinjuku Boys*, she emphasises that we cannot analyse the speech of people who identify as onabe – those who 'identify as non-female (sometimes identifying as men), sexually desire women (transgender women included), and typically cross-dress female to male (FTM)' (Maree 2003, 1) – without acknowledging the specificity of their self-identification. Maree states that one of the subjects of the documentary, Gaishi, uses the first-person pronoun 'ore,' but does not do so as a mimicry of stereotypical male speech. She argues that classifying it as such 'does nothing more than reinforce the misleading concept of a static essentialist gender manifested in gendered speech patterns,' and that the masculinity indexed by an onabe's use of 'ore' is 'not necessarily identical in social meaning to

that indexed by a heterosexual man' (Maree 2003, 10-11). As Halberstam argues, there are multiple 'alternative masculinities' that exist beyond cisgender, heterosexual conceptions of 'maleness' (Halberstam 2018, 1-2), and the way in which these alternative masculinities are linguistically conveyed will be unique to each individual. With this in mind, Kawano's use of first-person pronouns in *Blue* – as one of many implementations of queer language – appear to be asking the readers to detach themselves from what they think they already know about 'men's language' and 'women's language,' and to embrace the individuality of each of the characters in the narrative. Kawano is not suggesting that every individual who uses 'watashi' is like Masago/Masawo, or that every individual who uses 'boku' is like Takigami, and so on. Instead, Kawano is highlighting how each queer individual is able to mark their 'difference' linguistically, utilising queer forms of expression in ways that are unique to them.

Ultimately, when it comes to queer language, it is important to focus on how each individual navigates their identity linguistically, utilising the resources available to them – in this case, in Japanese – within different settings, interacting with different people. Queer language is neither static nor homogenic; it rejects normative forms of language and their false claims of 'naturalness' or 'correctness.'

Medical Terminology: (Un)intentionally Reinforcing a Binary

One threat to the fluid, heterogeneous aspects of queer language in Japan has been the systemic medicalisation of queer identities. In 1998, after almost three decades of being prohibited in the country, gender reassigment surgery once again became legal in Japan. However, this was under strict regulations, and such surgeries were specifically conceived as 'medical treatments' for a 'medical condition' – 'sei dōitsusei shōgai' ('gender identity disorder,' or GID) (McLelland 2004, 12). In 2003, the passing of the Act on Special Cases in Handling Gender Status for Persons with Gender Identity Disorder meant that individuals could legally change their gender on the 'koseki' ('family register'). However, this too was under very specific conditions – including sterilization – and still required individuals to identify as male or female, and possess 'the sex organs associated with the gender to which they desired to legally transition' (Dale 2020, 62). In short, the turn of the century in Japan brought with it a drastic reframing of queerness as something defined by medical intervention, and, as a consequence, binary conceptions of man/woman. Even today, in order to receive legal and medical recognition, queer people have to render themselves as legible within this binary framework – if not as cis-man or cis-woman, then as trans-man or trans-woman – while 'leaving the hetero-normativity and gender polarity of the overall sex and gender system unchallenged' (McLelland 2004, 15). This is not only an extension of the state's demand for legibility in order to effectively exert control over individuals (Halberstam 2001, 9), but erases the history in Japan of queer identities purposefully defying the gender binary. Until the 1990s, when it became possible to change one's legal gender, queerness in Japan had existed both linguistically and physically in the semantic field of mixing, blending, and illegibility (Dale 2020, 63), with terms such as 'nyū hāfu' ('new half') drawing attention to the uncategorisable nature of each individual's gender identity (McLelland 2004).

Set in the present day, *Blue* is able to highlight the potentially negative effects that medical, binary terminology proliferated by political, legal, and medical institutions can have on queer people in Japan. In the first act of *Blue*, Udai asks Masago if 'mune toru shujutsu' (non-technical phrasing, literally 'chest removal surgery') is available for individuals who don't identify as 'toransujendā' (Kawano 2023, 190). Masago's immediate reaction is to clarify if Udai is talking about 'nyūbō setsujyo jutsu' (medical terminology; 'mastectomy'), and once they've received this clarification, their response is littered with technical and medical terminology (Kawano 2023, 190). Masago explains that 'seibetsutekigō shujutsu' ('gender reassignment surgery') is classified as 'sei dōitsusei shōgai no iryō no saishū dankai' ('the last stage of medical treatment for gender identity disorder'), so anyone seeking a mastectomy would first need to be diagnosed with the 'byōki' ('disease,' 'condition,' 'illness') of 'sei dōitsusei shōgai' ('gender identity disorder,' 'GID') (Kawano 2023, 190). As Masago continues to rattle off the difficulties of receiving a diagnosis when you're still a teenager, and the technicalities of having medical treatment covered by health insurance, Udai cuts them off. Udai's individual experience does not neatly fit into the medical, binary view of gender presented through Masago, and her language reflects this. Her speech is, on first glance, full of hesitation and uncertainty. She says she *probably* ('tabun') doesn't *necessarily* ('wake dewa [...] nai') experience 'seibetsu iwa' ('gender dysphoria'), and that whilst she *doesn't know for sure* ('iya wakaranai kedo'), she *thinks* that what she's feeling is different from wanting to be 'otoko' ('a man') (Kawano 2023, 190). This speech, however, is not necessarily betraying an uncertainty, but instead reveals the way in which complex, ambiguous, queer feelings have to be – and struggle to be – communicated through currently available medical terms such as 'seibetsu iwa,' and binary social conceptions such as 'otoko.' Udai has to define herself *against* these terms, showing at once their insufficiency to convey the wide array of queer experiences, and their normative power when it comes to being seen, understood, and accepted. In the end, Udai says:

'jibun no karada ga kirai toiu ka jibun no mono ni omoenai dake' ('moreso than hating my body, I just don't see my body as my own') (Kawano 2023, 190). Her speech here is simple, and pointedly gender neutral. She repeatedly uses the neutral first-person pronoun 'jibun,' and the use of 'dake' ('only,' 'just') highlights the fact that her complex emotions *can* be explained simply, if she doesn't have to contend with medical, binary terminology. Ultimately, Udai's words remind us that whilst viewing gender identity through the lens of 'illness' and 'treatment' means that some queer people might receive the help they seek – hormone therapy, surgeries etc. – it also means that others might suffer.

Through the character of Masago/Masawo, Kawano is able to show us how the medicalisation of gender identity can be both liberating and limiting for the same individual. Masago/Masawo's university life coincides with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning they can no longer receive the same level of medical care that they had previously, and have to stop 'nijisei seichō yokusei ryōhō' (literally 'secondary sexual characteristics suppression therapy,' more commonly known as 'hormone blockers' in the UK) (Kawano 2023, 201, 204). The level of distress that Masago/Masawo feels when they begin underdoing a testosterone-based puberty reveals the extent to which such medical intervention had been improving their quality of life. We're told that every time Masago/Masawo picks up a razor to shave their newly grown facial hair, they feel compelled to shave off not only their beard, but their skin as well ('hige dake denaku hada made mo sogi otoshitai you na kibun ni natta') (Kawano 2023, 204). Building upon this violent, distressing imagery, we're told that Masago/Masawo views their physical changes as something monstrous – as they become more masculine ('otoko ppoi'), they feel as if they're watching a monster hatch ('maru de, kaibutsu no fuka wo mimoru you ni, mitsumeteita') (Kawano 2023, 204). Masago/Masawo's relationship with their self – both their physical and emotional state – is clearly strained here. In showing the negative effects of removing Masago/Masawo's medical

support, Kawano is able to show how medical intervention such as 'nijisei seichō yokusei ryōhō' ('hormone blockers') *can* be life-changing for queer individuals in a positive way.

However, the surgical intervention required to have one's legal gender changed on the 'koseki' ('family register') is shown to have a negative effect on Masago/Masawo's personal relationship with their gender identity. In the second act, we are told that Masawo doesn't personally see surgery as necessary for affirming their gender identity: 'hontō no tokoro masawo ni totte, shujutsu wa hissu no mono dewanai' (Kawano 2023, 201). The use of 'hontō no tokoro' ('in truth,' 'in actuality,' 'in their heart') suggests a separation between Masawo's true feelings, and the role they know they have to play in order to be accepted by society. Masawo knows the risks that they face if they don't take the practical step of surgery, including employer discrimination, being viewed as a 'seihanzaisha' ('sex offender'), poverty, depression and suicide (Kawano 2023, 201, 205). For Masawo, then, surgery has become a part of what Judith Butler defines as a 'strategy of survival,' as gender is not only a performance, but one with 'clearly punitive consequences' (Butler 2007, 190). Even if their conception of their own gender exists beyond the binary, they know that they have to artificially present themself as a 'man' or a 'woman' in order to survive. We're told that the discomfort Masawo feels towards their body doesn't manifest in a desire to surgically remove/add, a particular part from/to themself – 'tokutei no bui wo setsujo wo shitari, aratana bui wo tsukuttari suru koto ni hasodo kyoumi ga nai' – and that they specifically have no need for genitals that match a particular gender – 'dochira no seibetsu no seiki mo betsu ni iranai' (Kawano 2023, 204). They even refute the idea that they would base their identity upon something like genitalia – 'atta tokoro de sore ga jibun wo kettei suru to wa omowanai' (Kawano 2023, 204) – thereby 'problematizing the supposed congruence between gender identity, genitalia and sexual orientation' (McLelland 2004, 15). In this way, their gender identity does not align with the medical, binary view of gender, and their self-conceptualisation

stands in opposition to the government's requirement for specific genitalia to align with one's legal gender. Ultimately, their self-conceptualisation, like Udai's, is based on defining themself *against* an available category, as they say they would be happy if they could live as 'dansei denai mono' ('something that is not male / a man') (Kawano 2023, 204). Interestingly, Masawo uses the term 'dansei' ('male,' 'man') here, with the suffix 'sei' gesturing to a more 'biological and essentialist understandings of female and male bodies' (Bullock 2016, 31). This word choice brings into question where and how the terms 'jyosei' ('female,' 'woman') and 'dansei' ('male,' 'man') overlap with the other terms that appear in the novella: 'onna no ko' ('young woman,' 'girl'), 'otoko no ko' ('young man,' 'boy'), 'jyoshi' ('woman,' 'girl'), and 'danshi' ('man,' 'boy'). Masawo, in defining themself through difference, seems to be critiquing all of these possible categories, and suggesting their desire to exist beyond the binary that all of these terms reinforce.

However, Masawo acknolwedges how such a non-binary conception of the self would be misconstrued in a binary society, and says that they couldn't bear to be seen as a 'otoko no dekisokonai' ('a failure of a man') or 'nisemono no onna' ('a fake woman') (Kawano 2023, 204). If they don't commit to presenting as a man or a woman, they'll always be viewed as man-like or woman-like – something false, incomplete, and therefore a failure in society's eyes. This point is reiterated by Masawo when they're speaking to their friends from the drama club in the second act:

> <otoko demo onna demonai, etai no shirenai nanika> tte minasaretara shakai ni ibasho ga nai no ni ne
>
> (if you're seen as 'neither a man or a woman, a strange / suspicious / unfamiliar thing,' then you have no place in society) (Kawano 2023, 206)

This moment reflects Jack Halberstam's formulation that 'one must be readable at a glance' (Halberstam 2018, 23) and that 'ambiguous gender, when and where it does appear, is inevitably transformed into deviance, thirdness, or a blurred version of either male or female' (Halberstam 2018, 20). If Masawo can't be seen as 'otoko' or 'onna,' the only classification left to them – in society's eyes – is 'etai no shirenai nanika' ('a strange / suspicious / unfamiliar thing'). The sole solution Masawo can see for themself is to be viewed as a 'chanto to shita jyosei' ('a proper woman / female'), or a proper man/male, and has to confront the fact that to be viewed as such, 'mitame wa jyūyō datta' ('appearances were everything / important / key') (Kawano 2023, 204). In the end, they have to either undergo unwanted surgery, or stop all medical intervention (including hormone blockers) – neither of which align with their actual wants or desires.

Ultimately, in *Blue*, we are shown how assigning discrete, objective criteria to something as subjective and fluid as gender identity leads to individuals having to 'prove' their credibility – their right to exist – through means they would not have otherwise pursued. The medical model of gender not only involves the creation of new language to relate specifically to the process of diagnosis and treatment, such as 'sei dōitsusei shōgai' (GID), but has a wider effect on other terms used to refer to queer people – unnecessarily medicalising terms. For example, the term 'toransujendā' comes to symbolise not the variety and complexity of individual lived experiences, but something formulaic – part of the 'binary gender schema' (Halberstam 2018, 23) that everyone has to follow in order to survive. In Takai Yutori's essay 'toransujendā no teigi wo shiritai anata he' ('To people who want to know the definition of toransujendā') – featured alongside *Blue* in the August 2023 edition of Shūeisha's literary magazine *Subaru* – they talk about the danger of strict definitions (Takai 2023). Takai believes that there is no single 'teigi' ('definition') of the word 'toransujendā', and instead they offer various 'setsumei' ('explanations'), highlighting the varied lived experiences of people who identify as 'toransujendā' (Takai 2023, p. 237). Takai

argues that whilst some people earnestly want to understand 'toransujendā' people, and believe that a definition will help them, others seek a definition because they want to erase the existence of 'toransujendā' people (Takai 2023, p. 237). If people in power can clearly define what being 'toransujendā' is, they can more easily control and police them. If toransujendā people continue to defy categorisation and classification, they can't so easily be erased. I believe that we can read *Blue* as an example of one of Takai's 'setsumei' ('explanations') rather than a 'teigi' ('definition') of 'toransujendā,' or queerness in general. As a text, it openly critiques the narrow, medical view of gender identity prevalent in Japan today, and the wider implications that such a view has on the way queer people live – how they adapt in order to survive.

Mermaid as Metaphor: Going Beyond the Binary

Masago/Masawo's exploration of the image of 'ningyo' ('mermaid') develops from something that neatly aligns with medical, binary model of gender, to one that stands in stark contrast to it. Ultimately, it provides an example of self-conceptualisation outside of the binary.

In the first act of *Blue*, Masago states that they want to play the role of the Little Mermaid in their drama club's re-imagining of the Hans Christian Anderson tale, and seems to relate to the Little Mermaid's plight. When Takigami – playing Margret, the human princess (i.e. the Little Mermaid's love interest) – asks why the Little Mermaid falls in love with the prince/princess, and is willing to give up everything for him/her, Masago argues that the Little Mermaid isn't committing a form of 'jikogisei' ('self-sacrifice'), but becoming her 'hontō no jibun' ('true self') (Kawano 2023, 169). Masago believes that the Little Mermaid was born a mermaid by mistake ('machigatte ningyo ni umarechatta'), and that turning into a human is simply her enacting her free will, something she is doing for the sake of herself, not another person ('hoka no dareka no tame no jikogisei toka jyanakute [...] jibun no shitai koto wo shita dake nano') (Kawano 2023, 169). Masago views the Little Mermaid's story through a lens of transition from one state to another, being born in the 'wrong' body and trying to achieve a physically 'correct' embodiment that aligns with their inner thoughts and desires. In other words, Masago reads *The Little Mermaid* in a queer way. They also see their own personal journey as overlapping with the Little Mermaid's: just as Masago believes that the Little Mermaid was born a mermaid by mistake, Masago believes that they were born male by mistake; just as the Little Mermaid wants to be human, Masago – at this moment in the narrative – wants to be an 'onna no ko' ('girl,' 'young woman'). It is certainly a queer reading of the story, but still along binary lines – there is a discrete separation between ocean and land, being a 'mermaid' and being 'human,' and there's a sense of anxiety about achieving a 'real' or 'true' state of being. When discussing the fact that the Little Mermaid in Anderson's

original story doesn't have a soul, Masago contends with the fact that even when the mermaid gained legs ('ashi wo te ni iretemo'), and achieved the physical form of a human being ('sugata wa ningen ni nattemo'), she couldn't become a real human ('honmono no ningen niwa narenai mama dattan da') (Kawano 2023, 179). In this moment we are shown that Masago is not only focused on physical presentation and existence – the Little Mermaid's and their own 'sugata' – but on being a *real,* or *genuine* 'onna no ko' ('girl,' 'young woman'). To reinforce this fact, later in the narrative we're told retroactively that Masago's initial motivation for performing as the Little Mermaid was rooted in proving that they were a 'kanpeki na <onna no ko>' ('a perfect "girl"'; 'a picture-perfect "young woman"') (Kawano 2023, 211). At this point in the narrative, Masago can't yet see that the concept of being 'homono' ('the real thing') or 'kanpeki' ('perfect') can only function within a binary logic, as both terms imply an end-point to gender that does not exist. They are still too focused on the mermaid's complete physical transformation as proof of their new, human existence.

Moving into the second act, Masago/Masawo is still initially deeply troubled by what they see as their own 'ningyo' ('mermaid') existence – always stuck between two worlds, a cursed chimera, never truly one thing or another – but by the end of the novella, the image of the half-human/half-fish comes to represent not a division of the self for Masawo, but a model for a liberating form of simultaneous multiplicity. Masawo is able to dismantle the discrete separations between ocean and land, mermaid and human, natural and unnatural, and is able to address the anxiety they feel towards achieving a 'real' or 'proper' state of being. We can see the development of Masawo's relationship with the image of the mermaid most clearly through the social media posts interspersed in the narrative of the second act. Masawo's posts are initially thematically focused on ideas of a split-existence, or being not-fully-formed. They lament over the fact that a mermaid's life is a 'chūtohanpa na ariyou' ('incomplete / unfinished / half-baked existence'), and

that they are waiting to transform into a 'kanzen karada no ningen' ('a complete-body human') (Kawano 2023, 199). Masawo, by contrasting the concepts of 'chū' ('half,' 'middle,' 'neutral,' 'in-between') and 'kanzen' ('complete,' 'whole'), addresses some of the issues contained within the medical conceptions of gender identity, and echoes their concerns from the first act of trying to be 'honmono' ('the real thing'). The language here suggests that every individual should be aiming to be 'kanzen' ('complete,' 'whole'), but complete according to whom, and in what way? As I have previously discussed, Masawo is concerned about being viewed as 'otoko no dekisokonai' ('a failure of a man') or 'nisemono no onna' ('a fake woman'), and fears that if they can't successfully perform as one of the two genders currently available to them, they will suffer. S.P.F. Dale notes how those who identify as 'x-jendā' – a term used by individuals 'who do not fit under the existing categories of male (dansei) / female (josei), or who are unsure of their sex/gender' (Poco a poco 2000, 128) – are often conceptualised as 'chūsei' (literally 'middle sex'), as well as 'musei' (literally 'no sex') or 'ryōsei' (literally 'both sexes') (Dale 2020, 64). It seems, then, that there could be a potential site of liberation in remaining 'chū' ('half,' 'middle,' 'neutral,' 'in-between'), in remaining indicipherable and incomprehensible. However, as Dale points out, whilst trying to provide an existence outside of the binary, definitions that involve terms like 'chūsei' still rely upon it (Dale 2020, 64). Being 'chūsei' takes for granted that gender exists on a spectrum from man to woman, and thereby takes for granted that 'man' and 'woman' are indisputable categories. At this point in the novella, Masawo has only just begun unpacking these ingrained concepts, and is still trying to reach one of these two (im)possible categories that the binary system falsely promises.

However, Masawo's posts then take a thematic turn, using the story of *The Little Mermaid* as a basis for criticising the terminology of 'transformation' itself. They criticise the English word 'transform,' and state their lack of identification with it:

> ima no watashi wa sore wo **transform** to yobu beki dewanai you ni kanjiteiru
>
> watashi wa zutto sore de atta no dakara **transform** dewanai
>
> (right now I feel like I shouldn't call it a '**transform[ation]**'
>
> I have always been this way, so it's not a '**transform[ation]**')
>
> (original spacing retained for all social media posts, Kawano 2023, 202)

In this moment, Masawo is asserting that they are inherently 'complete' – being 'complete' or 'honmono' ('the real thing,' 'genuine article') in the eyes of society isn't something they have to strive for any longer. They have come to realise that it is in part the terminology of transformation that has imposed a 'before' and an 'after' upon them, and that if they can reformulate their existence linguistically, they can do so emotionally and conceptually. By criticising the word 'transform' specifically, Masawo is also calling attention to the influence that the English language has had on queer terminology in Japan, such as the transliteration of self-identifying terms like 'toransujendā,' and asserting that their rejection of currently available categories of identification extends to the etymological roots of the terms that surround them.

Taking this rejection one step further, Masawo splits the English word 'transform' into its two component halves – 'trans' and 'form' – in order to interrogate them more thoroughly:

> hitobito wa sono ten ni tsuite machigatta kangae wo motteiru watashitachi ga **trans** shite koko ni kuru no da to
>
> (people always get that wrong that we '**trans**' in order to get here)
>
> (Kawano 2023, 202)

Interrogating the English prefix 'trans' instead of the transliterated Japanese term 'toransu' opens it up to various endings – trans*form*, trans*fer*, trans*ition*, trans*late.* In this way, it also calls attention to how it functions etymologically as a prefix, meaning 'across,' 'beyond' or 'on the other side of.' Just as the word 'transform' suggested a 'before' and 'after' that doesn't exist, the prefix 'trans' suggests a movement – metaphorically or literally – from one distinctly formed, concrete place to another distinctly formed, concrete place. This, Masawo now suggests, is a false formulation of their queerness. To build upon this, they interrogate the term 'form' in the same way:

> shikashi **form** kaeru toiu ten de wa machigatteinai no ka watashi(tachi) ni ai ni kuru tabi no aida ni sorera wa kawaru koto mo aru sore dake
>
> (isn't that what they get wrong, the idea that our '**form**' changes they change on their way to meet us) (Kawano 2023, 205)

Masawo, through this interrogation, shifts their focus away from the physical 'form' of the mermaid, and themself. They no longer experience the same anxiety around the Little Mermaid being viewed as a 'honomono no ningen' ('real / genuine human being') once they take on the 'sugata' ('physical form') of a human, nor themself being viewed as a 'chanto to shita jyosei' ('proper woman/female') or 'kanpeki na <onna no ko>' ('a perfect young woman'). In this way, they have been able to deconstruct the gender binary, and the language that upholds it.

By the end of the novella, Masawo's social media posts focus on theorising an existence in two (or more) realms simultaneously, or in a hypothetical new, all-encompassing realm. They say:

> ningyo hime no ikiteikeru basho ga nai no wa ningyo hime no sei dewanai
>
> umi to riku shika nai no ka warui
>
> (it's not the little mermaid's fault that there isn't a place where she can live
>
> the fact that only the ocean or land exists is the problem)
>
> (Kawano 2023, 221)

The blame, or responsibility, is no longer placed on the mermaid – it is not their fault that there isn't a place where they can live happily. Likewise, it is not queer people's fault that society doesn't accommodate queer existences outside of the binary of 'man' and 'woman.'

This critique also manifests as a contemplation, when Masawo asks:

> ningyo ga ningyo no mama de ikiteikeru basho ga atta toshite, dou dattan darou
>
> (if there was a place where mermaids could live as themselves, what would it be like?)
>
> (Kawano 2023, 219)

Here, Masawo is going beyond the binary of ocean/land, and by extension man/woman. They are no longer looking towards the insufficient options that already exist, but theorising a new mode of existence beyond them. Instead of a mermaid, or a queer person, having to change themself in order to fit in to the world around them, the world should accomodate them.

It is worth noting the culturally specific formulation of the gender-neutral Japanese 'ningyo' – half-human/half-fish – in comparison to the gendered European 'mermaid' – half-*woman*/half-fish. Mateja Kovacic, in their work on ningyo mummies from the Tokugawa period in Japan, quotes 18th-century naturalist Ōtsuki Gentaku's comparison of the two terms. Ōtsuki states that 'westerners named the mermaids based on the differences between two genders,' whilst in China and Japan 'there is no word to distinguish male from female mermaids' (Ōtsuki and Hakugen 1786, p. 22). This conceptualisation of 'ningyo,' as distinct from 'mermaids,' can be seen in the creation of ningyo mummies, which were 'hybrids made of monkey, fish and dog body parts combined with wood and papier-mâché' constructed by 'Japanese hyakushō including artisans, fishermen, and artists' and were featured as part of curiosity displays during the Tokugawa period (Kovacic

2024, 116). Masawo's language seems to be purposefully playing with both the image of the Japanese 'ningyo' and the European 'mermaid' – sometimes they refer specifically to the 'ningyo hime no ningyo' ('the mermaid from *The Little Mermaid;*' literally 'the human-fish from the human-fish princess') or the 'ningyo hime' ('the Little Mermaid;' literally 'the human-fish princess'), but at other moments they discuss the 'ningyo' ('human-fish') more broadly. In one social media post, there even appears to be a direct reference to the ningyo mummies:

> nani ga kimaira de nani ga sou denai no ka wo kimeru no wa dare na no ka
>
> ningen wa ningyo to saru no kimaira dewanai no ka
>
> (who gets to decide what is or isn't a chimera?
>
> isn't a human a chimera of a ningyo and a monkey?)
>
> (Kawano 2023, 228)

Masawo defiantly flips the image of the 'ningyo' on its head. It is not the 'ningyo' who is an unnatural, monstrous construction – half of a monkey and half of a fish sewn together by a hyakushō – but human beings. By extension, it is not queer identities that are 'unnatural,' but cis-gender, heterosexual ones. This reversal aligns with Judith Butler's argument that 'if trans people were seen as normal, instead of "abnormal," the instability of all gender would be exposed and norms would become unsettled' (Butler 2004, 27-28, quoted in Rose 2021). Equally, by utilising and juxtaposing the two images of the 'ningyo' and 'mermaid,' Masawo is able to call attention to how gender is culturally formulated, and linguistically deployed uniquely in different languages. What may be a gendered term in one language – 'mermaid' – can exist in a gender-neutral state in

another – 'ningyo.' By referencing the half-monkey ningyo mummies, Masawo is also able to expose how the very idea of what is 'natural' or 'unnatural' – and what is considered monstrous – is culturally formulated. As Takigami argues in the text, what is considered 'natural' is vague, and in constant flux ('nani ga shizen to sare, nani ga fushizen to sareru ka no kyōkai mo hontō wa kanari aimai de, tsugō yoku acchi kocchi ugokasareteru,' Kawano 2023, 226). Masawo's exploration of 'nature' through the image of the 'ningyo'/'mermaid,' alongside Takigami's comment, helps them reassess what has been viewed as 'natural' and 'unnatural' about them and their gender identity. Masawo lists aspects of their life that have been deemed 'shizen' ('natural') and 'fushizen' ('unnatural') by society. For example, their body undergoing medical treatments was deemed unnatural, but their body now (having undergone a testosterone-based puberty) is deemed natural (Kawano 2023, 226). They then ask the question: 'dewa jibun ni totte no 「shizen」 to wa nani ka?' ('Well, what is natural *to me*?) (Kawano 2023, 226). At this moment, Masawo is finally able to centre themself in their own journey. They are able to reclaim the narrative that they first ascribed to the Little Mermaid: enacting their free will, acting for the sake of themself, and noone else. Through exploring the metaphor of the 'ningyo'/'mermaid,' they are able to unpack and destablise the various binaries that surround them. They are able to theorise a new existence that embraces multiplicity, and rejects cis-gender heternormative conceptions of being 'complete' or 'natural.'

Translation as Queer Methodology

I have already highlighted a variety of examples of culturally and linguistically specific expressions and imagery related to queerness in *Blue*, but queer translation isn't just about translating queer terms, and queer language use. It's about highlighting the indeterminate nature of language, interrogating the inequalities and limitations in place in our current language use – both in the language we're translating from *and* into – and making space for 'strands of thought not yet present or possible' (Kaza 2022, 312). Helen Vassallo, in reference to feminist translation practices, argues that translators should deliberately *not* neutralise gendered language, nor 'smooth out' or remove sexist language present in the original text, but should retain – and thereby shine a light on – the sexist social structures embedded in language (Vassallo 2025). In a similar way, queer translation shouldn't attempt to 'smooth out' language use that aligns with normative constructions of gender, but should follow the intention of the original text – retaining both when binary gendered notions are abided by, *and* fought against. In short, I wish to demonstrate how English and Japanese can be used together, in conversation with one another, to formulate new queer forms of expression, *and* to question the modes of expression currently available to us. To facilitate this exploration, I am going to discuss some moments in the second act of the novella that feature Masawo and the friend that they make at university, Hazuki.

As I have previously discussed, in the second act of the novella Masawo is unable to access the hormone blockers that they had taken during high school, and so they begin to undergo a testosterone-based puberty, causing several physical changes, including: their voice lowering in pitch, getting taller, and growing facial hair (Kawano 2023, 204). They also alter their clothing choices in response to these physical changes, opting to buy clothing categorised as 'jendāresu' ('genderless') and 'yunisekkusu' ('unisex') (Kawano 2023, 204). With this in mind, Masawo and Hazuki initially meet and interact over Zoom, as part of an online, remote class. Neither character

shows their face on camera, and Masawo decides to set their display name as their surname, Asakura, rather than Masago (the first name they chose to go by during high school), Masawo (the first name they have chosen to go by since university), or Masao (their birth name). When Masawo and Hazuki first interact with each other, Masawo doesn't utilise speech patterns considered hyper-feminine – referring to what is considered feminine in the context of 'women's language' (for reference Maree 2003; Okamoto 1995) – but they don't utilise hyper-masculine forms either, instead using the neutral final-sentence particles 'kana' and 'yo ne' (Kawano 2023, 207-8). Masawo never explicitly speaks to Hazuki about their own gender identity, leaving Hazuki to come to her own conclusions. When the two characters first meet in person, Hazuki is visibly shocked at Masawo's masculine appearance: 'hazuki wa me wo marukushite' ('Hazuki stared with round eyes;' 'Hazuki looked shocked') (Kawano 2023, 209). She first refers to Masawo as 'asa-chan,' a nickname composed of the shortening of Masawo's surname / username, Asakura, and the honorific '-chan,' a term of endearment used to convey a sense of familiarity or emphasise the cutesy nature of an individual, as it is often used towards small children (Nakajima & Fujii 2023). It is also typically (but not exclusively) used to refer to young women or girls. Once Hazuki says out loud that she sees Masawo as an 'otoko no ko' ('boy, young man'), Hazuki goes to correct her language use, wanting to refer to Masawo instead as 'asakura-kun.' This not only omits the abbreviation of the nickname before, but utilises the honorific '-kun,' which is typically used to refer to someone who is younger than you, and specifically towards a young man or boy (Nakajima & Fujii 2023).

The original exchange is as follows:

> **asa-chan** tte **otoko no ko** dattanda, to itta.
>
> **asakura, kun**, to iinaosou to suru no wo saegitte,
>
> sono mama de ii yo, to masawo wa waratta.
>
> 「nanka, hanashi yasui kara katte ni **onna no ko** da to omotteta」
>
> (Kawano 2023, 209)

When it comes to translating this moment, we have to consider what Hazuki is indirectly indexing through the use of 'asa-chan' and 'asakura-kun.' The honorifics –chan and –kun can be used in reference to anyone of any age of gender, but what does Hazuki mean by her usage? Hazuki seems to switch her language because she is now viewing Masawo as an 'otoko no ko' ('boy,' 'young man') rather than as an 'onna no ko' ('girl,' 'young woman'), but what does this actually mean? Hazuki views the world through a cis-gender, heteronormative perspective, and places importance on whether her friends are the 'same sex' or 'opposite sex' as her – categories that can only exist in a binary system. It is because Hazuki adheres to these strict categories that she is shocked that Masawo – someone who she is on friendly terms with, and she finds easy to talk to ('hanashi yasui kara') – doesn't physically align with her conception of someone who is the 'same sex' as her. Ultimately, the switch from 'asa-chan' to 'asakura-kun' doesn't just suggest that Hazuki is decoding Masawo's gender in a different way, but suggests that there is a newly established formality and distance in their relationship. A queer translation of this passage, then, should attempt to retain the binary conception of gender in Hazuki's language, as well as the increased

level of formality and distance implied by the change in address. For example, we could translate the passage as the following:

> '**Asa-chan**, you're a ***boy***?' Hazuki said.
>
> Masawo could see **the cogs turning** in Hazuki's head. As she went to re-address Masawo more **formally** as **Asakura-kun**, Masawo interrupted her.
>
> 'Haha, you can still call me **Asa-chan** though.' Masawo laughed.
>
> 'Huh, I guess because it was so easy to chat to you, I thought you were a **girl**.'

In this version, I've retained the use of 'asa-chan' and 'asakura-kun' to maintain and expose the linguistic dynamic present in the Japanese, but to compensate for an English-speaking reader's potential unfamiliarity, I've translated Hazuki's confusion and hesitation more explicitly. I've also directly addressed the intensified formality implied in the Japanese. In this way, I'm providing some scaffolding for the reader, and context for what –chan and –kun can mean beyond purely being a signifier for 'girl' and 'boy.' I have also translated Masawo's reply to include a direct reference to still being called 'Asa-chan,' alluding to the fact that this form of nickname can be used to refer to anyone of any gender. In this way, whilst acknowledging that the same 'formal indexical encoding of gender' (Inoue 2003, 319) does not exist in English as in Japanese, I can indicate to the reader how some of this encoding works in Japanese. Whilst I have highlighted previously that 'onna no ko' and 'otoko no ko' have culturally specific meanings, I have chosen here to use the English terms 'girl' and 'boy.' This is so that I can take a moment to highlight the fact that binary formulations of gender are pervasive in both Japanese *and* English. I've also

italicised 'boy' to emphasise the shock in Hazuki's speech, and thereby highlight the fact that she sees Masawo's personality and their physical presentation as existing on two opposite sides of the gender binary. Another way we could translate the passage is as follows:

> 'Asa, **babe**, you've been a **guy** this whole time?' Hazuki said.
>
> As Hazuki was about to take back the **'babe,'** Masawo interrupted with
>
> 'Well, you can still call me Asa!' and laughed.
>
> 'Huh, I don't know, I guess because you were so easy to talk to I thought you were **one of the gals**.'

I've chosen the term 'babe' to imply the intimacy and cutesy nature of the original nickname 'asa-chan,' and because this term in English could be misconstrued as a romantic pet name. Hazuki, now viewing their relationship through a heterosexual lens, might feel the need to revoke this pet name to assert the platonic nature of their friendship. I've chosen 'one of the gals' to imply a new established form of exclusion, i.e. Masawo was once 'one of' the 'onna no ko,' but now they have been barred from entering this discrete category. In this version, I've chosen to show Hazuki's binary language through the use of 'guys' and 'gals.' I believe the more colloquial language helps expose how embedded binary language is in our day-to-day speech – even when we're speaking in a casual way, our speech can be affected by binary oppositions.

After this interaction, Masawo doesn't shy away from Hazuki's estimation of them as an 'otoko no ko' ('boy,' 'young man'), as they feel they can use their positioning to convince Hazuki to leave her controlling boyfriend: 'watashi ga otoko dattara, sonna otoko yamete watashi ni shina

yo tte ieta' ('if I was a guy, I could say "leave that guy and be with me"') (Kawano 2023, 200). However, it is Masawo's more masculine positioning that costs them their friendship with Hazuki. In the final phone call conversation between Masawo and Hazuki, Hazuki explains that they can no longer be friends because her boyfriend is opposed to her being friends with boys. Masawo makes their final attempt to plead for Hazuki to stay friends with them, and is ultimately turned down (Kawano 2023, 233-5). This is also one of the few moments that we see Masawo using the first-person pronoun 'boku' (traditionally considered to be more informal and masculine) instead of 'watashi' (traditionally considered to be more formal and feminine). Each time Masawo says 'boku,' it is accompanied by an excessive use of commas and filler words, suggesting a sense of discomfort. It signals to the reader that this is a word that Masawo is almost struggling to vocalise, and thereby suggests a kind of performance of masculinity that doesn't align with Masawo's identity. Masawo, in the end, asks Hazuki the following question:

> **boku**, ga, **onna no ko** dattara, soba ni irareta? (Kawano 2023, 233)

Here are some possible translations of this question:

> If **I**, **uh,** had been, **well, who you thought I was**, I could've still been your friend?

> If **I** had, **like,** been **[*clears throat*] a "girl,"** things could have been different?

boku

If **I, uh,** had been**, well, a "girl,"** could I have stayed your friend?

If ~~**watashi**~~ **boku** had been an **onna no ko (girl)**, I could have stayed by your side?

In the first and second translations, whilst I haven't retained the use of 'boku,' I have tried to emphasise the hesitation and discomfort in Masawo's speech by mirroring the excessive commas, and adding in more filler words such as 'uh,' 'well,' and 'like.' In my first translation, I have chosen to translate 'onna no ko' euphemistically as 'who you thought I was,' emphasising that the categorising of 'onna no ko' and 'otoko no ko' is something that Hazuki (and society at large) has imposed upon Masawo, and not something that Masawo personally identifies with. In the second and third translations, I have placed 'girl' in quotation marks, mirroring the bracketing of '<onna no ko>' at other moments in the text, emphasising its existence as a socially constructed category. In the second translation I have also decided to add stage directions into Masawo's speech, emphasising the performativity of Masawo's speech (in both a theatrical and Butlerian sense), and taking this moment towards the end of the novella to mirror the format of the opening (i.e. emulating a play script). In the third translation, I've tried retaining the use of 'boku' by emulating the 'rubi' ('ruby') characters that can appear above kanji in Japanese, operating as annotative glosses that either provide phonetic readings or semantic information. This is a technique that isn't present in this moment in the original, but does appear elsewhere, such as the 'rubi' of 'heterosekushuaru' ('heterosexual,' in katakana) appearing above 'iseiai' ('heterosexual,' in kanji) (Kawano 2023, 200). This technique means that the phonetic – and semantic – meaning of 'boku' can be conveyed on the page, and I can highlight how meaning can be conveyed linguistically in Japanese. In the last translation, I have tried to not only retain the Japanese first-person pronoun

of ‘boku,’ but have used a stricken-through version of ‘watashi’ to emphasise the effort Masawo is making to *not* say ‘watashi’ in this moment – their desire to maintain the performance. This internal struggle is only enhanced by the fact that Masawo’s inner voice uses the first-person pronoun ‘watashi,’ contrasting with the ‘boku’ they use when speaking to Hazuki:

> **watashi** ga kowai no? (Kawano 2023, 233)

Here are some possible translations of this self-addressed question:

> Am ***I*** scary?

> **watashi**
> Am **I** scary?

> Am **I – watashi** – scary?

In all three options, I have tried to retain the fact that there is a separation, and difference in the ‘I’ being used here, compared to the ‘I’ used towards Hazuki. In the first translation, I have shown this difference by italicising the ‘I.’ In the second translation, I’ve tried the ‘rubi’ character technique again. In the third translation, I have brought the ‘watashi’ to the forefront, providing it its own space on the page, between two dashes. Whilst I am making a conscious effort to not ‘completely obliterate the self-gendering signifiers within Japanese first-person singular pronouns’

(Enke 2104, 242), is physically rendering them on the page enough? This entire final conversation between Masawo and Hazuki would have a different, and more flattened, meaning if I were to 'obliterate' the dynamics conveyed in the use of first-person pronouns. But the first-person pronouns only carry meaning if the person reading and interpreting them has the 'cultural knowledge that they point to elements of the context where they are uttered' (Inoue 2003, 319). It is important, then, to give these words their meaning, their context, through other linguistic means. This could be in typography (e.g. font, italics, underlining, emboldening, strike-through) or formatting (e.g. 'rubi' characters, translator's notes, footnotes, appendices). It could be in creating unique tones and voices, focusing on aspects like formality (e.g. use of slang, or high vocabulary), hesitancy (e.g. use of filler words, or punctuation), and intimacy (e.g. use of pet names) – the possibilities extend beyond the realm of this project.

Ultimately, there is no one answer, no 'true' translation of any text. It is important to always interrogate what stereotypes we may impart, and what elements we may flatten or obliterate during the delicate negotiation that is translation. It is also important to remember that no translation is final, or definitive. Queer translation, like queer language, is neither static nor homogenic; it is not searching for one 'kanzen' ('complete') or 'kanpeki na' ('perfect') translation, but drawing attention to the incompleteness and imperfection inherent in all translations, and in language itself. These examples of queer translations are not intended to simply be potential solutions to practical translation problems, but to hopefully serve as a template for interrogating and unpacking language, for utilising one language to interrogate another and thereby interrogate itself.

Conclusion

Queerness is expressed uniquely by every individual, and the resources that someone can utilise to convey their queerness varies depending on the language they speak, and the culture they exist in. This complicates the process of translation, as translators use a second language to try and relay these unique expressions delicately, and respectfully, with an entirely different set of tools. However, translation is an opportunity to highlight these difficulties, and examine *why* they exist – because gender is a culturally and temporally contingent sociolinguistic construct.

In the end, queer translation is about opening up new possibilities for expression between and within languages (utilising the resources of multiple languages), and acknowledging and exposing the limitations of language for what they are by laying them bare on the page. Queer translation reveals the simultaneous power and insufficiency of language, and opens up the possibility for multiple, simultaneous meanings that refuse a single definition – like queerness itself.

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