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James Welker

Transfiguring Women in Late Twentieth-Century Japan: Feminists, Lesbians, and Girls' Comics Artists and Fans

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Across borders

While research on feminist work, lesbian activism, and *shōjo* manga is booming, notably in English,[1] James Welker's book offers a refreshing perspective on these themes. *Transfiguring Women in Late Twentieth-Century Japan: Feminists, Lesbians, and Girls' Comics Artists and Fans* brilliantly intertwines Cultural Studies with Gender, Feminist, and Media Studies to highlight how, in the 1970s and 1980s, artists and fans challenged the expected gender and sexuality roles of (young) women in Japan. Welker focuses on 'three socially marginalised spheres—the women involved in the *ūman ribu* (women's liberation) movement and those who identified with the *rezubian* (lesbian) community, as well as young women artists and adolescent girl readers of queer *shōjo* manga (girls' comics)' (1). More precisely, he examines the 'trajectories' (the histories of these groups), the 'terminologies' (the conceptualisations and definitions created by and for these groups), the 'translations' (done by members inspired by, and wanting to inspire, other activists and artists), and the 'travels' (undertaken by individuals of the groups and what they have learned from them).

Transfiguring Women in Late Twentieth-Century Japan innovatively crosses borders through Welker's choice of a transversal analysis across the three spheres, his vast variety of materials, and—most importantly—his concept of 'transfiguration.' This methodological and theoretical approach is reminiscent of what Simone Pfleger and Carrie Smith have called

[1] For instance, on feminism, see Andrea Germer and Ulrike Wöhr, eds., *Handbook of Feminisms in Japan* (Amsterdam University Press, 2025); on female same-sex activism, see Sharon Chalmers, *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan* (Routledge, 2003); and on *shōjo* manga, see Masami Toku, ed., *International Perspectives on Shojo and Shojo Manga: The Influence of Girl Culture* (Routledge, 2015).

'transverse disciplines.'[2] As a form of 'collaborative knowledge-building' that decentralises power,[3] such an approach enables the mapping out of the three spheres' queer, feminist, and/or activist existences in terms of their commonalities and differences. More pointedly, the notion of 'transfiguration' provides a foundation for astute navigation in and out of Japan. Welker demonstrates how '[e]ach of these spheres is at once a local construct and a product of transnational flows.' (9) Not only does this term avoid a reductionist and orientalist perception of queer and feminist spaces in Japan as a mere 'copy' of western, particularly US-American, practices, but it also emphasises the transformative process of influences to and from Japan. This underlines the agential components of Japanese feminism and queerness, in line with the views of other scholars and activists.[4] For instance, 'Chapter 4. Translation' (95–139) explains the importance of translation by women in developing a more contextualised account of women's experiences (96–97) as well as the emergence of 'engaged translation' as a feminist act (108). The chapter illustrates the creation of new texts that differ from their originals through self-annotation by translators, the selection of chapters most relevant to a Japanese audience, and the fostering of connections between Japanese readers and US-American writers (108–11).

Across groups

Already evident through the choice of a transversal analysis, *Transfiguring Women in Late Twentieth-Century Japan* also spans among groups. This approach is most welcome as it demonstrates the effects of cultural works on artists, writers, fans, and readers—and us. The refusal to idealise both the subjects and objects of the study then becomes apparent. More precisely, this refusal advocates including tensions among and within the spheres of *ūman ribu*, *rezubian* community, and queer *shōjo* manga. Indeed, in 'Chapter 2. Trajectories' (19–52), Welker situates the first openly lesbian formation, *Wakakusa no kai* (Young Grass Club), at the juncture of a growing disagreement with *ūman ribu*, which did not address lesbianism and issues of lesbophobia, and of their invisibility in society (32–35). Despite having been deemed apolitical and having reiterated a gender role binary for lesbians, this group nonetheless 'provided an important space for many women' (35).

By promoting the effervescence that can result from conflict, that is, by depicting a more nuanced narrative of the groups, the book unveils the highs and lows of activist and artistic circles in their identity- and community-building processes. This is particularly evident in 'Chapter 5. Travel' (140–79). The voyages of members from Japan's *rezubian* community have effectively transfigured local lesbian identities and built a global lesbian network. Sojourns in Mexico City for the United Nations World Conference on Women or in the United States to connect with and

[2] Simone Pfleger and Carrie Smith, 'Introduction: Transversal Thinking, Accountabilities, and Commitments,' in *Transverse Disciplines: Queer-Feminist, Anti-Racist, and Decolonial Approaches to the University,* ed. Simone Pfleger and Carrie Smith (University of Toronto Press, 2022), 14.

[3] Pfleger and Smith, 'Transversal Thinking,' 12.

[4] See notably Natsuno Kikuchi, Yuri Horie, and Yuriko Iino, 'Kuia sutadīzu to wa nani ka,' in *Kuia sutadīzu o hiraku 1: Aidentiti, komyuniti, supēsu,* ed. Natsuno Kikuchi, Yuri Horie, and Yuriko Iino (Akihiro shobō, 2019); Akiko Shimizu, '"Imported" Feminism and "Indigenous" Queerness: From Backlash to Transphobic Feminism in Transnational Japanese Context,' *Jendā kenkyū* 23 (2020).

learn from other women and lesbians have 'led to the creation of the Asian Lesbian Network' (157). However, this did not avert 'racism directed against ethnic Koreans in Japan by some Japanese women' (178).[5] Similarly, members of the lesbian retreats known as 'Weekends,' which were 'a joint venture of the Japanese- and English-speaking communities' in Japan, did not face the same treatment from society, expatriates were often spared discrimination (159–61).

Across 'texts'

In *Transfiguring Women in Late Twentieth-Century Japan*, Welker does not analyse texts *per se* but rather discusses their production and reception. By broadly defining texts as 'elements—texts, ideas, images, practices, and the like' (2), he explores how these texts came into life and what impacts they had on Japanese society with particular attention to fellow activists, artists, and fans. The wide variety of materials (including manga, magazines, pamphlets, and testimonies) honours the complexity of these three spheres. In 'Chapter 2. Trajectories' (19–52), the use of different materials enables Welker to trace the emergence of queer *shōjo* manga through theatre (the Takarazuka Revue), illustrations (*jojō-ga*, European and US-American comics), memoirs (e.g., by artist Hagio Moto), *dōjinshi* (the circle Abnorm), and self-conducted interviews with activists, artists, fans, and publishers (e.g., publisher Nanbara Shirō) (41–51).

Through movements inside and outside of communities, the book further articulates how transfiguration has been pivotal for the three spheres in the production and reception of 'texts.' For instance, 'Chapter 3. Terminology' (53–94) explains how *ūman ribu* reappropriated the meaning of the English term 'women's liberation' (56–57) and transformed it as locally valid in order to subvert male-centred narratives about empowered and empowering women and as globally inscribed in order to express a 'sense of solidarity' with feminists beyond the Japanese borders (62–64). Aware of the complex process and interpretation of words, Welker highlights the necessity for fluidity and change in the context of transfers and alterations of 'texts,' nourishing and nourished by the *ūman ribu*, the *rezubian* community, and the queer *shōjo* manga community.

Transfiguring Women in Late Twentieth-Century Japan is thus an example of what I would summarise as a process of 'crossing, decrossing, and recrossing.' The book proposes a new way of perceiving these three spheres and invites us, readers, to interrogate transfigurations from various cultural contexts, gesturing, in a time of wars and genocides, toward a dialogue.

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[5] Recently, efforts for the building of feminist alliances between Japan and South Korea and with a focus on historical discrimination and violence from imperial Japan have been noted (see Emma Dalton and Caroline Norma, eds., *Voices from the Contemporary Japanese Feminist Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 91–93, 114–15).

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