

Transgender Representation and Japan: Manga's Potential for Disrupting Gender

Introduction

From *Mad Max: Fury Road* to *The Legend of Korra*, and from *Orange is the New Black* to *The Hunger Games*, modern popular media have increasingly become the terrain of debates over representation. There is nothing surprising about this: in a world where media consumption is a significant part of life for many people, decisions over who is represented and in what way define and redefine the limits of the normal and the acceptable. It is not difficult to find anecdotes of people who, at various times in history, were inspired by particular on-screen representations; an oft-cited example is when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. urged Nichelle Nichols to not give up her role on *Star Trek*, saying that she had the first non-stereotypical role for a black actor on television (O'Keeffe 2010). It is quite logical to imagine the flow of such representation, too: when media representation diversifies, audiences are confronted with experiences that are not their own, with stories that are not about them, with worlds that are bigger than their own. As such, proper representation has the power to promote new understandings of the world, to combat stereotypes, and to encourage people to review their ideas of what is normal and what is different. This is the destabilizing potential of media.

This essay focuses on examining a specific kind of minority representation – transgender representation – in a specific type of media – Japanese manga. In recent years, increasing attention to LGBTQ issues has led to a number of smaller and larger institutional changes to the benefit of transgender people; for example, the recent government notice urging education boards to make school more transgender inclusive, by allowing transgender students to use the bathroom of their choosing or wear the uniform that fits their gender (Murai 2015). That being said, transgender people in Japan still face many problems, from the threat of physical violence to increased risks of depression and other mental illnesses (DiStefano 2008, p. 1436). In order to progress towards a society that is more inclusive of transgender people, new ways of imagining gender are required – ways that do not render transgender people as impossible or problematic, but which promote diversity and understanding. This essay does not claim that manga alone can bring about such a change. However, like any other form of fiction, manga do have the potential of offering new ideas, new ways of thinking, and new definitions of what is normal and what is not. As such, manga that specifically include transgender characters have a unique opportunity to envision new ways of thinking about transgender topics.

This essay, then, analyses a number of manga with transgender main characters (from here on referred to as 'transgender manga') in order to determine to what extent they provide new views on both the concept of gender and on the existence of transgender people. The focus will be on treatment of a number of core concepts: the notion of a sex/gender connection (section one), the depiction of transgender characters and transgender narratives (section two), and the idea of gender identity as something fixed, essential, and binary (section three). There is no 'score' attached, no judgment of 'right' or 'wrong' as far as the execution of these topics is concerned; rather, the aim of this research is merely to establish in what ways transgender stories can offer unique insights into transgender topics, as well as to determine whether the selected manga are harnessing this potential or if they are avoiding doing so. In the end, this essay aims to establish whether manga may in the future be a potent site for reimagining normative ideas about gender and transgender topics, as well as to explain in what ways they can do this and which problems they will need to be overcome.

Source selection

For this essay, no attempt has been made to gather a complete and exhaustive list of all manga featuring transgender characters. Such an attempt would be beyond the scope of this research in terms of time required, search options, and source material availability (both access-wise and language-wise). Nor is such an exhaustive list required for the stated purpose: since the research is focused on the extent to which each transgender manga is able to reimagine gender, and not on the influence of these manga as whole, a general impression of transgender manga is sufficient for making basic observations. In order to be able to speak of making such a general impression, however, the source manga have been selected systematically through a process of elimination. Firstly, the directories of three major English-language manga-hosting websites – mangafox.me, mangahere.co, and mangaupdates.com – were consulted, and the manga that were found under the nearest relevant overarching category were gathered. For mangafox.me and mangahere.co this overarching category was ‘Gender Bender’, which subsumes under it all manga dealing with non-standard gender situations; for mangaupdates.com this category was ‘Transgender’.

The resulting manga, which numbered close to 800 unique entries, were checked one by one to eliminate all those that did not fulfill the following requirements: 1) contain at least one character that identifies as a gender other than the one assigned at birth; 2) for that character to be one of the main characters of that manga; 3) for these elements to be sufficiently identifiable based on available story summaries and reader comments (since time did not permit reading every manga to personally check these requirements); and 4) for the manga to not be pornographic. The wording of these requirements is knowingly ambiguous and leaves room for interpretation, so that in cases of doubt, decisions could be made with the purpose of the research in mind: to analyze those narratives containing characters that would be called transgender within a specific real-life understanding of gender. For example, supposing one of the manga were to present a fictional society where gender does not exist, that manga could not be said to contain transgender characters, since the typical definitions of ‘transgender’ are based on a specific understanding of gender itself that would not be present in-story. As such, that manga would be interesting to analyze in its own right, but it would not be relevant to this particular research.

The vast majority of manga did not meet the requirements. After discarding them, fourteen remained to be analyzed in this essay. The list is as follows:

- Kyou Kara Yonshimai / 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇
- Hourou Musuko / 〇〇〇〇
- No Bra / 〇〇〇〇 / *No Bura*
- -Double House / 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇/ *Daburu Hausu*
- -Bokura no Hentai / 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇
- Stop!! Hibari-kun! / 〇〇〇〇!!〇〇〇〇! / *Sutoppu!! Hibari-kun!*
- Yuureitou / 〇〇〇
- Himegoto – Juukyuusai no Seifuku / 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇
- Family Compo / 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇 / *Famiri- Konpo*
- Half & Half / 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇/ *Haafu Ando Haafu*
- Sazanami Cherry / 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇 / *Sazanami Cheri-*
- Ai no Shintairiku / 〇〇〇〇〇
- Claudine...! / 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇...! / *Kurōdīnu...!*
- Paradise Kiss / 〇〇〇〇〇〇〇〇 / *Paradaisu Kisu*

Theoretical Framework

This essay deals with stories; stories written in particular times and places, by particular people, for particular reasons; particularities that in many aspects remain almost entirely unknown. It is necessary to mention this because it signifies what is not being attempted here: no exploration of the historical locations of these texts, or the circumstances of their writing; no speculation regarding any views of gender the authors may or may not have held, or whether they were trying to engage a specific discussion; in short, no meta-investigation of any kind. Instead, this essay focuses on the text itself, stripping away – ignoring – what exists outside of it in favor of reading potential, not intent; of examining those ways these stories might provide safety, understanding, validation, destabilization, reinterpretation, or contrarily, offer denial, dismissal, normalization and suppression. This essay tries to steer away from the suggestions of the text and towards reader interpretation as the important site of generating new understandings.

However, the analysis of interpretational possibilities itself does come from a very specific theoretical angle. As mentioned, the context in which these text are read (not written) is one in which transgender people suffer a great many basic inequalities, denials of existence, and general unintelligibility. Following the work of Butler and gender theorists since, this essay holds that there are certain general assumptions that exist about gender which render problematic – and are rendered problematic by – the existence of transgender people. Most notably, the idea that gender is something naturally arising from the body; that gender is exclusively, naturally, or predominantly binary; and that gender is an essential part of a person's identity, so much that we can even speak of gender identities. This essay, then, aims to use transgender representations in manga to not just indicate these ideas and why they are problematic, but also to determine which readings these manga can offer us to deconstruct them, criticize them, and imagine new ways of framing gender.

This research is admittedly superficial in nature. However, it was found that the scope of this essay did not allow for both the examination of a range of source material as well as an in-depth, multi-level analysis of them. With the main goal in mind being to create a general sense of what potential to reimagine gender transgender manga could offer the reader, the decision was made to make use of a representative sample of transgender manga rather than engaging with and analyzing a single complex narrative. Essentially, the underlying concern of this essay is focused on the reader: if a person is transgender, or questioning, or despairing, and they look for themselves in manga, will they find anything to soothe them, to make them feel intelligible, to make them feel they have a place? If a person is cisgender (identifying with the gender they were assigned at birth; non-trans) and has never given gender much thought, or, on the other hand, has any of a number of reasons to start wondering about gender, could these manga grant them new ways of thinking, make them question what they know, make them review 'common knowledge' about the world and about themselves?

Simply put, there are thousands and thousands of stories out there that that can reinforce any popular belief a reader might want reinforced – but the decision to write about transgender characters bestows a great opportunity (and arguably, a great responsibility) to challenge, to redesign, to reposition what is normal and what is not. This essay, concerned with that potential and the extent to which it may or may not be used (or abused), aims to examine these manga in the hopes of finding potential sites for new understandings of gender that allow for greater self-examination, greater non-normative thinking, and greater freedom.

1. Views on sex and gender

This section will focus on examining those views that hold sex and gender to be inextricably linked, and the role they play within transgender manga. There are two main views that in these manga are expressed in this regard: the view that sex and gender are synonymous, to the extent that one cannot have a gender that does not 'match' one's natural body, and the view that sex and gender can differ, but are still linked, meaning transgender people do not have the 'wrong' gender, but the 'wrong' body. The first part of this section will examine the view that sex equals gender, the way this view renders transgender characters impossible, the underlying assumptions about binary sex, and the trans-targeted violence that results from it. The second part of this section will examine the view that gender and sex can be different, how this view creates space for transgender people, and explore the danger of a body dysphoria-focused narrative. The overall aim is to determine how transgender manga can cast as problematic the assumption of a sex-gender connection, what alternatives they can be read as offering, and where these manga fall short in reimagining the relationship between sex and gender.

Gender of the Body – Your Body is X, So You Are X

The idea that sex and gender are essentially the same thing is perhaps a very obvious one at first sight, especially to those with no background in something like gender studies and no real-life experience with gender non-conforming people. In such a situation, one might notice just by looking around that in general, people have one of two types of bodies, as well as an according array of social behaviors. This observation, if simply taken for granted, may very well lead one to assume that both the existence of two types of bodies and the social aspects connected to them are natural phenomena; especially since similarities can be found the world over. However, this view becomes challenged by the existence of transgender people, who have a 'mismatch' (in this understanding) of body and social behavior (in the broadest sense, that is; for example, even claiming that one is female while one has a 'male' body could cause such a 'mismatch'). The response a cisgender person might have to such a challenge depends on the individual, but in reality, many such responses include ridicule, scorn, even violence, as the sex/gender belief is seen as such a natural thing that the transgender person cannot be taken seriously.

Perhaps the best manga to illustrate this view on gender would be *Stop!! Hibari-kun!*. To summarize: the story of this manga revolves around the boy Kousaku, whose mother passes away, causing him to have to move in with an old friend of hers – a yakuza boss and his family. Kousaku is initially pleased on finding that the boss has four daughters, but soon finds out that the third oldest daughter – Hibari – is "really a guy" (the words used by her father). As it turns out, Hibari considers herself a girl, but everyone else sees her as a crossdressing boy, and this leads to continuous conflict as Kousaku and others try to get Hibari to stop her deviant practices. The important thing to note here is that, in any understanding of gender that allowed self-identification, Hibari would be undeniably a girl: she refers to herself as one, dresses as one, even attends school as one, all of which indicate that she is not playing around, but is very serious about wanting to be herself. However, within an understanding that says sex and gender cannot differ, Hibari *must* be seen as a crossdressing boy; in this understanding, her body speaks an undeniable 'truth', and by extension, her entire female presentation has to be a 'lie'.

We see this reflected in the language used by her father, her older sisters, and especially Kousaku: not only do they refer to her as "he", "guy", and "son", but they also say she "passes himself off as a girl at school", and is "posing as a girl", and refer to her body as "the truth" that she supposedly hides. The consequence of this line of thinking is obvious: because these characters see Hibari as undeniably male in gender, they see her female-coded behavior as inherently wrong, and

put a great amount of pressure on her to conform to their idea of what a guy is supposed to be like. In fact, their need to suppress Hibari's gender expression is so vital that the large majority of jokes and character conflicts in this manga arise directly from it – in other words, Hibari's subversion of gender expectations is used as a source of humor. Since the success of these jokes depends on the reader's ability to identify with Kousaku and see Hibari's existence as inherently contradictory and thus comical, it is clear this view on sex and gender is a highly pervasive one.

Similar negative responses can be seen in other manga every time a character 'discovers' that another character is transgender. Some respond with denial or confusion: in *Yuureitou*, Amano tries to convince himself that transgender character Tetsuo was just pretending in order to hide from the police, as he does not want to believe that a 'girl' like Tetsuo really considers himself a man. In *Hourou Musuko*, too, Seya asks Maho if her little brother is "sick or something"; though his concern speaks of his kind and gentle character, it does not occur to him that someone like Shuuichi could be just as normal as him or anyone else. Other characters respond more viscerally, such as Masahiko in *Family Compo* who violently vomits on realizing his aunt and uncle have a 'male' and 'female' body respectively; or the student in *Ai no Shintairiku* who falls over in shock after seeing Sara's bare chest; or like Yukari in *Paradise Kiss*, who faints after running into Isabella, and fears that the "freak" that caught her is an "angel of death". Some characters even respond by immediately trying to 'fix' the transgender character: In *Kyou Kara Yonshimai*, when Kashiwa returns home as a woman, her sisters immediately inspect her body, interrogate her, and when she admits she hasn't had any surgery they gladly conclude that she can still "continue from a save point"; as if Kashiwa would return to presenting as a guy based on their demands. Even worse, in *No Bra*, main character Masato is so anxious about Yuki's gender status that he forces her to wear his clothes, then demands that she cut short her beautiful hair that she has been growing out for years, all because he cannot stand that she is 'really' a guy but does not look like one.

These examples vary wildly in the fierceness and attitudes displayed by cisgender characters in their responses, but they all display the same underlying belief: that there's no such thing as a normal, healthy transgender person. In collecting these responses, we see how pervasive this view is, and how difficult it is for transgender people to be themselves in a world where "sex equals gender" is seen as undeniable truth. And it deserves to be mentioned that it's not, in fact, such a truth: because the body binary that seems so clear and obvious does not actually exist. As Dreger remarks in her book on historic intersexuality: "We live in an age of genetics and oversimplified stereotypes about the nature of males and females, so it is not surprising that many people assume there must be a simple genetic, algebraic sort of solution to sex variation" (Dreger 1998, p. 4). However, she explains, there is no plain division between male and female, between XY and XX. "Hermaphrodites get reduced in number (...) chiefly because we have many social distinctions that depend on there being (only) two sexes" (8). This is in line with what Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*: that sex is the result a heterosexual-focused culture that needs to make intelligible distinct male and female bodies (Butler 1990, p. 17). Through this process, for example, a penis is marked male and a vagina is marked female, and combined with the presumption that an 'intelligible' body must either have all female and no male characteristics or vice versa, this results in a clean and obvious – if artificial – distinction between two types of bodies.

This, then, lies at the heart of another highly problematic notion for transgender people: the notion of 'passing'. If a person believes that there naturally exist only two kinds of bodies, and that these bodies correspond to two kinds of gender, then the resulting assumption is that one can always point to a person's body to tell the 'truth' about their gender. Passing, then, comes in when a person of body type A can present themselves in such a way they are seen by other people as having gender B; when they can 'pass for' the 'real thing'. Julia Serano in her book *Whipping Girl* does an excellent job of pointing out why this is so vile: because the term implies that the transgender person is

successfully pretending to be something they are not, as if they were an undercover operative on a stealth mission. “[I]t implies that the trans person is getting away with something,” she writes. “Upon close examination, it becomes quite obvious that the concept of “passing” is steeped in cissexual privilege, as it’s only ever applied to trans people.” (Serano 2007, p. 155). Serano points out that when a cis person is addressed as the wrong gender, they are never said to have failed to ‘pass’; instead, they were ‘misgendered’. This double standard rests squarely on the assumption that, at some level, trans people are not ‘really’ the gender they claim to be; that their bodies speak some kind of hidden ‘truth’ about them that, when found out, disqualifies them from ‘really’ being their target gender. In contrast, cis people cannot ‘pass’ because they cannot fail; their gender was assigned to them based on their body type at birth and this is still seen as the ultimate proof, the ultimate essence of gender, even though for the vast majority of gendered interactions in society *bodies are entirely irrelevant*.

Applying this concept once more to *Stop!! Hibari-kun!*, it becomes understandable how these binary, essentialist views can move from insulting and oppressive to downright physically violent. For example: when some of Hibari’s classmates become suspicious regarding her gender, they start making various attempts at exposing her, ranging from ripping off her bathing suit during swimming class to paying older, bigger students to holding her down and inspecting her body. Because of Hibari’s unexpected strength and ability to defend herself none of these plans succeed, but they are highly indicative of the threats transgender people face in a society that considers them ‘fake’, and tries non-stop to expose the ‘truth’ of their bodies. The same problem also features in *Ai no Shintairiku*, where Sara’s classmates on two separate occasions plot to kidnap her, strip her, and take pictures of her body to spread around the school. In this case, however, everyone in school already knows Sara’s listed as male, and she herself always refers to her body as a guy’s body – her transgender identity is no secret to begin with. Her attackers, then, cannot even pretend to act out of any concern for a deceit that must be exposed, but are simply interested in violating and humiliating Sara for ‘pretending’ to be something she’s not.

These two examples show direct, physical violence, but the destructive power of the ‘sex equals gender’ mentality works on indirect levels as well – mostly through a process of isolation and rejection. For example, the manga *Claudine...!*, named after the main character, tells the story of a child from a wealthy French family that struggles with his gender identity throughout his life. He starts referring to himself as a boy at a very young age, but is not recognized as such by anyone else, and goes through life being seen as a girl. At a later age, at university, he finally finds a female lover who appears willing to accept him the way he is, and they pursue an intense secret relationship that only ends when she cheats on him with his brother. Claudine becomes depressed, and comes to the conclusion that he really is a man after all, but with an imperfect body – and that because of this, no woman will ever truly love him the way he could love her. In the end, overwhelmed by despair at his situation, he commits suicide. In a literal, physical sense, Claudine was not attacked by anyone; but the refusal of society to acknowledge and respect his gender undeniably drove him to depression, with very physical consequences.

In a similar vein, Tetsuo from *Yuureitou* had suffered all his life from being seen as female. When he was young, his adoptive mother tried to force him into acting like the perfect little daughter she wanted, to the point where she threatened to abandon him if he didn’t comply. She tried to marry him off to a young man, but Tetsuo explained to the suitor that his heart was male, and that all he wanted was friendship – a request the other man could not fulfill, as he could not see Tetsuo as something other than female. After Tetsuo’s adoptive mother was murdered and he had to go on the run as a suspect, he took on the male identity that had been denied from him and focused his efforts on finding a mythical treasure – a treasure that would allow him to buy someone else’s place in the national family register, so that he might finally be recognized as male. His greatest pain throughout

the story is that he is unable to find pure friendship, because every time he shares the secret of his body with a man, they instantly see him as female, and the friendship is ruined. In other words, the view that sex and gender are synonymous makes it so that even the people who know Tetsuo's gender still find it hard, if not impossible, to see him as male – and this turns him into a cynical, isolated person, who is quite literally on the run from the female identity society has forced on him.

With these examples, transgender manga show quite unambiguously how destructive and harmful the belief that sex equals gender can really be, in both direct and physical as well as in indirect and non-physical ways. The manga also show us just how incredibly pervasive this view is; almost every source manga has characters seem to consider transgender people impossible, unintelligible, unnatural. It is shown in *No Bra* when Masato, having first received doubts about Yuki's gender, tries to strip her while she sleeps; it is shown in *Half and Half*, when a stranger need to be exposed to Itsuki's naked body in order to 'understand' what she is; it is shown in *Family Compo* when Masahiko demands his transgender aunt and uncle dress 'the way they were meant to'. In rare cases, this view is even used to condone violence, such as when Hibari herself is blamed for being attacked because she had the gall to try and deceive everyone – a line of reasoning that is eerily similar to the 'trans panic defense' argument that in real life is used to justify the murder of trans women (Lee 2014, p. 105-106). The most problematic aspect, though, is that the impossibility or unreality of the 'transgender gender' is not something these cisgender characters have chosen to wield for a purpose, or have even thought about at all; it is merely something that is so obvious to them that they never consider they might be wrong. This illustrates the need for transgender manga and other fiction to engage with this view and show its consequences – so that readers might realize the damage it causes.

Gender of the Heart – You are X, but your Body is Y

In contrast to the above view, transgender characters do not typically see themselves as unreal or impossible; after all, they know they are not faking, not pretending, and not sick (apart from being sick of everyone telling them they can't be themselves). Returning to some of the previous examples, we can see that Sara and Hibari both see gender quite differently from their attackers. Hibari never really goes into her feelings or thoughts on the matter (the story rarely takes her perspective) but we know she lives unapologetically as a girl, and never so much as expresses doubt or even considers amending her behavior for other people's sakes. Sara, as well, has felt like 'girl' would fit her better than 'boy' for a long time, and has at the beginning of the story finally reached a moment where she decided she didn't want to hide her true self any longer. Both of them see their gender as something inside them, something that is unrelated to whatever body they may have. At the same time, bodies are not unimportant to them; Hibari at one point wishes she could grow breasts, and Sara is worried that her love interest is turned off by her 'male body', and hopes to be a 'real girl' one day. This is the view on gender that is echoed by the majority of transgender characters in these manga. They see two important aspects to it: the way their body looks on the outside, and the way they feel on the inside. The latter is often referred to as 'the gender of the heart', and is taken to be the most meaningful; when the body and the heart differ, it is simply the body that is wrong.

This view is a significant departure from the 'sex equals gender' one in the sense that it allows for the existence and intelligibility of transgender people. The body is no longer the determinant for who a person 'really' is, but is now simply a thing that is either right or wrong. If the general public could embrace this view, transgender people would at least be allowed to be themselves without being pressured into conforming to a gender that was merely assigned to them. However, even in this improved understanding the binary sex/gender connection remains important; a character may feel like a girl at heart, but she will not be a 'real' girl, not 'fully' a girl, as long as she retains the 'wrong' body. One logical consequence of this is that transgender people may be expected

to always want reconstructive surgery, to always desire to change their bodies – after all, if they are not unhappy with their body, and body is linked to gender, then they could not be ‘really’ trans. This line of thinking creates a narrative where transgender people are expected to suffer from body dysphoria for most of their lives, and can only be saved by medical advances that promise to ‘fix’ their bodies. An example of a character who might be said to personify this ‘perfect’ transgender narrative is Marika from *Bokura no Hentai*. Marika had considered herself a girl for as long as she remembered, but was forced into acting like a boy as she was growing up. For a long time she believed that she would still change into a girl one day, that her penis would disappear and her chest would grow, but when this failed to happen she started to despair. Then, one day she saw a transsexual woman on television, and immediately knew that she wanted to be like her. From then on, her dream became to one day transition fully into being a girl.

Another example is Kashiwa from *Kyou Kara Yonshimai*. She returns home to her sisters to let them know she has decided to start living as a woman, and part of the reason she came back was so she could save on expenses and put aside more money for a future sex reassignment surgery. Kashiwa says she hates her male body like she hates the entirety of her ‘male side’: “I’ve always hated being a guy ever since I was a kid, and as my body matured, I found it harder and harder to live, but I thought I just had to endure it. (...) Once I realized that the curse could be lifted, I wanted to go back to being a princess.” The pressure from her dysphoria is strong enough that even though her girlfriend wants her to not have the surgery, and even though her sisters grow to accept her the way she is, Kashiwa keeps her sights set on saving up money and getting gender reassignment surgery in the future.

A third example is Kaito from *Himegoto – Juukyusai no Seifuku*. Kaito lives her public life as male, but often goes out presenting female, although her body is starting to mature to the extent that it become harder and harder for her to ‘pass’. One instance of dysphoria is shown when Kaito has to stay over at her friend Yuki’s house, and then panics the next day when she is unable to remove her beard stubble. It also manifests in more unhealthy ways, such as an obsession with youth and cuteness that causes her to stalk and impersonate the cutest girl from her class. Finally, Kaito’s body dysphoria makes having sex something very dual in nature to her: receiving oral sex makes her feel uncomfortably like a man, but otherwise, sex is actually empowering for her to an extent, as it is the only way she can ‘connect’ to the female bodies that she so desires to have. At the same time, what she really wants is to have sex while presenting female, but there is nobody who would let her do such a thing, and she has learned not to bring it up.

Involving body dysphoria in the depiction of transgender narratives is not in itself problematic; on the contrary, since many transgender people in real life face varying degrees of dysphoria, it is an aspect that should not be glossed over. However, there needs to be a cautious attitude towards taking body dysphoria as a defining or essential aspect of every transgender person’s experience, for fear of creating a limited or exclusionary understanding of transgender that is only preoccupied with identifying who is ‘really’ trans and who is not. One iteration of such a limiting definition can be found in certain English-speaking internet communities, where people going by the label ‘truscum’ advocate for limiting the use of the word transgender to not include those who don’t suffer sufficient body dysphoria; as an example, one such user (by the username “incorrectusage”) wrote on their Tumblr page: “gender is one thing, and one thing only: you’re [sic] brain’s map of your body. The rest- presentation, roles, etc- are social constructs that you are welcome to challenge.” (see Incorrectusage). The rest of their post betrays an underlying fear that, if the definition of transgender is no solid or limited enough, transgender communities could be overwhelmed with people who only casually exploring their gender and did not understand what it meant to ‘really’ be trans.

In a way, these self-appointed gatekeepers mirror certain trans exclusionary radical feminists who aim to keep trans women out of women’s spaces with similar arguments about who is ‘real’ and

who is not – arguments that Butler has personally addressed as “misunderstanding [social construction]’s terms” (Williams 2014). ‘Truscum’, then, in their attempts to keep the ‘wrong’ people out, try to define the term transgender in such a way it only allows for a very narrow range of experience, aiming to turn the word into something exclusive rather than inclusive. As seen from the cited post, the result is a definition of transgender that is literally a definition of body dysphoria – having the wrong “brain map of the body” – and is otherwise completely unrelated to any notion of gender as is relevant in social reality. These kind of arguments only serve to replace one strict body-based definition with another, and as a result get in the way of transgender struggles that aim to break free from oppressive sex and gender norms.

Marika’s story, of course, is still entirely valid. Again, in real life, many transgender people do suffer from body dysphoria. The question is not if this particular transgender narrative is ever presented, but whether it is the only one that is ever presented – whether attention is also given to those transgender people who may or may not wish to change their bodies, but who would be equally okay with not changing them at all. Fortunately, several examples of this sort can be found among the other manga. For example, Sara from *Ai no Shintairiku* is only particularly worried about her body when she fears it will affect the interest her crush might have in her. She also refers to her body as a ‘guy’s body’ and looks towards a future in which she will be a ‘real girl’. However, though Sara is sometimes a bit lost and confused about why she has the body she has, she barely seems to think about it in day-to-day life, and is quite happy, self-confident, and loving even if she’s not ‘perfect’. Yuki from *No Bra*, too, is aware that her body is ‘male’, but she’s never shown to dislike her body – only to dislike having to act like a boy. One way this is shown is through the fact that she is extremely content dressing in cute clothes – even revealing clothes – without regard to how people might see her. Her goal is to find the courage to be herself, dress like herself, present publicly like herself, regardless of what body she has. Finally, in *Paradise Kiss*, Isabella is undoubtedly aware of how people see her: her parents have more or less abandoned her into the care of their butler because they loathed the fact she was transgender. However, she does not try to hide who she is, and typically dresses up in highly extravagant costumes with intricate makeup, which if anything makes her stand out more – but she does not care about that, because she loves who she is and she loves creating beautiful appearances.

These examples are excellent in diversifying the ‘gender of the heart’ narrative away from the ‘dysphoria imperative’ that some people try to uphold, but they also make a valuable point when compared with the manga where the transgender characters could *not* find their happy resolutions even if they didn’t specifically show dysphoria – namely, *Yuureitou* and *Claudine...!*. Initially, there seems to be a major difference in how the characters deal with their transgender status, with characters like Sara and Yuki remaining happy and cheerful and fighting for their rights, while Tetsuo and Claudine fall into death and despair. However, when we compare their situations the difference is not in their understandings of gender: they all consider themselves to be in-betweens, ‘imperfect’ to some extent, but not sick, not faking, not unreal. On closer inspection, the difference lies in whether they had people around them to acknowledge them, respect them, and support them. Yuki has Masato, and she finds that his presence gives her the strength and courage to be herself; Sara may be weird, but most people at school seem to accept her and she has a few close friends that help her when she’s in trouble; Isabella knows she is a ‘deviant’, but she bands together with others who are different in their own ways, and accepting each other they work towards their dreams together. Conversely, Tetsuo had a horrid mother and could never find a single friend that accepted him for who he was, and Claudine was rejected and betrayed by those he thought loved and accepted him. ‘Trans people cannot be expected to carry this burden alone’, the manga seem to want to say. ‘Society needs to change and take it from them.’

Conclusion

In summary, several important ideas about sex and gender can be read from these transgender manga. First and foremost among them is that transgender people are real; that they exist, that they are valid, and that they are intelligible. They could have been portrayed as faking, as perverted, as confused – but instead, they are likeable, they are varied, they know themselves well, and they are not giving up in their struggles to be accepted and respected. Secondly, most of the manga can be read as excellent arguments for why the ‘sex equals gender’ arguments are so problematic; by showing the intolerance and violence resulting from this way of thinking, and by indicating how pervasive it is, the manga force the reader to rethink what they know about gender and how this may affect other people. Thirdly, the variation in transgender characters’ attitudes towards their bodies disallows stereotypical understandings of body dysphoria and turns away from limited, body-focused ideas of gender that might unnecessarily limit and hamper the development of alternative transgender experiences.

On the other side, however, these manga themselves are also guilty of only addressing some of these problematic gender understandings, while leaving others intact or even tacitly supporting them. For example, not a word is spoken regarding the gendering and de-gendering of bodies bodies, and as a result, the understanding that a person cannot ‘really’ inhabit a gender without having the ‘right’ body remains uncontested. Furthermore, in the views expressed within these manga there are almost no provisions for the potential of stepping away from a binary gender model altogether; most of these transgender characters define themselves very clearly as either male or female, and do not consider there might be other options. These lacks represent both future potential and future threat; if addressed, they can help push for even strong non-normative gender understandings, but if left untouched, these stories may grow to merely swap one mode of gender regulation for another.

2. Character choices, narrative choices

Introduction

So far, this essay has focused on the views of gender that are expressed by the characters within the manga themselves, be they stated outright or implicitly woven in their thoughts and actions. However, the portrayal of the characters themselves and the formation of the narratives they appear in is also worth analyzing. The choices made by the authors regarding the design of both character and story progression are important, not so much to determine *why* these specific choices were made – again, this is no meta-level investigation – but to determine whether certain stereotypes and narratives are predominant in describing transgender characters and whether this could hinder the way readers can imagine, understand, and relate to them. Stereotypes, in a way, are a massive hindrance to creating new understandings; they take what is strange, unknown, or unintelligible, and turn it into something single-faceted that can be easily contained and ‘understood’ within dominant ideology. They ‘reclaim’ those aspects that challenge normalization and make them manageable, so that they can be written off as unreal or unimportant. To combat this, variety in representation is essential, both in the ways the characters are designed as well as in how their stories are set up, developed, and concluded.

The first part of this section will briefly examine the transgender characters from the manga to determine if there are severe imbalances towards certain designs. It will show that especially in terms of age, gender, and appearance, representations are strongly skewed towards one side, resulting in a predominant type of ‘transgender character’ and a dearth of alternatives that explore other facets of transgender existence. The second part will explore two dominant narratives that are found in these manga – the transgender perspective narrative and the cisgender perspective narrative. It will examine the humanizing, nuancing, and destabilizing potential of the first perspective, as well as the unique possibilities that are offered by the second one; at the same time, it will display some of the dangers involved in stereotyping, misrepresenting, and othering the transgender, especially through a cisgender perspective. Finally, it will touch on the overarching issue of the *types* of narrative transgender people are allowed to take part in – and the ones in which they’re not.

Character design – Young, female, passable

To a degree, a study of transgender character design, if pursued deeply enough, might well provide enough material to fill an essay by itself. Because every element of a fictional character is the result of the author’s conscious decision to implement it, every element also carries meaning; and from general features like hair style or body type all the way to circumstance details such as how many friends they have could potentially, with enough comparison material, be analyzed to and expected to yield some kind of result. In this essay however, the scope is much smaller (and the conclusions less far-fetched): only a few obvious, easy-to-identify features have been selected for analysis, in order to ascertain whether or not there are any egregious imbalances present in representation. The reason variation in representation is vital is because stereotypes of transgender people can reflect and reinforce harmful prejudices and end up dehumanizing them – turning them into something inherently ‘other’. Alternatively, skewed representation can also be used to marginalize transgender subgroups and render invisible their particular struggles by denying their stories the chance to be heard. So first, this section will examine the choices made in designing the transgender characters regarding gender, age, and appearance. The list of these characters would be as follows:

Yuki from *No Bra*

Tetsuo from *Yuureitou*
Claudine from *Claudine...!*
Sara from *Ai no Shintairiku*
Isabella from *Paradise Kiss*
Hibari from *Stop!! Hibari-kun!*
Marika from *Bokura no Hentai*
Maho and Koko from *Double House*
Hikari and Sora from *Family Compo*
Kashiwa from *Kyou Kara Yonshimai*
Itsuki and Maru from *Half and Half*
Ren from *Sazanami Cherry*
Kaito from *Himegoto – Juukyusai no Seifuku*
Shuuichi, Yoshino, Makoto, Yuki, and Ebina from *Hourou Musuko*

When looking for trends and commonalities between the selected characters, it is the gender division that immediately stands out. Seventeen out of twenty-one characters were assigned male at birth and consider themselves female, with only four characters being assigned female at birth and considering themselves male. If we were to add the characters who aren't transgender, but who do engage in crossdressing for various reasons, this difference would be even starker. There is a clear bias towards exploring the gender issues of those assigned male at birth compared to those assigned female, which means that the stories and experiences of transgender males get explored significantly less. This is particularly a problem if we consider that, in a society where sexism is still prevalent, there is already the danger of underrepresentation of those assigned female at birth. However, the interactions of sexism and transgender issues are incredibly complicated, and it is difficult to say how exactly the noted gender bias relates to issues of traditional sexism. Suffice to say that there is a lack of potential for the imagining of the lives of transgender males, and that this may be a significant point of improvement for the future.

Another observation to make is that the majority of characters are fairly young. Ten out of twenty-one still go to various types of school; five are not shown going to school, but are clearly in their late teens or early twenties; and only six are either shown to be closer to middle-age adults or are too ambiguous to tell their age with certainty. Notably, of these last six, four are not even the main characters of the manga they appear in – and those main characters are teenagers. This focus on younger characters is not surprising when we consider that manga are predominantly aimed at younger audiences. However, a lack of older transgender characters leaves us with a lack of possibilities for imagining the futures of transgender lives. How will Shuuichi fare after she moves out from her parents' house and starts working at a transgender bar? Will Sara be able to remain her optimistic and confident self after the magic of youth fades away? There is a need for reassurance that one can be transgender and still grow up and find a niche for oneself, that one can be confident and self-assured even when one's appearance may grow further away from the ideal, even if one has to make their own way in a society that is generally unkind towards transgender people. This reassurance is something youth-oriented manga cannot offer.

A similar problem rears its head when we examine the appearances of the characters. This is not meant in the sense of art style, but rather in how these transgender characters are seen by other characters in the same world. Examining this, we find that sixteen of the twenty-one characters are explicitly shown to be able to 'pass' most of the time, with a fair number of the trans girls even being called exceptionally cute or beautiful by other characters. Interestingly, those who don't pass easily – Maho and Koko, Ebina, Isabella, and Claudine – are all older than the average, tying into the previous point that certain problems are more prevalent for certain character demographics. This prevalent

focus on creating 'passable' characters is understandable – in the sense that 'positive representation' can easily be interpreted as 'make them good-looking' – but entails such problems as casting beauty standards as inherently valuable and an unwillingness to criticize or engage with the concept of 'passing' itself. Keeping in mind that 'passing' is a highly toxic and harmful idea, and one that is tied so heavily in the sex/gender link, a significant point could be made by manga electing to portray more trans people who do not 'pass' perfectly but are still happy, social, and *whole* – not forever wishing to gain the appearance that 'completes' them.

From this brief and superficial look at the transgender character designs, it is thus possible to notice predominant choices regarding gender, age, and appearance. While the age factor can be excused considering the target audience, the lack of representation of female-to-male transgender people is both severe and problematic. On top of that, it is made worse by the fact that of the four female-to-male characters one no longer considers herself male by the end of the story, one commits suicide, and one is a fugitive whose life has been characterized by rejection. Only one female-to-male character lives a happy life in stable circumstances, and he is not even the main character of the story in which he appears. Furthermore, the strong focus these character designs place on the importance of passing is understandable, but also regrettable, as it fails to imagine situations where non-'passing' character can be just as accepted as those who do 'pass'. Overall, even these superficial choices in character design are in need of repair and diversification if they wish to provide new, non-normative ways for transgender people to exist.

Narrative - Transgender Perspective

Next to character design, narrative choice is a key element in providing representation that offers new ways of understanding transgender people. There are two types of narrative that are particularly prevalent in transgender manga, and in a way, they are the same narrative only from a different perspective. The first one takes the viewpoint of the transgender character, and the story deals with their search for identity and their struggles with a world that does not know how to treat them or understand them; the second one takes a cisgender perspective, and deals with the conflict that is introduced by having a transgender character enter their lives. First, this essay will focus on the transgender perspective narrative, which appears in at least six of the fourteen manga. *Hourou Musuko* employs this with Shuuichi, but also with Yoshino, Makoto, and to a lesser extent even with its other gender-deviant characters. *Bokura no Hentai* does the same, but only with Marika (Tomochi is not a viewpoint character). *Himegoto* has Kaito who is obsessed with trying to be something that she cannot be; *Double House* has Maho and Koko both revising and reinterpreting their place in the world; *Ai no Shintairiku* has Sara growing confident in her female identity and (sometimes literally) fighting off society's attempts to keep her down. Even Tetsuo from *Yuureitou* could be counted among this, for though he is not the main character, he does have his own distinct narrative that is told from his own viewpoint and deals with his inner fears and doubts as he tries to get to terms with who he is and who he wants to be.

The main advantage of this perspective is that it almost immediately humanizes and complicates transgender people's situations. By taking their point of view the story shows us their thoughts, fears, hopes, and doubts, the uncertainties they have about their needs and feelings, and how difficult it is for them to live in a world where nobody seems to understand or recognize them. The best example of this may well be *Hourou Musuko*, in which the reader follows main character Shuuichi over several years of in-story time. In the beginning, Shuu appears to be a likeable, ordinary boy – a bit timid and shy, but very kind and gentle. At the end, she dresses like a girl a lot, works at a transgender bar, has a happy relationship with another girl, and is very confident in what she wants: she wants to be a girl. The transformation that takes place over the course of the story is major, but is developed very gradually (spread out over some three thousand pages) and the reader is present for

transgender manga are consistently too strange, too unfamiliar to a cisgender reader to understand, they might end up alienating them. However, it would require a complete absence of nuanced and intermediary viewpoints to create such a situation, and even then, it must be stated that transgender manga do not *need* to make things easy on a cisgender reader; in the same way that transgender experience is often not easy, so may their narratives reflect this.

Narrative - Cisgender Perspective

The second type of narrative takes the viewpoint of a cis character, whose normal life gets disrupted by the appearance of a transgender character and whose values and understandings of normalcy get challenged as a result. *No Bra, Stop! Hibari-kun!!*, *Paradise Kiss*, *Family Compo*, *Kyou Kara Yonshimai*, *Half and Half* and *Sazanami Cherry* all follow this exact setup, and *Claudine...!* is not quite the same, but very similar in essence. The cis characters often start out with very ingrained ideas about gender, which leads them to respond negatively to the transgender character. Over the course of the story, they struggle with these ideas, and in the end, they either evolve their understanding and accept the transgender person, or stick with their existing ideas and maintain the status quo, having 'defended' the rightness of their lives against the corrupting invader. The main disruptive power of this narrative comes from showing how a character responds when their ideas of normalcy and the structure of their world is threatened: by having them understand how their previous ideas were harmful and having them embrace alternative understandings, the story can advocate open-mindedness and willingness to break down established ideas. However, the opposite outcome is also possible, where a character is shown to succeed through fending off corruption (the transgender person) and returning the world to its 'normal' state.

An example of such a 'corruption' narrative can be seen in *Stop!! Hibari-kun!*. Already summarized before, the manga is brought up again here to focus attention on the various times when main character Kousaku feels personally threatened by Hibari's presence and behavior. For example, on realizing that he might actually be attracted to Hibari, he becomes highly anxious and wonders if that means he is "gradually being pulled into that perverted world". Feeling threatened by the prospect of "ending up a laughable couple of two guys" he then tries to distance himself from Hibari and resolve to "walk the path of a man". Another instance of the same sentiment occurs when Hibari's father hires a professional yakuza trainer to try and turn Hibari into a man. The trainer tries to cut Hibari's hair and rip off her clothes by force, but she defends herself by beating him up. Later in the story, the trainer's son angrily appears, and says that his father, after being beaten by Hibari, has turned into a feminine, panty-wearing, flower-loving person. These are not the only examples, but they excellently display the deep-rooted fear of male femininity these characters have and how this makes them see Hibari as a dangerous, corrupting influence.

In *No Bra*, too, there are similar scenes where main character Masato struggles with his feelings of attraction for Yuki. After they accidentally share a drunken kiss, he thinks to himself: "If I'm being affected by Yuki, I might fall into a world that I can't even imagine. And I might turn into someone that only likes men..." In the background of these panels, we see two images: first of Masato as a crossdresser, winking seductively and using feminine speech and body language, and second of himself hugging a large, muscular man from whom we only see the hairy chest and arms. After picturing these scenes, Masato stands up and shouts "It's better to be normal!" in a room full of people. His anxiety clearly rests in the idea that if he falls into non-normative behavior he will end up in the 'other' world; that place which is described simply as '□□□□', 'this world', by the people moving around in various sexual subcultures (McLelland 2005, p. 1). In Masato's mind, one can either be 'normal' or not, and if you interact with people who are not, you yourself might become irreparably corrupted and never fit in with normal society again.

The supposed connection between transgender people and homosexuality deserves

additional attention. In Japan specifically, this connection goes back at least as far as the postwar era, when “male homosexuality was not clearly differentiated from cross-dressing and transgenderism” (McLelland 2005, p. 72). The crossdressing male prostitutes of that time (referred to as *danshou*) were assumed to have a “predilection for passive anal sex, a predilection that (...) was part of their psychosocial makeup” (74); they were also assumed to be inherently womanlike in mind and body, which made them want to dress up as women and have sex with masculine men (75). Both heteronormativity and gender essentialism can be recognized in these categorizations, as a person with a ‘female soul’ must also be ‘passive’ and ‘narcissistic’ and desire sex with masculine men, and likewise, a person who desires sex with masculine men must then be innately ‘female’. If these generalizations may have been relatively accurate for some individuals, it is also clear that they reflect and propagate similar attitudes to gender as the ones explored in section one of this essay, which leads to understandings of transgender women as ‘feminine homosexual men’, and in turn, to the homophobic feelings that are visible in *No Bra* and *Stop!! Hibari-kun!*. While it is unclear to what extent this particular stereotype is popular today, it is used directly in at least one of the transgender manga: in *Half and Half*, Itsuki consistently refers to herself as both a woman and a ‘gay guy’, and when she asks Maru “you’re not straight, are you?”, Maru answers: “yes, I’m a girl too in my heart”.

Other manga interact with this notion in their own ways, and the reason this matters is that the choices made in depicting transgender people can be used to either dismiss or reinforce harmful stereotypes. So when Kousaku and Masato look at Hibari and Yuki and are struck with homophobic anxiety, what does this mean about the implied understanding of transgender girls? What does this say about the links between homophobia and transphobia? The fact that these manga employ cisgender perspectives only increases the ease with which these kind of insinuations may be read from the text. For comparison, we can momentarily look at a scene from one of the transgender-perspective manga, *Hourou Musuko*, where Makoto muses: “I wonder if I want to be a girl because I like men. [But] you’re not like me, you like Takatsuki-san, right? It’s all so complex!” Recognizing the stereotype before immediately subverting it is one way in which manga can alter transgender understandings, and while this method is not limited to those stories with transgender viewpoints, they certainly make it easier – there are no cis characters around when Makoto says these things, after all.

Returning to the cisgender-viewpoint manga, we can see how different narrative solutions can similarly destabilize or re-stabilize what is considered ‘normal’. *Stop! Hibari-kun!!* is an example of a story where the status quo is maintained in the end: Hibari does not stop being herself, and Kousaku and other characters continue to reject her claim to girl-status, leaving the story open-ended. In contrast, *No Bra* ends with Masato recognizing that Yuki is a girl ‘at heart’ and trying to help her be allowed to go to school as a girl. The first story employs the trans character as a threat to the cis character’s ‘normal’ views on gender; defeating the threat reinforces the validity of those views. The second one uses the trans character to create a clash of ideas that resulted in renewed insights and a greater understanding of gender. The same principle can also apply in a more general sense: in *Paradise Kiss*, Isabella is part of a group of various ‘deviants’ who rejected society’s normative ideal of prestigious universities in favor of pursuing their passion for fashion. The deviance of their life choices is reflected in their character designs: George is bisexual, Arashi’s skin is riddled with chains and piercings, and Isabella is transgender. All of these elements are symbolic for their rejection of the normative, and while the cis main character initially looks down on them (referring to them as □□, ‘idiots’, in her head), she soon finds she greatly respects them for doing what they love instead of blindly following a set path for life, which leads to her quitting school and becoming a professional fashion model herself. In this example, we see how the inherent disruptive potential of the transgender character is symbolically employed to teach a cisgender character to break free from normative structures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the choices that have been made regarding character design and narrative design have real influences on the potential of the transgender manga to destabilize ideas of gender and offer new ways to imagine them. Firstly, significant underrepresentation of female-to-male characters, older characters, and characters whose appearance falls outside normative standards for their target gender leads to a higher chance of stereotyping and a decreased ability to confront issues like transgender futures or the concept of passing. Secondly, when it comes to a comparison between the use of a cisgender perspective or a transgender perspective, the transgender perspective has a number of significant advantages that are almost inherent to the form: it humanizes the transgender character, it provides more complex and nuanced understandings of the character, and it provides a switched perspective that reframes the normal as something other, allowing for criticisms that are perhaps not more objective, but certainly more diverse. Thirdly, while the cisgender perspective makes it easier to get away with stereotyping and is more likely to frame the transgender as something foreign, unnatural, or fearsome, it does provide a unique potential for showing a cisgender character recognize, confront, and finally discard their own prejudices, which may serve an exemplary function.

Finally, there exists an overarching narrative problem that persists regardless of perspective, which is that the transgender characters all have narratives that are inextricably bound to issues of gender and identity. While this may seem obvious at first sight, there is in reality no reason for a transgender character to *only* show up for gender-related stories; any character of any major manga series could theoretically have been transgender and have the exact same role. The reason this does not happen is that transgender characters, like other minority characters, are seen as non-standard, which means that authors feel they need a specific reason to add them to a story – and whether that reason is comedy, drama, or even challenging gender norms, the fact remains that the transgender character is included *because* they are transgender. The reason this practice is a problem is that it reinforces the divide between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’ by denying minorities any narratives where they can exist simply as configurations of elements like any other human being, and turns their particular configuration – a ‘mismatch’ of gender and assigned gender – into something ‘special’, something ‘abnormal’, something that cannot *simply* exist, but must exist as a problem to be solved, an obstacle to overcome, an identity to explore.

As a result, transgender people don’t go to Narnia, they don’t get to save Middle-Earth, and they don’t appear in manga if the story is not specifically about their transgender related issues. Cisgender characters are blank spaces: they can become anything. Minorities are only allowed to be minorities. As such, this issue of only casting transgender characters in transgender narratives – or rather, of seeing the two as inherently connected – remains stringent, and great progress could be made if future manga series would allow the separation of the two, offering opportunity to cast the transgender character as simply a human with a collection of characteristics no better or worse than any other.

3. Existence beyond gender

So far, the understandings of gender that we have seen have focused on characters either being confident in their identities as male or female, or struggling to make sense of which one of those two options they are. As mentioned in section one, though, this particular way of framing transgender situations has some drawbacks: not only does it allow little possibility for non-binary thinking, but it also doesn't reflect on whether gender should be an essential part of identity at all – whether one should even try to 'identify' as anything. Kate Bornstein in her *New Gender Workbook* notes that "It's safe having an identity – it's secure. It's safe having a gender. But there's a price. (...) We can't grow any more. (...) We're frozen in that shell" (Bornstein 2013, p. 46). We see that need to identify, that desire for safety and intelligibility, reflected in the way the various manga characters think: 'male-bodied' or 'female-bodied', 'man' or 'woman', 'gay' or 'straight', every aspect of bodies, genders, and sexualities is coded as binary, in the hopes that one can simply discover one's proper place in the grand scheme of things. Bornstein notes, however, that it's never that easy; that gender, for example, is so entwined with a multiplicity of other factors (such as race, religion, and sexuality, to name just a few) that the notion of there being something like an equal binary, or even multiple equal binaries, could not be true except "in a vacuum, when [the two elements] exist completely by themselves, with no outside influence" (p. 57). Identities are not out there, naturally, to be found: they are created by the interplay of a thousand factors beyond one's control. Perhaps, then, there is no need to be *something*; perhaps it is enough to just *be*. This section, then, will examine those rare moments in which the transgender manga have offered hints at existences beyond gender.

Firstly, there are some indications that one's sense of gender can change, both in the short term and in the long term. Yuki from *Himegoto – Juukyusai no Seifuku* was mentioned before; she was considered a boyish person throughout much of her childhood, and was happy to be seen that way, even being proud of the name 'Yoshiki' that she was given by her male friends. However, as she grew she started to dislike it, and increasingly feels she would like to express herself in a more feminine way; however, she is at a loss for where to start. On top of that, her best friend Sho has become a major hindrance; he has been picking the same schools as her every time they graduated, but he doesn't allow Yuki to grow or change, as he constantly treats her the same as he did years ago in an attempt to monopolize her time and affection. As such, Yuki feels that returning to a more girlish expression would be a betrayal to both her friend and to herself, and more than that, that she doesn't really have a 'claim' to femininity because she always presented so boyish. However, the desire persists, and the story shows how a series of escalating conflicts allow Yuki to break with the past, give her some room to rethink herself, and allow her to start shedding an identity that no longer fits her (much like the frozen shell Bornstein describes).

In a similar but more light-hearted fashion, Yoshino from *Hourou Musuko* spends most of her story expressing a desire to be a boy. She cuts her hair short, dresses in boyish clothes, and is considered very 'cool' by her friends. She is mortified by her feminine body, particularly her periods and her growing breasts, and hates it when her family makes jokes about her femininity. However, near the end of the story, after several years of struggling with these feelings, Yoshino starts to feel less strong about being a boy. She starts to appreciate her appearance for what it is: tall for a girl, a bit androgynous, but not masculine. Eventually she realizes that she no longer wants to be a boy, and this makes her feel guilty towards Shuuichi, who is unwavering in wanting to be a girl. However, Shuu tells her it's okay, and that it was Yoshino herself who said they should wear whatever they want to. Yuki, too, the transsexual woman who is both a friend and a bit of a mentor for the children, is not particularly surprised about Yoshino's change of heart: "□□□□□□□□□□" she simply says, indicating that there is not one right way of exploring your identity. The support and acceptance from both Yuki and Shuuichi allow Yoshino to finally feel all right about herself.

It needs to be admitted that there are difficulties with reading these narratives as examples of gender fluidity. As can be seen, both of the characters explore boyish appearances during their childhoods, before eventually 'growing out' of them; this fits with the normalized understanding that childhood and especially puberty are phases of exploration and experimentation, after which one is expected to 'find' one's identity and settle on it for the rest of their life. Both stories also suggest that the characters were never so much attracted to masculinity as they were fleeing from femininity: in *Hourou Musuko*, Saori tells Yoshino that it seems like she just hates being a girl, which Yoshino considers and is unable to really deny, and in *Himegoto*, Yuki is suggested to have some childhood trauma attached to her sense of femininity, appearing in the ghostly shape of a large man physically dominating and humiliating her. In other words, both character arcs can easily be read as normalizing narratives, where the girls' inherent femininity is momentarily abandoned but never truly lost, and in the end successfully reclaimed. However, at the start of this essay it was mentioned that the focus was not on author's intent, but on potential readings; and especially when a narrative is so rare, that potential should be recognized. So, these stories *can* indeed be read as examples of gender fluidity, just like the guilt that both Yoshino and Yuki feel can be read as an example of how they are aware they are expected to be consistent in their 'identities'. The responses of the other characters speak volumes, then: Sho is angry, but later realizes he is merely selfish, and Shuuichi is supportive, because all he wants is for Yoshino to be happy with herself.

Other examples of genderfluidity are more direct in their criticism of fixed identities by presenting a more in-the-moment approach to gender. Sarashina from *Hourou Musuko*, for examples, may wear either a girl's uniform or a boy's uniform to school at any given day, and she doesn't care what anyone thinks – if she likes to wear something, she wears it, regardless of how other people may gender it. While Sarashina still calls herself a girl, she also shows an understanding that she is who she is regardless of what she wears – which is part of the reason why Yoshino, who worries so much about what gender she really is and what her appearance should be like, looks up to her. Yoshino herself, in spite of her worries, actually displays the same attitude from time to time, especially around Shuuichi – she tells Shuu to wear what she wants to wear even if she doesn't have a 'typical girl's' body. The both of them also discuss pronouns: Yoshino remarks how she still uses the feminine/neutral 'watashi' while Shuuichi uses the masculine 'boku', even though these supposedly don't match up with their current gender identities; they then both decide that in spite of that, they will keep using them just because they feel it suits them. In a sense, all these characters recognize that society uses gender in a certain way, but then establish their own power over how *they* use gender; even if this only manifests in small moments, they are moments when glimmers of new gender understandings shine through.

A particularly interesting example is Tomochi from *Bokura no Hentai*. Tomochi is a side character who befriends Marika over their shared desire to present as a girl, but unlike Marika, who wants to dress as a girl because that's who she really is, Tomochi feels gender doesn't really matter. He likes dressing as a girl because it looks good, and he doesn't care if people know about it – he's not trying to hide anything, even if it's caused people to talk about him behind his back for many years. When Marika visits Tomochi's house, his family is shown to be very open-minded in thinking about gender, and they help Marika find the courage to come out to her mother as well as supplying her with some contacts in the medical world who can help her with her gender issues. They not only see gender deviance as something natural, but they enjoy it when people explore themselves, which is why Tomochi always felt free to dress however he liked. Overall, Tomochi and his family are almost an ideal example of what the world might look like if society ever broke free of its gender shackles: supportive, loving, accepting, and free.

These are most of the 'beyond gender' examples, and as said, they are few and far between; most of the manga simply don't go as far as to think outside either a binary, a body-focused, or an

essentialist view of gender and identity. However, the shift in how gender is understood between these examples and the earlier ones is extremely illustrative: instead of gender being something essential and unchangeable deep inside, it now becomes a general term for how someone likes to express themselves at a given time. Of course, gender preferences can *result* from deeply held needs or desires, which is why for example Shuuichi always goes back to wearing girl's clothes even when she tries to resolve not to; however, this doesn't mean that when she decides to present as a boy she is no longer being true to herself, and the reason that understanding gender as fluid is so important is that it eliminates the need to constantly feel pressured into living up to a certain image. If gender is fixed, then one must be a single gender and will be judged by the standards of that gender's ideal type forever; whereas if gender is fluid, then one doesn't need to be compared to other people to judge whether one is 'properly' exhibiting their gender, and people can simply be who they are without worrying.

It should also be noted that most of these beyond-gender examples are found in a select few manga with typical characteristics. *Hourou Musuko*, *Himegoto – Juukyuusai no Seifuku*, and *Bokura no Hentai* all are long to medium-long stories with serious undertones and a variety of characters exhibiting persisting desires to present as genders other than the ones they were assigned at birth. As such, these particular manga have the ability to present various views on gender that may be valid to each character even as they conflict with each other, and it is through their interactions that an understanding of gender as something complex and multi-faceted is created. It may be said, then, that the decision to present varying characters with unique views on gender provides an inherently rich soil for destabilizing and imaginative potential – in other words, for gender disruption and the formulation of new gender ideas to occur, bringing together a multitude of views may well be critical. However, examining the manga *Double House* as a final example in this section will show that neither length of story nor number of characters are essential in order to provide such a perspective.

Double House, then, is a short manga, spanning less than a 150 pages over three chapters. As such, it is neither through narrative nor through character development that the manga stands out. Instead, what it does extremely well is provide its characters with critical perspectives that they use to understand their own situations. To summarize, the main character is Maho, a trans woman who works in a bar and who starts to develop a friendship with Fujiko, an adolescent girl who lives in the same apartment building. When Maho discovers that Fujiko ran away from a wealthy home with excellent prospects she is initially annoyed – it's the kind of life most people can only dream of, and certainly one that is out of reach for someone like herself. However, Fujiko proposes a different way of looking at life: she sees everything as 'frames'. Family, nationality, sex, they are all frames, are all constructs that exist outside of people's inner selves. Some people fit those frames; others do not. And no matter how attractive a frame looks from the outside, it can become a cage if the person inside it cannot be themselves.

What Fujiko highlights is the constructed nature of gender and other concepts that people tend to take for granted. She indicates that people like her and Maho, who didn't fit their original frames, need to break free in order to be themselves. However, she does not propose the creation of new frames, but an escape from frames altogether – essentially, an escape from fixed identity. Maho is skeptical; she doesn't feel she would be able to live if she had no fixed way of understanding herself. "Call me a drag queen," she says, "a tranny, whatever you want, just put me into an established genre of people. If I didn't have that, I'd just be a freak." Maho, in this conversation, represents all those people who *know* that something isn't right, who *know* that they are limited by who they are allowed to be, but who are so used to the idea of identity that they cannot imagine living without one. The prospect is a scary one, even if it is also enticing; is there even such a thing as simply 'being' without being 'something'?

Fujiko tells Maho not to worry: since they share the same inclination, the same desire to

transcend frames, they will never have to be alone. Maho isn't sure what to make of that; but that night, she has a dream where she is swimming, without direction. "There was no up or down, no left or right," she later describes it. "Just a stairway of light that I threaded my way through, one that stretched far into the distance. Nobody labeled me with any names or told me what direction to go in, but I wasn't afraid of anything. (...) I considered telling [Fujiko] about it, but ended up keeping it to myself for the time being. (...) If I'd told her that she'd been swimming with me in my dream for some reason, she'd definitely have gotten all worked up about it." Maybe, then, transcending identity is possible, and maybe it is even beautiful; and maybe all that is required is having someone with you who feels the same way.

Conclusion

In the basest way, three categories of observations can be made about the transgender manga that were examined in this essay: the things they do right (and need to keep doing), the things they do wrong (and need to stop doing), and the things they *could* do (which they need to start doing). In the introduction it was said that there would be no such assessment in terms of 'right' and 'wrong'; to an extent, that was a lie. The reality is this: transgender people suffer discrimination, rejection, violence, isolation, hatred, and more; and every day that goes by where no improvement has been made in the way people understand gender is another day where these issues are free to persist. As such, the responsibility of manga, as well as other media, to properly and adequately represent transgender people is a very serious one; and in the light of that responsibility, the terms 'right' are 'wrong' cannot be said to be entirely devoid of emotion.

Having said that, the analysis of the selected transgender manga has shown that they offer significant options for improved understandings of transgender situations. Transgender characters are overall varied in personality, often realistic, overwhelmingly likeable, and undeniably portrayed as real and valid individuals. The humanizing potential from taking a transgender character's perspective is particularly valuable, as it allows the reader to identify with the characters, realize the uniqueness of each of them, and look at 'normal' ideas of gender from a new perspective that does not assume their rightness. The 'sex equals gender' narrative is almost entirely rejected as belonging to small-minded characters who cause nothing but trouble; and the 'gender requires sex' narrative is shown to be varied, complex, and something entirely dependent on the individual.

That being said, there is still a lot of room for improvement. Character design suffers from serious bias, with a majority of transgender characters being trans girls compared to trans guys, young compared to old, and 'passing' compared to 'non-passing', all of which severely limit the themes that can be explored and the experiences that can be included. Narrative design has a similar problem, where transgender characters simply do not appear outside of transgender-focused narratives; if normalization of transgender people is to happen, there need to be more 'normal' stories featuring transgender characters as well. As for views on gender, they are mostly unable to move beyond binary, body-focused, and identity-based notions that almost seem to provide hard limits for how far gender exploration can go; rather than being discussed and then either rejected or reinforced, they are simply not discussed at all, as if they are seen as entirely self-evident.

Finally, there are some moments, if one looks in the right place with the right gaze, when one can see hints to the possibilities of existence beyond gender. Characters who don't recognize gender as important at all, or whose understanding of gender changes over time, provide vital opportunities of denaturalizing the entire concept of gender. *Double House* towers above all other manga in this respect, being the only story to downright dismiss gender as a construct; but it also shows that no particular complexity of story is required to incorporate and explore these types of views. In the end, transgender manga show they absolutely have the potential to provide non-normalized ways of thinking about gender and identity; and if, in the future, there can be more variation in character designs, more variation in narratives, more questioning of *why* we even need to be one gender or the other – then transgender manga may provide an increasingly open space for the disruption of the normal, and the exploration of the alternative: a world where gender doesn't matter.

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