A "Japanese Stonewall": The Role of Drag Queens and Female Impersonators in LGBTQ+ Activism in Japan

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Introduction

One of the more notable moments in queer history is the Stonewall riots of 1969. On the evening of June 27, police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York City. Although this was not an unusual thing to occur, this particular evening, the bar patrons would fight back in protest against their humiliating treatment from the police. This protest against the police initiated a riot that lasted the whole night. According to bystanders, the ones who started throwing bricks and other objects to the police were drag queens and transgender women, specifically the iconic drag queens/transgender women Marsha P. Johnson (1944-1992) and Sylvia Rivera (1951-2002) (Appenroth 2015). These two women have been pillars in queer history and are synonymous with the Stonewall riots and the gay liberation movement that occurred in the 1970s. Sylvia Rivera mentioned that the people were fed up with the police raids and especially angry the night of the riots because that day Judy Garland's funeral was held, who was an icon for many queer people at that time. During this time of mourning for the queer community, the police raid was the last straw, and they were not going to tolerate this violence anymore (Appenroth 2015).

The Stonewall riots are commonly viewed as the start of the gay liberation movement and a turning point in the history of LGBTQ+ life in not only the US but in most Western countries (Armstrong & Crage 2006, 724). However grand and unique the story of these riots might seem, many historians and other scholars have debated the legitimacy of these riots being the catalyst of the gay liberation movement (Armstrong & Crage 2006, 724-725). The stories around the Stonewall riots should thus be looked at like the myths that they are, not as factual events. However, the importance of those stories should not be overlooked, especially considering the relevance they have to drag queens and transgender people. They still seem to be thought of by many queer people as the initiators of the riots and thus as the initiators of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

Drag queens are especially thought of as being activists by many queer people. According to Renee Middlemost (2019), drag queens use satire to play with stereotyped gender roles, and they have historically used performance to gain media attention, organize, and call for change when the rights of LGBTQ+ people are being threatened. With the rise of the popular reality television program *Rupaul's Drag Race* in the late 2010s, a reality competition in which drag queens compete for a grand prize through a variety of challenges, drag queens are now at the core of LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream media and have a big platform to present their individual and collective activism (Brennan & Gudelunas 2017; Jenkins 2017). On episode 9 of season 13 that aired on the 5th of March of 2021, contestant Symone wore a white dress that had two bullet wounds at the back and a hat that spelled out 'Say Their Names' as a protest to the murder of several African-Americans by the police, which started the Black Lives Matter-movement that happened during the filming of this season. Another example of a political statement is episode 4 of season 11, in which contestant Shuga Cain dressed as a drag queen version of the then president of the United States, Donald Trump, while eating Cheetos during an orange-themed runway, which was an apparent mockery of the president. These examples confirm the notion that drag queens and activism are strongly connected with one another.

Rupaul's Drag Race is a global phenomenon and has a far-reaching influence on the international queer community, and because of my specialization in Japan and my interest in drag, I was curious about the popularity of *Drag Race* in Japan. During the *Werq the World* tour[1], many parts of the world are included in the tour, and in 2019, the first tour through Asia was a fact. One of the countries that were on the tour list was Japan. In an interview with The Japan Times, Tom Hall and Yuta Furakawa, who organized the first viewing party of the show in Tokyo's gay district of Shinjuku Ni-chōme and acted as the promoters of the event, mentioned that they felt the need to bring these queens to Japan because they saw a rise in the popularity of the show. They organize their parties at Tokyo Eagle Blue, originally a leather bar, but during viewing parties the show turns into an eclectic entourage of queens with different nationalities, leather daddies and straight girls who are fans of the show too (McKenna 2020). They mention how the queens at their parties are so different from the rest of Tokyo's nightclubs since they attract a wide variety of drag queens to their venue and not just a specific niche, like queens who perform cabaret or queens who lip-sync to hit songs. It is clear from the argument of the organizer that the Tokyo drag scene is diverse and consists of a lot of different types of drag queens.

So what is the drag scene in Japan like? Do they use drag as a political tool like their American peers? In this thesis, I would like to investigate what drag is like in Japan in contemporary times; specifically, I would like to try and answer the question of how drag queens use performance as a political tool in Japan in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. From the female roles in *kabuki* played by men named *onnagata* to drag queens performing in gay bars of the famous gay district of Shinjuku Ni-chōme in Tokyo, several books and studies have been written on different forms of female impersonation (Baker, 1998; Leupp, 1995; Mitsuhashi, 2006). However, the role of drag performers in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in Japan has not been studied as extensively as in other parts of the world. In recent years, the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights in Japan has come under considerable media attention again when Japan was announced as the host of the 2020 Olympics, during which many LGBTQ+ people pushed for better legislation on the issues LGBTQ+ individuals face in contemporary Japan (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The fight for equal rights is therefore more current than ever and taking a closer look at how one part of the LGBTQ+ community uses their voice to push for equality is crucial in establishing discourse on LGBTQ+ activism in Japan.

In this thesis I have chosen to categorize my chapters according to the thematic elements of my thesis, meaning I will be including theory about these themes in the chapters instead of combining them in a separate theoretical framework. I have chosen to do this because I wanted to structure the theories around the thematic elements they belong to and give an argument at the end of each chapter to strengthen the arguments I will make in the analysis. In the first chapter, I will review theories on drag queen and female impersonator identities and I will investigate how these identities emerge in a Japanese context by reviewing research on female impersonation and drag in Japan. I will also be giving a brief history of traditional gender bending practices in Japan from the Edo period until World War II. By looking at common conventions and tropes between traditional gender expressions of

[1] The *Werq the World* tour is a popular world tour in which a group of well-loved former participants from the show perform for their fans on big stages with big productions all across the world.

this time and the one's of today, I would like to argue that these identities exist in the realm of female impersonation and they are the root of how female impersonation developed to what it is in contemporary times in Japan. Secondly, I will focus my attention on a specific phenomenon typical for the postwar era in Japan: Japan's 'booms.'An excellent example of one of these booms is a moment in Japanese history that has been crucial to the status of LGBTQ+ individuals: the 'gay boom' (*gei būmu*) of the 1990s. During this time, Japanese media and the Japanese public in general became obsessed with LGBTQ+ media and saw a record high of visibility for sexual minorities (McLelland 2000, 460; 2006, 7). I will not only consider the gay boom, but I'll be primarily focusing on the booms that came before the gay boom and focus on the representations of the different transgender identities that were typical of the era before the gay boom to find out more about how they were perceived and how they presented themselves to the general public throughout the postwar era. In doing so and investigating the history of female impersonation in Japan in the first chapter, I hope to come to a better understanding of how drag queens and female impersonators have formed their identities and what tools they use to construct this identity. In the third chapter, I will discuss theories about activism followed by a summary of the history of LGBTQ+ activism in Japan in order to connect these theories to how LGBTQ+ activism developed in Japan. finish my research with an extensive analysis of several performers in Japan who use female impersonation in their performances.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to broaden the academic research done on the queer community in Japan and to amplify the voices of a marginalized group within an already marginalized group of sexual minorities. As has been mentioned before, the research on the LGBTQ+ community in Japan has only recently become a topic of interest to scholars, including Japanese scholars, meaning the transgender and drag community of Japan has also not been studied well (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 1; Ishida, McLelland and Murakami 2005, 34). This thesis wishes to be not only an attempt to a better understanding of these communities, but also an attempt to further progress the academic discourse around the queer community of Japan.

Chapter 1: Drag and female impersonation in Japan

Theorizing drag and female impersonation

Firstly, it is crucial to establish what female impersonation is and how drag queens relate to other identities that fall within the spectrum of female impersonation. From the literature at hand, it seems that female impersonator is a broader term to describe certain gender bending identities that includes drag queens. In their introductory study of female impersonators, Steven Schacht and Lisa Underwood simply define drag queens and female impersonators as "individuals who publicly perform being women in front of an audience that knows they are "men", regardless of how compellingly female -"real"- they might otherwise appear." (Schacht and Underwood 2004, 4). In an article related to their book *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (2003), a case study on a drag queen bar in Florida, Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor describe drag queens to be gay men who dress up and perform as women (2004, 115). They clarify that indeed not all men who dress as women are drag queens, and distinctions need to be made between the different categories. These categories include transvestites or cross-dressers, generally straight men who wear women's clothing for sexual and erotic reasons; preoperative male-to-female transsexuals; and transgender people who display and embrace a gender identity at odds with their biological sex (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 114). Schacht and Underwood share a similar definition of the spectrum of female impersonators, but they exclude transvestites and postoperative transsexuals since they do not perform their gender identity in front of an audience (Schacht and Underwood 2004, 4). They emphasize that many scholars have found it helpful to distinguish between the terms "female impersonator" and "drag queen" as the former being an impersonator of a specific female icon (e.g. Cher, Liza Minnelli) and the latter being a fabricated female persona (Schacht and Underwood 2004, 14). They use both terms interchangeably in their publication, as this seems to be consistent with present usage of these expressions and members of the community and the public use the terms interchangeably too. However, historically speaking, there are certain situations where one term is preferred over the other and the term "drag queen" has only come into widespread usage in recent decades (Schacht and Underwood 2004, 14). In my thesis, I will be using the terms interchangeably too, but consider the historical and situational aspects of the term when discussing specific categories.

According to Rupp and Taylor, one of the burning questions about drag queens, among scholars and audiences, is whether they are more gender-conservatives or gender-revolutionaries. Some scholars, like Steven Schacht (2002), view drag as "primarily reinforcing dominant assumptions about the dichotomous nature of gender presentation and sexual desire because drag queens appropriate and perpetuate gender displays associated with traditional femininity and institutionalized heterosexuality" (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 115), while other scholars, like Judith Butler (1988), treat drag in the context of the gay community "as more of a transgressive action that destabilizes gender and sexual categories by making visible the social basis of femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and presenting hybrid and minority genders and sexualities" (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 115).

Rupp and Taylor argue that there are three ways in which gender and sexual identity influence the becoming of a drag queen: *gender transgression* through dressing in feminine or androgynous clothing, experimenting with makeup and other activities that are stereotypically categorized as feminine (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 119); *masquerade* or dressing in flamboyant attire that allows them to flaunt femininity and embrace gender fluidity by performing a separate identity that they could put on and take off (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 120); and *sexual attraction to and desire for men* (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 120). Moreover, drag seems to be an expression of a *transgender identity* (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 121) and a *theatrical identity* (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 123) combined into one distinct identity that emerges as an in-between or third-gender category in a society that insists there are only two genders (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 130). Drag queens thus create their own identities that force their audiences to think in a complex way about what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 131).

These descriptions of drag queen identities and how they are formed are still relevant today. However, in recent years the idea that only cisgender, homosexual men can do drag has slowly changed in the more inclusive idea that anyone can do drag. For instance, one of the subcategories of drag queens is *faux queens* or *bioqueens*, the term for cisgender women who perform as drag queens. In recent years these terms have sparked controversy as *faux* suggests that their drag is invalid and the use of *bioqueen* exclusively for cisgender women is seen as disparaging towards transgender women since they have female bodies too (Coull 2015). For the sake of this thesis, however, I will mostly consider female impersonators and drag queens to be biologically male in the Japanese context since the literature I will be discussing concerning female impersonators and drag queens in Japan mostly focuses on cis men and/or male-to-female transgenders.

As mentioned before, the world of drag queens and female impersonation has not been studied well academically in Japan. One of the first Japanese scholars who researched this community was Junko Mitsuhashi. In her 2006 research on the male-to-female cross-dressing community in Shinjuku, Tokyo, Mitsuhashi attempted to map the experiences of an, until that point, largely unknown community. As a transgender woman herself, she was able to partake and observe relatively easily, as she worked at some of the bars in the entertainment district in Shinjuku. From her findings, it is apparent that transgender people and female impersonators coexist within a diverse and rather complicated community in Japan. In her research, she establishes four categories within this community. The first category is the “new-half” or “Mr. Ladies”, a term for men wearing female clothing or trans women who work in entertainment, show business, or sex services. The second category is the male-to-female cross-dressing community. Thirdly, there are the male-to-female cross-dressing women’s members-only clubs, where amateur cross-dressers come to cross-dress in private. The final category is the Gender Identity Disorder demographic, which is a term that is commonly used to define transgender people or transsexuals in Japan and is not seen as offensive by most transgender people in Japan (Mitsuhashi 2006, 204-208). Interestingly, she is apprehensive to include drag queens in one of these cross-dressing communities, as drag queens identify as gay men, so it would not be appropriate to include them in the category of transgender; however, the fashion and attire of drag queens is part of the cross-dressing community, so drag queens inhabit an exciting place. That is, according to

Mitsuhashi, because drag queens are the bridge between the gay community and the transgender community in Japan (Mitsuhashi 2006, 208).

A more in-depth look at drag queens in Japan is given by Carmen Săpunaru Tămaş, who published her case study of a drag queen cabaret in Osaka in 2020 after three and a half years of fieldwork. Instead of focusing on the gender and sexuality aspect of the drag queens, she focused mainly on the performance aspect. She noted that the drag queens in the cabaret could be categorized into four different groups: the "divas," who embody the glamour of past eras; the "fools," whose primary focus is making the audience laugh; the "fashionistas," who mainly focus on creating a beautiful aesthetic; and the "artists," who see drag as a tool to create art (Tămaş 2020). This last category seems to be fundamental when looking at the way drag performers use performance as a political tool, since these performers are the one's making statements through performing not only their art, but their gender.

A big part of being a drag queen is the performance aspect and playing with gender is the main vehicle of performance . At the beginning of the 1990s, Judith Butler published a groundbreaking study on the performativity of gender that defined the field of gender studies as it is in contemporary times. Butler likens the performativity of gender to performance in theater as played by actors on stage (Butler 1988, 519-520). The 'script' of gender is passed down on the 'actors' generation by generation, which determines how each gender should play their respective role in society. However, she also argues that although gender performance is similar to theater performance, while theater performance is less threatening to the audience since it is not based upon reality, the realness of gender performance can induce fear and misunderstanding within society when the performance does not abide by social norms (Butler 1988, 527). As drag queens perform mainly in a theatrical environment, they can play with these gender expectations.

In her research on drag queens in Osaka, Tămaş likens drag to the traditional Japanese dance of *kagura,* a ritual dance in Shinto that is performed at shrines by men only, with the use of masks to convey meaning to the audience (Tămaş 2020). She mentions: "In ritual terms, the mask turns the body of a dancer into a vessel for a god; for the drag queen, the makeup makes them transcend the limits of a body and create a new being, a genderless glamorous person who can make the audience weep, laugh and come back for more" (Tămaş 2020). Moreover, during *kagura* performances*,* a phenomenon called *kamigakari* occurs, a form of ecstasy or divine possession on the dancer's part. This phenomenon is also described by drag queens in the bar who mention that "their best performances are when they can't see anyone" and are in a trancelike state while performing as their drag persona (Tămaş 2020). Tămaş also likens drag to *kabuki* as it functioned as one of the primary forms of *asobi* or play in the Edo period in which people could enjoy themselves free of social restraints and restrictions imposed by society (Tămaş 2020). Drag queen performances are precisely that: carefree entertainment, an escape from the real world with the help of performers that stand at the border between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the sacred and the profane (Tămaş 2020). This ambiguous state of being recalls Victor Turner's theory on liminality. Liminality is a social concept referring to the middle phase of a ritual process in which an individual undergoes a transition from one social status to another (Wels, Waal, Spiegel and Kamsteeg 2011, 1). In this phase, the individual is 'no longer' one thing, but also 'not yet' the other. The individuals, as Turner put it, are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the

positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1969, 95). Drag queens thus might fulfill an interesting role in Japanese entertainment as they walk the line between theatrical performance and gender performance, making the audience both enjoy themselves and forget their troubles while at the same time making the audience think about gender.

From onnagata to drag queens: a timeline

The concept of a drag queen is relatively new in Japan and has been heavily influenced by Western ideas around gender and performance (Tămaş 2020). However, Japan has a long history of female impersonation that has shaped the way drag is performed and perceived in contemporary times. One of the most well-known forms of female impersonation, particularly in the West, is the tradition of *onnagata* in Kabuki theater (McLelland 2013, 205; 2004, 21-23). *Onnagata* are female roles played by men and originated from the performing bans in Kabuki of both women (1628) and young men (1652) because both were thought to be too sexually provocative by the strict government (Baker 1998, 67). While drag is often seen as being linked to homosexuality, female impersonation at this time was not synonymous with sexual orientation. Even though they took on transgendered roles, the roles of *onnagata* were seen as a professional way of doing female impersonation. Many of them would marry and have children and these children would then be more often than not trained to become *onnagata* as well (McLelland 2003, 205). Homosexuality, and especially homoeroticism, were still a big part of this tradition because men who played *onnagata* roles engaged in sex and prostitution with men and women (McLelland 2003, 206), and they were known to work at brothels within the red-light districts, where they catered to men who were especially interested in having sexual relations with a male-to-female cross-dressing prostitute (McLelland 2004, 23).

This phenomenon, in turn, is part of the Japanese tradition of male-male sexuality named *nanshoku*. This tradition has been thoroughly explored by Gary P. Leupp in his book *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan,* in which he argues that *nanshoku* practices were commonplace in the Tokugawa period, since the presence of male-male sexuality was so widespread (Leupp 1995, 3). Although *nanshoku* mainly focused on eroticism between men, the receiving partner within the relationship often embodied a certain degree of gender ambiguity that has also been documented in erotic prints from the Edo period called *shunga*. Leupp states that the main focus of *nanshoku* was directed toward boys and male-to-female crossdressers (Leupp 1995, 3). These effeminate young men were named *wakashu* and are seen by some researchers as a 'third gender' existing between men and women (Mostow, 2003). These *wakashu* would often work as actors or prostitutes, and they would often accentuate their feminine appearance and be desired for this appearance by older men of higher social class (McLelland 2003, 206). When looking at both *onnagata* and *wakashu*, it is apparent from these two distinct forms of gender ambiguity that in Japan, there existed a tradition of sexual and gender ambiguity, like drag queens and female impersonators are today, a long time before the influence of the West.

Figure 1. *Onnagata* during a performance (Hannah 2019)

Figure 2. *Wakashu* (left) with lover (Miyagawa).

After Japan opened its borders to the Western world, a more oppressive shift in ideology concerning sexuality, gender identity, and female impersonation occurred in the Meiji Period (1868-1912) caused by the imposition of Western ideologies rooted in religious doctrine (McLelland 2003, 206). Discourse regarding sexuality, gender identity, and female impersonation in Japan started to emulate discourse from the West. While *onnagata* continued to be regarded as an honorable profession because of its importance in theatre, other practices like *nanshoku* began to be viewed in a more negative way (McLelland 203, 206). Western discourse kept growing throughout the Meiji Period and grew even more in the Taisho Period (1912-1925). In this period, the hegemonic masculine ideal of the Japanese man was solidified by the increased militarization and was further established in World War II (McLelland 2004, 26; 2003, 207).

After the war, Japan was occupied by US military forces, and a constitution modeled after Western ideas was implemented. However, anti-homosexual policies that existed in the United States were not included in the constitution. Thus, postwar Japan saw a return to pre-Meiji discourse on sexuality, gender identity, and female impersonation (McLelland 2004, 27). For example, censorship that prohibited sexual perversions like homosexuality or the spread of media containing these perversions was lifted, which gave space for media to talk about these subjects again. The result of the return to this pre-Meiji discourse was the development of various "booms" of heightened media attention for LGBTQ+ people and thus a higher level of attention from society to LGBTQ+ issues (McLelland 2004, 32-35; Ogawa 2017, 4). These so-called "booms" also brought new terms and classifications with them, like "gay boy" in the 1950s and "new-half" and "Mr. Lady" in the 1980s (McLelland 2003, 211-214; Mitsuhashi 2006, 204-208). I will discuss these "booms" and the way they formed drag queen and female impersonator discourse and identities later on in more detail.

In this chapter, I have tried to make clear what drag queens and female impersonators are and how these identities emerge in a Japanese context. From the traditional practices and identities of *onnagata* and *wakashu*, it is clear that Japan has a long history of female impersonation. The role of *onnagata* is still a staple in *kabuki* theatre and male-to-female crossdresser communities are vibrant communities that exist in nightlife and the entertainment world, as did their predecessors in the floating world. However, to fully grasp how drag queen and female impersonator identities have developed in Japan, it is important to look further beyond the traditional representations of these identities. In the next chapter, I will continue my investigation on how drag queen and female impersonator identities developed by closely looking at the "booms" that occurred in 20th century Japan and looking at the representations of these identities.

Chapter 2: LGBTQ+ is "booming": Representations in Japan's "Booms"

As mentioned before, Japan experienced several "booms" of media phenomena that are characteristic of the postwar era. Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro, therefore, dubbed Japan as a "boom-based society," which means that Japanese society is in a process of continuous production and exploitation of new differences in rapid succession (Yoshimoto 1989, 9). When these differences become a familiarity and lose their novelty, another boom emerges, and the cycle continues. The English loanword boom demonstrates the popularization of several phenomena like sports and fashion, but also LGBTQ+ representation as a consumer trend (Skov 1995, 175-176). The biggest and most prominent boom in which LGBTQ+ individuals experienced a higher level of media attention was the "gay boom" that occurred from 1991 until 1995. During this boom, media like articles on gay men, magazines, novels, films, and tv shows featuring homosexual men were a common sight. The gay boom was at its peak when a women's magazine called *Crea* published a special issue named "The Gay Renaissance."

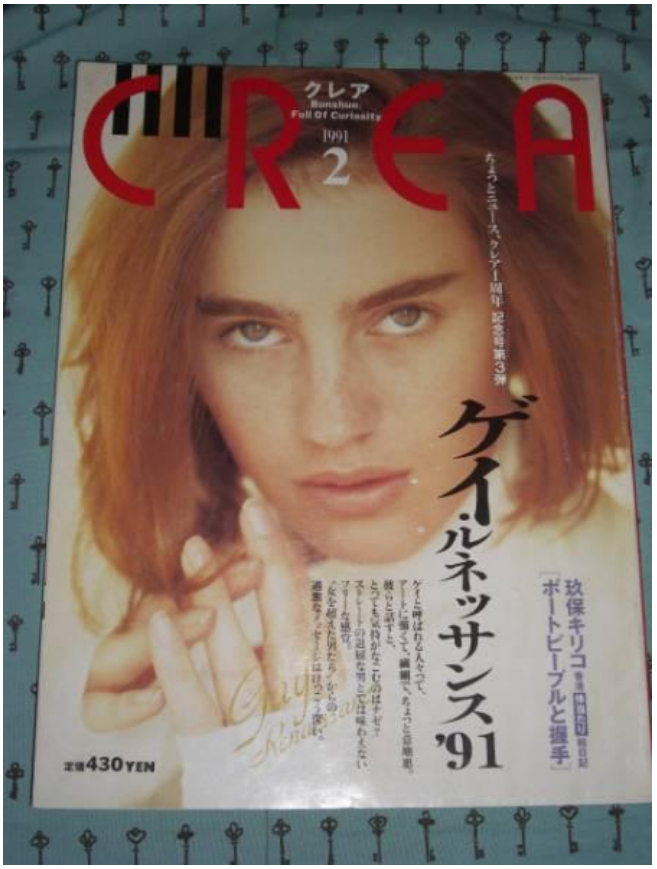

Figure 3. *Crea Magazine* special issue "The Gay Renaissance" (1991)[2].

[2] https://fashion.aucfan.com/yahoo/b126064954/

Still, people quickly lost interest in media featuring gay men because the novelty had subsided (Ōgawa 2017, 2). While the gay boom of the 1990s might be the most widely known and most well-researched, it was not the first boom that generated higher visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in Japan. Moreover, the media focused mainly on gay men. Lesbian narratives and transgender narratives, although present, were mostly an afterthought and thus represented insufficiently (Ōgawa 2017, 5; 19-20). In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the different booms that preceded the gay boom and underline the importance they had in the development of discourse concerning transgendered identities like drag queen and female impersonator.

Hentai magazines and the original "gay boom"

In the 1920s, Japan saw a sexology boom in which traditional ways of thinking about sexual desire and gender were gradually replaced by a modern pathological framework (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 2). This popular sexology not only intended to establish discourse on homosexuality, but it also included transvestism, fetishism, and sadomasochism, and these terms were all categorized as "perverse sexual desires" (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 2). The boom was stopped in its tracks in the 1930s as Japan prepared for war and the media was subjected to censorship from the government. However, the establishment of this new discourse quickly re-emerged after the war and lasted until the beginning of the 1960s. The magazines in which this modern sexology was published were known as *hentai* magazines and were devoted to examining perverse sexual desires (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 3). Interestingly, while the word *hentai* has come to be known in the English-speaking world as a word to describe animated pornography, it is mainly used in Japan in the context of "perverse" or "queer" desires and characteristics (McLelland 2006, 1-3; 21-26).

Hentai magazines had two main characteristics. The first characteristic was the fact that the titles and scope of the publications were framed as being "sex research" to avoid charges of obscenity from the government. However, most of these magazines were pornographic in nature (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 5). The second characteristic of *hentai* magazines was the animated and in depth exchange that took place between different types of people about the topics relating to the magazines (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 6). Specialist researchers, amateur researchers, and readers all discussed the topics that were published in the magazines and round-tables where these people came together to talk were a common sight. Despite a diverse range of "perverse desires" that were discussed in these magazines, there was a general agreement that these desires existed in a binary system of active/passive, male/female, sadistic/masochistic, etcetera (Ishida, McLelland & Murakami 2005, 41). At the end of the 1950s, people interested in sadomasochism started to dominate the discourse around the magazines, and from the 1960s onward, other sexual desires were excluded from the magazines (Ishida, McLelland & Murakami 2006, 43). This meant that the magazines no longer served their purpose for the queer community. However, a break away from the magazine's binary system meant that a new boom could arise for the queer community.

According to a 2006 archival research on *hentai* magazines by Mark McLelland, the original "gay boom" happened around 1958 with the rise of the term *gei boi* (McLelland

2006, 2). The term gay (*gei)* entered the Japanese vernacular shortly after World War II through men in the Occupation forces who had relations with Japanese men, and by the mid-1950s, the term *gei* or *gei boi* was used in mainstream Japanese media to describe effeminate homosexual men (McLelland 2006, 6). Coincidently, because *gei* is a homophone of the *gei* in the word geisha (where it refers to "artistic accomplishments"), it was easy to confuse the terminology, and *gei boi,* therefore, came to be partly understood as an occupational category similar to *onnagata* or geisha (McLelland 2006, 6). McLelland accredits the passing of an anti-prostitution bill in 1957 with the rapid expansion of the *gei boi* subculture because space opened up in former red-light areas for new sex-related business, including the bars and spaces catering to homosexual men and cross-dressers (McLelland 2006, 8).

Because these *gei boi* were feminine, androgynous and they worked in nightlife, they were seen as an evolution or progression of a category that was the most visible homosexual category in the perverse press of this time: *danshō*. *Danshō* were cross-dressing male prostitutes who adopted a style similar to *onnagata* performers, and they were more commonly referred to as *okama.* This term is still used today, meaning "buttocks," thus alluding to anal sex and the "passive" role these people took during intercourse (Lunsing 2005; McLelland 2006, 3). Because *danshō* were traditional in their attire (wearing kimono and donning their hair like geisha) and *gei boi* were seen as contemporary and even pioneering in their self-presentation, *gei boi* received wider media attention, and many articles were written about these *gei boi* and the "gay bars" (*gei bā)* they worked at (McLelland 2006, 10). *Gei boi* did not present themselves as female impersonators. Still, they deliberately tried to dress themselves in a gender ambiguous way because this would interest their clientele at the bars and would benefit their income. Moreover, these bars would attract feminized gay men to begin with since they could employ their femininity at these bars (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 15).

It is apparent that a particular shift occurred in the queer discourse around this time since the focus shifted from female-presenting men to a more androgynous and modern representation of the homosexual man. Although this boom of queer visibility and discourse was significant for the development of the LGBTQ+ community in Japan, media attention shifted so quickly that often categories like the men who dated these *gei boi*, lesbians, and other queer categories were overlooked by the media and thus the general public (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 18; Ogawa 2017, 19-20). Also, with the rise of *gei boi*, the dualist way of thinking about sexual desires and the binary system in which these desires and identities were categorized was falling apart and created a space for queer identities to flourish and for more "booms" to occur.

Figure 4. Picture of feminized "gay boy" (Eizō 1958)

Developing discourse on trans identities

While all throughout the 1950s, male homosexuality and feminization were understood to be closely related to one another, during the 1960s, the focus from the media was solely on the feminized, androgynous *gei boi*. However, in the 1970s, a new identity gained momentum with the publication of magazines concerned with *homo* or non-feminized homosexual men (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 24). It was with the development of a new category that the discourse around feminized men could slowly but surely become a discourse about transgendered identities. Many stories were published about *gei boi* taking measures to become more "women-like," like surgeries and taking hormones. They talked about "being women from the day they were born," but others talked about "feeling neither male nor female" (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 28-29). However chaotic these stories might be, they resulted in a "sex-change boom" in the media. Many different narratives surrounded the sex-change boom, but at the end of the 1970s a consensus was reached by the media, and the chaotic situation was clarified by a new understanding that the "true nature" of feminized men "was always female" (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 30). The mass media began to represent feminization in men as a conflict between "sex of the heart" and "bodily sex," which is not unlike the discussions around male-to-female transgender people today. The idea that the

"sex of heart," or one's gender identity is one's "real identity," became mainstream (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 31).

In the 1980s, the discourse around homosexual and transgender identities developed gradually through a number of events. In 1981, the appearance of Matsubara Rumiko, a transvestite who worked as a hostess in Ginza, Tokyo, in an advertising campaign to promote the nightlife in Tokyo's Roppongi district, resulted in her having a short period of media success. She was described as *nyūhāfu*, or new half, and this resulted in the "new half boom" (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 35). Matsubara was interviewed extensively by the media and described herself as having a female heart, but a male body, and she insisted that she was different from *homo* (the term used in Japanese media to relate to gay men) who were featured in the media at that time as well.

The new half boom presented the idea that feminized men were distinct from homosexual men to the general public even further than the sex-change boom did in the 1970s (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 36). The new half boom seamlessly transitioned in the "Mr. Lady boom" in 1988 with the daytime TV show *Tamori's It's OK to Laugh* that introduced a large number of new half to the general public and calling them "Mr. Lady" instead of new half (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 37). Although both booms factored in the common understanding of the difference between homosexuality and transgenderism in contemporary times, the discourse was not yet hegemonic. For instance, while some feminized males gave explanations like Matsubara, others mentioned they were driven to transvestism or transsexualism by "their love for men" (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 39). Interestingly, this description was also cited as a factor for becoming a drag queen in Rupp and Taylor's study on drag queens (2004). According to Ishida and Murakami, two discourses existed simultaneously in the 1980s: the notion that feminine homosexuals harbored an interior male identity and outwardly masculine homosexuals wanted to suppress a feminine nature in themselves (2006, 41). "Feminised men" and "male homosexuals" were thus still intertwined identities at this time.

In the 1990s, LGBTQ+ activism from abroad and the start of the second "gay boom" went hand in hand. This boom focused mainly on gay male culture with many articles in magazines and TV shows dealing with the so-called *tōjisha* , a term borrowed from the legal world meaning "the party concerned" (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 47; Lunsing 2005, 83). This term became significant in giving autonomy to the ones being discriminated against, like homosexual men and transgender people, in how they were presented in the media. With the power partly back in their own hands, queer activists started spreading new terminology among their peers and among the general public. Terms like "transgender" and "transvestite" that were not common in use by the media started becoming normalized. A discourse of "sexual minorities" followed in relation to mainstream society, but as a result, marginal sexualities became fixed in public discourse within a rigid-three dimensional framework of representation which was divided among three axes, namely: biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 63). While terminology concerning sexual minorities improved, when compared to the dualist system of the 1950s, the dualist framework of the 1950s gave space to more "sexual perversions" like sadomasochism and fetishism. The new framework was helpful in creating discourse around homosexuality and transgenderism, but did not provide the same framework to create discourse on other forms of

sexuality (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 54). In the late 1990s, many homosexual and transgender *tōjisha* were critical about the newly established framework, saying that their lived experiences can not be categorized in a single framework (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 55). Nowadays, the framework is still part of public discourse.

In this chapter, I have made an effort to describe how transgendered identities developed during the several booms that happened in the 20th century in Japan. When looking at the first two chapters, several things become apparent concerning drag queen and female impersonators identities. Firstly, the discourse around homosexuality and transgenderism has long existed in the same vacuum meaning they were, more often than not, confused with one another when public discourse was created in media. "Feminized men" and "male homosexuals" were only separated theoretically in the 1990s with the rise of the *tōjisha*. Secondly, transgendered identities in Japan exist in a continual evolution that seem to evolve according to external factors like modernization and are influenced by specific moments of public debate on the topic, often involving statements made from lived experiences. This continual evolution is clear when looking at the similarities between *wakashu* and *gei boi* in that both exist in a state of gender ambiguity and employed their gender identity to attract customers and income. Thirdly, transgendered identities in Japan have always been linked to the entertainment world and performance with *onnagata* performing in *kabuki* theatre or "Mr. Ladies" performing in cabarets and appearing in national tv-shows. However, it is only since discourse has shifted centering the experiences from the people involved that gradually more and more room for public debate surrounding these identities and the problems they face in society has been established. From the mid-1980s onward, LGBTQ+ activism grew in Japan and awareness surrounding these individuals grew as well. In the next chapter, I will take a closer look at how LGBTQ+ activism has developed in Japan and will try to already make a connection between activism and drag queen and female impersonator identities in Japan.

Chapter 3: The fight for equal rights: LGBTQ+ activism in Japan

Sexual and gender identity and human rights have only been linked together in Japan since the mid-1980s and the 1990s. This is mainly due to the fact that cross-dressing and same-sex sexual behaviour has never been labelled as an illegal behaviour, so police surveillance and harassment of sexual minorities has never been common, meaning that a motivating factor for LGBTQ+ activism has been largely absent in Japan (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 329)[3]. Moreover, a powerful moral authority like the Roman Catholic Church that perceives homosexuality and transgenderism to be sinful is not part of Japanese rhetoric (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 329). In the late 1960s, the United States saw an emergence of a counter-culture where people who faced discrimination like African-Americans and women fought for legislation protecting them as people. This was essential in empowering sexual minorities to start the gay revolution (Humpreys 1972, 113). This resulted in a movement that fought back against legal oppression derived from Judeo-Christian ethics that are cemented in the discourse of most Western countries like the United States (Gould 1979, 51). These factors were all missing in Japan, meaning that the counterculture movement had little impact in shifting discourse around LGBTQ+ rights. The 1970s in Japan saw a small fight for equal rights from the lesbian community coinciding with the feminist movement that did take hold in Japan, but the lack of interest in lesbian issues from the mainstream feminist movement and the unstable financial and social situation of many lesbians meant that this fight went largely unnoticed (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 330). Only in the mid-1980s a new movement began adopting similar sentiments around activism borrowed from Western activist groups and the mainstream media started dealing with LGBTQ+ issues outside of the dominating rhetoric that placed gay people only as entertainment factor in the media (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 330). In the following paragraphs, I will explain theories on activism and link these to the LGBTQ+ rights movement in Japan while also investigating the development of queer activism in Japan in order to see where drag queens and female impersonators are situated in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in Japan.

Theorizing activism

"Research on political activism compares the ways that citizens participate, the processes that lead them to do so, and the consequences of these acts" (Norris 2009, 1). To understand how LGBTQ+ activism is formed in Japan and why it has progressed the way that it did, it is useful to define common theories on political activism. Theory around political activism was established around the 1960s and 1970s in a time where many counter-cultures started to emerge. From the literature that was written in this era, several findings about the distribution of mass activism were established. In most democracies, voting has been the primary and sometimes only form of political participation for a majority of the citizens

[3] This does not mean that these individuals were free to express themselves in public, but merely that they were not prosecuted because of their identity.

(Norris 2009, 1). More demanding forms of political participation like contacting representatives or party work was only engaged in by a small minority and protesting politics with petitions and political strikes was similarly engaged in by only a small number of citizens (Norris 2009, 1). In 1972, Sidney Verba and Norman Nie developed a baseline model explaining who became active in politics in which they suggested that structural resources like educational qualifications, income and occupational status, but also factors like sex, ethnicity and age played a significant role in the possibility of an individual becoming politically active (Verba & Nie 1972; Norris 2009, 1). Cultural attitudes related to socioeconomic status and education also played an important part in making people motivated (Norris 2009, 1). When people are informed about what's going on and interested in the political climate, they are more likely to take action. These findings, especially the last ones, illustrate that not every individual has the same access to becoming politically active because of a lack of resources that give access to political engagement.

In relation to these last findings, Pierre Bourdieu's theory on *capital* comes to mind. According to Loïc Wacquant, Bourdieu saw capital as "any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it" (2006, 7). In other words, capital is what an individual holds within themselves to make use of in society. Bourdieu makes a distinction between three different types of capital: *economic capital* (material and financial assets), *cultural capital* (symbolic goods and skills like education), and *social capital* (resources acquired by membership of a group) (Wacquant 2006, 7). The idea of social capital has been linked by Robert Putnam to the importance of civic associations and voluntary organizations for the political participation of citizens in his publications *Making Democracies Work (1993)* and *Bowling Alone (2000)* (Norris 2009, 8). He defines social capital as "connections made among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam 2000, 9). Putnam argues that social capital has significant political consequences because democratic, civic societies directly promote social capital, and social capital, in turn, facilitates political participation of citizens (Norris 2009, 8). However, Putnam also mentions the deterioration of the civic society, and especially social capital, because social connectedness has decreased since the rise of technology and media, particularly with the rise of television entertainment (2000, 246). Although Putnam has mainly focussed his attention on the United States, he states that similar trends have been observed in other postindustrial societies as well. Traditional ways of civic associations and voluntary organizations are thus perceived to be obsolete. These theories on social capital are relevant when looking at the role of drag queens and female impersonators in activism in Japan because it will assist in explaining why certain circumstances have led to how and why they have taken on this role.

In contrast to these traditional organizations, modern agencies that have evolved since the early-1960s are characterized by the women's movement, the anti-globalization movement and the environmental movement, as well as a diverse number of non-governmental organizations and multinational policy advocacy networks (Norris 2009, 9). Instead of the bureaucratic structure in the traditional organizations which were ruled by formalities, the new social movements had more fluid boundaries and looser network coalitions (Norris 2009, 9). Moreover, while these traditional organizations were usually defined by regularized, institutionalized and structured activities to influence politics, the new

social movements often focus on achieving social change through direct action, as well as by altering lifestyle and social identities (Norris 2009, 9-10). Because of the informality of the new social movements, crossing national borders is easier and a feeling of belonging has also become more accessible (Norris 2009, 10).

This rise in new forms of activism is largely due to the growth of cause-oriented politics and how these politics have become mainstream, according to Pippa Norris, a lauded comparative political scientist (Norris 2009, 10). *Cause-oriented* politics developed as a reaction to *citizen-oriented* politics. Where citizen-oriented politics mainly entails influencing politics through elections and parties, cause-oriented politics focuses on specific issues and policy concerns where political influence is employed through consumer politics, petitioning, demonstrations and protests (Norris 2009, 11). This trend in cause-oriented politics or activism is also confirmed by Roger Soler-i-Martí's study of Catalan youth and how they relate to politics. He found that younger people are indeed more likely to participate in newer forms of politics like protests and demonstrations (2015, 408-409). One of the most important characteristics of cause-oriented politics is that they have broadened toward engaging in "consumer" and "life-style" politics, meaning that the dividing line between "social" and "political" has broken down (Norris 2009, 12). Included in cause-oriented activism are also issues of identity politics like ethnicity and sexuality. These too break down the line between the "social" and "political" (Norris 2009, 12). Through cause-oriented activism or politics, what is perceived to be political has thus broadend and a shift has taken place among citizens in the manner of how they participate in politics. By employing these theories of citizen-oriented and cause-oriented activism to the Japanese context, the way LGBTQ+ activism in Japan is mainly practiced can be determined and this could help in determining the role of drag queens and female impersonators in activism.

LGBTQ+ activism in Japan: a timeline

As mentioned before, Japanese lesbians were the first ones who became politicaly active as a community, not gay men, as is the case in many other countries. In fact, lesbian and gay activism in Japan has largely developed separately. Men and women with same-sex attraction came together in different environments, police persecution was not common, and since sodomy laws were absent in Japan, lesbians and gay men had no issues of common concern that would galvanize a social movement (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 334). The reason why lesbian issues were first adressed by the community was because of the feminist movement of the 1970's. Since gay men were not discriminated against in Japan, the motivation to change politics in Japan was lacking from men and an attempt to develop a broader queer resistance was not made, as was the case in many other countries where gay men were discriminated against like the United States (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 334). From the late 1980s until the mid-1990s, many magazines on lesbian and female issues were released, but none of them saw a long lifespan and most magazines stopped after a few issues. In contrast to the difficulty lesbian magazines faced, erotic magazines aimed at gay men have been more succesful. Starting with arguably the most famous gay magazine, *Barazoku* (Rose Tribe), that was first published in 1971, erotic magazines for men have been published well into the beginning of 21st century and have only seen a decline since the

spread of the Internet (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 335). These magazines, in a way, are an evolution of the *hentai* magazines that were popular in the immediate postwar era.

Despite the fact that most gay men in Japan did not feel the motivation to assert themselves politically and media aimed at gay men was common, one of the first people to make a connection between Japan's hetero-normative social system and the oppression of sexual minorities was a homosexual men named Tōgō Ken as early as 1971 (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 335). He started a political party aimed at bringing a wide range of people together who felt left behind by the social system, mostly sexual minorities and other individuals that could not adhere to the strong family values in Japan (Oikawa 2007, 263). However, Tōgō was a controversial figure in Japan. He posed to reclaim the term *okama* (that I've discussed in a previous chapter) in line with the reclamation of the term "queer" in the United Stated, in order to combat homophobia, but he was not able to find support from gay men or other people in the queer community (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 335). Someone who had a greater impact during the 1970s was Ōtsuka Takashi, the first activist who began the use of the term *gei* in a political way on his popular underground radio show *The Snake Man Show* (Ōtsuka 2007, 247). This new terminology to describe one's identity as a gay men did not see an immediate popularity among Japanese men, largely because the term *gei* was associated with the *gei boi* that worked in the entertainment districts (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 335; McLelland 2006, 8).

This situation, however, began to change in 1983 when Minami Teishiro, editor of a popular *homo* magazine, was interviewed by a foreign journalist who was researching homosexuality in Japan (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 335). This caused Minami to become involved with the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), an organization that not only offered support to other lesbian and gay organizations around the globe, but also lobbied national governments and international organizations like the United Nations to protect sexual minorities (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 335). Minami acted as representative of ILGA in Japan, but also represented Japanese sexual minorities at international conferences during his time with ILGA. One of the biggest successes made with ILGA in Japan was the organisation of the first Tokyo Lesbian and Gay Parade in 1994 with over 1000 attendees (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 336; Suganuma 2006, 3). While the parade saw some success in the first two years, numbers of attendees plummeted because many people felt unhappy with the organizers. Lesbians even organized their own parade since they didn't feel included by the organization (Suganuma 2006, 3). The assembling of a unified queer movement still seemed hard to establish.

Minami and ILGA were never able to to establish themselves as representatives for the sexual minorities in Japan and due to many younger people disagreeing with the politics of Minami and ILGA, an inevitable split took place in 1986 and the organization OCCUR was born (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 336). OCCUR is known for their proactive way of changing rhetoric in Japan. One of their key strategies was the use of the concept of *tōjisha* that I've discussed in a previous chapter. By the association of this term with sexual minorities, the public at large could perceive them as individuals with specific desires and needs linked to their identity (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 336). OCCUR has also been succesfull in lobbying for declassifying homosexuality as a mental illness and for changing terminology in dictonaries in line with Western terminology (McLelland & Suganuma 2009,

336; Lunsing 2005, 82-83). However, not every Japanese queer person was welcoming these politics. Some of them felt that queer people were depicted as victims by the organization and that the organization was using too much Western ideology that did not fit perfectly into Japanese society (Lunsing 2005, 82-83). A common consensus among Japanese queer people was thus still not reached regarding activism with the establishing of OCCUR and the organization has also yet to gain popularity among Japanese queer people.

Political activism in Japan by sexual minorities, especially gay men, saw it's ascent in the mid-1980s throughout the beginning of 1990s when the HIV/AIDS panic hit Japan (Hasegawa 2006, 9). The first people to contract HIV were patients who got blood transfusions with non-sterilised blood by hospitals, however, the Ministry of Health and Welfare as well as the AIDS Prevention Law labelled 'male homosexuality' as the main route of contracting HIV (Kazama 2003, 33). This is by many believed to be a diversion to shift the blame away from the government towards homosexual men. This situation prompted gay activists, including Minami and OCCUR, to fight against negative stereotypes caused by the HIV/AIDS panic by public campaining heavily influenced by strategies employed by gay activists in Western countries (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 337).

In the 1990s, Japanese intellectuals started developing queer theory that suited Japan's situation better. Two theorists in particular, namely Fushimi Noriaki and Kakefuda Hiroko, were very influential, although the latter found it hard to deal with public scrutiny and eventually retreated from the public eye (Suganuma 2006, 1). Fushimi first gained attention with the publishing of his book *Private Gay Life* in 1991. He opened his book with a 'queer' (*hentai*) declaration in which he states to have no interest in being 'normal' because it implies there is an 'abnormal' which sets society up to be discriminatory (Suganuma 2006, 2). This is in stark contrast to OCCUR's tactic of minoritizing and victimizing queer people in order to shift the discourse. Instead of normalizing sexual minority desires and perspectives, Fushimi wanted to critique and eventually dismantle what he coined the 'hetero-system', in other words, the heteronormative structure of Japanese society (Suganuma 2006, 5-6). Kakefuda published her book *On Being 'Lesbian'* in 1992 which impacted the lesbian and feminist debates throughout the 1990s. Similar to Fushimi's approach to queer identies, she does not want to categorize lesbians as a minority and thus defining them as separate or distinct from 'heterosexual women', but rather 'lesbianism' is produced by the othering of 'lesbian women' through the hetero-homo binary embedded in Japan's patriarchal society (Suganuma 2006, 14-16). From these theories it is clear that the queer theories fabricated in Japan in the 1990s were aimed at mobilizing a change in discourse and politics around LGBTQ+ individuals and inciting activism. An example of how this change has presented itself might be the election of Otsuji Kanako to the Osaka Prefectural Assembly in 2003, who came out as a lesbian shortly after her election, making her the first openly LGBTQ+ politican in Japan (McLelland & Suganuma 2009, 338).

In this chapter, I have collected theories on activism and attempted to summarize the history of LGBTQ+ activism in Japan. It is clear that LGBTQ+ activism in Japan has had a unique development. Firstly, instead of a collective development of LGBTQ+ activism in for example most Western countries, Japan's lesbian community was the first to establish a form of activism with gay men joining them later on during the AIDS pandemic. Secondly, the development from citizen-oriented to cause-oriented activism can also be seen in the

Japanese context. The attempt of Tōgō Ken to be elected into public office with his political party in 1971 is a clear example of citizen-oriented activism. This inevitably followed in forms of cause-oriented activism with the establishing of the Tokyo Lesbian and Gay Parade and the organization OCCUR. Interestingly, after a period of cause-oriented activist activities like demonstrations, citizen-oriented activism became relevant again with LGBTQ+ people running for political positions. Lastly and most strikingly, not much is known or published about the role of drag queens and female impersonators in LGBTQ+ activism. This makes it all the more interesting to plunge into the role of this specific subculture among LGBTQ+ individuals.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Methodology

My analysis will consist of three different cases in which I will demonstrate how drag queens and female impersonators can use performance as a political tool in Japan. These cases consist of collected qualitative data gathered from different media. For the first case, I will discuss two high brow cross-dressers who appear regularly on television to share their opinion on certain topics, namely Matsuko Deluxe and Mitz Mangrove. In the second case, I will discuss the documentary *Queer Japan* from 2019 in which several drag queens share their experiences with performing as a drag queen and what it means to be a drag queen in Japan. Lastly, I will examine interviews with famous Japanese drag queens like Esmeralda, Bourbonne and Simone Fukayuki in which they talk about the various parts of being a drag queen in Japan, including activism. I have chosen these data since they represent a wide spectrum of where drag queens and female impersonators locate themselves: entertainment in nightlife and media. An unfortunate limitation of this analysis is the lack of more interviews with drag queens and female impersonators in for example the form of an unstructured interview with a focus group or in-depth structured interviews. However, since this is a first attempt at looking at the role of drag queens and female impersonators in LGBTQ+ activism in Japan, looking at previous data like the data I will analyze will give a first indication of what this role might be and how these individuals use the performance of their gender identity in a political way. In future research, more qualitative and quantitative methods are essential for confirming hypotheses that will be made in this thesis.

Case 1: Matsuko Deluxe and Mitz Mangrove

Besides drag queens, other female impersonators like cross-dressers have a large platform in Japan, especially on mainstream media like talk shows and television advertisements. I'll be discussing two notable cross-dressing television personalities in Japan, namely Matsuko Deluxe and Mitz Mangrove. Both personalities are well-known for having developed a career based on their gender expression, but both have used their popularity as a medium to bring certain topics like gender, sexuality and LGBTQ+ issues to a mainstream audience.

Matsuko Deluxe is a TV personality known for his cross-dressing stage persona who is featured in various Japanese talk shows, especially late night talk shows, and several advertisements for well-known Japanese brands like Calpis (Fifield & Oda 2015)[4]. Besides being a popular guest on talk shows and popular with brands as a promoter for their products, Matsuko hosts several of his own shows. "The World Unknown to Matsuko" is one of the

[4] According to Matsuko Deluxe's Wikipedia page, he prefers he/him pronouns. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matsuko_Deluxe

most popular shows hosted by Matsuko. In the show, Matsuko invites experts from a variety of specialities to introduce a topic or hobby that is unknown and surprising to Matsuko and his audience[5]. Matsuko gives comedic reactions and gestures to entertain his audience. Although Matsuko is known for being comedic in his shows, he doesn't hesitate to share his opinions on sexuality and gender in Japan. In his research on similarities and differences between drag queens and female impersonators in the USA and Japan, Noah B. McAllister collected several instances in which Matsuko voiced his opinion on issues in Japan.

In an article on J-CAST News in 2010, Matsuko was critical about a policy from then Governor of Tokyo Prefecture, Ishihara Shintarō, that regulated the sale of sexually explicit materials like manga and anime to minors (McAllister 2017, 27). Moreover, Matsuko gave furious remarks towards Governor Ishihara for his remarks about homosexuality in which he claimed that "homosexuals have some sort of deficiency[6]." Matsuko expressed that such remarks should not be uttered by public officials. The importance of Matsuko's criticism of the governor lies in the significance of the role of the *tōjisha* (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 47; Lunsing 2005, 83). Having someone like Matsuko speak out on this matter in the media is of significance because it gives autonomy to LGBTQ+ individuals in coming up for their own rights. In another instance in 2013, Matsuko was a guest on the fourth installment of NHK's HeartNet's nightly series of shows on sexuality named "Living with Diverse Sexualities" to talk about his views on gender identity and sexuality (McAllister 2017, 28). When a question about his attire was asked, Matsuko responded that "clothing is not just about masquerading as yourself, but in a way could you not say that it's, maybe not a weapon exactly, but at the very least kind of like armor?" (Kagami 2013). This last remark is interesting in that it plainly describes how drag can be used as a cover or as protection. Rupp and Taylor have described that masquerade is one of the main characteristics of drag (2004, 120). Through masquerade, an individual can take on a different identity that is more flamboyant and more outspoken. Individuals in drag might thus feel more freedom to speak their mind on certain topics since their true identity is concealed by flashy outfits and glittering make-up. When looking at the concept of *tōjisha* combined with that of masquerade, something striking can be deduced about drag queens and female impersonators. By means of masquerade and thus having a vehicle to be outspoken and conspicuous, having the role of *tōjisha* becomes almost second nature to many drag queens and female impersonators, almost as a "mascot" of the LGBTQ+ community. This could have a positive effect on progressing the discourse on LGBTQ+ issues, however, it also has a downside that I will discuss in the following paragraph.

One of Matsuko's cross-dressing colleagues is Mitz Mangrove, who is also a popular singer in Japan. Mangrove has attributed his success to "his powers of expression and intellectual, respectful use of language that does not use stereotypically effeminate language frequently used by gay and/or cross-dressing TV personalities in Japan" (McAllister 2017, 29). However, Mangrove has also stated that he and other female impersonators have gained their popularity mostly because of their outrageousness and their tendency of going against the status quo, even going so far as saying that drag queens and female impersonators are

[5] https://www.thehawaiiherald.com/2019/04/23/ngn-programs-52/

[6] https://www.j-cast.com/2010/12/14083475.html?p=all

only liked when they "say thing that aren't mainstream or that are sharp or vulgar" (McAllister 2017, 29). Mangrove fears that although female impersonators are a popular scene on Japanese television, the stereotypes that are perpetuated by the media could be harmful to the LGBTQ+ community (Fifield & Oda 2015). Moreover, when female impersonators, and thus the LGBTQ+ community, are merely showcased on television as entertainment, stereotypes will persist and this will hinder the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals as an integral part of Japanese society (McAllister 2017, 30). This echoes discourse around gay and transgender individuals in the post-war era where both these identities were intertwined for a long time in public discourse (Ishida & Murakami 2006, 41). While during the 1990's terminology and theory around queer identities started to represent the individuals better, in part thanks to the popularization of the *tōjisha*, discourse around different queer identities stays intertwined in contemporary times as well, resulting in misrepresentations and a tendency to resort to stereotypical characteriaztions of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Drag queens and female impersonators thus have a very dualistic role when it comes to the fight for the LGBTQ+ community in Japan. One the one hand, they are probably some of the most outspoken figures in the LGBTQ+ community and use their distinct appearance as a tool to attract attention to causes that concern LGBTQ+ individuals. On the other hand, due to the media focusing their attention mostly on the outrageousness of drag queens and female impersonators, ideas and discourse around LGBTQ+ individuals gets confusing and misrepresentations and stereotypes are unfortunately common in Japanese media. Junko Mitsuhashi said in her research that drag queens are the bridge between the gay community and the transgender community (2006, 208). I believe that drag queens and female impersonators might also be a bridge between the LGBTQ+ community and the rest of Japanese society, be it in a positive or negative role of furthering the discourse on LGBTQ+ issues.

Case 2: Queer Japan

In 2019, the documentary *Queer Japan* directed by Canadian filmmaker Graham Kolbeins was released. The documentary depicts several members of the Japanese LGBTQ+ community including high profile individuals like gay artist and activist Akira the Hustler and the first ever openly transgender elected official Kamikawa Aya who share their experiences as a sexual minority in Japan. Kolbeins describes the film as a "series of character studies" instead of a documentary focused on one issue (Aoki 2006). Issues that are discussed by the subjects include nightlife, BDSM and other fetishes, HIV/AIDS awareness and LGBTQ+ rights in Japan. More than one hundred interviews were conducted for the film over the course of four years with locations including Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Okinawa (JUSFC 2006).

One of the people interviewed in the documentary is Tokyo-based drag queen Vivienne Satō. When asked how they identify, they mention themselves to be an *okama*[7].

[7] Satō never mentions their pronouns so I will use gender neutral they/them pronouns to refer to them since this is an inclusive way of referring to LGBTQ+ individuals. From here on out, I will use they/them pronouns for individuals that have not specified their pronouns in interviews or other media that I used.

However, they rightaway state that identities can not be “neatly tied into words, or in nouns” as each individual has “their own particular way of living.” (Kolbeins 2019, 04:41) They live their everyday life as a drag queen, meaning they even go to the convenience store in full drag. They feel as if it’s “just another form of theatre” (Kolbeins 2019, 05:07). One of the biggest reasons why they have decided to live their everyday life as a drag queen was to get a reaction from the public. They even state that if they dressed like this and no one turned around or no one complained, they would be “a little sad” because they want to be “the noise” that invites a reaction from people (Kolbeins 2019, 05:32). In the last part of the documentary, Satō is interviewed again about politics (Kolbeins 2019, 1:35:47-1:37:04). They mention that the political system in Japan is largely patriarchal, including the representative system, and that the system is outdated. They argue that things are ambiguous and femininity can recognize the fact that society doesn’t revolve around one principle, but that society is many things coexisting. They feel that a shift towards a more flexible, diverse and ad hoc way of thinking is necessary in Japan to further the cause of LGBTQ+ individuals. Lastly, they believe that people should be allowed to have multiple identities that they can construct in accordance with the people in their environment.

Although it is not known from the documentary or discussed if Satō performs in cabarets or nightclubs, Satō lives their life performing in drag. When looking at Butler’s theory on the performativity of gender, a comparison can be made with Satō’s situation. As Satō moves about Tokyo in full drag, this will inevitably incite a reaction or emotion from the people they encounter during her day, be it positive or negative. This is in large part because of the unexpectedness of Satō’s gender expression that is not in line with the social norms of gender in Japan. As Butler describes in her research, one of the distinctions between a theatrical role and a social or gender role is the fact that gender performances in a non-theatrical context are subject to punitive and regulatory social conventions (1988, 527). Since these social conventions are broken by Satō, the public can’t help but react to their gender performance. Moreover, Satō’s drag can be categorized as being part of the “artist” category described by Tămaş (2020), as Satō mentions themselves to be not only a drag queen, but also an artist (Kolbeins 2019, 04:18). “Artist” drag queens use drag as a vehicle to create art and make statements. It can be argued that Satō uses their drag persona in public life to make a statement about gender conventions and the way gender is perceived in Japanese society since they are primarily looking for a reaction in their audience on the street. Albeit not in the theatre, Satō makes their audience, unconsciously, think about gender and what it means to be a man or a woman. As Rupp and Taylor (2004, 131) and Tămaş (2020) have argued, this is a significant role drag queens fulfill in the questions surrounding gender roles and conventions.

Another drag queen who is featured in the documentary is Madame Bonjour JohnJ, a female-born drag queen who describes themselves just as “a living creature” (Kolbeins 2019, 1:04:45). Just like Vivienne Satō, JohnJ describes themselves as not merely a drag queen, but more as an artist. Besides being an “artist” drag queen, JohnJ is director of Community Centre akta in Shinjuku Ni-Chōme that focuses on spreading awareness about HIV and AIDS in the LGBTQ+ community of the Ni-Chōme neighbourhood. When going to pride parades or protests, JohnJ appears to dress in their drag persona. Spreading awareness about HIV and AIDS to not only the community, but also in protests directed towards people outside the

community like politicians is a good example of cause-oriented activism as described by Pippa Norris because the issue is raised through a collective effort of citizens by protesting and demonstrating (2009, 11). The involvement of JohnJ in these protests in drag has significant meaning too. Drag is rather conspicuous, as is evident from my discussion about Vivienne Satō. By dressing up in drag at protests, JohnJ not only makes people question gender conventions, but also draws attention to the cause she is fighting for through gender transgression and masquerade (Rupp and Taylor 2004, 119-120). Drag might thus not only be a tool to make a statement on gender conventions, but also a tool to make political statements during protests and demonstrations.

Case 3: Drag queen's point of view

Although not much research has been done on Japan's drag queen community, the community is really diverse and vibrant and consists of some legendary drag queens who are known outside of the LGBTQ+ community to a wider audience. One of these drag queens is Esmeralda, a drag queen who has been active since 1994 and is the founder of drag queen group *Happō Fubijin*. In an interview by Ichikawa Naoto for web magazine Wasegg, created by students from Waseda University's Faculty of Political Science and Economics, Esmeralda is asked about their experience as a drag queen in Japan (Ichikawa 2021)[8]. Esmeralda mentions that Japanese drag queens originally have a very specific way of performing in drag with uniquely developed comedy elements. They make use of many comedic tools like snippets from television programs and movies. One of the drag queens who has made this way of performing an art is Bourbonne, who has incorporated lines from Studio Ghibli movies and Japanese drama series accompanied with theatrical facial expressions and gestures to make the audience laugh (Ichikawa 2021). However, nowadays many types of drag queens coexist together as has been described by Tămaş (2020) with the older generation of drag queens like Esmeralda making room for the younger generation of queens, whose performances are focused more on incorporating dancing and fashion elements (Ichikawa 2021).

One of these younger queens is Okini. Okini describes themself as a "drag artist" or "drag performer" instead of a drag queen, as they see drag as "a form of art, so they would feel more comfortable with the term artist" (Ichikawa 2021). Besides, the term drag queen is not seen as being inclusive anymore by some drag queens because they feel it excludes non-binary and transgender performers who might not feel comfortable with the term "queen." (Ichikawa 2021). This channels the argument that I made about discourse surrounding transgendered identities in a previous chapter. These identities are in a process of continual evolution that is influenced by external factors like public debate. In addition, Okini mentions their drag to be "genderfuck," meaning as much as playing with gender expectations and subverting gender roles[9]. This is in line with Butler's notion of drag queens in that they transgress the gender binary and make people think about femininity and

[8] https://wasegg.com/archives/3472#note_1

[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_bender

masculinity (Butler 1988; Rupp & Taylor 2004, 115). Again, it becomes apparent that drag queens play a vital role in dissecting gender roles by performing gender in front of an audience to make people reconsider their ideas and biases surrounding what is feminine and what is masculine. In a patriarchal and heteronormative society like Japan, drag queens act as important scrutinizers of these societal structures.

In most interviews I have collected, the drag queens credit the popularity of *Rupaul's Drag Race* as the reason that drag has become more popular in Japan (Ichikawa 2021; Shinohara 2020). In an interview about the opening of their new bar, Bourbonne, the drag queen I talked about earlier, is asked about the rising popularity of drag queens (Ota 2020)[10]. They mention that it is noticeable in the way that many drag queens, including Bourbonne themself, are asked to appear in magazines or online videos to talk about make-up and about gender (Ota 2020). In the interview they even talk about a "drag queen boom" happening right now (Ota 2020). Essentially, this is the case in Japan and in many other countries as well. Due to a sudden rise in widely available media centered around drag queens for everyone to consume with programs like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its many international spin offs like *Drag Race UK* or *Drag Race Holland*, drag queens have a big platform which they can use to indeed talk about their experiences as not only a sexual minority, but as an artist that plays with gender conventions. Following the trajectory of Yoshimoto's claim that Japan is a "boom-based society," eventually the popularity will subside and will make way for another new difference that the media and the general public will fixate on (1989, 9). However, the mere fact that drag queens are able to voice their thoughts and opinions to a mainstream audience can be seen as activistic in nature since it progresses the dialogue around the LGBTQ+ community and it showcases a part of the community that not many people outside of the community might be familiar with.

Another interview with a well-known drag queen, who also appears shortly in the documentary *Queer Japan*, is with Simone Furayuki, who is by many called "the Empress of the West" because they have dominated queer nightlife in the Kansai area since the 1980s and is famous for their party "DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER" that has been going on since 1989 (Maruo 2020)[11]. Interestingly, Furayuki believes that drag queens should not meddle into politics (Maruo 2020)[12]. They feel that their party is a place for entertainment and should be a place for everyone. If they would incorporate politics at their parties, they fear that they would intimidate people with different opinions than the ones that would be presented (Maruo 2020). However, they mention that sometimes performances can be politically loaded. For instance, they describe a performance in which a performer poured water on themselves as a protest to a non-disclosed issue (Maruo 2020). Furayuki will, however, keep on fighting for awareness around HIV and AIDS, as she has done since the AIDS-panic of the 1980s (Maruo 2020). It is clear that not every drag queen has a desire to be in the role of activist and some drag queens want to focus on the main parts of drag, which is entertainment

[10] https://bunshun.jp/articles/-/40493?page=3

[11] https://hanabun.press/2020/07/17/simone01/

[12] https://hanabun.press/2020/08/14/simone05/

and performance. Nevertheless, from the interview it is clear that Furayuki regards activism as something important that has to be done by people in the community.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have taken a closer look at the role of drag queens and female impersonators in LGBTQ+ activism in Japan, specifically through performance. Although finding data on performances by drag queens and female impersonators proved to be challenging, some conclusions can be made from the analyzed data. First of all, by playing with gender roles and subverting gender through performance, drag queens and female impersonators draw attention to the ideas people have surrounding femininity and masculinity in a playful and sometimes comical manner. By doing so, drag queens and female impersonators actively or unknowingly contribute to LGBTQ+ activism as they change people's perception of gender and sexuality through gender performance. Secondly, drag acts as a vehicle to be outspoken as is seen from Matsuko Deluxe's (McAllister 2017, 28) and Vivienne Satō's (Kolbeins 2019) experience with masquerading in traditionally female attire or outrageous costuming. Thirdly, because the nature of being a drag queen and female impersonator is innately conspicuous, they are sometimes tokenized by the media as a spokesperson for the entire LGBTQ+ community. While having drag queens and female impersonators speak out on LGBTQ+ issues is helpful in the fight for equal rights, the risk of misrepresentations and stereotypical portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals needs to be taken into consideration. Lastly, because drag queens and female impersonators are such fixtures in the LGBTQ+ community, they possess a large amount of social capital and have a certain amount of leverage that they can use to not only influence members of the community, but also public discourse around the LGBTQ+ community.

This thesis definitely has its fair share of shortcomings. Since academic literature on drag queens and female impersonators in Japan is rather limited, the findings in this thesis are mostly assumptions about the way drag queens and female impersonators might fulfill their role as spokesperson for the LGBTQ+ community and their role as activists. For future research, I ought it necessary to complete more ethnographic studies on drag queen culture in Japan and particularly look at how they might incorporate politics in their performances, but also to find out how they feel about having this role as spokesperson for the LGBTQ+ community expected from them by the media and by some members of the community. This is the perfect time to do more research on drag queens and female impersonators, as Japan appears to experience a "drag queen boom" like the rest of the world. With all the representations in popular media, it is only natural to look closer at these identities through an academic lense.

I would like to end this thesis with a quote from an interview with Esmeralda in which she says that "doing drag is a political activity" (Shinohara 2020)[13] as has also been stated by many other drag queens internationally, like Bimini Bon Boulash, a contestant of *Drag Race UK* season 2, who stated that "drag has always been a protest and will always be a political

[13] https://book.asahi.com/article/13315596

statement" (Nicholson 2021)[14]. Drag and female impersonation in general will always have this political and activistic element as it goes against the status quo and it will continue to put question marks around gender expectations and around what is considered feminine and masculine.

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