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“I wanna be the me I wanna be!” Changing Depictions of Transgender Characters in Manga

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Citation

Bandringa, J. (2024). *“I wanna be the me I wanna be!” Changing Depictions of Transgender Characters in Manga.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

“I wanna be the me I wanna be!”

Changing Depictions of Transgender Characters in Manga

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MA Thesis Culture and Politics

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14,951 Words

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Introduction

While manga's international appeal has skyrocketed in recent years, it remains as popular as ever in Japan. As the comic format transitions to the digital screen, manga is becoming easier to create, access, and share. Self-published web comics – and in extension web manga – allow individual authors to reach large audiences worldwide (Berube, 2022). Even traditionally, manga were often produced by one artist who could obtain nationwide serialisation in Japan. While this required convincing a magazine's editors that their work would sell, this is a smaller hurdle to clear than organising a theatre play or filming a movie, for example. While social media has made it easier for individuals to platform their message, manga remains one of the most powerful forms of mass communication where an individual can reach a wide audience.

As such, manga seems particularly suitable for subversive ideas and stories that challenge cultural norms. This is something that has not gone unnoticed by Japanese queer people, most notably with the development of autobiographical essay manga that describe individuals' queer experiences. But where essay manga tends to be relatively niche (Kaiser, 2017; Nagaike, 2023), queer depictions that challenge mainstream narratives also appear in more popular works. In this thesis, I will be looking at transgender characters in recent manga that have been serialised in magazines. I will show that the depiction of transgender characters, and the manga's conceptualisations of transgender identity as such presents a change from mainstream depictions of transgender characters in Japanese media, and challenges the mainstream transgender identities of Japanese society.

Mainstream or traditional depictions of transgender characters in Japanese media typically ridicule transgender people, who are represented in two ways. The former is the *okama* archetype, a term that will be explained more thoroughly in the literature review, but which conflates male homosexuality and femininity. These characters are shown having 'male' features such as stubbles, trying to appear female but noticeably failing, with stereotypical gay mannerisms. The latter character type is usually a character who identifies as a man but is dressed as a woman, a deception that is often revealed for comedic effect or to embarrass a heterosexual seducer. It should be noted that this usually concerns male-to-female transgender characters. The appearance of transgender characters who are treated with dignity and without being reduced to a gag character is relatively rare. As such, I will be looking into relatively recent manga that have gone against the mainstream, challenging traditional depictions by including transgender characters who are treated as normal and with dignity.

To this end, I will analyse the transgender character Nao-chan from the manga *Skip and Loafer* (Takamatsu, 2018-2023), together with similar characters from *Strange Land Diaries* (Yamashita, 2017-2023) and *Our Dreams at Dusk* (Kamatani, 2015-2018). I will compare and contrast these depictions and characters with Hana, a transgender character from the anime film *Tokyo Godfathers* (Kon, 2003). She is a mainstream depiction of a transgender character and thus played for laughs, though treated with some sympathy. Before the analysis, I will first conduct a literature review focusing on transgender identity in Japan. Then I will conduct a more brief literature review focused on manga. After that follows a methodological section including justification for the case selection. Then I will continue with the analysis.

In order to conduct the literature review, I have systematically gathered sources on the history and development of transgender identity in Japan, key works from queer studies and transgender health, manga theory, and particularly queer manga. Only English-language sources were included. The first part of the literature review serves to firmly situate the manga analysed within contemporary developments in transgender identity in Japan. Conducting an analysis without a thorough understanding of that context would pose challenges to both attaining an understanding of the manga as well as its potential in challenging mainstream transgender identities of Japanese society. The second part of the literature review serves as a theoretical background and foundation for conducting the analysis itself. While the analysis in this thesis is not deeply theoretical, an understanding of both the history of manga as well as manga studies helps situate the work academically and provides it with the language necessary to conduct such an analysis.

Literature Review

Transgender Identity

Before discussing transgender identity in Japan, I will set out my own conceptualisations and positionality. As a Western European, cisgender man, my understanding is shaped by my European and American queer and transgender friends. My understanding of Japanese queer identity is based on my interaction with Japanese popular media, academic literature, and limited experience in Japan itself. As such, this work is written from a certain, limited perspective, and its findings should be understood within that perspective.

The conceptualisation of transgender used in this thesis is based on the performativity of gender. That means, in the words of Judith Butler, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are

said to be its results.” (1999, p. 33). In this sense, gender is socially constituted and constantly being reconstituted, which exposes the gender binary as unnatural (Butler, 1999, p. 190). This also implies that it is possible, if not likely, that our Western, by which I mean Western European and North American, understanding of gender is different than how (trans)gender identity is understood in Japan. This idea plays a central role in following sections.

My conceptualisation is also grounded in the current medical consensus regarding transgender people. Pathologising transgender identity by treating it as a disease or disorder to be cured is problematic since far from all transgender people need or want medical support. However, many transgender people do seek medical support, be it hormone replacement therapy (HRT), sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), or psychological and therapeutic care. My understanding of the medical consensus is based on the most recent version of the transgender Standards of Care (Coleman et al., 2022). One important development to understand is that mainstream global medicine has moved past understanding transgender identities as a mental disorder with the release of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Version 5 (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013. Instead, DSM-5 includes the diagnosis of gender dysphoria, which focuses on any distress and discomfort that accompanies being transgender, rather than on the gender identity itself (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Finally, a note on terminology. In this thesis, I use transgender as an umbrella term for all gender diverse identities. This terminology is most common both in my daily life as well as in the academic literature used in this thesis. However, Japanese lacks a term that corresponds to transgender as such. The loan word *toransujendā* (transgender) has become more popular in recent years (McLelland, 2005, p. 195), but is still far from universal. There are many different terms on the “transgender spectrum,” such as *okama*, *josō/dansō*, and *nyūhāfu* (new half), but it should be kept in mind that they all have overlapping meanings, which vary based on the user.

Transgender Identity in Japan

Early queer studies of Japan focus mainly on homosexuality and the gay community in Japan, as well as Japan’s long history of male-male sexual relations, such as Nicholas Bornoff’s *Pink Samurai* (1991). Even so, he mentions *okama* as a term for gay people in close relation to crossdressing and drag, which literally means (cooking) pot (Bornoff, 1991, p. 436). Although widely used, its reference is quite feminine and carries “connotations of transvestism” (Valentine, 1997, p. 102). In Japan, gender and sexuality are conflated, Valentine (1997) shows: “a sexual orientation to the same sex implies transgression to the opposite gender” (p. 102). Mark McLelland,

one of the most important scholars in Japanese queer studies, agrees that “they all tend to conflate same-sex desire with transgenderism and transsexuality” (2000b, p. 460).

The origin for this tendency likely lies in the Edo Period (1600-1868). Joshua Mostow shows that the sexual paradigm of the Edo Period was nuanced and hard to capture in a sexual and gender binary (2003). For instance, young “homosexual” men known as *wakashu* were permitted to have sexual relations with older men and women, but not with other young men, and rarely with young women (Mostow, 2003, p. 52).

McLelland (2003) demonstrates that a category of professional transgendered persons had grown out of the kabuki theatre, where female roles were played by crossdressed male actors known as *onnagata* (literally ‘female-side’) (p. 206). *Onnagata* also, or rather, more often worked as prostitutes serving both male and female customers (McLelland, 2003, p. 205). They were, however, understood to be transgendered in order to earn a living, rather than in relation to any sexual preference, McLelland (2003) argues (p. 206).

The post-war period saw the development of several transgender categories growing out of *onnagata* predecessors. In the 1950s, *danshō* were male prostitutes characterised by their feminine nature and passive role in sex, which established stereotypes in both homosexual and transgender circles (McLelland, 2003, pp. 210-211). *Gei bōi* (gay boy) was associated with *gei bā* (gay bars). Effeminate in appearance with makeup and female clothing, they worked as hosts and prostitutes. Many transgender people were reliant on work in the entertainment industry, but this also provided a safe space for them to be transgender (McLelland, 2005, p. 197). Junko Mitsuhashi (2006) argues based on this that Japanese transgender identity is a temporary (as in part-time) identity performed in bars and clubs. In the 1980s, media fame of transgender figures who styled themselves as “half woman, half man” and adopted the term *nyūhāfu* (new half) led to an explosive rise in transgender visibility, though this was limited to appearances in the entertainment world (McLelland, 2005, p. 200)

Another term is *burū bōi* (blue boy) associated with a troupe of French transgender performers who had undergone SRS. This led to increased interest in SRS in Japan, until it was banned in 1969 following the infamous “Blue Boy Trial” which made it illegal until 1998. (McLelland, 2003, pp. 212-213). Satoko Itani (2011) explains that topics such as SRS and gender dysphoria became untouchable in Japan until the 1990s (p. 287). Instead, the male-to-female (MtF) transgender community oriented around terms such as *josōka* (woman-dresser); crossdressing, rather than medical interventions such as HRT and SRS (Itani, 2011).

Okama as a term and identity existed alongside these above mentioned terms. McLelland (2004) notes it was at times used interchangeably with *danshō*, for instance (p. 17). Valentine (1997) notes a similar overlap with *nyūhāfu* (p. 106). It is also worth repeating the conflation between homosexuality and transgender, which Valentine (1997), Itani (2011), and McLelland (2000a; 2004; 2005) all point out. This ‘entertainment identity’ was, however, not the only way to be gay or transgender in Japan, but it was the only publicly recognised and socially acceptable way to do so. McLelland (2000a) notes both gay men as well as transgender women dejected by the conflation of identity and almost obligatory role for them in the entertainment world (p. 45).

Nevertheless, Valentine (1997) argues that many queer people still prefer to identify as *okama*, without necessarily disentangling homosexuality and transgender identity. While the feminisation of homosexuality invalidates same-sex relationships and harmfully reinforces the gender binary, trying to create a dichotomy between transgender and homosexuality is problematically Western-centric. Given the understanding of gender as performative and socially constituted, the conflation might only exist from a Western perspective. A universal definition is unlikely to be found, as meanings of gender and sexuality invariably differ from person to person and society to society. However, since the 1980s Western ideas from queer studies and LGBTQ movements have gained increasing salience in Japan, challenging the hegemony of indigenous identities (Dale, 2020; Yamada, 2022)

For example, Thomas Baudinette (2021) argues that many gay men in Japan oppose the “heteronormative positioning” of *okama* (p. 10), where Wim Lunsing (2005) shares gay voices who embrace the term. This may be due to a sixteen-year gap in time, but also shows that these terms are contentious within Japan itself, as shown by the opposition to *okama* by Japanese gay rights organisation OCCUR which Lunsing (2005) criticises.

It is important to note that *okama*, along with other above mentioned terms, solely refer to assigned male at birth individuals, or MtF transgender persons, and not assigned female or female-to-male (FtM) persons. For certain terms, there are FtM-equivalents, but these do not mirror their MtF counterparts, having different histories. The most important thing is to be aware of the fact that there is no consensus on terminology, and that like with their MtF counterparts, each word carries different identity connotations.

For instance, for *okama* exists the equivalent *onabe*, and for *josō(ka)*, there is *dansō(ka)* (not to be confused with *danshō*). *Onabe* literally means pan and is as such linguistically tied to *okama* (Valentine, 1997, p.102). *Onabe*, like *okama*, carries both lesbian and transgender meanings but

seems to lack the controversial nature of *okama* (Lunsing, 2005, p. 90). *Dansō* literally means ‘man-dressing’ and is best translated as FtM crossdressing. *Dansō* negotiate gender through fashion but also seek to become ‘strong and cool’ from within, Tianyi Xie (2020) argues (p. 194). Xie (2020) characterises *dansō* as non-binary: *dansō* are not as concerned with passing (being able to ‘pass’ as one’s preferred gender without one’s transgender identity being noticed) (p. 207) or with traditional male masculinity (p. 206).

Gender Identity Disorder

Alongside growing activism by the FtM transgender community, a professor at Saitama Medical University applied SRS for ethical review in 1996, obtaining approval under strict guidelines (Itani, 2011, p. 289). As mentioned above, FtM transgender identity received comparatively little attention up until then, and especially during the *nyūhāfu* boom of the 1980s, transgenderism had been viewed primarily as an MtF phenomenon (McLelland, 2004, p. 13). FtM activists were successful in pushing the concept of transsexual identity, focused around SRS and HRT – that is, a medical model of transgender identity. The identity revolves around *seidōitsu seishōgai* or ‘gender identity disorder.’ The revised guidelines for SRS initially did not allow people to change their gender in Japan’s family register, but in 2003, the Diet passed the Exceptional Treatment Act for People with GID (GID act hereafter) which made it possible to change one’s legal gender under five strict conditions: a person should be (1) over 20 years old, (2) unmarried at the time, (3) have no children, which was later revised to no children who are minors, (4) be sterilised, and (5) have genitals that resemble those of the other sex (Taniguchi, 2006, para. 15).

The GID act and revised guidelines made it possible for the first time to change one’s legal gender, as well as the first time transgender people could undergo SRS in Japan since the Blue Boy Trial. A new transgender movement developed in tandem with these changes, which did not come out of earlier communities or identities, but was instead developed entirely separately (Itani, 2011, p. 291). According to Itani (2011), the GID community view themselves as transsexual: their body and way their gender is perceived by society (legal gender) are both incorrect, and must be medically and legally corrected. They embrace the ‘disorder’ in ‘gender identity disorder’, and explicitly seek out medical treatment as a cure. As Itani (2011) translates Mitsuhashi (2003) summary, they do not consider transgender people who cannot pass as “true transsexuals,” they are obsessed with traditional masculinity and femininity, and they look down on *okama/nyūhāfu* and *josō/dansō* (p. 126, trans. via Itani, 2011, pp. 291-292).

As such, the GID community has developed to being rather exclusionary and what Itani (2011) calls “transsexual fundamentalist” (p. 291). They do not define themselves as transgender, reserving that for those who are gender diverse but do not seek out SRS or HRT (Itani, 2011, p. 291). This makes the GID community controversial for several reasons. Firstly, transgender experiences are incredibly diverse and not all people seek full medical transition (Coleman et al., 2022). Secondly, being able to pass is not always possible even for those who want to for various reasons, be they financial, genetic, or based on peer pressure. Furthermore, GID reinforces the strict gender binary and fully excludes non-binary transgender people. (Dale, 2020). Finally, using the GID act and medical diagnosis as the basis of their identity carries the issues inherent to both of those.

To briefly expand on the GID act, I return to the five conditions required to change one’s legal gender. The requirement to be unmarried reinforces Japan’s heteronormative marriage laws, and the requirement to resemble the other sex reinforces a strictly male/female dichotomy, physically, mentally, and visibly (in the eyes of others), in what Dale calls an instance of ‘bio-power’ “whereby a population is regulated through the monitoring of bodies through discipline and reproduction” (Dale, 2012, para. 7). In an autobiographical paper, Masataka Masaki (2006) describes his own experiences as an FtM transgender person: while living fully as a man, because he does not want to be sterilised or undergo SRS, he would be excluded from the GID community.

Folk Identities, GID, and the Future

Already in 2004, McLelland noted that compared to other transgender identities, categorising everything from *okama* to *nyūhāfu* to *dansō* as ‘folk identities’ marked by their indigeneity, the GID identity received the majority of attention in the media, specifically in ‘serious’ journalism, as well as in political debates (p. 14). As such, much of recent academic literature has criticised the restrictive, binary, and heteronormative aspects of the GID act. Dale (2020) explicitly characterises the rise of *x-jendā* in the 2000s and 2010s as a reaction to the binarism of the GID movement (p. 64). It has been defined by LGBTQ journal *Poco a poco* as a “term used by individuals who do not fit under the existing categories of male/female, or who are unsure of their sex/gender” (Dale, 2020, p. 64). As such, it appears to be an umbrella term similar to how ‘non-binary’ is used in English.

In a critical examination of *jōso*, Ho (2021) argues that GID discourse is “problematic for reproducing institutional power relations and pathologising transgender individuals through its mistranslation and misinterpretation of “*seidōitsuseishōgai*” as “disorder” and “disability” (p. 8).

Instead, terms such as *jōso* can be much more expansive, allowing cisgender practitioners and transgender people (who might also identify as GID) to exist in the same space and transcend lines demarcating cis, trans, or otherwise (Ho, 2021, pp. 15-16).

Hidenobu Yamada (2022) argues that the popularisation of the term ‘LGBT’ since 2012 has led to transgender activists using the T in order to challenge restrictive GID discourse. A 2018 decision by Ochanomizu University to accept transgender people who were legally registered as cisgender constitutes a paradigm shift away from the medical model towards a rights-based model of transgender, according to Yamada (2022, p. 504).

However, Yamada (2022) also argues that GID is being used by conservatives and ‘gender-critical’ women’s groups, also sometimes known as ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminists’ as an acceptable minority. GID allows a number of traditional and conservative feminists to appear supportive of transgender rights by tolerating GID, but exclude transgender identities that challenge the gender binary. The same 2018 decision led to a moral panic that mirrors ‘gender-critical’ backlash in the Western world, such as fears that “men” or “male-bodied” people would be stalking women-only spaces. Yamada (2022) shows how these terms were introduced directly from English online discourses (p. 504).

Finally, it is important to add that the medical science that GID was originally based on has since disavowed the use of ‘disorder’. DSM-5 replaced gender identity disorder with gender dysphoria in 2013, and the most recent Standards of Care recommend transgender healthcare that moves beyond the need for medical diagnosis wherever possible (Coleman et al., 2022). Recent publications such as an estimation of the prevalence of gender dysphoria in Japan (Oshima et al., 2022) have moved beyond GID, instead using definitions and methods that seek to include as diverse a spectrum of transgender identity and experience as possible (McGuire et al., 2020).

Manga

Moving on from gender identity, it is now important to gain an insight into manga in order to both analyse it (alongside with anime) and to ground my understanding of its political potential in academic literature. In this literature review, I will first be looking at the politics of manga and its activist potential, followed by the historical role of transgenering in manga, as well as a brief look at other queer manga genres.

Political Manga

According to Roman Rosenbaum (2020), a leading scholar in the study of manga and politics, it has been suggested that contemporary manga is “surprisingly apolitical” compared to its Western counterparts (p. 1). He argues the opposite: not only are there plenty of manga with explicit social and political commentary, manga is becoming a means by which Japan shapes and exports its national pop-culture identity (Rosenbaum, 2020). Furthermore, manga also reflect political events and sociohistorical currents (Rosenbaum, 2012). On top of this, Ēiji Ōtsuka (2013), a key Japanese manga scholar, argued that the origins of manga are itself political, as they can be traced back to propaganda in the Asia-Pacific War, which was in turn based on a union of Eisenstein’s Soviet cinematography and Disney’s wartime propaganda movies.

Within the genres of queer manga, the most explicitly political and activist works are likely essay manga. Essay manga incorporates autobiographical experiences in order to share them with a wider public. Kazumi Nagaike (2023) argues that essay manga, “developed as a form of cultural text that actively partakes in Japanese social sensitivities, [...] are positioned to express possible and distinctive forms of reality” (p. 732). Essay manga has the ability to investigate provocative and controversial issues of queerness, which allow them to function akin to a more nuanced kind of journalism (Nagaike, 2023). However, she also warns that the resilient, immortal bodies of *kawaii*-ified protagonists of manga could undermine LGBTQ activist potential by “creating a sense of anti-realistic game realism” (Nagaike, 2023, p. 732).

‘Game realism’ is a term developed by Hiroki Azuma which critically expands on Ōtsuka’s theory of ‘manga realism’ (Nagaike, 2023, p. 729). Manga realism is, according to Ōtsuka (2013), found in the earliest manga of Osamu Tezuka, the grandfather of manga, in imparting a flesh-and-blood body in the vein of Eisenstein-style realism onto the Disney style (p. 275). Manga realism, then, is a response to the unrealism of the Disney style, in which the ability of manga characters to bleed – to suffer, in a greater sense, imparts a greater sense of realism to the medium.

In contemporary popular light novels, but also manga such as essay manga, characters are not presented as specific individuals but rather represent meta-narratives, which are endlessly produced and consumed within the postmodern context. Characters lack ‘manga realist’ corporeal existence as their life stories produce never ending narratives which do not conclude in death (Nagaike, 2023, p. 729). This deconstruction of manga realism, game realism, stands in opposition to it. Nevertheless, Nagaike (2023) does not reject the potential for essay manga to make queer issues visible to readers.

Rachel Thorn (Kaiser, 2017) recognises that essay manga includes most of the few transgender manga produced by transgender authors. However, she argues that compared to most works of manga, essay manga tends to fall flat as works of fiction and entertainment. As autobiographical or at least outwardly activist works, their purpose is primarily to educate and activate, not entertain people. This might explain why essay manga is comparatively niche and not as widely read in Japan, and why entertaining manga with a political message might have more potential.

Sharon Kinsella (2000) argues that manga has been an outlet for political activists since the rise of independent publishers in the 1960s (p. 103). As large publishers began to take over the manga publishing industry, artists felt that their liberty to produce manga without the interference of editors came under pressure. Therefore, they established numerous small, independent publishing companies such as Tezuka Osamu's *COM*, with the express purpose of supporting free expression (Kinsella, 2000, p. 103). However, these small publishers were not able to keep their heads above water financially and went under in the 1970s (Kinsella, 2000, p. 104). Furthermore, Kinsella (2000) argues that the publication of politically radical and stylistically innovative manga in large publishing companies came to an end in 1972 because they no longer sufficiently appealed to their mass audiences (p. 106). Later, she also notes that in this decade, a class of editors from a homogenous socioeconomic background had become entrenched within large publishing companies, who also opposed the publication of subversive manga (Kinsella, 2000, p. 169).

As a response, young manga critics and fans began to encourage the production of amateur manga, which was made possible by developments in printer technology making production cheaper (Kinsella, 2000, p. 106). While publishing underground magazines was a step back compared to independent publishers like *COM*, but these amateur works, known as *dōjinshi*, gained massive popularity in the 80s as manga conventions, chiefly Comic Market, grew explosively and provided an outlet for amateur manga producers (Kinsella, 2000, pp. 106-107).

Dōjinshi as a genre includes both original amateur manga but mainly parody works which are essentially fan fiction, using characters from popular mainstream manga. Kinsella (2000) shows that, while a few detractors see parody works as a way for fans to recapture and subvert mainstream narratives from large publishers, most critics find parody manga to be mostly devoid of political and activist content (p. 119). On the other hand, she argues that it has reduced the barrier of entry to producing manga, which has allowed a greater number of authors to create and share their manga (Kinsella, 2000, p. 120).

While Sharon Kinsella (2000) published in the internet's early days, its development followed by the development of social media have had a much more drastic impact on the barrier of entry to producing manga. As stated in the introduction, web comics can become immensely popular. Furthermore, they can bridge the gap to edited magazines: the manga *Until I become me* began as a web comic published on the author's twitter until being published in ComicWalker, a digital-only magazine (Satō, 2019-2023). This unique, weird, transgendered story started quite poorly drawn, the author's visual development apparent throughout the work. However, it was not critical editors upholding industry standards, but twitter followers who decided that *Until I become me* was worthy of attention, which led to its eventual adoption in an official publication (Satō, 2019-2023).

Writing about Western web comics in particular, Hatfield (2015) argues that they can facilitate queer representation and social justice (p. 59), but also create a participatory culture which allows the queer community to participate (p. 61). Similarly, Baudinette (2022) argues that gay manga produce activist spaces, and that the creation and consumption both constitute activism (p. 207), also demonstrating that the act of reading manga can increase readers' social and political consciousness (2018, p. 162).

As such, manga has clear political and activist potential, though mainstream manga tends to lack subversive elements due to the influence of large publishers. Therefore, in the next section I will discuss queer elements in manga which could be politicised or made into the subject of activism.

Queer Manga

Fujimoto Yukari (2004) shows that from the start – from Osamu Tezuka onwards – manga has featured stories that question gender, such as Osamu's *Ribbon Knight* where the main character is a princess with a 'male' and 'female heart' who is raised as a boy, problematising gender (p. 77). Many manga focused on sex and gender transgression already in the 1950s-1970s, with more progressive queer characters appearing in the 1980s (Yukari, 2004, p. 83). However, transgendered characters are often women running away from binary gender norms, who usually revert back to female before the story ends, reaffirming binary gender norms (Yukari, 2004).

Tomoko Aoyama (2005) broadly agrees with this view, arguing that the popular trope of transgendered female androgyny is based around an adolescent fear of becoming a woman – a feeling that is perhaps worse for, but not limited to transgender people assigned female at birth. As such, she characterises it as a feature of adolescence manga rather than as particularly queer.

Aoyama (2005) supports this by arguing that *shōjo* manga aimed at adolescent girls is often imaginary and removed from ordinary life.

The influence of and *dansō* is also found in manga (Aoyama, 2005). Grace Ting (2020) argues that *dansō* representations “often have ambivalent gender and sexual politics, situated somewhere between performing in transgressive ways and reinforcing heteronormative standards” (p. 315). She underlines the empowering and feminist potential of such manga, but agrees with Yukari that the reversion and reaffirmation of the gender binary is common (Ting, 2020, p. 315).

Beyond *shōjo*, the forefront of queer representation is likely to be found in erotic manga. Most prominent, also in academic literature, is *yaoi* or boys love (BL). Typically produced by amateur artists, *yaoi* exists both as parody and original work. The term derives from the first syllables of the phrases: *yama nashi*, *ochi nashi*, *imi nashi*, which means something like ‘no build-up, no point, no meaning’ (Kinsella, 2000, p. 113). *yaoi* centres homosexual erotic encounters between young, lean, sometimes pubescent men. Written for and by women, Kinsella (2000) argues the characters are essentially genderless even though they are biologically male (p. 117). Anne Allison (1996) asserts that erotic manga featuring women is extremely misogynistic (ch. 3). This might explain why Kinsella (2000) states that “young female fans feel more able to imagine and depict idealized strong and free characters, if they are male” (p. 117).

Kai-Ming Cha (2005) agrees that women are expected to fulfil a certain role during sexual encounters. *Yaoi* consequently allows readers to identify with either of the characters, rather than the female one. However, Cha (2005) also argues that *yaoi* glosses over any real homosexual themes, given its authors and target audience, noting one example of a reader’s gay friends regarding it with “polite curiosity” (para. 9). McLelland (2000) notes that gay activist groups such as OCCUR object to homosexual representations in *yaoi* manga (p. 50), but Lunsing (1997) argues gay people in Japan generally enjoy the genre (p. 274). Especially in recent years, the gay community in Japan has moved towards embracing *yaoi* as queer media (Baudinette, 2017).

The further queer potential of *yaoi* has been covered in research. Andrea Wood (2006) shows that *yaoi* facilitates subversive queer identifications and desires by challenging heterosexual relationships in intimate contexts with the audience. Yukari (2015) argues *yaoi* offers a space where readers can explore intimacy free from the restraints of gender oppression, and Nagaike (2015) adds that *yaoi* allows straight men to deconstruct their own masculinity, challenging gender roles.

Finally, scholars have examined queer manga that falls outside of these trends, such as Emily Somers’ (2012) analysis of the transgender character’s inner world in the 1980s manga

Tsurubara-tsurubara, in which she concluded that it anticipated the growing awareness of LGBT-awareness in Japan. There is also the work of Ito and Gilbert (2020), which shows that non-binary characters in manga are in majority depicted as morally ambiguous, non-human, and as such reduced to being undesirable.

This review shows that while manga does not lack queer and transgender depictions, but that few of these are subversive or positive when viewed from the perspective of advancing transgender awareness and rights. While more subversive work might be found within *yaoi* manga, its queerness can be found in its representation of homosexuality and its particular non-binary deconstruction of masculinity, which much has already been written about (see McLelland, 2015 or the work of Thomas Baudinette). As such, they fall outside the scope of this thesis.

Methodology

In my case selection, building on the literature review's discussion of manga realism and game realism, one of the most important considerations is the manga's realism. The manga that I have selected – *Skip and Loafer*, *Our Dreams at Dusk*, and *Strange Land Diaries* are all situated in contemporary Japanese society. Using this as a setting creates expectations for the audience regarding the behaviour of the characters in the story, which makes subversive queer representations more effective through the added believability of the depiction. For this reason, I have excluded popular transgender depictions such as Kikunojo from *One Piece* or Hoshi Kirara from *Jujutsu Kaisen*. While these manga are magnitudes more popular than the ones included here, their action fantasy settings jeopardise the normalising realism, which is so novel in the manga I analyse.

Of the four works, *Tokyo Godfathers* serves as a comparison to the other three. Being a film, rather than a manga, and more than a decade older, it represents the mainstream depiction of transgender characters in Japanese popular media. While the age of the film might suggest this depiction is now wholly outdated, recent examples such as *Kingdom of Ruin* (Yoruhashi, 2019) *Palpol* – an aggressively offensive depiction of an *okama* person – show that this kind of depiction is still recognised by Japanese audiences, as it was adapted for animation in 2023. There are plenty of other examples, but *Tokyo Godfathers* possesses a degree of realism similar to the manga, which makes it more suitable for comparison.

The following analyses will be primarily oriented around the transgender characters, with the work as a whole serving as the backdrop. Only *Tokyo Godfathers* features a transgender character as part of the main cast. In *Skip and Loafer*, the character in question is Nao-chan, the

aunt with whom the main character lives. In *Our Dreams at Dusk*, Misora Shūji and Utsumi Natsuyoshi are two characters at different stages of their transgender experience featuring in a cast where the main character is gay and the story covers the spectrum of LGBTQ+ experience – literally. Finally, *Strange Land Diaries*' Itsuki Juno plays a minor role but nonetheless an important addition in a story that deals with a number of societally difficult topics.

To this end, I will broadly consider visual and artistic characteristics, self-identification through language-use, treatment by other characters within the narrative, treatment at a larger level by the narrative itself, to then finally consider to which extent this depiction is transferable to real experiences. In other words: what does the work say about transgender people? The manga were written after the rise of the GID movement and LGBT backlash against it. As such, the manga's positions in that debate, if it can be called that, should be considered.

Visual and artistic references include studying the character's facial lines and eyes within the context of the work. It is common for manga to have clear visual distinctions between masculine and feminine faces, but there are also genres such as *yaoi* which buck this trend. Furthermore, strong muscles are often masculine. (Male-oriented) manga tend to feature exceedingly large-breasted female characters, but the cases I have selected do not feature this trope due to various reasons. Finally, the manner of dress is also important: female dresses that are too small or fashion from the entertainment world says different things compared to clothing that does not stand out.

Self-identification is important so as not to assume too much about the character. As shown in the literature review, transgender identities in Japan are incredibly diverse, and it is not the objective of this thesis to categorise characters within constrictive frameworks. While Japanese is in some aspects less gendered than English, there are still clear male and female patterns of speech. Some of these aspects are lost in a written medium, but others remain, including personal pronouns. The Japanese first person pronoun includes a gendered aspect, with forms ranging from almost exclusively feminine, such as *atashi*, to almost exclusively masculine, such as *ore*.

A further consideration is the treatment of the character – both by other characters within the narrative as by the narrative itself. If other characters do not acknowledge the transgender character's identity at all, this could be seen both as a virtue of their transpositive acceptance or as a denial of their transgender identity by the narrative. In either case, neither situation would reflect transgender experiences in Japan. However, when transgender characters' identities are acknowledged, these responses could be neutral, positive, and negative, which would all reflect transgender experiences. Therefore, the narrative's treatment of the character is important for

determining which responses are depicted as normatively bad and normatively good, ultimately deciding what the work says about transgender identity.

Analysis

Tokyo Godfathers

Tokyo Godfathers is an animated film by Kon Satoshi (2003) set in Tokyo around Christmas featuring two homeless people, Hana and Gin, and a runaway teen, Miyuki as main characters. The three find a foundling child and go on a quest throughout Tokyo in order to find the baby's parents and return the child. Being set around Christmas, featuring Christmas music and a lot of *Ode an die Freude*, the film mirrors the nativity of Jesus Christ in various ways, with the three main characters standing in for the three magi, but also Mary and Joseph.

Hana is a transgender woman. She is called an *okama* by other characters, but uses the personal pronoun *atashi*, which is an exclusively feminine pronoun, and calls herself an *onna*, or woman. In the film, it is revealed that she used to work in a *gei bā*, a bar where crossdressed and transgender people entertain guests, and that she had a male partner she met at this bar. Considering this, Hana fits inside the *okama* type of transgender identity, given that what we know about her



Hana (*Tokyo Godfathers*)

gender expression and life fits with the stereotypical idea of an *okama* person for the most part. However, where *okama* is a broad identity, ranging from male homosexual to non-binary and female gender identifications by *okama* themselves, the film leaves no ambiguity as to Hana's gender expression, as she clearly identifies as female.

It would not be atypical for someone like Hana to seek out gender-affirming care. However, as she has a clear stubble throughout the film and a masculine voice (acted by Yoshiaki Umegaki, who to my knowledge identifies as male). As the film was produced in the middle of ongoing developments in the field of GID law in Japan, it is not a surprise that it does not incorporate the newest (legal) possibilities, but the fact that Hana has no access to gender-affirming care due to her homelessness also serves as sufficient explanation.

On an artistic level, there is a clear distinction between masculine and feminine bodies in *Tokyo Godfathers*. Men are generally stockier, with more pointy shoulders and blocky jawlines. Feminine bodies are more rounded and curved. Elderly women break this rule, but their chins are narrower than those of masculine characters. Similarly, feminine characters have larger and more

rounded eyes, whereas masculine eyes are smaller and feature sharper angles. Hana's appearance follows masculine rules, pushing them to the grotesque. As such, a viewer is able to easily visually distinguish masculine and feminine characters in this film, with Hana firmly on the masculine side. By depicting Hana in such a masculine way, it pushes her character further into the *okama* archetype.

Where at one level, the film offers a relatively realistic portrayal of one kind of transgender experience, including the vast precarity associated with sexual and gender minorities, confined to entertainment work at the margins of society, it also stigmatises *okama*. The reactions of others, especially Gin and Miyuki, to Hana is one of comedic revulsion at her claims to womanhood. They pair this with a denial of her womanhood, with Gin often saying things to the effect of Hana not being a woman but rather an *okama*. Taken together, it is clear that cis characters in the film are being unsettled by the *okama* contravention of binary gender norms. In this light, *okama* are portrayed by the film not as transgender women, but as (homosexual) men deluding themselves.

Tokyo Godfathers straddles the line between treating Hana and her quest for motherhood with sympathy and making fun of her. It does this by exaggerating Hana's movements and exclamations in a stereotypically gay way, which feeds into the other characters' reaction to her. The way she is animated and acted is dramatic compared to other main characters to a point of ridiculousness, which tips the balance of Hana's portrayal towards the side of offensive stereotype. However, the film also shows her in the role of caring mother of the foundling baby. Her position in the story is that of the role of Mary, an archetypal symbol of motherhood and femininity. A visual example of this can be found in the convenience store scene, where Hana cradles the baby in a way that bears striking resemblance to Christian art of Mary cradling Jesus Christ.



*Hana, exaggerated movements
(Tokyo Godfathers)*



*feminine character (Tokyo
Godfathers)*



*masculine character
(Tokyo Godfathers)*

The film is mostly realistic, but features a number of supernatural events. Because they are treated as such within the narrative, this poses no challenge to the realness of the transgender

depictions in the film. Beyond taking place in a real place, it also allows its (main) characters to look ugly, without conforming to manga and anime beauty standards. In doing so, it increases the sense of manga realism. The narrative includes issues of stark precarity such as homelessness and (illegal) immigration: the Spanish-speaking characters in the narrative might seem odd at first glance, but are a likely representation of Japanese Peruvians – migrants from Peru with Japanese heritage – whose situation at the time of the film’s production in Japan was especially precarious. This inclusion of a realistic and topical kind of migration confers a greater sense of realism to the narrative, especially in a medium that often fails to tackle this issue (see for instance Ōmori, 2010). However, the fact that the two Spanish-speaking characters speak not a single word of Japanese – while making for some interesting scenes – is confounding and turns migrants into a stereotypical and magical other that is unlikely to exist in the Tokyo of the film.



Hana as Mary (Tokyo Godfathers)



Mario (Tokyo Godfathers)



Mario crossdressing (Tokyo Godfathers)

Of them, Mario is especially of note. He is embedded in the action-packed world of gangster movies that the film briefly intersects with, which makes it all the more strange that he does not speak any Japanese. However, what is even more noteworthy is that he enters the film crossdressed, wearing a wig, a skirt, and makeup in order to sneak in to a party and assassinate a gangster boss. There is one clear shot of his face in this guise, and his character design in this shot is unmistakably feminine, including the lines of his face. When he pulls off the wig and reveals his male voice, however, the next shot of his face shows masculine lines. In order to sell the audience on Mario’s initial crossdressing, the film allows the action hero-type character to have it both ways where Hana is made to look masculine throughout. Because Mario is young and attractive, while Hana is old and unattractive, the film appears to take a stance on who is allowed to transition their

gender in a way that often mirrors real life: attractive transgender people are welcome, the unattractive people are pushed to the margins.

Comparing this analysis with the prior literature review, it is possible to conclude that *Tokyo Godfather's* depiction of transgender characters, and the film's conceptualisations of transgender identity as such does not present a change from mainstream depictions of transgender characters in Japanese media and does not challenge the mainstream transgender identities of Japanese society. The portrayal of Hana is similar to how McLelland (2005) or Valentine (1997) describe the Japanese societal understanding of *okama*, from its conflation of homosexuality and transgender identity, to its identification of *okama* with living on the socioeconomic margins in the entertainment world. Furthermore, the film, while being contemporaneous with the development of GID identity and the GID act, as shown by Itani (2011) or McLelland (2004), does not incorporate at that time modern and progressive (although already problematic) ideas about transgender identity into Hana's depiction. Instead, it reinforces negative stereotypes about transgender people through its depiction of *okama* in a particularly classist way.

Skip and Loafer

Skip and Loafer is a manga about Iwakura Mitsumi, a teenage girl from rural Ishikawa who moves to Tokyo in order to attend a top-level high school, written by Takamatsu Misaki (2018-2023). For that reason, she moves in with her aunt Nao-chan who lives in Tokyo. The story follows the life of Mitsumi and her friends, her every day struggles with moving from the countryside to Tokyo, and the challenges of being a high student in Japan. According to the author, she wanted to portray a light-hearted but realistic high school story, using the genre of *shojo* manga as a starting point (Hagi, 2020). However, unlike most *shojo*, Takamatsu did not want to make romance the central focus of the story, nor did she want to solely portray Mitsumi's perspective (Hagi, 2020). As such, *Skip and Loafer* becomes a *shojo* manga more grounded than most of its genre, including a diversity of perspectives from various characters. The manga is still ongoing, and the first part of the series was adopted into a 12-episode anime season in 2023.

In *Skip and Loafer*, masculine characters have sharper jawlines than feminine characters, but the differences are subtle, and there is an area of overlap in the middle, which does not necessarily coincide with androgyny, but with conventional attractiveness. Nao-chan's face does clearly fall on the masculine side, and she also immediately stands out as being tall. However, she does generally wear feminine clothing throughout the manga, supplemented by feminine make-up and hairstyle. Moreover, Nao-chan is a professional stylist, and as such depicted fashionably in a feminine way

throughout. As such, an audience should be clearly able to code Nao-chan as a woman, but noticeably transgender.

What this represents, especially compared to Hana in *Tokyo Godfathers*, is a shift in the response that comes from noticing masculine aspects in a character's appearance that might stem from their gender transition. Within the *okama* paradigm, there seems to be a tendency to see MtF transgender people as “men pretending to be women” where comedy can be derived from the audience's ability to clearly code their masculine characteristics. In the LGBT paradigm, the masculine elements in an MtF character's appearance are not markers of a failed deception. Instead, it is simply a realistic admission of what some transgender people, who are unable to pass perfectly due to various reasons, tend to look like after transitioning. As such, it is not necessarily biological appearance that determines how we perceive gender, but self-expression. The style of *Skip and Loafer* reinforces this shift by allowing Nao-chan to appear visually feminine in her dress.



Nao-chan (*Skip & Loafer*
vol. 3)

Nao-chan self-identifies as female, describing herself as *onna* in chapter 25. She does not use the first person pronoun often because most of her appearances are in informal and familial settings, but when she does, she used *atashi*. Furthermore, she uses feminine expressions such as *ara* throughout. This means something like “oh?” and is an interjection commonly used in manga by female characters. Furthermore, she asks Mitsumi's friends to address her as *onēsan*, which literally means “older sister”, but is a second/third person pronoun also used for other (young) women with whom you are familiar. As such, it is clear that Nao-chan is a woman. Finally, she states her transgender identity outright in chapter 15: “there is no need to tell your friends that your aunt is biologically male, you might surprise them” as Mitsumi's friends are coming over.

In the first panel Nao-chan appears, in chapter 1, Mitsumi's internal dialogue refers to her as “my father's younger brother” (*otōto*). However, in chapter 15 she respects Nao-chan's wishes and only refers to her as aunt. Other than this one case by Mitsumi at the start of the manga, perhaps because she has not seen her aunt since she transitioned, everyone in Tokyo treats Nao-chan as female. Furthermore, there are no cases of people asking invasive questions, nor is anyone shown to, for instance, have any rude thoughts about Nao-chan or her appearance in their internal monologue. As such, it can be said that her treatment by others is roundly respectful.

The main exception is her family in Ishikawa, whom she has not seen in years. In chapter 29, her brother, Mitsumi's father, uses Nao-chan's pre-transition name Naoki, which is typically a masculine name. It is unclear how Nao-chan feels about this, so she might not mind, but in most cases using a person's pre-transition name is offensive. In chapter 51, Nao-chan visits her family, and her mother also uses Naoki to address her. However, she also asks Nao-chan whether she has a boyfriend, and to bring him along next time. Nao-chan's relationship with her family is neither perfect nor traumatic. She has bad memories and they have difficulty accepting her for who she is, but both sides are trying to do better.



Young Naoki and Mitsumi (Skip & Loafer vol. 5)

Throughout the manga, there are a few chapters which feature Nao-chan's backstory. In chapters 29 and 55, there are scenes of her before she transitioned and went by Naoki. In chapter 29, Naoki is shown relatively unhappy and directionless, taking care of Mitsumi while she is four years old. Mitsumi makes a flower wreath and Naoki tells her that he wishes he could have been a cute girl too. He muses that Mitsumi is too young to understand what gender means, and she gives him a flower bracelet and calls him cute. The scene can be interpreted in different ways. Taken with the rest of the chapter showing Naoki to be unhappy, it could be seen as a sort of turning point in his life leading to his coming out as transgender. It could also serve to show that gender is constructed and learned, and not something people understand from birth. In either case, the chapter highlights the awkwardness and pain that can come with coming out – something that most transgender people will experience in various degrees.

Chapter 29 ends with Nao-chan speaking on the phone to her brother. While reminiscing about the beach, the panels show a young Naoki crying while looking out over the sea. In chapter 55, this same scene returns with the line: "I was anxious and wondering if there was anyone who could accept someone like me." Regarding this, her relationship with her boyfriend Goro is important, which is only shown in chapter 33. They do not live together and it is unclear at what stage their relationship is. While there are many people who accept and like Nao-chan, Goro is shown to be head over heels, answering the question Naoki asked himself those years ago on the beach. At the end of chapter 55, still in Ishikawa, Nao-chan calls Goro and invites him to come meet her family and see her home town.

Aside from the exceptions discussed above, every other character treats Nao-chan with respect in regards to her gender identity. As mentioned, Nao-chan is a professional stylist and fashion designer. This is work that is stereotypically associated with women, but avoids the archetype of having her work in the entertainment industry. It means that Nao-chan's work reinforces her femininity without her transgender identity as a prerequisite, which work in the entertainment industry would have done.

Within the context of Mitsumi knowing little about style and fashion, Nao-chan takes on the role of female role model who teaches her teenage niece these things. This further reinforces her femininity, by acting as the narrative's shining example of mature feminine expression. At various points in the manga, Nao-chan also serves the role of confidante of Mitsumi's friend Egashira Mika, who is looking for help with their own teenage struggles. In chapter 15, Nao-chan and Mika meet, and she advises her throughout the manga. In turn, this helps Nao-chan become more confident in her own womanhood, because she is seen as a role model by teenage girls even if she never got to experience puberty as a girl herself.

Finally, the narrative also casts Nao-chan in a motherly role. By virtue of being Mitsumi's adult caretaker, there are a few necessary parental expectations, but Nao-chan develops from being a kind but mostly absent housemate to going out of her way to, for instance, make a birthday breakfast or a special school lunch for Mitsumi in chapters 33 and 36. These acts are traditionally motherly responsibilities within Japanese gender roles women take care of the household. Through adopting a more motherly role towards Mitsumi, Nao-chan also picks up the feminine associations embedded in that role.

Nao-chan is on multiple occasions depicted in casual, non-binary, gender-neutral clothing, which she wears both at home (all the time) and in public (in chapters 46 and 51). Despite masculine elements in her face not being compromised, the narrative is confident to present Nao-chan as fully female in these scenes as well, which shows that it has faith in its character's gender identity. By wearing feminine clothes, makeup, and a feminine hairstyle, the character's gender identity is constantly being made explicit to the audience. However, by discarding all that yet still



Nao-chan at work (Skip & Loafer vol. 6)

portraying a transgender character as fully feminine, the narrative admits to a level of respect for transgender people that has hitherto been rare in manga.

In the framework of Japanese transgender identity, Nao-chan is the T of transgender in the LGBT. She is not *okama*, lacking many key characteristics, and is treated with dignity and respect that is rare in depictions of *okama*. She is not part of the GID community either. As discussed in the literature review, GID identity essentially erases post-transition transgender experiences, and the idea that once “cured” – i.e. transitioned – a person is no longer transgender insofar as being part a gender minority or community. While Nao-chan does not interact with any other LGBT characters in the story (because there are none), the open nature of the narrative’s discussion of Nao-chan’s relations with her family and the scenes of her life pre-transition count against her being GID.

However, the strongest argument against it can be found in chapter 14, where Nao-chan crossdresses as a man in order to follow Mitsumi around on a date. Even if they have undergone physical changes, transgender people typically have years of experience acting as the other gender, an experience that has been described as literal acting (Thorn, 2021). As such, Nao-chan is able to pass perfectly as a man and follow Mitsumi without being detected. However, recognising one of the rare and situational practical privileges of being transgender and using it as such is incompatible with the ideas of GID, in which gender binaries are enforced, and not strategically played with in scenario’s such as these.



Nao-chan crossdressing (*Skip & Loafer* vol. 3)

Hana from *Tokyo Godfathers* and Nao-chan from *Skip and Loafer* are both MtF transgender characters who clearly identify as women. Both portrayals visually show their transgenderedness by incorporating clear masculine signs. Furthermore, they both perform motherly roles within their narrative. This makes for some clear points of comparison. As stated earlier in this section, Hana and Nao-chan are grounded in different transgender paradigms, *okama* and LGBT respectively. As such, Hana’s self-identification as female is made fun of within the narrative, treated as a (homosexual) delusion, and denied by other characters, whereas Nao-chan’s is wholly accepted by the narrative and treated by other characters with earnestness and sometimes realistic scepticism, which mirrors real-life struggles. Hana’s visual masculinity is also employed for comedic effect, whereas with Nao-chan it is a more narratively neutral part of her visual depiction. Unlike Hana, Nao-chan is allowed to be a visual icon of femininity.

Furthermore, Hana's motherly role is at times treated with sympathy and at times played for laughs. Her desperate wish to be a mother is pitted against its implicit impossibility as presented in *Tokyo Godfathers*. In effect, this desire to be a mother is part of her female identity. Nao-chan does not seek out motherhood, and in a more feminist way is allowed to be a woman despite that. However, when a parental role in the form of caring for Mitsumi (and advising her friends) is thrust upon her, she performs admirably and is treated as a role model. Finally, Hana is pushed to the socioeconomic margins as a homeless person who used to work in the *gei bā* entertainment industry, a depiction which reinforces negative stereotypes about transgender people. Nao-chan defies these stereotypes while reinforcing her femininity by giving her an occupation and socioeconomic status (as a fashion stylist) which is associated with femininity, but not transgender identity.

In conclusion, *Skip and Loafer* presents a respectful, dignified and realistic portrait of a transgender character in a contemporary Japanese setting. While Nao-chan resides in the background of Mitsumi's story, *Skip and Loafer* explicitly aims to give attention its whole cast of characters, and she is no exception. Through a number of short appearances and a handful of chapters that partially focus on Nao-chan, the audience gets a satisfying depiction of a feminine, self-assured woman who is nonetheless still dealing with issues stemming from her transgender identity, who fits within the more recent LGBT-paradigm of transgender identity.

Our Dreams at Dusk

Our Dreams at Dusk is a relatively short, four volume manga by Kamatani Yūki (2015-2018). The manga is about Kaname Tasuku, a teenage boy who was just outed by his classmates as homosexual. Contemplating suicide, he ends up in a local community club, Cat Clowder, ran by the mysterious *Dareka-san* or "Someone". In Cat Clowder, various characters come together to support each other and to volunteer to renovate abandoned houses in the area. The characters range from the mysterious Someone, who struggles with identity and labels, Daichi Haruko, who is lesbian, and Ilya Chaiko, who is gay, primary school student Misora Shūji, who experiences gender dysphoria and crossdresses as a girl, and Utsumi Natsuyoshi, who is a transgender man. In only 23 chapters, *Our Dreams at Dusk* features almost every identity in the LGBTQ+ abbreviation in a realistic and contemporary Japanese context. Kamatani Yūki (2012), identifies as *x-jendā* themselves, although there are no characters who explicitly do so in the manga.

The setting of the manga is realistic, using the real town of Onomichi as a backdrop, including social issues such as depopulation. If anything, the manga can appear somewhat similar to

a tourism brochure, because many pages include famous sights, landmarks, and things to do in Onomichi. Because it takes place in a real place you can visit, it makes the narrative feel more realistic. This fits within the trend of using manga and anime in order to draw tourists in the form of fan pilgrimages (Okamoto, 2015). While there are magical realist elements, the manga focuses heavily on portraying real LGBT struggles, such as homophobic characters, but also a situation where a man cannot visit his dying partner in the hospital because they are not married because gay marriage is illegal. By adding these real issues that are part of ongoing LGBT activism, the manga manages to feel realistic despite the inclusion of some magical realist sequences.

Our Dreams at Dusk uses familiar face line conventions where masculine characters have more angular jawlines. However, many young characters, including main character Tasuku, appear androgynous, and as such the male face is found only with older and more muscular men. The manga uses eyes to distinguish between more masculine men and other characters as well, whereas specifically feminine characteristics are found in eyebrows, makeup, and other more subtle features. As such, *Our Dreams at Dusk* makes it easy to distinguish between characters who are coded ‘very masculine’ and the rest, but there is an overlap between the juvenile male and feminine.

Misora Shūji

Misora Shūji is an 11-12 year old boy who uses *boku* as their first-person pronoun, which is a masculine pronoun used mainly by boys. Tasuku refers to Misora as *kare*, a masculine third-person pronoun. In chapter 6, Misora says “I am not an *onē* or *okama*” in response to Tasuku’s question of whether or not he is attracted to men, and turns it around by asking why Tasuku does not crossdress, since he is attracted to men. In this moment, Tasuku comes to the realisation that his ingrained conflation of crossdressing/transitioning to another gender with same-sex attraction makes no sense, because neither he, nor Daichi, who is lesbian, have any desire to crossdress. Misora reveals he crossdresses only in private, and for his own sake.



Misora on the cover of Our Dreams at Dusk vol. 2, crossdressed left, not crossdressed right.

In chapter 7, Misora visits Tasuku at home without being crossdressed. He expresses anxiety about his first wet dream, as well as the prospect of his voice growing deeper and his body

becoming more masculine: Misora is scared about puberty, and asks Tasuku because he does not have any other (young) men in his life. Tasuku asks if Misora wants to become a girl, but he is not sure. He says that he does not understand anything about himself, and before he leaves, he mutters: “I’m a pervert, aren’t I?” In chapter 9, Misora goes to a small festival in town dressed in a traditional female yukata together with Tasuku. He says he enjoys going out while crossdressed, as others are treating him as a girl. Misora reappears in chapter 21 and 22, but his identity does not get defined further.



Tasuku and Utsumi supporting Misora (Our Dreams at Dusk vol. 2)

The other members of Cat Clowder are generally not inquisitive and support Misora with his gender exploration. Daichi loans him her old clothes, which are all of the feminine clothes he wears when crossdressed. When crossdressed, outside in chapter 9, other people see and treat Misora as a girl, but when he is not, other people treat him as a boy. Tasuku does not understand Misora and has trouble accepting the fact that Misora has not adopted any specific label. As mentioned, Tasuku insinuates that Misora could be *onē* or *okama*, but in chapter 8 we also see him use the internet to look up transgender influencers, and something that looks like a gender dysphoria test. This

stems from a misguided attempt to help Misora by classifying him as a transgender girl. However, Tasuku’s affirmations end badly as in chapter 9, a person in the crowd gropes Misora and Tasuku tries to interpret it as a sign that Misora is able to pass well, which understandably upsets him, and he does not return to the narrative until Tasuku apologises to him in chapter 22.

The narrative does well to make Tasuku appear like a pushy, annoying character when trying to box Misora in by making the tension in those scenes awkward and Tasuku’s own thoughts speak out against himself. Whether or not Misora is definitively transgender, he is experiencing gender dysphoria. Furthermore, by participating in Cat Clowder together with other LGBT characters who support Misora, his experience is framed as an LGBT-experience. His experience is not something he can talk about at home, which is why he goes to Daichi, Someone, or Tasuku, who are all part of the LGBT-community, and their solidarity and (misguided) attempts to help make him part of that community too.

Utsumi Natsuyoshi

Utsumi Natsuyoshi is a member of Cat Clowder who appears from the start but mainly in the background until chapter 11. He appears as a strong, masculine man, with short hair and business casual wear. He uses *boku* as first-person pronoun, which is associated more with boys, but is also used by adults in informal settings. His patterns of speech are generally masculine as well.



Utsumi (Our Dreams at Dusk vol. 3)

Other characters in the narrative treat Utsumi as a man. In fact, there is no context from which to suggest that he is a transgender man at all until the final pages of chapter 11, when he runs into a classmate from high school, Koyama. She recognises him and calls him Natsumi, his pre-transition name. When witnessing the exchange, Tasuku realises for the first time that Utsumi is transgender.



Koyama and Utsumi (Our Dreams at Dusk vol. 3)

In the following chapter, Koyama expresses her desire to join Cat Clowder. She sees herself as an LGBT-ally, but is unable to read the room and asks awkward questions, continues to use Utsumi's pre-transition name, assumes to be able to speak on his behalf, and brazenly asking other members if they are queer. It is clear that everyone else thinks badly of the one character that openly uses Utsumi's pre-transition name. She also appears to be homophobic, trying to talk up being transgender as "something else entirely" to being gay. Furthermore, she undermines Utsumi's struggles with coming out by claiming that everyone in Utsumi's high school would have accepted him if he had come out back then, and that she does not understand why he did not do that. Finally, it is important to note that she uses the word *shōgai* to describe being transgender, which means disorder.

More specifically, she says: "a disorder where your heart and your body do not have the same gender," which almost matches GID terminology exactly.

However, in private, Utsumi tells Tasuku that he is not bothered by Koyama and that he does try to get everyone to accept him. He says he isn't perfect himself either, concluding that these experiences are just another part of life. Tasuku realises that for Utsumi, it is not about being a man,

coming out, or being understood, but that it is about being himself. This frames Utsumi not as someone who needs to be a man, but as someone who is a man in order to be himself.

LGBT and GID

In chapter 12, Tsubaki is hanging out with Tasuku and talking to some strangers. They are talking about Cat Clowder, and while Tsubaki describes it in glowing terms, he eventually adds: “but you know, that group is full of *okama*.” This sours the mood, and one of the people he’s talking to says: “why do you have to say something like that? [...] One of my friends’ older sister is married to a man who used to be a woman.” Throughout *Our Dreams at Dusk*, *okama* is used, essentially, as a slur, because in every context it is meant in a negative way. While this could be a realistic portrayal of homophobia in Japan – and the manga includes many instances of queer-phobia – the manga does not advance a positive portrayal of an *okama* either, instead using the term LGBT- in chapter 8 even explicitly, when Tsubaki’s father derisively refers to Cat Clowder as “those LGBT types.” As such, *Our Dreams at Dusk*’ portrayal of transgender characters places them within the LGBT-paradigm.

The role of GID in *Our Dreams at Dusk* is clear through the role of Koyama, who represents someone who believes in the GID idea that being transgender is a medical disorder, and that it is not a part of the LGBT community. While Utsumi could probably fit inside the GID paradigm because he is able to pass without anyone being able to tell that he is FtM transgender, unlike for instance Nao-chan, he chooses to participate actively in the LGBT community through Cat Clowder, and is made uncomfortable by the medicalised terms Koyama is using. As such, it is clear that Utsumi would reject identification with the GID paradigm.

Strange Land Diaries

Strange Land Diaries (also known as *Journal with Witch*) is a manga by Yamashita Tomoko (2017-2023). She has a background of writing *yaoi* manga, and is known for her manga that question conventional values (Harada, 2021). In an interview about her popular *yaoi* work, *The Night Beyond the Tricornered Window*, Yamashita says that she goes out of her way to add diversity, such as for instance including women when drawing female police officers, and that she tries to question her own biases when she draws (Harada, 2021). For example, she used to portray homosexual relationships as “forbidden love,” but she has since stopped doing that because she came to the realisation that this stigmatises homosexuality.

From the same interview, it is evident that Yamashita is tuned in to American LGBT discourses, because she talks about watching Netflix-show *Queer Eye* (Harada, 2021). This show features a team of gay men giving people a total makeover while talking about personal issues openly, and is itself a part of American LGBT discourse. Her enjoyment of popular media also makes it into *Strange Land Diaries*: there are mentions of artists such as Coldplay, Bruno Mars, and Yonezu Kenshi, but also popular phenomena such as ASMR videos. While these may stem from her personal interests, they add a layer of realism in a way rarely seen in manga. *Strange Land Diaries* allows itself to be dated by its pop culture references, but in doing so also positions itself firmly in the late 2010s.

Strange Land Diaries is a story about Takumi Asa, a high school girl who loses her parents in a car accident, and her aunt Kōdai Makio, with whom she starts living after the accident. Asa is struggling with her own identity, not only as someone processing the grief of losing her parents, but also someone on the cusp of adulthood, and relies on the other people in her life to help her figure out who she is and who she wants to be. Makio is an author who has attachment issues and who struggles with the responsibility she feels for Asa, paired with the difficulty of suddenly having someone live in her house. The transgender character in *Strange Land Diaries* is Juno Itsuki, an author friend of Makio who plays a minor role in the story.

The visual style of *Strange Land Diaries* is androgynous. Likely due to her background in *yaoi*, almost every character inhabits a space in the middle where they appear both as femininely pretty and masculinely sharp. Main characters Asa and Makio especially have androgynous appearances and they often wear gender-neutral fashion as well. Juno Itsuki has an androgynous appearance as well, wearing both male and female fashion, and they have short hair. They use the first-person pronoun *atashi*, which is feminine. However, their gender identity is not otherwise confirmed throughout the manga. In chapter 37, Asa asks Makio: “is Juno a woman or a man?” and Makio responds, puzzled, that “Juno is Juno.” Upon further questions, Makio adds: “they are someone who is fighting to be themselves.”



Makio and Asa on the cover of *Strange Land Diaries* vol. 4, showing Yamashita's androgynous visual style.



Juno (*Strange Land Diaries vol. 6*)

Juno first appears in chapter 27, which is a transitionally interesting chapter. In the chapter, three people visit Asa and Makio days apart, and each visit is interlaced with the others in what McCloud (1994) calls scene-to-scene transitions (p. 71). As such, some panels which show only Asa are ambiguous about which scene she is currently in. In response to Juno and Makio making fun of Asa's short stature, and Juno's suggestion that they can make the best of their short stature together, Asa boldly declares: "No, I wanna be the me I wanna be!!" to which Juno responds: "That's the eternal challenge, isn't it?"

Juno is treated normally and with respect throughout the story, with the only rude remark perhaps being Asa's question to Makio. Within the narrative, Juno also plays the role of giving sage advice to Makio, so generally, her depiction is positive.

From that point onwards, "I wanna be the me I wanna be!!" written in Asa's diary next to a doodle of Juno's face becomes one of the manga's central motifs. Most of the characters in the manga are struggling with their own identity in some way. Asa's best friend Emiri is lesbian and struggling with coming out of the closet, for instance. While most other characters are not queer, they are still struggling with the realisation that their identity – the person that they want to be – does not conform to societal expectations: from Makio's ex-boyfriend facing toxic masculinity, to Asa's classmate facing gender discrimination in entrance exams, and Asa herself coming to terms with the difficult relationship she had with her deceased parents, these all stem from non-conforming identities in a conformist society.



Doodle of Juno's face in Asa's diary (*Strange Land Diaries vol. 6*)

While there is not a lot transgender or queer-specific subject matter in *Strange Land Diaries*, the manga still centres this journey towards discovering one's own identity and becoming able to express it. Through the motif of Juno and the line "I wanna be the me I wanna be!!" the manga establishes similarities between LGBT people and cisgender/heterosexual people: even if it is not the gender binary or heteronormative conventions that you are breaking, you might not be able or willing to conform to other strict, societal norms. In that sense, *Strange Land Diaries* normalises the LGBT community by making their challenges relatable to others.

Beyond *Strange Land Diaries*, Yamashita is primarily a *yaoi* author, a genre which, despite its origins, has now come to be considered empowering for the gay community (Baudinette, 2017). As Baudinette (2018; 2022) argues, such genre publications have the potential to enhance reader's social consciousness and produce activist spaces through reading. *Strange Land Diaries*, which is steeped in Yamashita's visually *yaoi* style, deals with subversive subject matter, not just related to gender identity, and shows an overlap between *yaoi* and other queer manga.

Placing the depiction of Juno in the context of Japanese transgender identity, it is difficult to get into specifics, but she is not part of either the *okama* or GID types of identities. We lack any context or information in regards to relate her to the former; there is simply no evidence in the manga to suggest such a link. With regards to latter, the ambiguous gender identity of Juno does not conform to GID's strict binary understanding of gender. It would not be strange to see Juno identify as either transgender or *x-jendā*, however, because these identities include ambiguous, non-binary gender identifications.

Conclusion

Japan has a long history with transgender identity in which transgender identity and homosexuality were conflated under various terms such as *okama*. While *okama* could on one hand subvert gender norms, the conflation with homosexuality meant that it at once reinforced a heteronormative binary even so. With the introduction of modern medicine, transgender identity had to contend with gender identity disorder, or GID, a pathologising understanding of transgender people in which the gender binary was reinforced. Furthermore, GID led to Japanese legislation which attached strict requirements to anyone seeking to change their legal gender, and used GID legislation as a stick against gay marriage activists. While criticism from GID began early, the medical establishment disavowed the use of the word "disorder" to describe gender dysphoria in 2013. Nevertheless, the GID act continues to be the law in Japan.

GID is the idea that being transgender is something to be cured of, and perhaps ashamed of. People with GID are not visible, because it is not supposed to be visible, because while transgender people are allowed to be treated, they have to fit in a specific mould of what it means to be transgender, and the end goal of their treatment is to return to the strict, heteronormative gender binary. In recent years, LGBT as a way to understand queer identity has become more popular in the Japanese queer community, as well as *x-jendā*, which offers a non-binary understanding of gender

identity. LGBT and *x-jendā* understandings of what it means to be transgender oppose the GID conceptualisation of transgender identity.

In this thesis, I have analysed three manga – *Skip and Loafer*, *Our Dreams at Dusk*, and *Strange Land Diaries* – that were written during the period of the popularisation of LGBT as a way to understand queer identity. *Tokyo Godfathers*, on the other hand, is older with its depiction of an *okama* character in line with negative stereotypes. While this depiction remains common in the public consciousness, the manga each have something to say about the debates regarding GID and LGBT conceptualisations of transgender identity, their characterisations in effect advocating for a more LGBT, *x-jendā*, and gender dysphoria-based understanding of transgender identity. As such, I have shown that these transgender depictions present a change from mainstream depictions. These manga subvert social norms and challenge both mainstream *okama* stereotypes, as well as GID identity in Japanese society.

The thesis was limited by several factors. First and foremost, the lack of access to Japanese academic sources separates this thesis – save a few important translated works – from Japanese scholarship on manga, which might have provided a valuable contribution to the literature review. While my language ability proved sufficient for the primary sources itself as well as a handful of other Japanese sources, I was not able to utilise Japanese academic publications. Secondly, while the cases in this thesis have been carefully chosen, they are not the product of a systemic review of transgender representation in manga. Especially media that is popular in Japan but has no crossover in English-language fan communities might have slipped under the radar.

Furthermore, while I have already discussed the reasons for using *Tokyo Godfathers*, it remains a significantly older work than the other cases. Therefore, it would have been interesting to compare them to a more contemporaneous case with more negative transgender representation. Finally, *Tokyo Godfathers* only includes an *okama* and MtF transgender character, while – as discussed in the literature review – FtM transgender characters in manga and anime, especially *dansō* characters, exist in a different context and would be worth including in a comparative analysis.

Finally, it is also worth discussing the fact that none of the manga discussed have transgender characters as their main character. Unlike Hana, we always see them through the lense of another character. There are manga with transgender main characters, although many of these are essay manga, and there are many less realistic manga where the main character's gender changes. One example briefly mentioned in this thesis is *Until I become me*, where the setting is realistic

except for the fact that the main character's biological sex characteristics change overnight due to a fantastical medical condition. Their struggle with gender afterwards is interesting but not necessarily reflective of real transgender experiences.

It might still be too controversial to have a realistic transgender main character in a popular manga, and the novelty of the works in this thesis could explain that having transgender characters as part of the cast rather than as the star is only a first step towards wider representation. More consciousness and awareness of transgender issues could be required in order for manga artists to make it the focus of a story – beyond autobiographical essay manga.

The manga share in common that they treat their transgender characters with dignity and respect. The narrative does not treat Nao-chan, Misora, Utsumi, and Juno as strange or as weirdos. It does not make fun of them, and it does not make light of their identity. While this might not sound noteworthy, comparing them to how Hana is depicted in *Tokyo Godfathers* shows that this treatment is groundbreaking in a media environment where depicting transgender characters as objects of ridicule has been the norm. As the transgender community in Japan is struggling with a legal situation that reflects neither their own understanding of their identity nor medical science, the role such popular manga can play in changing public consciousness is as important as ever.

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