

THE ANDROGYNE PATRIARCHY IN JAPAN  
CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN  
JAPANESE GENDER

by

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ABSTRACT

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This project seeks to identify recent trends in Japanese masculinity, particularly the inclusion of androgyny as a mode included in masculinity, while tracing their historical influence and the implications therein. The salary man is perhaps the best-known model of masculinity in Japan identifiable to the West; but with the economy faltering in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japan has seen some interesting developments in acceptable forms of performable masculinity, which includes androgynous figures. In the first chapter of this thesis especially I deal with a historical analysis of three different eras of Japanese history that provide models of androgyny as masculinity: the Heian period, the *onnagata*, the female role played by a male, of traditional Kabuki Theater, and the *mobo*, or modern boy, of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The second chapter looks at the contemporary counterpart to the *mobo*, the *hikikomori*, or shut in. I also analyze *hikikomori* figures in the writings of Haruki Murakami, specifically *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* and "The Kangaroo Communiqué." I attempt

to unravel the causes of and possible consequences for incorporating this mode of masculinity in Japanese masculinity.

The final chapter is an analysis of a genre of musical performance art known as Visual kei. In this style, rock bands (typically) use the model of androgyny provided by the *onnagata* in order to create a uniquely Japanese genre of music and performance. I look at the possible reasons for its popularity in Japan as well as what it means in terms of subverting Western gender binaries; however, I find that this music style exemplifies a kind of androgyny as masculinity that upholds these Japanese gender binaries.

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## CHAPTER 1

### ANDROGYNY AS MASCULINITY

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Japan is facing some very intriguing social issues that are, intentionally or not, kept out of sight from Western eyes, particularly in the area of gender deviation and plurality. These problems, however, are not altogether new or unpredictable based on historical observations. What Japanese society has created and reified is a wave of masculinity that strays far from the conventional Western masculinity they seem to have adopted. Japan seems to have embraced an inclusive masculinity in the post-1980s era, an era marked by economic instability and wide-scale social ennui. Previous generations of men had been driven by their government, bosses, and fathers to create, build, and modernize Japan, which defined their role as men; however, in contemporary Japan, no such call to action exists, and masculinity itself has lost its concrete definition. This new generation of men has often been called the “lost generation.” But what older generations have seen as something lost – the loss of nation-building incentive, the loss of job availability – has instead been the instigator of a renaissance of inclusivity in Japanese masculinity.

Through an investigation of historical inclusive masculinity, I will show that inclusivity is directly linked to governmental involvement in defining the terms of gender: where there is no governmental intrusion, maleness and masculinity are flexible terms that encompass androgyny. Unlike Western gender theory, which seems to focus on the importance of determining a biological link to gender representation, the Japanese exemplify a gender theory that denies the corporeal body and instead focuses on pure gender performance. This difference in gender determination seems to lie in the relative lack of binaries in the general Japanese social

consciousness. Historically speaking, the Japanese have never participated in the Cartesian Dualist school of thought, a circumstance that has produced a culture of plurality, and hence it is only natural that this plurality would extend to gender representation as well. In other words, there is no conceptual tie between biological sexuality and outward gender representation. While this is the crux of theories of gender in the West, this idea of gender representation in the Japanese context is at once acknowledged and ignored. The chapters following will deal with two contemporary issues related to this history: one being a new look at the salary man<sup>1</sup> model of masculinity and his contemporary counterpart, the *hikkikomori*, or shut-in, and the other the popularity of *Visual Kei*, a genre of music that models its visual performance on Kabuki style cross-dressing. These contemporary concerns are closely related to the history of Japanese androgyny and have emerged simultaneously as subversive modes of gender representation.

As idyllic as the Eastern concept of fluid gender seems, complications in the traditional Japanese concept of nonphysical gender arose after the adoption of Western culture. Modernization in Japan, to put it simply, was a pseudoadaptation of Western ideals to the Japanese context. Binaries appeared where before there were none – and suddenly the government began to interfere with previously acceptable gender productions. Clearly defined concepts of manliness and masculinity began to take shape in Japan in order to produce an image of Japan as a strong nation; nation-building as a function of masculinity produced a culture of maleness and progress. In the West, we are familiar with the concept of patriarchy being defined in no positive terms, which essentially means that masculinity is defined by what it is not. In Japan, it seems as if the opposite is true: masculinity is clearly constructed in positive terms, and it is femininity that is defined by what it is not. In this spectrum, there is only one gender, the masculine, and all gender is just varying degrees of that particular gender, or lack thereof. This spectrum that I am positing allows for fluidity of masculinity; and at varying eras in

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<sup>1</sup> The Japanese use the term *sarariman*, literally “salary man,” to describe the mostly middle-aged corporate employees and office workers in Japan. During the economic boom of the

history that spectrum expands and contracts, allowing for either inclusive (plural) or orthodox (hegemonic) masculinity. However, when the nationalistic incentive fails, the Japanese have gravitated back to their inclusive fluid masculinity.

Japanese scholars are facing some recent baffling changes in masculinity. On the heels of the salary man, the term used to describe hegemonic, masculine, white collar working men from Japan's economic heyday, is the "herbivore man," coming to prominence in urban areas. The term was coined three years ago by author Maki Fukasawa, and describes men who "are young, earn little and spend less, and take a keen interest in fashion and personal appearance" (Neil). Fukasawa explains, "In Japan, sex is translated as 'relationships in flesh'... so I named those boys 'herbivorous boys' since they are not interested in flesh" (Neil). This movement in masculinity, away from the "carnivorous" salary men of yore, is seen by Japanese scholars as a return to pre-Western masculine ideology:

Fukasawa estimated some 20 percent of men are what she would call "herbivorous" and said their attitudes were influencing others. Indeed, she said, it was a return to the norm for Japanese men, rather than a departure.

"It was after World War II and the post-war economic growth that Japanese men gained the reputation as a sex animal through the competition with the West. Looking back beyond that time, older literature talks a lot about men with the kind of character we see in the herbivorous boys." (Neil)

As Fukasawa contends, multiple masculinities are not new to Japan, but in the wake of a failing "carnivorous" masculinity, manufactured to take on Western competition, gender ambiguity takes on new meaning. Elémire Zolla characterizes androgyny and the androgyne as occupying strange spaces, restless yet ever-present: "The androgyne is stalking through the land. Men feel its shadow on them and relent, cease to cling to their harsh, cramped male roles

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1980s, the *sarariman* symbolized everything that was desirable in modern Japanese men: hard

and persuasions... Within a metaphysical perspective the encounter with the androgyne has always been unavoidable" (5). For Western theorists looking at things like drag queens and drag kings, androgyny becomes something relegated to the margins; and in the margins, these androgynes do their part to undermine traditional gender assumptions. But what happens when the marginalized androgynes are accepted into the center? Out of the margins, do they perform any real subversive function?

Though there are also some social customs at work to ensure little deviation from the normative heterosexual model in Japan, current trends seem to indicate that these customs of deference to public models of masculinity have little relevance in the lives of young Japanese men, whether due to internal or external circumstances. Although the salary man remains the stereotypical model of masculinity in corporate Tokyo, various other forms of masculinity have taken hold in Japan. Taking into account Japan's rich cultural history, from the hedonism of the Heian period to the *eroguro*<sup>2</sup> ('erotic and grotesque') of the Showa, it seems to me that perhaps Japanese masculinity has never been a singular ideal. Certainly any set of markers of masculinity must be accepted within a culture as masculine traits, which in many cases leads to a hegemonic masculine ideal; but in Japan masculinity seems almost limitless and indefinable.

Although inclusive masculinity, in contradiction to hegemonic, orthodox singular masculinity, has been documented primarily in Western cultures, Japanese participation in inclusive masculinity is slightly different from the Western model. R.W. Connell developed a theory of masculinity based on its hegemonic structure while at the same time admitting that multiple masculinities are capable of existing within any society (Anderson 93). Eric Anderson remarks that "according to Connell, men are culturally compelled to associate with [...] one dominant form (i.e. men looking up the hierarchy). This 'looking up' is the *hegemony* in hegemonic masculinity" (94). The establishment of a hegemonic form of masculinity seems

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working, efficient, and extremely heterosexual.

<sup>2</sup> *Eroguro* is the shortened version of "Erotic and Grotesque," which is a term used to describe the era of decadence and prosperity in pre-war Japan.

dependent on several outside forces, and Anderson is quick to point out that paramount among these is the “cultural zeitgeist of excessive homophobia, [in which] homosexuality will be stigmatized, and boys and men will desire to distance themselves from it” (96). According to the hegemonic theory of masculinity this “distancing” from homosexuality leads to a singular archetype of masculinity. The inclusive masculinity theory that Anderson presents is dependent on the same basic factor:

Inclusive masculinity theory argues that as cultural homophobia significantly declines, a hegemonic form of conservative masculinity will lose its dominance, and softer masculinities will exist without the use of social stigma to police them. Thus, two dominant (but not necessarily dominating) forms of masculinity will co-exist, one orthodox and one inclusive. Orthodox masculinity loses its hegemonic influence because there is a critical mass of men who publicly disavow it. (96)

The presence or absence of homophobia, then, determines whether masculinity is inclusive or hegemonic. Conservative masculinity, or what Anderson calls “orthodox masculinity,” is characterized by the lingering presence of homophobia, while inclusive masculinity is characterized by “emotional and physical homosocial proximity” (8). Both the proliferation of various masculinities in Japan and the general lack of overt concern for homosexual behavior lead me to believe that Anderson’s argument, though based on Anglocentric ethnographies, can be applied to Japanese masculinity.

However, Anderson’s theory is problematic in the Japanese context because although masculinity is and has been inclusive, there has historically never been a period of homophobia. In fact, it seems the driving force behind any period of hegemonic masculinity in Japan in recent history has been globalization and militarization. During the Second World War, Japanese were continually encouraged to reproduce. According to Vera Mackie:

Soldiers were socialized into a particularly aggressive form of masculine sexuality. This was not directed at the chaste young women of the patriotic

organizations but, rather, at a series of racialized, sexualized and marginalized 'others.' Military sexuality was managed through the system of military brothels, regulated by the army bureaucracy and staffed by Korean, Chinese, Philippine and some Japanese women. (110)

In other words, men were engendered by the state to be sexually and physically aggressive during the war – something that was repeated during times of economic stability during the early 1980s. On the homefront, however, “married women were encouraged to produce healthy soldiers and imperial subjects” (111). The idea of reproduction for the purposes of propagating an empire seems to be of utmost importance to the Japanese.

Emphasis on reproduction, and not homophobia, is the catalyst of hegemonic masculinity, and in the absence of homophobia, inclusive masculinity takes its place. Androgyny as masculinity can only occur when no emphasis is placed on reproduction. This issue is one that lingers in contemporary society, where government action has been taken to increase the likelihood of reproduction. For example, when Viagra became available in the United States in 1998, Japanese men circumnavigated the law to get the drug which had not been approved by the Japanese Ministry of Health, which had the effect of speeding up the process of drug approval. A process that normally takes two years to complete took ten months (Frühstück 188). In comparison, low dose contraceptive pills were not legalized until 1999 (in part because of the legalization of Viagra), but efforts to allow of its legalization had been ongoing since the mid-1980s (190). Viagra can be seen as a synthesizer of hegemonic masculinity; many men have erections and can impregnate women. On the other hand, contraceptive pills are the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity and are therefore threatening to the empire. This is, of course, more of an issue with older generations of Japanese, the ones concerned with maintaining their manhood. For younger Japanese, there is less incentive to reproduce, and therefore a greater likelihood for them to embrace inclusive masculinity.

In several different periods of time throughout Japanese history, androgyny existed as a part of inclusive masculinity, which means that historically androgyny has not been a threat to heteronormative structures at work in Japan. Important to note is that, generally speaking, in periods of hegemonic masculinity, androgyny (or more specifically cross-dressing) is seen as something subversive and deviant. This deviation from the archetypal masculinity has certain powers that Judith Butler argues subvert the normativity of gender:

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic – a failed copy, as it were. And surely parody has been used to further a politics of despair, one which affirms a seemingly inevitable exclusion of marginal genders from the territory of the natural and the real. And yet this failure to become “real” and to embody “the natural” is, I would argue, a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable. Hence, there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects. (200)

What Butler means here is that cross-dressing, drag, and “parodic practices” of gender performance predicated by the anatomy of the performer are supposed to expose the farce of the male/masculine, female/feminine binaries. However, when these deviations are included and predictable for a given gender, they lose their subversive edge. Cross-dressing is no longer a means of thwarting the power of the dominant culture because it is accepted as part of dominant culture. Therefore, androgyny, if included under the umbrella term “masculinity,” upholds gender binaries.

Western scholars have previously noted Japanese masculinity as non-hegemonic, and reduced it to one of two. Ian Buruma has formerly claimed that Japanese masculinity is either *koha* or *nanpa* (hard or soft), and according to David Gilmore:

The first is expressed in heroic or aggressive action, often warlike, and is recognizable as a variation of “machismo” (Buruma’s term). The other involves more placid but always “useful” pursuits, or perhaps more accurately stated, the selfless industriousness and moral conformity that Westerners today associate with the Japanese “salary-man” mystique that has brought Japan to the zenith of economic power. (187)

Soft masculinity and hard masculinity are dependent upon the economic welfare of the state: the salary-man of Buruma’s study has been deemed an overwhelming failure in the wake of a failing economy. The economy dictated that the warrior became the salary-man, and now it is dictating that the salary-man becomes the androgynous man because he is essentially rendered impotent. Although Buruma equates his dichotomy with “the inherent tension in Japanese society between the stress on individual performance and the opposing tendency toward conformity to group ideals and self-effacement” (187-8), I believe it is more illuminating to think of it in terms of Anderson’s equation of inclusive masculinity with the absence of homophobia. Buruma’s internal tension becomes external: the tension between the West’s zeitgeist of homophobia and the Japanese zeitgeist in which homophobia is nonexistent. Japanese society has the remarkable ability to both conform to Western ideology superficially and remain in actuality traditionally Japanese. This will be explained further below.

### 1.1 Defining Androgyny

In Japan, the difference between sex and gender is simply a suffix. The term “masculine” in Japanese is *otokorashii*; *otoko* means “male,” and *rashii* is a suffix that implies appearance. Likewise, the Japanese word for “feminine” is *onnarashii*. Much of the language surrounding specific gender discourse is determined by context. For example, in a certain



context, the words *onna* and *otoko* can mean either sex or gender. In other contexts, to be certainly clear that one means “sex,” the suffix *sei* is added. *Josei* means female, and *dansei* means male; but the *dan* in *dansei* can also refer to male gender, so the suffix is necessary for distinguishing the difference (Robertson 421). It can therefore be implied that the Japanese see no real difference between appearance (gender) and reality (sex); in many cases, this is true. However, because the true meaning of masculinity in Japan is “male appearance,” it can be deduced that the Japanese have a linguistic understanding of the separation of sex and gender. Japan is very much a visual culture, and social norms dictate how a person must appear and behave, even though it may be common knowledge that it is an act. The tacitness of Western sex/gender identities is much more explicit in the Japanese culture.

Like gender, androgyny has some specifically Japanese terminology that differs slightly from the traditional English translation. I must establish what I mean by “androgyny.” The Japanese have several different words for this concept, each with their own intricate use. Jennifer Robertson notes that the loanword *andorojenii* has been in use in Japan since the 1980s, and is used mostly in reference to “men’s clothing adapted by and for women” (420). Japanese words for androgyny did not come about until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, they were used in “newspaper and journal articles about homosexuality and ‘abnormal sexual desire’” (421). *Ryousei*, which literally means “both sexes,” is used to refer to someone who possesses characteristics of both sexes. The term is commonly employed to denote someone who is intersexed. *Chuusei*, which means “neutral” or “sexless,” is used to refer to someone who cannot be identified as either man or woman. It seems as though there is an equal amount of both kinds of androgyny represented in masculinity. *Ryousei* is probably more commonly seen, since usually one form of gender can be visually identified; *chuusei*, however, seems to be less common, but quite desirable at the same time due to a resurgence of interest in *kawaii*, or ‘cute,’ culture that occurred in the 1990s.

## 1.2 Past and Present Japanese Androgyny

I agree with Judith Butler's assertion that gender norms are "determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject" (182). As Butler suggests of Western cultural trends, traits of masculinity have changed over time in Japan due to cultural and social movements; more specifically, masculine traits vary according to both economic and political changes, becoming inclusive due to what can be seen as a failing of the economic powerhouse of the carnivorous male. This evolution in gender representation has reached a climax in the twentieth century: Japanese men have become transgendered. According to Wim Lunsing:

In Japan, as elsewhere, there have in fact always been men who have transgressed the socially constructed boundaries of 'masculinity.' The most obvious of these transgressions is that of female impersonation... [In] contemporary Japan a number of ways of impersonating females exist that must be clearly distinguished from each other. There are, for instance, drag queens (*doraggu kuiin*) – in most but by no means all cases gay men – who perform the feminine as an act. (21)

Lunsing goes on to discuss the various types of transgender Japanese men: Male transvestites, drag queens, "new half,"<sup>3</sup> male-to-female transsexuals, intersexed peoples, and homosexuals. These men constitute a variety of not-quite masculinity and not-quite femininity that I wish to include in Japanese inclusive masculinity. Lunsing himself is wont to admit that the attributes of these categories of transgenderism are being co-opted by males at large. He writes, "Transgender activity seems to be gaining ground throughout Japanese society... Men who do

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<sup>3</sup> The "new half" (*nyuuhaafu*) is the new version of what used to be called "Mr. Lady" (*Mr. Redii*). They are typically men who have altered their bodies to become feminine while retaining their male genitals. Therefore, they are "halfway between men and women" (Lunsing 26). New half are generally pop idols and are frequently featured on Japanese quiz and variety shows. In some respects, they are also an advanced version of Yoshizawa Ayame's ideal *onnagata*.

not wish to conform to the boundaries of the construction of the male gender act to undermine its rigidity” (32-33). Lunsing calls attention to the notion of an inflexible masculinity that exists in times of hegemonic Japanese masculinity, such as the economic boom of the last three decades. Interestingly, Lunsing cannot explain why “the common occurrence of transvestism at company parties and university festivals suggests that in certain circumstances many men have no qualms about dressing up as women and wearing make-up and that this usually does not lead to stigmatization” (33). I believe that if Japanese masculinity were analyzed as inclusive, there would be no question as to why those forms of transgendering male bodies do not lead to reprehension.

Although some claim that this recent feminized form of Japanese masculinity is a return to a pre-existing historical plural conception of masculinity, it is important to note that all forms of masculinity, even those within inclusive masculinity, reify heteronormativity; in other words, inclusive masculinity is not a subversive form of masculinity. In recent years, the Japanese corporate structure, in the place of the state, enforces compulsory heterosexuality. Younger generations of Japanese men, suffering from over-education and under-employment, and perhaps youths with absentee fathers, have simply opted out of the corporate lifestyle. Part-time work, or *arubaito*, allows these men to shift the balance of life and work. Where once their fathers worked eighty and ninety hours a week in a corporate office, they have been relegated to twenty hours of menial work in convenience stores and retail outlets, arenas typically reserved for young, unmarried women. Their free time is spent honing in on their various hobbies – playing video games, shopping, or spending time with friends. It is precisely this lack of corporate influence that grants men the capacity to be androgynous; when women hold these part-time jobs, it is simply viewed as an extension of their femininity.

Attention to appearance is not something unique to pre- and post- modern Japan, as similar trends are seen throughout European history; but for the purposes of this analysis I feel it is important to avoid comparison to Western culture. The very makeup of Western conceptions of

gender theory relies heavily on the idea of constructed and deconstructed binaries – specifically those that surround masculinity and femininity. Anne Fausto-Sterling takes a biological approach in doing this: “While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many other bodies... that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females. If nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural conceits” (31). What Fausto-Sterling is arguing against is the automatic application of specific gender attributes to a specific physical body, which is part and parcel to historical views of gender in the West. The Japanese do not have the same philosophy dictating their views of gender. My understanding of Japanese gender constructs, which I will show through my analysis of masculinity in various periods of Japanese history, is that they have little to do with the actual physical body, which allows for more flexibility of gender performance. What is troublesome is that this flexibility is seemingly a privilege afforded to masculinity, and the question of the flexibility of femininity underlies my central question of the subversive power of inclusive masculinity: Is it possible for androgyny, when it is included in masculinity, to remain subversive?

### 1.3 Male Beauty in Heian Era Japan

The history of Japanese sexuality provides particular insight into patterns of inclusivity in masculinity. Pre-Western Japan has long been thought to be a nation with little to no moral compass, especially sexually. Some Japanese scholars have called this mythic era of Japanese civilization a utopia because it had not yet been influenced by Western ideologies, and once the era of modernization began, the utopia disintegrated. According to Mark Driscoll:

[The pre-modern Japanese utopia] is claimed to have enjoyed first, the social and moral permissiveness that is invariably evidenced through the invocation of the pure and grand tradition of Japanese homophilia, and second, an indigenous symbolic regime that was supposedly free from the ‘Western’ sexological injunction that individual

identities be coerced to follow exclusively and uniformly from the sexual acts of those individuals. The pillaging of this 'Japanese' utopia of free love is said to have been brought about primarily through the 'copying' of homophobic, erotophobic, and misogynist European codes like 'homosexual,' 'hysteria,' and 'masturbation' by Japanese sexological modernists. (194)

Driscoll's comments are similar to other Japanese scholars who believe that Japanese culture is, in its essence, not homophobic, not concerned about sexual deviancy; therefore any recent cultural movements toward fear of sexual deviancy are superficial copying of behaviors. The Heian era is the period most scholars refer to when discussing Japan's "pre-modern utopia." Heian Japan is known to have been relatively permissive, and provides the model of male-focused *ryousei* androgyny that is reproduced in contemporary Japanese society. According to Nicholas Bornoff, literature of the era, which lasted from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and which has survived, provides an excellent look at the moral views of the era (114). Female authors, Murasaki and other diary writers in particular, give insight into the social workings of the elite. What we find here is evidence that supports Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory. Recorded and recognized are the remnants of a hedonistic and homophilic culture, which is merely a snapshot of the lives of the "Good People," the 10 percent of the population who made up the upper class. In his discussion of the Heian aristocracy, Bornoff includes a passage from the diary of the lady-in-waiting to the Empress Sadako concerning fashion:

... [After painstakingly describing the formal clothing of the empress, she] describes the attire of a Chancellor, who wore a court cloak of pale violet, a scarlet under-robe and trousers of light green. This would have been topped with a tall, light cap of lacquered wicker. Men were as fastidious about their clothing as women. (115)

That both men and women were equally concerned with appearance seems to suggest something of a lack of clear gender boundaries, and I would argue that the homophilia of this

era allowed for a shrink in the distinction between masculine and feminine – at least for men in comparison to the hegemonic masculinity that followed the adoption of Western gender codes. Because of the relative similarity of apparel in men’s and women’s fashion, and the same basic concern for appearance, men were able to bridge the gap between the masculine and the feminine. This masculine interest in fashion following this point in history has wavered between apathy during times of hegemonic masculinity and obsession during times of inclusive masculinity.

My assertion of the relative homophilia of the Heian era does not negate my assertion of homophilia being unimportant in the development of inclusive masculinity. On the contrary, the homophilia of the Heian era elite is an indicator of the absence of state-induced reproductive incentive, which may in turn, be the result of a hedonistic imperial order. The pursuit of pleasures of the flesh would undoubtedly lead to sexual permissiveness among the imperial court; and this runs concurrent with Bornoff’s claims of the Heian era being “one of the most sensual Japan has ever seen; an early cultural morning glory regretted ever since” (111). The Japanese are, and have been, desirous of returning to that “long-lost utopia” that is considered to be the highlight of pure, non-Western Japan.

There is a contemporary movement that has been in place in Japan with the purpose of bringing back male beauty. In fact, one wonders, due to the legacy of the Heian era, whether it really went away entirely. The present-day preoccupation with male beauty discussed by Laura Miller in *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* has distinct ties to Heian ideals. Although Miller ties the increase in marketing mens’ beauty products to capitalistic profiteering, it seems as if, to a large degree, due to cultural history, men are once more becoming focused on their appearance. Miller writes:

The ascendancy of male stars such as Kimutaku reflects a shift in Japanese canons of taste for young heterosexual men. While previous generations were evaluated primarily on the basis of character, social standing, earning capacity,

lineage, and other social criteria... young men these days are increasingly concerned with their status as objects of aesthetic and sexual appraisal. (123)<sup>4</sup>

Although Miller does admit that the history of male beauty is somewhat important to her discussion of male aesthetics, I believe she is too quick to dismiss its relevance to the current trend of beauty. Additionally, her conclusion that men have had to adapt a more conscious approach to body aesthetic because of this “era of intense marriage resistance among women” seems premature. Going back to my modified version of inclusive masculinity theory, androgyny is primarily a function of the absence of reproductive sexuality, not the presence of compulsory heteronormativity. If this is the case, androgyny is not caused by a lack of desire to meet the standards of socially acceptable heterosexuality; rather, social standards of heterosexuality must change to incorporate androgynous men. In other words, Miller is arguing that women find beauty-conscious men attractive, therefore men become beauty-conscious, whereas I am arguing that men become beauty-conscious independent of women’s desire. When masculinity is inclusive, it may initially be that different forms of the gender develop for the purpose of female attraction, but when it is ingrained into an entire society for many years, the actual purpose of the development of that gender performance is forgotten. In other words, androgyny, especially in the herbivore men of Japan, is no longer a means of attraction and is instead a response to consumerist market forces, which in turn are a response to the waxing and waning of traditions; it is fashionable or trendy, and it has the additional benefit of thwarting Western codes of gender.

#### 1.4 The Onnagata: Man or Woman?

The Kabuki actor is perhaps the best model of a traditional basis for Japanese male androgyny, although its actual status as androgynous is complex. This performance is what I believe to be the cornerstone of modern Japanese conceptions of masculine flexibility in Japan’s visual culture; but it is not necessarily a model of masculine inclusiveness. Kabuki

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<sup>4</sup> “Kimutaku” is the shortened nickname of Kimura Takuya, a pop idol in Japan.

Theater has a long and rich history. It began as an all-woman troupe of actors, brought together by a woman known as Izumo no Okuni in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The first Kabuki productions, then, were composed of women playing the roles of both women and men. As Paul Varley writes in *Japanese Culture*, the change in the actors' gender occurred when Shogunate officials of the time intervened:

[Okuni and her troupe] performed farcical skits in which they portrayed encounters between men and prostitutes or reenacted assignation scenes in teahouses and bathhouses.... Shogunate officials sternly disapproved of both the onstage and offstage behavior of female performers such as these, and in 1629, after a period of indecision, they banned their participation in *kabuki* altogether. This had the immediate effect of giving impetus to the rise of another form of entertainment known as "young men's *kabuki*" that had gradually been developing in the shadow of "women's *kabuki*." (187)

Following in the tradition established by the original female Kabuki actors, the male actors took the parts of both female and male roles. Thus, what we see in the *onnagata*, or "female" role, in standard performances is a reproduction of femininity by males. These male actors, as *onnagata*, were seen as not just parodies of women, but as real women. In her study of the politics of androgyny in Kabuki Theater, Robertson finds: "[Yoshizawa] Ayame conceived of the *onnagata* not as 'male acting in a role in which he becomes a "woman,"' but rather as 'a male who is a "woman" acting a role.' In other words, the transformation is not part of a particular role but precedes it" (423). Ayame, according to Robertson, was the first to arrive at a formal concept of androgyny in Japan, which occurred during the early Edo period (17<sup>th</sup> century) (423). He was an *onnagata* himself, and theorized about the metamorphosis of the *onnagata*. His theory is largely based on the Buddhist idea of *henshin* and *henjo nashi*, or transformation, which originates from the concept of the female body needing to become physically male in order to attain enlightenment. In Ayame's theory, only gender is transformed; but this



transformation must be so thorough that it is deeper than mere impersonation. His goal was to apparently embody the “patriarchally inscribed, state-regulated ‘female’ gender” (424). Ayame did not see the *onnagata* as an androgyne, but as a complete woman. Another theorist, Tetsuo Watanabe, however, believes that the male sex of the *onnagata* cannot be ignored, and thus the actor is androgynous.

This definition of *onnagata* seems to oversimplify the issue at hand in that it conflates sex and gender. A male is not a woman, and will never be a woman, simply because he cannot deny his biology. It is, however, possible for a man to behave as a woman, to become feminine. Judith Butler contends that this conflict between sex and gender reveals the faults in heteronormativity:

If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a picture of “woman” (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.  
(187)

What is achieved through this revelation of the “fiction of heterosexual coherence,” is a destabilization of gender binaries, a break in the cohesion of gender and sex and therefore in a destabilization of heteronormativity. However, in instances where there are no established binaries to be destabilized, this same result cannot be expected. In the Japanese zeitgeist, there is always already no tie between gender and sex, therefore Japanese gender is at all times constructed without thought of the body, a denial of any tie between the physical significance of genitalia, and instead is constructed separate from it. As a result, somewhat paradoxically, in the Japanese context, being feminine is so closely related to being a woman

that to the Japanese appearing as a woman is all that is required to pass as a biological woman – performance is all it takes. To clarify, biology does not construct the gender of women, rather the gender, in a way, constructs biology, at least theoretically. Natural biology is separate in this case from perceived biology, and perceived biology trumps natural biology in the Japanese cultural context. Because of the gap between the persuasiveness of male and female androgyny, this construct seems to only work in one direction: male to female.

The stance that gender performance is all that is necessary for the determination of a person's sex complicates the idea of androgyny. Ayame's views of the *onnagata* as woman, and therefore not androgynous, run parallel with Judith Halberstam's theory of female masculinity. Female masculinity, according to Halberstam, is any indicator of masculinity found in women; but it is important to note that this performance is not androgynous. Halberstam writes, "Androgyny is, in fact, figured as the perfect blend of the masculine and feminine and the creation of gender harmony... Of course, the image of the blatant butch upsets such a balance and offers no hope of temperate gendering" (215). Although Ayame was not a "butch" figure, he and his *onnagata* do not fit into the model of androgyny appropriated by Halberstam any more than the masculine female. What seems to be an issue with Halberstam and Ayame is the actual definition of androgyny. In *ryousei* androgyny, one gender is dominant though both are present. Therefore I argue that there must be a spectrum of androgyny that includes the *onnagata* and (to Halberstam's chagrin, I'm sure) the masculine female, as well as all the different combinations of genders. This spectrum is, of course, at the mercy of cultural context; and due to the visual nature of the culture surrounding the *onnagata*, Ayame cannot be said to be wholly androgynous.

What happens when the masculine females take off their gender-identifying clothes? In her introduction to *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam asks who is allowed access to the women's bathroom. Although those who would have her removed from the ladies' room confronted her, she claims that as soon as she spoke, she was allowed to stay. She did not have to give bodily

proof of her gender, but the identification was still physical. When the *onnagata* takes off his costume, is he able to use the women's bathroom? When Ayame was a practicing *onnagata*, there was "'tacit approval' for the *onnagata* 'to bathe at the public baths reserved for women'" (Robertson 424). This "tacit approval" that the still-male Kabuki actor had to bathe with women hinged on the social acceptance of the femininity-as-female nature of the *onnagata*.

Social tides turned when, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, during a phase of Westernization, the state began regulating gender. Tetsuo Watanabe describes this as the state's "anti-androgyne complex," which forged two distinct genders belonging to two distinct sexes (Robertson 424). Watanabe views Kabuki actors at this point as *displaying a dialectic relationship between sex and gender* through the androgynous performance of the *onnagata*; this means that the Kabuki actors are capable of defying the gender law because of their ability to "pass" as the opposite sex. The social link between physical bodies and social perceptions of gender, not to mention state interaction with regulated gender performance, play a huge role in gender perception in this case. The intrusion of the state, or *bakufu*, in enforcing gender distinctions helped to form the idea of androgyny, a gender distinct from masculinity or femininity. In other words, the state enforced hegemonic masculinity (and femininity) in order to enforce regulated sexuality, which would then enforce sexual reproduction. Kabuki actors ably breached gender laws, but it would not be long before the art dwindled, along with the government that regulated it, at roughly the same time as Japan opened its ports to the West.

Important to note is that androgyny in Japan is typically only seen as a problem worthy of state interference when performed by men. This is not to say that there is no female masculinity or androgyny, but merely that these genders were seen as inconsequential to the reproduction of imperial subjects. The Takarazuka Revue, a rebirth of sorts of the original Kabuki Theater and contemporary of the Modern Girl discussed below, features a cast of women playing both male and female roles. Ichizo Kobayashi founded the revue, around the time of the state's enforcement of gender roles, as an alternative to the elitist and old-fashioned

Kabuki Theater. Although the women who played the male roles were crossing gender boundaries on stage, their heroes were not quite the same as Kabuki's heroines. These women portrayed *otokoyaku*, literally "male role," in a way that, according to Kobayashi, is not actually male. According to Robertson: "Kobayashi proclaimed that 'the [Takarazuka] otokoyaku is not male but is more suave, more affectionate, more courageous, more charming, more handsome, and more fascinating than a real male'" (424). However, scholars of Japanese have noted a distinction between the *onnagata* and the *otokoyaku* that affects the way the characters are perceived: the *gata* in *onnagata* means "archetype," where the *yaku* in *otokoyaku* literally means "role" (Robertson 424). Ayame had intended the *onnagata* to be the archetype of femininity, but it was not the same for the *otokoyaku*, who apparently really was too good to be a true archetype of masculinity; in other words, no men could actually match the masculinity exhibited by the *otokoyaku*, which negates their ability to convincingly portray men.

Regardless of the actors' actual sex, in Kabuki, all bodies are the locus and compounding sites of gender ideals, and therefore serve as excellent examples of Butler's performative gender theory. Butler writes:

It is clear that [sex and gender] coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (185)

Since there are two distinct genders at work, it is possible to consider Kabuki Theater, and not the Takarazuka Revue, as both informed by and continually informing Japanese heterosexual normativity, as the *onnagata* both duplicate and determine femininity. The conflation of genders inherent in the cross-dressing Kabuki actor, however, seems slightly problematic for Butler's theory concerning her argument that drag has a subversive effect on heteronormativity, exposing gender as a farce. Instead of disrupting heterosexual coherence, it reinforces it.

Bornoff explains:

In many early theatres, cross-sexual pantomime triggered much hilarity among the groundlings, while other more licentious ones apparently staged plays with ribald *double entendre* revolving around matters of sodomy. Afterwards, actors offered themselves to members of the audience who fancied them. Even the samurai were known to let composure slip as they drew swords to fight for the favors of a beautiful *wakashu* [young male actor]" (165).

Therefore, regardless of their true sex, the gender they represented on stage took precedence. Performative gender, working as it does on the surface of the body, is a construct that is evident, in theory, when examining the Kabuki actor. However, in the Japanese context, gender is never seen as different from sex because of the visibility of Japanese culture. The samurai know that the *wakashu* are male, and yet they are willingly deceived by their femininity, and legally they were not trespassing into deviant sexual territory. In their eyes, and in the eyes of the law, the *wakashu* are female. In other words, because the shogunate had outlawed cross-dressing, these male actors *became* female instead of female impersonators, just as Ayame argues the *onnagata* become women.

In terms of inclusive masculinity, this example creates problems because of the ambiguous nature of the *onnagata* and the looseness of the definition of gender in the Japanese context. Although it was acceptable for men to don the *onnagata* role on stage (and off), laws forbade anyone else from doing the same. The driving force behind the gender

distinctions is not homophobia, however. Since I am arguing that inclusivity depends on the absence of pressure to reproduce, and the state allowed the *onnagata* and *otokoyaku* to continue practicing, these were not seen as threats to hegemonic masculinity. However, this would mean that the *onnagata* is not a form of masculinity, but rather femininity. To a certain extent, this seems true; the *onnagata* actually is a woman according to the state, as is the *otokoyaku*; though both are androgynous, and have provided examples of androgyny that continue to be reproduced in contemporary society; at the time, they were seen as participating in hegemonic masculinity in so far as femininity was accepted as a facet of masculinity and masculinity never a facet of femininity. In turn, the concept of biological femaleness is called into question. Contemporary Visual Kei artists, discussed in Chapter 3, who continue on with the tradition of performance cross-dressing have only recently come to realize this issue, as female Visual Kei artists (who are greatly outnumbered by their male counterparts) are almost always initially assumed to be naturally male and perceived as female. The complexities that arise out of this have yet to be fully determined because of the lack of information available about these artists at this time; however, it seems as though Japanese conceptions of natural biology versus perceived biology remain consistent. In terms of stage performances, perceived biology will always overtake natural biology.

### 1.5 Modern Boys and Zero Boys

The Feminist movement had a late start in Japan though it had a massive impact on Japanese masculinity. The Modern Girl, or *moga*, became a symbol of rebellion and sexual liberation for women of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Miriam Silverberg writes:

[The Modern Girl] was neither an advocate of expanded rights for women, nor a suffragette; nevertheless she had no intention of being a slave to men. The self-respecting Modern Girl had liberated herself from age-old traditions and conventions, and now, suddenly, without any argument or explanation, she had

stepped out onto the same starting line as men in order to walk beside them.

(52)

The Modern Girl, therefore, escaped the bindings of past traditions of femininity and instead focused on her own pleasures. However, with this liberation of women came changes for men of the modern era that did not go unnoticed by the media, which printed comics about an “aggressive Modern Girl and a passive Modern Boy” (Silverberg 53). The passivity of the Modern Boy is compelling, but not unpredictable. During this time period, emphasis on reproduction for the state fell to the wayside – women were unbound from the confines of the home and the biological need of the state for more citizens. Instead, she lived for herself in a state of unfettered autonomy. Instead of reproducing citizens, she reproduced her own culture.

The Modern Boy, or *mobo*, underscores the effect that the autonomous *moga* had on social gender norms. In the midst of the social uproar of pre-war Japan, men were impotent. When pundits attempted to define the Modern Girl, they could not help but compare her to the Modern Boy, who was by contrast easier to classify. According to Silverberg:

These critics determined the following about the *moga*: (1) she was not hysterical; (2) she used direct language; (3) she had a direct, aggressive sexuality – she checked to see if a man was compatible; (4) she scoffed at chastity – changing men, for her, was like putting on a clean white shirt; (5) she could be poor, for clothing was now inexpensive; (6) she was liberated from the double fetters of class and gender; (7) she was an anarchist; (8) she accosted men when she needed train fare; (9) she had freedom of expression, which she got from the movies, and finally, in an indirect commentary on the autonomy of this persona, they pronounced that her counterpart, the *mobo*, was a “zero.”

(60)

What these critics meant by the Modern Boy being “zero,” was that these men were not masculine in comparison to the Modern Girl. However hegemonic masculinity informed the

labels the Modern Boy at that time, it is obvious that he was representative of a new kind of masculinity emerging as a result of negotiating with all the eccentricities and newfound liberation comprising the Modern Girl.

During the Modern Girl/Modern Boy era, which ended in 1931 as a result of the worldwide economic depression and a nationalist coup in Japan, the Modern Boy signified a break from hegemonic masculinity. The “zeroness” of the *mobo* is not actually a nullification of masculinity any more than the *moga* nullified femininity; on the contrary, it is the creation of a new form of masculinity. The *mobo* was compatible with the *moga*, something heretofore unheard of in Japan. He believed in the liberation of women, which marked him as passive. In many ways, the absence of prescribed masculinity in the *mobo* marks him as *chuusei*, the Japanese term for sexless androgyny. There are problems with this labeling, however, because to be completely sexless means that there is no gender distinction perceptible on the individual. This is not the case with the *mobo*.

The Modern Boy and Modern Girl are paradoxical figures in Japanese history because of their transitory position in history. Western influence, including feminism, on women and men helped to create Modern Boys and Modern Girls, and also made them targets of criticism from traditionalists:

The Modern Girl [and Boy] as un-Japanese and therefore criminal was the real subtext to such headlines as “Modern Girls Swept Out of Ministry of Railroads,” and “Conquering the *Moga* and *Mobo*.” In 1925, a “vanguard *moga*” in short hair and Western clothing was tried for murdering a delinquent foreigner with whom she had been consorting. The case, which received sensational press coverage, illustrated both sexual and cultural transgression. (Silverberg 70-71)

The discomfort the traditionalists felt with newly imported customs is therefore translated to uncovering the cultural transgressions of the Modern Girl and Modern Boy. Additionally, when the time came for war in the Pacific in the 1940s, this Westernization was further vilified, and the



state imposed gender codes to prevent the Modern Girl and Modern Boy from recurring: “By the beginning of the Pacific War, however, boundaries reifying gender ... were imposed: laws forbade women to dress in men’s clothing, women’s magazines were placed under tight controls, and supposed vestiges of Western decadence ... were outlawed” (71). We see the state stepping in, as it had done during the Meiji period when Kabuki Theater was developing, to provide a legal prescription of gender.

Regardless of the sanctions provided by the state, the *mobo* lives on, as does the *moga*, though they are not as recognizable. A new “zero” boy has emerged: the *hikikomori*. His masculinity, like the *mobo*’s, is both nullified and created by passivity; the nullification of masculinity is, in fact, his masculinity. Unlike the *mobo*, his passivity is not a response to a growth of female autonomy, but rather a fear of impotence in the face of economic crisis. He is androgynous simply for lack of displaying public prowess like his *sarariman* forefathers.

#### 1.6 Conclusion

Gender in Japan is deceptively complex. Due to the visual nature of the culture, gender is almost impossible to differentiate from sex, meaning that cross-dressing, drag, and androgyny have no real powers of subversion. Instead, a man becomes a woman by dressing as a woman, though the opposite is questionable; and because of this very fact, the state has typically been able to control femininity, a concept discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, while allowing masculinity to develop into a non-hegemonic ideology. Inclusive masculinity in Japan does not quite follow Anderson’s inclusive masculinity theory because homosexuality has never really been a threat to social or cultural norms; alternately, inclusivity of masculinity is threatened primarily by the cultural pressure of enforced reproduction.

Contemporary masculinity is following in the footsteps of its more inclusive predecessors. Currently, in part because of the instability of the Japanese economy, the birthrate in Japan is at an all-time low. The Japanese have even invented a word for their population crisis, *shoshika*, which translates to “a world without children.” The crisis that social

critics are currently debating is why women are waiting longer to get married and have children, and why some are opting for neither institution. The effect this has on masculinity is obvious; the salary man is no longer desirable and therefore new models of masculinity are becoming prominent and acceptable, resulting in a period of inclusive masculinity. Although the Japanese are attempting to reconcile this issue through the implementation of policies encouraging women to have children, until such time as women are actively being recruited for motherhood, masculinity will be inclusive.

Ultimately, the prevalence of androgyny-as-masculinity in Japan seems to be symptomatic of not only specified cultural practices, but also recent globally cultural paradigmatic shifts; by this I mean that as all societies, including Western societies, have advanced into their most recent techno-capitalistic age, there has been a significant shrink in the gaps between genders. We see evidence of this in even in America, where male beauty products are increasingly advertised and marketed. The Axe hair care line of commercials comes to mind. These ads feature hopeless, sloppy, unattractive men transformed into attractive and sexually desirable men through the use of pomades, gels, and sprays. Anderson himself cites, according to his own research, that several new modes of masculinity are emerging which include “jocks, emos, scholars, artists, etc.” existing without social struggle, meaning we are currently in a period of socially acceptable inclusive masculinity (95). Of course, Anderson’s argument is that American men have reached a period of inclusive masculinity because of an absence of homophobia. The evidence supporting Anderson’s theory of inclusive masculinity comes from “[heterosexual] university-aged (mostly) white men, athletes and non-athletes, alike” (7). Although I argue that reproduction is the primary variable in Japanese inclusive masculinity, the same cannot be said for American men, whose masculinities, as Anderson contends, are influenced above all by the presence or absence of homophobia. The Japanese zeitgeist has been, since the time of reconstruction following the Second World War, largely controlled by the state in order to protect the perception of Japan

throughout the world; masculinity, therefore, is just one facet of this bureaucratically dominated culture. Where and when the state can control gender, it will enforce a masculinity recognizable to the rest of the world, a mimicking of Western gender norms; however, when the Japanese citizens detect weaknesses or failings in their overarching social structures, they fall back onto traditional, non-Western modes of gender. These pre-Western gender roles, though breaking with heteronormative conceptions of a gender binary, generally do not function in a way that is conducive to current Western gender thought.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE GENDER OF SOLITUDE: THE *HIKIKOMORI* AND MASCULINITY

We want to say something but we're not able to  
We spit out what we can on the Internet  
Every day and every night on the message boards  
Arguing with someone else is a diversion  
-Merry, "Lost Generation"<sup>5</sup>

These lyrics to Merry's "Lost Generation" indicate, at a pop cultural level, an awareness of one of Japan's largest social problems: the *hikikomori*. These shut-ins and social outcasts, mostly men, make up the majority of the so-called "lost generation" of Japan. These young men came of age during the 1990s, when the economic downfall of the nation was imminent, and have suffered some severe psychological side effects because of it. With a sense of lost identity and a helter-skelter clinging to traditional feudalistic society, the Japanese have inadvertently created a social crisis. It is a problem that the Japanese prefer not to deal with directly, although the number of actual *hikikomori* is relatively high and pose a threat to the future of Japan. Hidden away from the prying eyes of the world, the *hikikomori* are a frustrated group of individuals who are discontent with the conformity they see in their homeland. Their lack of ability to conform to conceptions of masculinity considered "normal" to their fellow citizens – unquestioning submission to the status quo of the salary man doxa – marks them as men performing a different kind of masculinity, a solitary gender. The Japanese have a word for androgyny, *chuusei*, which is, more specifically, "'neutral' or 'in between,' and thus neither woman nor man" (Robertson 421). This term is useful in describing the *hikikomori*, since they do not exhibit characteristics attributed to femininity; rather, it is as if they are attempting to at once redefine and critique gender stereotypes through their non-portrayal.

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<sup>5</sup> Merry is a Visual kei band based in Tokyo, Japan. Many of their songs have lyrics about contemporary issues in Japanese society.

Since this subsection of the Japanese population has been so neglected, one of the most fertile areas for information about it is Japanese popular culture. It is important to note that during times of economic prosperity, Japan has had a tendency to import outside forms of popular culture; but during times of economic recession, the popular culture that is produced is authentically Japanese. Roland Kelts writes:

Younger Japanese had grown up amid the wealth of the post-war Japan Inc. machine just as its cogs were starting to falter. But instead of stymieing them, the resulting slump actually cultivated their creativity. In a weak job market, graduates and dropouts alike had little to lose. And through the examples of their postwar parents and grandparents, as well as the rigors of an educational system in a nation with a 99 percent literacy rate, they already knew how to work hard. (180)

In other words, as economic progress came to a standstill, the creation of popular culture increased. Novelist Haruki Murakami adds, "When we were rich in the 1980s, we weren't producing any kind of international culture. But when we got poor again, we got humble. Then we became creative" (180-1). What Murakami means is that until the Japanese suffered the loss of their phenomenal economic momentum, their cultural imports were more influential than their cultural output. The Japanese copied the West until that model failed them, which caused them to revert to their culturally productive selves. The influence of outside cultures, however, remains an integral part of the newly produced Japanese culture; but the new productions are distinctly Japanese.

Kelts also points out that during the economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s, Japan's underground artists produced original works modeled after what they saw in the West but maintaining the integrity of Japanese culture (182). These underground artists became influential following the implosion of the economy, and notable for their blend of Western structure and Japanese subjects. An example of this is Haruki Murakami's novel *Hard Boiled*

*Wonderland and the End of the World*, which presents an interesting mix of both Western and Japanese elements. The novel makes a case for the *hikikomori* as an alternative masculinity to the pressured life of the salary man, offering a fantasy world mixed with both escapism and social responsibility. Another short work of Murakami's, "The Kangaroo Communiqué," explains the ennui of the salary man, subverting the notion of the ideal male as in an unquestioning participant in the workforce. Both of these works question the status of the salary man during Japan's economic zenith.

The Japanese experienced many changes following the Second World War, the most striking being their propulsion to economic prominence. In the span of about thirty years, Japan evolved from a nation devastated by war to the second largest economy in the world. It is impossible to think that such a rapid change came without consequences; however, the most devastating result of the race to the top is to this day a problem unrecognized by the Japanese government and society. I am referring to the growing dilemma of the *hikikomori*, or the socially withdrawn. These people, mostly men, spend days at a time locked in their parents' homes, unable to go outside for a variety of reasons. Since the majority of the sufferers are male, it seems to me that this "social disorder" is one that is an indication of the failure of the hegemonic model of masculinity that was espoused during the economic boom, the salary man. But is this withdrawn man proffering a new model of masculinity? I have discussed the historic inclusivity of Japanese masculinity in myriad forms: the Heian "Good People," the *onnagata*, and the *mobo*. Inclusive masculinity has arrived in different eras throughout Japanese history, which I maintain is a direct result of the absence of state-fueled reproductive incentives (and I include economic incentives as a contemporary issue in reproductive trends), and it would seem as though the presence of *hikikomori* in Japanese society is indicative of a shift, albeit signifying an early stage, in the previous hegemonic salary man model of masculinity toward a more inclusive masculinity. Since the *hikikomori* are not socially recognized, hidden from friends and family by friends and family, this form of masculinity, if it is a form of masculinity, is not one that is

regulated by society at large. However, paradoxically, it is society that has created the *hikikomori*. Is social acceptance required for the creation and manipulation of a gender? Are the isolated and solitary creating a gender apart from society?

### 2.1 It Begins at Home

The problem of the *hikikomori* stems initially from the rapid changes in the traditional structure that holds Japanese society together: the family. It is important to note the way the family functioned during this time of economic expansion, because it is the undoing of this system that has created social problems within Japan. With the advent of modernization and reconstruction in the Western style following World War II, several institutions began to mimic the family. Christie Kiefer writes, “Community consciousness’ (*kyoudou ishiki*) is frequently upheld as the opposite of selfishness and narrow familism even in the modern middle-class suburbs where traditional forms of community cooperation have largely disappeared” (68). This “community consciousness” is the super-ego of the Japanese; it dictates their actions and decisions. As children, though, the Japanese, especially boys, who are traditionally educated for future careers, develop emotional bonds with their mothers, and must compete with their fathers, who are mostly absent due to their responsibilities at work, for affection. Kiefer notes:

In both Japanese and American middle-class society, however, the mother seeks to teach the child that he must love the father if she is to love him. Once the child has learned his lesson, he is on the road to becoming a man; that is “conquering” the father by “becoming” the father, and replacing him in his mother’s affection... Whereas the child is emotionally weaned from the mother to some extent in America, in Japan he continues to hold the “bad” image of the father unconsciously as a result of his early experiences of intense closeness with his mother to a later age, and simultaneously with his conscious image of the father as basically good. (69)

In other words, since the mother and son hold an emotional bond for an extended period of time, the father figure is still unconsciously seen as competition for affection. Kiefer also notes that male teachers “[assume] some aspects of the mother’s role, mainly in the aspect of moral training” (69). Because of the role the teacher has, and because of the student’s association of him with the mother, the emotions held for the mother are also held for the teacher. In the case of the Japanese education system, standardized exams are used to evaluate students and pass them onto the next level of education, and teachers are not involved in daily grading and evaluation. Therefore, Kiefer asserts, “as long as the student is allowed to expect the support of their teacher in spite of their progress, as long as they can *expect to continue as accepted members of their class* through the educational institution, the functional equivalence of the mother and teacher survives” (70). What this means is that so long as the system of examination works to evaluate the students without the teacher taking part in the process of evaluation, the teacher is a mother figure and therefore intrinsically “good.” In this way, education mimics family, which is a way of both successfully socializing Japanese boys and preparing them for their future bureaucratic jobs. Further, this observation uncovers an underlying facet of Japanese culture, which is the importance of the mother. The system of education based on the “good mother” prolongs the symptoms of childhood dependency into adulthood. Japanese men especially are continually placed into situations, even outside of the home, where they never have to break away from this dependency.

During the mid-twentieth century, which was a time of rapid economic growth, when Japanese graduated from school, they were ushered into desk jobs and set for a life of work. These jobs often demanded long hours and conflicted with traditional obligations to family, creating a “moral dilemma” in the individual (Kiefer 71). The answer to this predicament, according to Kiefer, was to use the family model:

The response to this problem in Japan has been to make use of concepts of loyalty learned in the family and to create a type of bureaucracy that mirrors the



family; that is, one in which the individual normally commits himself to a job for life and in which the obligations of an employer to his employee are extensive and “paternalistic.” The paradox of the Japanese bureaucratic system is that it makes *more* demands on members’ loyalty... thus placing the bureaucratic employee in a double bind, because family loyalty must be extended to the bureaucratic setting without undermining the family itself. Undermining familism would mean undermining the fabric of bureaucracy. (71)

It is important to note that during Japan’s economic heyday, the family model adapted to the demands of the bureaucracy. Salary men became models of efficient moneymaking masculinity and absentee fathering. This model was accepted and regulated by society because the three major institutions of Japan – namely family, school and bureaucracy – codified it. In actuality, bureaucracy was undermining familism. The employee, stretched in one way toward family and the other toward bureaucracy, had to reach a breaking point; but this was not readily identifiable until the economy faltered. The cracks within this system, or rather the undermining of familism by the same bureaucratic model that copied it to ensure maximum production, were not recognized at that time because of the enormous pressure on the people at that time to advance the nation’s prosperity. In studying the *hikikomori* of Japan, Zielenziger offers some revealing insight regarding the ramifications of the economic boom:

A nation that cannot define itself clearly cannot hope to act in its rational self-interest. In periods marked by rapid social change, traditional identities dissolve and new ones must be forged. Yet for decades Japan was able to avoid this struggle for new identity by immersing itself compulsively in its drive to catch up to the West, to make its country, as opposed to its people, wealthy, to acquire products and an advanced lifestyle, and to mimic the consumption patterns it witnessed in foreign lands; to build the suburban towns, golf courses, and strip malls that seemed to bespeak a sense of prosperity. (263)

Japan has long taken the stance of being neither capitalist nor socialist, neither traditional nor modern, which means that it is fundamentally unstable. Here again is another example of the pattern of dependency on a national level, intentionally or no: the Japanese themselves did not have to break free from their “maternal” colonizers. Their government and social systems have molded themselves into a copies of Western democracy, thereby reducing the need to develop an independent identity; and yet they retain a strong sense of tradition, creating a social psychology of continual double-mindedness. In many ways, this displacement of identity arising from their quick launch to modernization has backed the Japanese into a corner. Unable to fully break away from tradition, it can only mean that it was a matter of time before conflicts between their former lifestyles and modern advances arose; but it all begins with the underground dissonance between the rapidly growing economy and the family.

The changes that took place in the “family,” and by this I mean the structuring of bureaucratic institutions as a substitute for family, at the time of reconstruction after World War II led to a destabilization of the traditional values that held social order in Japan. On the national level, Japan was also facing changes as Michael Zielenziger explains:

What Japan did...was to emasculate its Imperial system – reducing a godhead into a mere figurehead – and consent to the reestablishment of a parliamentary democracy that met the demands and preconceptions of its American conquerors. These changes were carried out swiftly, paradigmatically, and without much fuss – and without actually undermining or tinkering with the fundamental, underlying beliefs about the nature of the state, its role in society, and its relations to the self. (124)

This observation gives credence to the view that the system of power that the Japanese established following the war was superficial at best. I believe that, as the part of the conquered people, the Japanese were wholly unwilling to part with such deep-rooted traditions, but this unwillingness to change has led to a slew of problems on the national and local level. How

does one participate in a capitalistic society when the values held are based on feudalism? Zielenziger is the first to admit that his preconceptions of Japan's supposed capitalism were mistaken: "As I got to understand it better, I saw that, rather than a vibrant free market, Japan actually functions more like a highly controlled, quasi-socialist system where bureaucrats feel they know best how to organize the system of production, and have the power to make life unpleasant for those who don't agree" (98). This is the basis of what Kiefer referred to as "community consciousness;" but it is purely based on coercion. The *hikikomori* are a reaction to this system of forced agreement.

The Japanese proverb, *deru kugi wa utareru*, which means 'the nail that sticks out will get hammered,' speaks to the overall social concern of conformity. In a sense, this proverb reveals that deviant behavior is taken care of on a social level. This is as true for businessmen as it is for young children; and it is especially true for representations of masculinity. As Butler would argue, anything that is not socially recognizable as masculine is considered deviant. Therefore, any differential response to an ordered society such as the Japanese is incredibly difficult to do in a public setting. Therefore, the *hikikomori* withdraw to a place where they can be completely natural: often their parental homes. These men<sup>6</sup> dwell indoors, away from a society that shuns them, mocks them, and calls them deviants. This seems to me to be an issue closely related with gender because, as Zielenziger writes, "these men [are] renouncing a complex web of values that made them feel impotent and without worth, one that curbed their innate individuality and suppressed the very qualities their nation needed to shake off its own inwardness" (121). They hide away to regain a sense of autonomous masculine power, which suggests that *hikikomori* is, in fact, a kind of androgyny that overlaps masculinity. It can be categorized as androgynous on the one hand because of the complete lack of gender performance; they are *chuusei* androgynes, they perform neither masculinity nor femininity.

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<sup>6</sup> Zielenziger's research indicates that, although there are some female *hikikomori*, at least 80 percent of those afflicted are male (17). There is not much research on female *hikikomori*, but

The *hikikomori* continue to be a problem in Japan not only because of the economic downturn the country has faced, but also because of the government's unwillingness to view them as a problem. Indeed, the question of whether or not the *hikikomori* are a problem arises in my study of them. Zielenziger interviewed an activist for the *hikikomori*, Masahisa Okuyama, who claims that the government can truly help the *hikikomori* through raising awareness of the disorder and offering health programs geared for them, but they are unwilling to do so:

Neither the Japanese government... nor its health care bureaucracy would willingly acknowledge the scale of this mysterious new social epidemic, set aside funds to help parents, or consider comprehensive plans to treat *hikikomori* patients. Bureaucrats in Japan are never bold, he complained, never willing to take initiative. Like bureaucrats everywhere, they prize order, follow precedent, and usually don't permit new realities to interfere with old formulas; yet in a society so heavily regulated, bureaucrats in Japan... run rings around the politicians, who tend to lack any background in policy-making and are constantly pressed to raise funds for their next campaign. (45-6)

What is startling about this description of Japanese government is the way bureaucrats in Japan seem to be able to control the society so intrinsically through their control of politics. Since the *hikikomori* are a relatively new development, and they don't fit into the "old formulas" of the bureaucracy, they are ignored. This seems very problematic in terms of inclusive masculinity, which I have argued is, in Japan's case, due to a lack of governmental interference in reproduction; meaning that increased awareness of the *hikikomori* would likely cause those affected to simultaneously be accepted as masculine *and* coerced into participating in a more acceptable form of masculinity. It seems to me that this acceptance of the *hikikomori* would lead to a change in masculinity; "healing" of the *hikikomori* means their kind of masculinity will

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since I am working with *hikikomori* as both androgynous and masculine, I see little difference that the actual sex of the *hikikomori* makes.

be either accepted into an inclusive form of masculinity, or that the *hikikomori* will be trained to act in an hegemonic form of masculinity.

However, there are additional roadblocks in the way of the role of the government in providing incentives for reproduction as a means of preventing the phenomenon of these “unmanly” men (i.e. non-salary men); this incentive has been rapidly dwindling with the advent of the “office lady” (OL), women who take on employment rather than marry and have children. OLs, according to Yuko Ogasawara, “account for 40 percent of all employed persons,” and “the percentage of women working increases dramatically when women leave school, reaching almost 75 percent among women in their early twenties” (17). These women are unmarried and childless; and the assumption is that when women *do* get married, they will leave work to raise a family while their husbands continue to work. Ogasawara remarks that married women were “generally believed to have more important commitments at home than in the labor market, and [if she] continued to work [it] meant either that she found her job extremely fulfilling or that she was a member of a lower class who must work full-time even after marriage” (61). Traditionally, then, the employment system in Japan is geared to unmarried and childless women. Although lower class women are more likely to work after marriage and having children, their job options are severely limited and offer little monetary incentive to remain under employ compared to their male counterparts, especially when they must also pay for childcare for young children (which is not readily available in Japan). It is little wonder, then, that in these times of economic depression, many women are unwilling to abandon their jobs, and the extra income they provide, for procreation. I do not believe that this situation is directly responsible for the perpetuation of the *hikikomori* in Japan; however, until there is some greater incentive to reproduce, awareness of *hikikomori* will remain a low priority for the government.

The plight of the *hikikomori* and ambitious women in the workplace are therefore intertwined; they are both failed salary men. One solution to this problem is that the government could provide some legislative changes to promote procreation, and thus raise more awareness

of the *hikikomori*. As it stands, though, the Equal Opportunity (EEO) Law, which was adopted in 1986, is equal in name only. Ogasawara notes that there are typically two types of positions open to university graduates that are essentially masks for gendered work, integrated or clerical: “Those in the [integrated track] were trained to become managers, and [clerical track] employees worked as their assistants. The deceptively gender neutral terms cloaked the fact that integrated-track employees were almost all male and clerical workers were without exception female” (28). The inequality in the work place is therefore only more discreet since the passing of EEO Laws. Additionally, many Japanese women feel marriage is too much trouble. Laura Miller writes:

The overall marriage rate per 1,000 people was 6.1 in 1999... and the average age of first marriage for women rose to 27 in 2000... The Prime Minister’s Office conducted a survey in 1999 that found that 40 percent of the women polled said that marriage is a ‘burden...’ Because marriage is a rite of passage for heterosexual men, who are dependent on women’s domestic labor, unwed men are seen as immature losers and are negatively sanctioned in their professional and private lives for their failure to get wives. (157)

Men are therefore dependent on women staying out of the work force, and they rely on their “domestic labor” to be real men. Japanese women want economic the freedom and job opportunities of the salary man. If there were further action taken by the government to rectify these legal forms of discrimination in the EEO Law, more attention could be focused on programs for family development; and this would, in turn, raise awareness of the *hikikomori*.

Assuming that changes were made to the EEO Laws to actually require no gender discrimination, masculinity would be required to change. Women would no longer be free to perform domestic labor for men, which would ultimately affect the way men define their masculinity. The *hikikomori* would be outed and confronted; additional changes would have to be made within the Japanese structure to adapt to their psychological needs, and their type of

masculinity would be forced to change as well. Until Japan can work its way from under the thumb of bureaucrats, these changes will not be possible. At the moment, the *hikikomori* benefit from the lack of awareness that they are given – they are awarded freedoms that the ideal masculine salary man does not have.

## 2.2 From Zero to Hero

It is admittedly strange to think of the withdrawal from society as being a trait of masculinity. However, a brief review of the *mobo*, that deviant male who was also effectually impotent, and his transformation following World War II reveals the connection between impotence and masculinity. The *mobo* was called “zero” when paired with his female counterpart, the *moga*. He had no power compared to her growing ambitious sexual liberation; or so the scholars at the end of the 1930s believed. At that time, Japan was interested in its empire building – which is similar to the post-war efforts to rebuild. Real men were soldiers with large sexual appetites; compared to them, the *mobo* was passive and weak. However, the humiliation of defeat brought new meaning to the impotent man. Christine Marran, who has studied “poison woman”<sup>7</sup> literature of the pre- and post-war eras, cites the movie *In the Realm of the Senses*, directed by Nagisa Oshima, as an example of this change in terms of male masochism. The male masochist is an “impassioned man who submits himself to the sexual and dangerous woman” (150). The inversion of the traditional sexual natures of the male and female are at the center of this film. She writes:

*In the Realm of the Senses...* introduces the male masochist who serves an allegorizing function in the narrative. Male masochism is cultivated as symbolic of the complete rejection of political and imperial power through the juxtapositioning of two types of men – the imperial soldier of the February 26 incident, which was an armed uprising in Tokyo organized by the members of

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<sup>7</sup> Poison Women are a recurring theme in Japanese literature. They are women who have committed crimes, such as murders (commonly using poison), against men. Their status as

the Imperial Army's First Division by 1,400 soldiers who called for direct imperial rule, and the devoted lover (150-1).<sup>8</sup>

The devoted lover is seen as a new and favorable model of masculinity in the wake of the defeat of the Japanese imperial movement by the United States. Marran continues:

The romantic, sexually explicit film *In the Realm of the Senses* dramatically affirms the pursuit of masochistic pleasure and complete withdrawal from society as a laudable response to a country on the brink of war. The masochistic lover Kichizou is politicized as an anti-authoritarian rebel for his rejection of male privilege and power. (153)

This new examination of the *mobo* reveals that the masculinity of postwar Japan was critiqued and deconstructed. Kichizou is a man driven to submission by his passionate love for Abe Sada, which runs counter to the prescribed masculinity of the 1930s, when militant sexual prowess was supposed to be a trait of manhood. Through the subversion of the masculine zeitgeist, Oshima shows that the man who would have been considered a *mobo* at the time is, in fact, a worthy model of masculinity. Marran explains:

[In postwar Japan] the marginal, the deviant, and the outcast were described as paragons of new possibilities for Japan for having hurled themselves into the world of flesh. They now occupied the position of the utopic and became the agents through which the conformist could imagine transforming himself. This romanticization of the marginal symbolized the possibility for the rejection of

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pop cultural icons dates back to the era of modernization (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), and extends to literature from the immediate postwar era.

<sup>8</sup> Sada Abe made headlines in Japan when murdered her lover, Kichizou Ishida in 1936. She is said to have erotically asphyxiated him, cut off his testicles, and carried them with her in her handbag. This is known as the "Abe Sada Incident." She was convicted of murder and disfiguring a corpse in December of the same year and sentenced to six years in prison. Her arrest and trial sparked a media frenzy, which fueled "Poison Woman" stories based on her life.



cultural and ideological encumbrances for even those men in positions of authority during this time of radical national transition from an aggressive, imperial nation to a subordinated national body within the global political sphere. The disintegration of the culturally and ideologically produced masculine ego of the empire is encouraged in the name of the body, especially the deviant female body. (142)

In other words, the deviants were seen as new possibilities for gender representations. They were given new meanings. The “genderless” *mobo*, who was ruled by his emotions and submissive to his passions, suddenly becomes an idealized prototype of masculinity in postwar Japan. This sort of revisionist history is common in Japan, where the past is ambiguous at best, and the constant deference to technology despite the strength of their traditional belief system that lies just below the surface creates systems upon systems of paradoxes. Especially in recent years, what this tension does is create an atmosphere of confusion. In the case of the model of masculinity Oshima presents, although a strong case for the *mobo*, it came at a time when the salary man was the hegemonic masculine ideal; the revisited *mobo* was, however, a newly minted alternative masculinity should a time of inclusive masculinity arise once more. During present day Japan, we are seeing the failure of the salary man, which is in part causing a rise in the *mobo*-esque *hikikomori*.

The *mobo* exhibits several characteristics similar to the *hikikomori*; what is different is the socioeconomic situation surrounding them. First, they are both subject to their passions. Where the *mobo* is a man seemingly submissive to women, as interpreted in *In the Realm of the Senses*, he is actually a man driven by his passion. The *hikikomori* is likewise someone who is driven by passions; however, due to what they see as social restrictions, they seclude themselves from society. Their passions are to be an individual, and to question the authority of their superiors, which is something they are not allowed to do. Therefore, in order to not submit to the cog-in-the-wheel position of their fellows, they instead obsessively submit to their

passions. Many would-be *hikikomori* find solace in other countries, such as Thailand and the United States, where being an individual is considered to be a virtue. The second link to the *mobo* exhibited by the *hikikomori* is their inability to be characterized as any particular gender. The *mobo* were called “zero” by social critics because there were no traditional gender attributes recognizable to them. Likewise, the *hikikomori* are “zero.” They do not express masculinity or femininity; rather they express almost nothing at all. It is in that gaping gender void that they find solace.

I believe that the *hikikomori* are examples of androgyny-as-masculinity because of their link to the *mobo* and their utter disregard for the standard of masculinity they face in their culture. Admittedly, this sort of masculinity is not one that is widely accepted or acknowledged by Japanese, and I do not intend to glorify the *hikikomori*. If this is a method of escape – escape from the oppressive social structures that dictate that they must be salary men – then it is successful, though they cannot escape some form of masculinity, which is the idea behind androgyny-as-masculinity. Their autonomous powers, though in a limited sphere, nevertheless allow them to create their own fantasy worlds based on their own ideals. Regardless of the social stigma of the *hikikomori*, I find that there are many examples of this isolationist behavior in men, tied to the idea of masculine androgyny, in the writings of contemporary authors such as Haruki Murakami. Murakami especially focuses on protagonists who are isolated, allowed to live out their fantasy lives, unrestrained by society, family, or children. Perhaps in the same vein as Oshima’s revisions of the *mobo* in *In the Realm of the Senses*, Murakami revives the *hikikomori*, striking a chord with the lost generation of Japanese, and brings him to the foreground.

### 2.3 Haruki Murakami and the Gender of Solitude

Haruki Murakami writes almost exclusively from the perspective of the “loner” in Japanese society. He explains that this type of person faces difficulties in Japan, but is nonetheless appealing to his younger readers: “My protagonists are so lonely... but at least

they have their styles, their obsessions to survive on. That means a lot. They don't know what the purpose of life is or what their goals are, but they have to live on in any case... Sometimes my readers are impressed by that kind of stoicism... It's not easy, you know" (Kelts 158). Although his protagonists are perhaps not dyed-in-the-wool stoics as the *hikikomori*, they nonetheless are afflicted with the same sense of: 1. a loss of identity or meaning in life; 2. disillusionment with social protocol; and 3. an obsession with their individuality. These men do not actively separate themselves from society, but rather find themselves drifting between reality and fantasy. For these reasons, these characters can be seen as reinterpretations of *hikikomori*. In "The Kangaroo Communiqué," the protagonist, a customer service representative for a department store, records a cryptic message to a dissatisfied customer. In the recording, he drops hints about his loneliness, his sexual frustration, and his complete resignation to remain the same. He illustrates the powerlessness inherent in the contemporary salary man. Much more ambitious is Murakami's portrayal of salary men and loners in *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. In this novel are two protagonists: both follow a pattern of first attempting to conform to their social settings, then rejecting them, and then becoming aware of their own personal responsibility to be individuals. In the novel, Murakami does seem to advocate for the *hikikomori*, and he gives them power where the salary men are powerless.

Murakami's critique of the salary man in "The Kangaroo Communiqué" is apparent through his protagonist's admissions of impotence. The unnamed narrator, the wage-earning merchandise control representative for a department store, is attempting to understand the motives behind a customer's letter of complaint. It becomes his obsession:

Actually, I started to write you a letter any number of times last week. "We regret to inform you that our policy prohibits the exchange of records, although your letter did in some small way move me to personally... blah, blah, blah." A letter like that. Nothing I wrote, however, came out right. And it's not as though I'm no good at writing letters. It's just that each time I set my mind on writing

you, I drew a blank, and the words that did come were consistently off base.

(55)

The narrator fixates on the idea of this customer writing a letter, but he is unable to find the correct way to respond. His impotence with words is striking, and reveals some unsettling information about him. For one, it is deducible that his job is relatively mindless. He is used to letters of complaint that do not “move him personally,” that he can respond to with a simple letter. Another revelation is that his job is not overly time-consuming. Regardless of the actual requirements for this job, the narrator is not fully devoted to it, as evidenced by his many attempts to respond to the original letter of complaint and his fixation on this letter. In short, the job has rendered him impotent and alienated, and his attempts to reach out to another individual are futile.

Another striking indication of the writer’s inability to make any sort of meaningful contact with this person is his concept of “The Nobility of Imperfection.” This concept strikes him as he’s watching the kangaroos in an exhibit in the zoo. He describes it as “nothing so much as the proposition that someone *in effect* forgives someone else. I forgive the kangaroos, the kangaroos forgive you, you forgive me – to cite but one example” (55). The indirect nature of this proposition for forgiveness, aside from being somewhat absurd that his apology must be passed on to the respondent through a kangaroo, is indicative of his state of isolation, the state of the isolation of the kangaroos on exhibit, and the isolation of the recipient of the tape recording of the letter. That he renders his actions and thoughts through the animals on display relates his base idea that, like the kangaroos, he is also a trapped animal – that all of Japanese society is trapped like animals in zoos. Thus, he is not autonomous and is therefore impotent.

Sex also plays an important role in the protagonist’s letter, yet his sexual fantasies do nothing to redeem his potency. Instead, the fantasies reveal continued alienation and isolation:

I’ll climb into bed to find you next to me, wake up in the morning and there you’d be. As I open my eyes you’ll already be getting out of bed, and I’ll hear

you zipping your dress. There I'd be – and you know how delicate the zipper on a dress can be – well I'd just shut my eyes and pretend to be asleep. I wouldn't even set my eyes on you...

In the pitch-black of night – I'll install special blinds on my windows to make the place extra pitch-black – of course, I wouldn't see your face. I'd know nothing, not your age or weight. So I wouldn't lay a hand on you, either (61-2).

Although he would be in the same room with the woman, he would never see her, and he would never touch her. There is no sense of “sex” in this sexual fantasy other than the fact that the woman would dress herself in the morning. His inability to consummate his relationship with the woman has more to do with his lack of willingness to think of himself and the woman as individuals than a physical incapability to perform sexually. In the darkness of the room, he does not need to see her, he does not need to differentiate her from any other woman. He places himself in a realm of non-differentiation, and he prefers to remain in situations where he does not have to think of himself or others as unique people with unique minds.

Sex is commonly used in Murakami's novels, but it is rarely titillating. Instead, the act of sex is a form of communication and understanding, which is complicated when the narrator is unable to perform. Giorgio Amintrano writes that Murakami has a tendency to use sex as a means of understanding in *Norwegian Wood*: “The narrator's process of getting to know women is paralleled by his loss of control over their sexuality” (329). This motif is slightly different, though no less important in “The Kangaroo Communiqué.” Instead of getting to know the woman, which he obviously has no desire to do, the loss of sexual control propels him to an understanding of himself: he is unwilling to individuate himself from anyone. Before reading the letter, this was not a problem, but this woman has caused him to reevaluate the cookie-cutter production of salary men. After his sexual fantasy fizzles, he compares it to his thoughts about commuters on the train:

You see, it's like this:

Sometimes, though, it will strike you that each and every one of those passengers is a distinct individual entity. Like, what does this one do? Or why on earth do you suppose that one's riding the Ginza Line? Or whatever. By then it's too late. You let it get to you and you're a goner.

Looks like that businessman's hairline is receding, or the girl over there's got such hairy legs I bet she shaves at least once a week, or why is that young guy sitting across the aisle wearing that awful tie? Little things like that. Until finally you've got the shakes and you want to jump out of the car then and there.

Why, just the other day ... I was on the verge of pressing the emergency-brake button by the door. (62-3)

Again, there is a sense that the protagonist is unable or unwilling to grasp, or is very disturbed by the idea that everyone around him is an individual. By the time he gets around to imagining the other passengers as individuals, he panics. This means that he has been indoctrinated into the typical salary man mindset, that of unquestioning acceptance of all things, which is obviously an unhealthy state of mind outside of the office. He also adds that, although he does have a girlfriend, he cannot see her as an individual: "If I thought about getting married, I'm sure I'd begin taking her seriously, and I'd lose all confidence that I could carry on from that point" (63). His confidence is interrelated with his inability to see himself and anyone else as individuals. Taking his girlfriends seriously would force him to take himself seriously, and then he would become conscious of the mundane nature of his existence. Until he sees everyone else as individuals, he is happy to delude himself into an "ignorance is bliss" lifestyle of daily formulaic repetition in responding to customer complaints. What is striking is that he *is* slowly realizing that his lifestyle is unnatural, like the kangaroo exhibit in the zoo. The protagonist is perhaps sympathizing with the self-imposed isolation of the *hikikomori*. It is these loners who have let those thoughts of individuals "get to" them. Murakami's protagonists always seem to

be somewhat sensitive to what affects those marginalized by the pressures of Japanese society, if they are not marginalized themselves.

Although Murakami is criticizing the salary man doxa of Japanese society, he also offers little in the means of an alternative to it other than social withdrawal, which carries with it some serious ramifications. The theme of complete withdrawal to escape the pressures of society is prominent in *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. The dual protagonists of the novel illustrate the two sides of a spectrum: one office worker who tries, but fails, to fit into Japanese salary man model and another who must assume responsibility for being an individual. I consider these to be the negative and positive *hikikomori*. Both of these characters exhibit characteristics of *hikikomori*, primarily withdrawing from society. Negative *hikikomori* is the absence of choice in becoming withdrawn, and a sense of loss when individuality is achieved. Positive *hikikomori* is characterized by the gains made through becoming an individual.

The first protagonist, the protagonist of the “Hard Boiled Wonderland” part of the novel, is a typical Murakami lone-wolf protagonist, who is ultimately a failed salary man. He is employed as a Calcutec, a data encoder, in near-future Japan, who works freelance for the Professor, who remarks, “Everyone speaks mighty highly of you. You got the knack, got the gumption, you do a crack job. Other than a certain lack of team spirit, you got no strikes against you” (27). Teamwork plays a huge role in the Japanese workplace, so the fact that he is missing this component speaks to both his failure as a salary man, and his tendency to be withdrawn from society. In characterizing himself, the protagonist states, “I wasn’t overly ambitious, wasn’t greedy. Didn’t have family, friends, or lovers” (80). Although salary men are supposed to be relatively unambitious, they are supposed to exhibit supreme levels of heteronormativity. That this character has no family, no friends, and no sexual conquests means that he has failed on another level of being a salary man. Salary men are not meant to be isolated.

If not a salary man, what model of masculinity is this character representing?

His job for the professor eventually leads him to the realization that he is nothing more than a programmed robot, bound to self-destruct – hence his unconscious mind is the “End of the World.” The Professor tells him:

It's your core consciousness. The vision displayed in your core consciousness is the End of the World. Why you have the likes of that tucked away in there, I can't say. But for whatever reason, it's there. Meanwhile, this world in your mind here is coming to an end. Or t'put it another way, your mind will be living there, in the place called the End of the World. (270)

In other words, he is retreating into himself, against his conscious will. This is negative *hikikomori*. Resigned to his fate, this character experiences as much as he can in the moments before his world ends, which is actually a sort of liberation. The Professor tells him, “It's not death. It's eternal life. And you get t'be yourself. Compared to that, this world isn't but a momentary fantasy” (290). Murakami deconstructs conceptions of reality here. What this character had experienced his entire life was not reality because he had been denied his true inner self, and likewise all Japanese are, in a way, denied their inner selves. Therefore, the only way to become an individual, to actually be true to one's self, is to retreat into the core consciousness. He must leave the “Hard Boiled Wonderland,” the only world he knows, and submit to his unconscious self, who, at this point, is an independent entity. The merging of the conscious and the unconscious selves is one that, for all intents and purposes, ends the protagonist's world; the End of the World will supersede the Hard Boiled Wonderland.

On the other hand, the protagonist's separate “true self” is living out his life independent of him, and is actually the narrator for the other half of the novel. Inside of the protagonist's unconscious mind, called the End of the World, he is a Dreamreader, which means that he has to “read” unicorn skulls to recover and interpret dreams. Obviously, this is not an exact replication of the real world, but like a dream, there are some similarities. He, like the first



protagonist, attempts to fit into the rhythm of the society by being gainfully employed. As the Town's Dreamreader, he is given scars on his eyes that mark him. The Gatekeeper stabs his pupils with a knife:

These scars are the sign of the Dreamreader. But as long as you bear this sign, you must avoid the light. Hear me now, your eyes cannot see the light of day. If your eyes look out at the light of the sun, you will regret it. So you must only go out at night or on gray days. When it is clear, darken your room and stay safe indoors. (40)

In his employment, he shares some outward similarities with the *hikikomori*. He cannot go outside during the day, and must stay in his room with no access to the outside world. This externally imposed, yet physically necessary isolation begs comparison to the *hikikomori*, who are condemned by their society to a life of hermetic life.

An additional cause of isolation for this protagonist is his sense of "mind," which is essentially his identity. With the End of the World, there is a place called Town, where, in order to live in peace, the citizens must daily perform rote tasks. From what this protagonist learns from the Colonel, a longtime resident of the End of the World, the thing that sets him apart from the rest of the people is his mind. This is particularly clear when the Colonel notices that the protagonist has fallen in love with the Librarian:

"I must tell you, however, that such love may not be prudent. I would rather not have to say this, but it is my duty."

"Why would it not be prudent?"

"Because she cannot return your feelings. This is no fault of anyone. Not yours, not hers. It is nothing you can change, any more than you can turn back the River."

I rub my cheek with both hands.

"Is this the mind you are speaking of?"

The old officer nods.

“I have a mind and she does not. Love her as I might, the vessel will remain empty. Is that right?”

“That is correct,” says the Colonel. “Your mind may no longer be what it once was, but she has nothing of the sort. Nor do I. Nor does anyone here.” (169)

The protagonist’s mind dooms him to a life of solitude simply because those around him do not have one. In other words, he is an individual in a world of conformists. The result of this sort of society is that it is relatively peaceful. Fuminobu Murakami writes that “*The End of the World* is established through the realization that, in order to avoid the failures of modernism, including wars, it is necessary to diminish the functions of the mind, including both love and respect” (132). However, the novel also seems to be questioning whether overcoming those failures of modernism is worth the loss of mind.

The end of the novel reveals that the protagonist in this world is responsible for the people within it – and that sense of responsibility drives his unresolved search to restore the minds of the people; this in turn means that the protagonist in the Hard Boiled Wonderland must remain forever inside of his mind. Murakami (the critic) explains Susan Napier’s argument about the Dreamreader’s responsibility to the people:

Susan Napier argues that “[i]n this late-twentieth-century world the protagonist feels his responsibilities are to himself...” Although elsewhere in the same book she mentions that the Dreamreader’s concerns with responsibilities “might be seen as in some ways admirable rather than only self-serving... to change the world one must start with oneself...” it seems clear that she interprets the Dreamreader’s decision to remain inside his own postmodern consciousness as an abandonment or at least a deferral of his responsibilities in real life.

(133)

Although Napier feels that the protagonist has abandoned his real life responsibilities, it is obvious to others that this character is merely taking responsibility for a world he had created. Murakami (the critic) points out that Murakami (the author) has said that “as he has created a fictional ‘end of the world,’ it would be a sort of (irresponsible) escape to flee it” (133). In terms of the *hikikomori*, this is a positive form of withdrawal. In other words, the act of being an individual requires taking responsibility. This is applicable to the Japanese social system because, as explained above, young men are put on a path to become salary men who do not question authority, and who therefore do not have to take responsibility for their actions. Murakami critiques this system in *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* while at the same time pointing out that those who do deviate from the norm must accept responsibility for what they have created. In reality, there is a reluctance, by and large, to take such responsibility, especially considering the dependence the Japanese have on their government and social cliques to determine their “acceptable” paths in life. The *hikikomori* are the most likely to assume this responsibility, but at the same time, because of their withdrawal from society, and their overall reluctance to see themselves as being in a position of empowerment, they, too evade this task.

#### 2.4 Conclusion

The *hikikomori* are one of the biggest social problems facing Japan today, and it is clear that there is no easy solution for it. However, embracing the *hikikomori* as a kind of masculinity responding to dissatisfaction with the salary man model of masculinity is not necessarily a satisfactory method of dealing with the problem. It is all the same undeniable that there are traits relatable to previously established masculinities that verify their need for both being driven by their passions and desiring to be an individual; it truly is a gender of solitude. Unless some changes are made in Japanese society, which I feel can only occur through government mandates, these shut-ins will continue to dwell just beyond the public’s consciousness. Figures in literature have rewritten the *hikikomori* as a hero of sorts; although this has done little to

increase awareness of the real-life psychological problems of those facing the prospect of being an individual in a conformist society.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ANDROGYNE PATRIARCHY

In 2003, the Japanese music magazine *Foolsmate* hosted a concert festival called “Beauti-fools.” It featured a host of bands from all over Japan who were of the same genre: Visual kei, or Visual group. Although the festival focused on the aesthetics of androgyny, several of the bands, all of which were comprised of young men, combined the aesthetic beauty inherent in androgyny with deviant and even grotesque pseudo-sexual acts, which were met with raucous applause. Additionally, because of the ambiguity of gender, several of the acts performed these sexual acts without exuding sexual appeal, making theirs an indefinable facet of male beauty work; this calls into question the measure of “masculinity” in Japan. One of the bands in particular, Merry, featured a performance that greatly calls into question both the limits of androgyny and masculinity and the female gaze. Merry’s vocalist, Gara<sup>9</sup>, pranced around the stage in a state of near undress and rub the front of his pants suggestively, all the while shoving the microphone into his mouth like a ball gag. Due in part to the particular grotesqueness of Gara’s performance and appearance, the act, though sexual in nature and intended for titillation, instead, it comes across as an act of anger and self-punishment. The audience, mostly female, encourages all of these seemingly startling acts, applauding and screaming in what seems to be voyeuristic pleasure. A major component of this kind of performance is audience participation, whether it be in the form of a unified *para para*, or synchronized dance moves, or, as is the case with Merry’s audience, in sharing the performer’s sexual deviancy. The kind of pleasure or satisfaction gained by the audience is purely that of the audience and not the performer; the performer is merely acting while what the audience experiences is something they believe to be genuine; this conception of performance-as-reality seems to be a

common theme in my study of Japanese culture. What makes these kinds of performances so shocking is the fact that they are not only commonplace, but also expected; and they arise from a notoriously conservative and traditional milieu. Japan has, for the last few decades at least, worked long and hard to establish their position as an economic powerhouse in the world; and in doing this, they have created a doxa of masculinity that revolves around businessmen, capitalism, and conformity. While these characteristics of manhood are necessarily Japanese, theirs is an adaptation of Western masculinity. Visual kei performers undermine the salary man model of masculinity through their outrageous and androgynous performances, and yet through it all they maintain their traditional Japanese gender binaries. I feel that this phenomenon is due to a desire to restore pre-Western Japanese inclusive masculinity. These men are androgynous, yet masculine, which signifies a return to their pre-Western, authentically Japanese masculinity, something that docile and unassuming salary men dare not do, despite their assumed masculinity as businessmen, a sign that they have been outmoded. Disturbing, desexualizing (yet resexualizing), deconstructing (yet reconstructing) masculinity, these bands are part of an inclusive masculine matrix informed by Japan's sexually complicated history.

Visual art has been used in Japan as a tool of resistance, and Visual kei performances are no exception. Artists such as Mari Tanigawa use visual art to draw attention to cultural taboos such as the growing number of homeless in Tokyo. On stage in the Terpsichore Art Space in Tokyo:

[She] performs in shredded, layered remains of Tokyo's instantly obsolete fashions, obsessively manoeuvring [sic] an expansive debris of consumer products which envelops the floor of the performance space; that excessive mass of objects evokes both the slowly accumulated possessions of the Tokyo homeless and the rapidly discarded possessions of the city's near-professional young consumers. (176)

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<sup>9</sup> Gara is not his real name. Virtually all Japanese artists go by assumed professional names.

As the name would suggest, Visual Kei focuses on visual appearance more so than the actual music, and like other visual artists they use the stage to respond to cultural taboos. The popular band Dir en grey has written songs about abortion, the *hikkikomori*, and Japan's oft-forgotten imperialistic history. Although the music itself is highly influenced by Western rock n' roll, the aesthetic of Visual Kei bands is clearly a product of traditional Japanese culture. These bands are typically composed of young men who wear makeup, dress in revealing, sometimes feminine clothing, and perform "fan service," in which they mock sexual acts on stage with their fellow male band mates, titillating their largely female audience. Occasionally, bands incorporate elements of bondage and sado-masochism into their stage costumes and performances, further distinguishing them from the heteronormative and conservative society for which Japan is well known, and which these bands are so clearly resisting. Bryan Reesman notes:

Josephine Yun, author of the book *Jrock, Ink.*, explains that visual kei originated in the late 1970s and early 1980s as Japan's rock scene began cultivating its own identity. "It was rock 'n roll, punk rock, glam and metal with a twist — a twist just as angry and rebellious as what came before it — but a poetic one, artistic, with painstaking attention to detail," Yun explains.  
(Grammy.com)

Ultimately, as Yun suggests, this is a genre of music that subverts conventional patriarchal gender coding in an effort to form a distinct, non-Western, Japanese "rock scene" identity. One of the first bands to establish the Visual genre was X Japan, which was active in the 1980s and 1990s (see Figure 3.1). Their outrageous hairstyles and makeup set them apart from Western musicians making similar music; it was the beautification of the performers that allowed them to break away from the Western mould and institute a Japanese genre of rock music, providing a model for almost every Visual band to follow. Although similar movements in music are identifiable in the West based on visual appeal, such as the 1980s "hair band" movement, and

their influence on Visual Kei artists is evident, in the Japanese context, the performance becomes something quintessentially Japanese. What this new and unique Japanese identity establishes is a sense of ante-Western masculinity. Yun continues, “Japan has a history of dressing outlandishly and cross-dressing since ancient times, and a man in touch with his feminine side is viewed as a healthy, balanced individual” (Grammy.com). Visual kei is not the creation of a new masculinity, but rather a return to an always already inclusive masculinity that exists underneath a fabricated Western hegemonic masculinity, as we have seen previously in our survey of the history of Japanese gender construction, especially in Kabuki. In fact, although there are several Visual kei bands composed of women, they are generally assumed to be men. Obviously this form of androgyny exhibits characteristics that are contrary to Western expectations of androgyny, which is that androgyny disrupts male/masculine, female/feminine binaries. Instead, this genre encapsulates Japanese history, rejecting Western notions of gender and appealing to a more traditionally inclusive masculinity thereby upholding a *Japanese* gender binary.





Figure 3.1 X Japan, an example of early Visual kei styles. Their colorful look set the standard for bands in the genre to follow.

Traditional Kabuki Theater, as well as its illustrious and androgynous *onnagata*, the female role played by men, is directly related to the Visual kei movement in music performance. Similar elements of cross-dressing and privileging male androgyny over female androgyny,

while dissociating sex from gender, serve to tie the two movements more explicitly together. Japanese tradition dictates that male inclusivity is dependent on female exclusivity; this means that during the span of time in which masculinity is inclusive, femininity is absolute and narrowly defined. During the post-war era, women were especially confined to specifically female roles and identities. According to Yuko Hasegawa, women at this time were supposed to be both “mother and young girl to their dependant male boyfriends” who were crushed by Western hypermasculinity (128). These roles for women come about as men were socialized into a series of dependencies: on mothers, schools, and bureaucracies. These dependencies that men develop are constructed as a way for the bureaucratic patriarchy to remain in control. Grown women are traditionally housewives and mothers, therefore when contemporary women enter the public sphere there is not a particular set of gender coding for them.

What is naturally biological women experience instead of liberation from gender roles in public is a compelling call to reinforce them; they are either young girl or mother in private and public spheres. In the meantime, men have become adept at subverting their Western-modeled patriarchy, especially during periods in which this patriarchal model has failed (i.e. during the 1990s when the economic bubble burst). Inclusive masculinity thwarts Western hegemony, and the Visual kei boom of the mid-1990s was (and continues to be) both a symptom and the cause of the perceived failure of the orthodox masculinity legitimated by salary men. By “perceived failure” I mean that the youth of Japan, as evidenced by the strong movement away from corporate hegemonic masculinity in the so-called “Lost Generation,” are disenchanted by the lifestyles of the salary men and therefore have rejected them as a legitimate mode of masculinity. These young men do not set themselves on the same course of continual employment established by previous generations of men. Visual Kei is another outlet for these disenchanted men (both as performers and as consumers) to rise against the establishment.

### 3.1 Subverting Manly Men

Gender performance as postulated by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, essentially eliminates the majority of the role the physical body plays in masculinity and femininity. Performative gender deconstructs the sex/gender binary; in other words, those of the male sex do not necessarily behave in a masculine manner – and those who behave in a masculine manner do not necessarily belong to the male sex; gender is instead dictated by particular rules specific to a particular culture. Moreover, Butler states that subversion of gender is only possible “from within the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself” (127). What that means is that if and when subversion occurs, it will utilize those prescriptions set in place by the power of the patriarchy. These laws are tacitly agreed to by society, and in Japan especially, the system of socialization in place works to deter any sort of deviation from the norm; and should such a deviation exist, it must take place using these norms in an abnormal way. Butler also argues, “Law is not literally internalized, but incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body; there the law is manifest as the essence of their selves, the meaning of the soul, their conscience, the law of their desire. In effect, the law is at once fully manifest and fully latent” (183). In other words, gender law is not explicit, but made normal through repeated performance, and is never actually visible except when performed on the bodies those laws govern; the law is a social construct developed in each individual through the society in which they are entrenched. In terms of gender, then, the performance of gender is dictated and constructed by the social law; and subversion of this law is therefore to perform a gender that is counter to social expectations. In other words, androgyny and cross-dressing are theoretically subversive acts.

But there is another aspect of law that helps dictate subversion. Georges Bataille writes in *Death and Sensuality*: “There exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed” (63). He admits that transgression is

approved for the precise reason that the order cannot exist without transgression; in order for law to reign, it must develop a taboo. One cannot exist without the other; yet in many respects they contain elements of the other. Bataille goes on to say that binary oppositions exist for the purposes of defining one another: “Human society is not only a world of work. Simultaneously – or successively – it is made up of the profane and the sacred, its two complementary forms. The profane world is the world of taboos. The sacred world depends on limited acts of transgression” (67-68). What this means is that societal laws are based on dichotomies that act upon one another to reinforce cultural values. In terms of gender, this means that masculinity does not exist without a distinct feminine other. With this in mind, the idea of androgyny as belonging to the gap between the feminine and the masculine undermines the distinct genders of masculinity and femininity because it destabilizes the terms of those genders, thereby not reifying masculinity or femininity.

Butler writes that gender can be subverted because it is set on a tenuous boundary between the “inner” and “outer” self in an effort to use gender to stabilize and control society; but the boundary is “confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes the outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished” (182). The boundary between the inner and outer self is so delicate because it does not actually exist. Patriarchal forces have instilled in the individual the Bataillean law of distinct genders because it seeks identification with no positive terms; meaning that patriarchy is only defined by what it is not; gender identification in turn helps the patriarchy identify itself as both male and masculine. Gender taboos are then set up to instill a fear of transgression; androgyny is a taboo act that is, in the Bataillean sense, socially constructed as an act of transgression against the establishment of masculinity because it reaffirms no gender, which is what the patriarchy needs in order to remain dominant. However, cross-dressing is only a taboo act when the farce is discovered. This means that merely breaking the rules, performing one sex when it is socially acceptable to perform the other, is not

actually upsetting the order, it rather reaffirms distinct gender binaries. The act of cross-dressing still holds elements of normative sexuality based on two genders (i.e. male and female). It is only in the middle ground, between genders, in a place that is neither taboo nor transgressed, that true subversion occurs – it is here that the patriarchy cannot find itself. Androgyny, because of its stance as a both and neither form of gender identification, falls into this space. However, the Japanese context is markedly different from the West, in that it supports two simultaneous patriarchies: Western orthodox and Japanese inclusive. The taboos inherent in Western orthodox patriarchy are different from those in the inclusive patriarchy, so much so that where one is subverted the other is upheld.

Japanese androgyny is only subversive within the context of the Western hegemonic model of masculinity established by the occupation of Japan by the United States after World War II. This is because the Japanese model of patriarchy, one that is pluralistic, includes androgyny as part of the patriarchy. The androgyne's ability to disrupt gender binaries in this context is therefore too dubious to be relied upon in order for gender deconstruction to take place. Judith Halberstam makes the claim in *Female Masculinity* that in order to truly disrupt the patriarchal encoding of the gender binary we must “leave the androgyne behind” (215). Essentially, in Halberstam's view, androgyny disrupts no binary at all; rather it enforces gender coding through reminding the viewers of the androgyne that there are still two sexes working in unity through the androgynous body. Thus, she proposes her third gender, the Female Masculine. This is not an androgynous body, according to Halberstam, but a distinct gender with its own set of codes. According to Halberstam's theory of the female masculine, though, the female or male may perform female masculinity, although she privileges the female. It is interesting to think of how a man might be capable of exhibiting a female masculinity – and it could be argued that Visual kei participates in this exhibition to a certain extent. However, it seems to me that the female masculine exists only within the confines of hegemonic masculinity. Without a sense of androgyny, the female masculine is still entangled in binaries,

contrary to what Halberstam claims. The pluralism found in the Japanese context excludes this sort of thinking; and because of its outright rejection of orthodox Western gender binaries, inclusive masculinity seems to throw any concept of actual subversive androgyny to the wayside. This is especially true in the Japanese cultural milieu, a milieu composed of subcultures, where a man can dress as a woman without being considered homosexual or necessarily deviant. Japan does have gender codes, but they are not as restrictive for masculinity as Western orthodox binaries. Japanese visual arts, especially Visual kei, exemplify the inability of the androgyne to subvert gender due to the cultural propensity toward inclusive masculinity, because in contemporary society androgyny, as either a combination or absence of gender, has become characteristic of masculinity.

Visual kei combines elements of the “glam” movement in rock music<sup>10</sup> with traditional Japanese visual arts. Different genres of Visual kei have developed, and each has their own model of performance, though all appear to be more or less ambiguous in terms of gender, and most are influenced by those historical time periods of inclusive masculinity. Eroguro kei bands model their costumes and staging around the *eroguro*, or prewar 20<sup>th</sup> century, period in Japanese history. Other Visual kei bands wear traditional unisex kimonos. Unlike the original *onnagata*, though, male artists in this genre are not models of acceptable forms of femininity, but rather masculinity; especially true of bands who are not signed with major labels, Visual kei has come to represent masculine sexual prowess, ironically, due to its lack of distinct sexuality.

One of the things that the *onnagata* and Visual kei continue to signify is the importance of public, or outer, performance. Men are especially at liberty with their gender performance when in the public (in particular the commercial) sphere. Christine Yano found this to be true of *enka*, or Japanese folk music. She compares the performances of male and female *enka* performers and explains the “apparatuses” by which plurality of masculinities (and singularity of femininity) are constructed in terms of “technologies of gender” (79). These technologies range

from text and music to stage lighting, body movements, and other effects. Yano notes that in terms of costume, “Whereas wearing kimono is the performing norm for females, traditional costuming marks a man’s performance with special significance” (80). Instead of being bound to the kimono or Western suits or tuxedos, men in *enka* (and in the public eye) are allowed the freedom of dress, thereby expressing their plurality. Yano calls this the “many ‘hes,’ some within the same person, each particularized as part of a complex of masculinities, public and private, at work and at play, pulled by conflicting ties” (82). The idea of multiple masculinities being present within the same person is something that is particularly identifiable in the Japanese, who already face a divide between traditional Japanese masculinity and their adopted Western hypermasculine model. Visual kei artists, like their *enka* contemporaries, exemplify this by their dress: using multiple styles, combining them in a way that the Japanese and Western styles coincide, and the work and play styles overlap. For example, many artists wear traditional garments and combine them with modern technological implements. Some bands dress in business suits but have pink hair and wear full make up, others wear traditional school uniforms but have robotic limbs. The inspirations for many of their costumes seem to come from anime and comics, allowing them to recreate worlds of fantasy. Whereas *enka*’s appeal to the blue collar sector of Japanese society allows Yano to use it as the representative of the national perception of masculinity, Visual kei’s appeal to youth culture in Japan provides clues to the future of Japanese masculinity; as the Visual scene experiences changes in expression, those same changes are inevitably felt throughout the nation, particularly in regard to the influx of multiple modes of masculine expression.

### 3.2 Defining Japanese Gender in Performance Art

Visual kei, as an act of gender subversion, only succeeds where it disrupts the gender binary, but, as I have already stated, there are two sets of gender codes at work in Japan. It is important here to establish a distinct cultural and historical definition of Japanese masculinity

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<sup>10</sup> Artists such as David Bowie and Queen made Glam rock famous in the West in the 1970s. It

and femininity in order to illustrate how exactly this binary is confounded. The Japanese have a complex perception of masculinity, due in part to its compulsory and superficial conformity to Western ideals in the period following the era of Modernization and World War II. Nicholas Bornoff, who has studied Japanese sexuality for over eleven years, writes of the early homoerotic nature of Japanese masculinity:

Masculinity was exalted in old Japan not only by the samurai and by the many shoguns who kept legions of pretty pages, but was also rooted in far older religious precepts which may have helped prepare the ground for the way of the warrior to grow. Indeed, the ancient celebration of virility is inherent in certain Shinto rituals. Generally held in winter, and closely associated with purification, the *hadaka matsuri* or naked festivals are exhilarating, exalting and sometimes dangerous. After an icy dip in mountain springs and waterfalls... scores of men and youths wearing only *fundoshi* loincloths leap on top of each other within the confines of a narrow shrine building to form a compact human pyramid (424).

He goes on to admit that even though this act is not particularly homosexual, “the body contact and the physical rejoicing in maleness leave plenty of scope for the latent and potential” (424). Although Bornoff has provided one example, there are actually many religious rites in Japan require near nudity of men while excluding women almost entirely, which I believe goes hand-in-hand with the traditional construct of a plurality of masculinity. At the same time, this example provides evidence of an existing binary of genders due to the exact roles men and women do or do not play in those rites. Outside of religion, the samurai exhibited elements of hegemonic masculinity, though there has always been a cultural subtext of inclusive masculinity. Religious rites offer a glance at pre-modern, pre-Western Japanese concepts of masculinity, which allowed for greater fluidity of masculinity, meaning the definition of masculine was quite broad. Maleness in the religious rites was a corporeal experience, where the performance, laying

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was especially prominent in the UK.



prostrate atop one another, exposes them to the other male bodies above them, making them vulnerable for penetration, which is something Western thinking deems feminine. Within that cultural context, it was not a feminine experience but a celebration of manhood. After the opening of Japan's ports to the West in the mid-nineteenth century, Japan experienced an era of modernization. This meant, according to Midori Matsui, "the acceptance and domestication of Western theories and aesthetics" (142), which of course entails the concepts of Cartesian dualism and gender binaries. Hideaki Mita, a Japanese literary historian, argues that the principle of modernization was "masculine," that it advocated "linear history with economic and cultural progress propelled by intellect." He also believes that a movement of anti-modernism, or reversion to pre-Modern Japan, is "feminine," which means that it makes "little distinction between human and natural (or supernatural) realms, while embracing a multiplicity of time, a coexistence of different historical moments attaining reality through individual or collective memory" (Matsui 143-144). Therefore, to break away from the Western codes of gender, for the Japanese, also necessitates a break with the modern; it is an embracement of a feminine principle of plurality, which is at the heart of Japanese inclusive masculinity.

The Anti-modern Japanese artists were tagged with the term *angura* (adapted from the English word "underground") in the 1960s. According to Matsui, these artists' works sought "a palpable expression of contemporary [sic] spirit in the realistic embodiment of the uniquely Japanese experience" (145). The art emerging from this movement tried to locate an essentially Japanese identity through art. Print comics in the magazine *Garo* became popular in the 1970s with publication of "works of young cartoonists, lyrically depicting the details of their daily life with a sense of isolation and frustrated sexuality" (147). This kind of exposure of mundane activities resonated with the youth. Naturally, there is a kind of subversion inherent in the *angura*, and certain Visual kei bands have taken up this term to categorize their visual style. Angura kei is now a legitimate sub-genre of Visual kei. Bands classified as such dress in traditional Japanese kimono and school or military uniforms. The songs they sing expose the

same sense of isolation and sexual frustration as the comics of the *angura* movement, as well as reveal a longing for a return to a bygone era.

The art produced by Visual kei artists is an act of both gender transgression and nationalism, longing for the more matronly version of Japan that existed before Westernization. In this respect, they succeed in performing subversive androgyny – subverting the modern/pre-modern dichotomy. They are probably the most Kabuki-like of the Visual kei subgenres and as such, they hold the most power to subvert Western gender binaries through historical and gender ambiguities. Visual kei has its roots in the traditional theater – particularly in Kabuki, which was a form of entertainment popularized before Japanese modernization. Recalling Jennifer Robertson’s findings that during the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, “androgyny was embodied by the *onnagata*, the Kabuki theater actor specializing in girls’ and women’s roles” (422), it is clear that Visual kei performers are the new *onnagata*; this means that they carry with them not only the connotations of drag and androgyny that the *onnagata* embodied, but also the pre-modern spirit of femininity that anti-modernists seek to repossess. In the Japanese context, this spirit of femininity is included in the traditional patriarchal structure and therefore actually a type of feminine masculinity. Marjorie Garber notes that the transvestite figure in the Kabuki “functions simultaneously as a mark of gender undecidability and as an indication of category crisis,” and she calls this category crisis, “a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable” (Garber 125). Garber is referring only to male transvestitism, though, which supports the traditional Japanese notion that the male figure is the only permeable body. Male Visual kei artists such as Mana exploit this concept of the permeable male body through their ability to cross-dress and pass as women. Therefore, Visual kei and other *angura* artists who perform drag and androgyny are also reifying traditional Japanese masculinities

However, dressing in the traditional manner alone is not enough to subvert clear gender boundaries (although it is subversive to Westernization); in addition, these bands must de-emphasize their gender. This is achieved in Visual kei by taking part in some recent

movements of acceptable Japanese masculinity, namely male beauty work. Several bands, such as Malice Mizer, use makeup to overemphasize female beauty (see Figure 3.2). Mana, the band's guitarist, is the quintessential contemporary *onnagata*. He is so extreme in his feminine fabrication that to this day, even though Malice Mizer has disbanded, there are no known recordings of his voice; it is thought that his voice would reveal his masculinity and break the illusion of his femininity. In other words, he has become the *onnagata* onstage and off, and therefore must be somewhat accepted in society. But is he accepted as a man or a woman? Traditional *onnagata* were considered by some theorists to be fully female by virtue of their roles on stage. Mana seems to be allowed to embody the female role he plays in society because of this tradition – allowed to become a woman as was done during the pre-modern era – even though most of the gender codes in Japan have been overtaken by Western dualism. The *onnagata* might be a figure used to thwart Western influence, but that influence is something that once known cannot be ignored. This is clearly the case with the dynamics of Malice Mizer as a band. Although Mana clearly toys with gender on a level subversive to Western gender binaries, Malice Mizer's vocalists were strikingly masculine, although beautiful. Their role was to play the "hero" to Mana's "damsel in distress." Gackt, who was the primary vocalist for Malice Mizer, is still an influential figure in male beauty magazines. He is a figure that conflates Western gender ideals and the concept of Westernization in Japan. He is not masculine in the same sense that a Western man, or even a salary man would be considered masculine – but nonetheless he is masculine.



Figure 3.2 A promotional photograph of Malice Mizer. They used makeup and elaborate costumes to make themselves appear more androgynous than X Japan.

Inclusive masculinity in Japan has come to focus on male beauty not just among celebrities, but also among all Japanese men. Gackt is the product of a society that has come to value male beauty aesthetics. Laura Miller notes that Visual kei performers set an example for all men: “Some observers claim that the male styles found in visual-*kei* have inspired the interest in eyebrow shaping, skin care, and other beauty work among ordinary men” (152). She goes on to explain that performers such as Gackt have themselves been influenced by “girls’ culture,” such as *bishounen* (or ‘beautiful young boy’) comics, and not Western culture:

J-Pop artists such as Gackt, Hyde, Izam of Shazna, and others seem to have all stepped out of the pages of girls' comics onto the music stage, providing living manifestations of readers' fantasy men. The blue hair of J-Pop boys is not modeled after Anglo-Saxons but after Japanese *manga* [comic book] characters. Male images in *manga* have their own complex histories and meanings, and while some critics perceive a type of deracialization at work in them, it is also true that their hybrid ideal for male appearance does not reflect hypermasculine Western norms. If the representations of men in comics do not look like Japanese to outsiders, neither can one say that they look like foreigners or "white" people either. (152)

Miller assesses that the kind of masculinity presented in Visual kei is indeed not Western, but based on Japanese culture. The hybridity of their masculinity reflects the fluidity of Japanese masculinity in its ante-Western milieu. What does this mean in terms of the subversive nature of male androgyny in Japanese patriarchy? Miller quotes Japanese social critic Chizuko Ueno, who writes, "Even when it cloaks itself in femininity... patriarchy is patriarchy" (154). Ueno coined the term "transvestite patriarchy" to describe this trend. Visual kei participates and propagates the transvestite patriarchy of Japan, which means that it cannot subvert its own cultural concept of gender.

The transvestite patriarchy is a relatively new, yet cyclical, occurrence in Japan, and ironically its hegemonic equivalent, which came about in the mid-twentieth century, has played a decisive role in its (re)creation. The Japanese hypermasculine patriarchy has tried to cover up its "unmasculine" past through the creation of the culture of cuteness. Hasegawa claims that as a result of the crushing defeat of Japan by the United States, Japan's patriarchy became, as modeled on its new Western overlords, hypermasculine by creating the concept of *kawaii*,<sup>11</sup> the

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<sup>11</sup> The word *kawaii* (literally "fair love") can refer to things that are "cute," "pretty," "lovely," and, according to Yuko Hasegawa, "also implies something precious: something that we are drawn

Japanese word for “cute”: “There is a strong connection between the infanticization [resulting from the ubiquity of the *kawaii* movement] of post-war culture in Japan and the establishment of a system of patriarchal control as a result of the psychological sense of despair and loss of confidence among the Japanese” (128). The Western-influenced patriarchy in Japan, therefore, established the concept of *kawaii* in order to redeem its masculinity – in a very Western way establishing a binary. To be *kawaii* is to be feminine, while at the same time carrying connotations of androgyny, sexlessness, or prepubescence. The Japanese word for infanticization, *youjika*, has an implied meaning of “potential for transformation,” according to Hasegawa (127). She goes on claim:

One meaning [of *youjika*] is an immaturity in the sense of an incomplete identity, a hollowness or unisexuality, that is, a sexuality that has yet to be distinguished or differentiated. The other meaning can be interpreted as something that is still developing, where there is a potential for transformation, the third sex, or intentionally remaining in an undetermined state. (127-8)

It is this prepubescent state that many Visual kei artists, as living *bishounen* represent; its importance in Japanese culture being that as a person exhibiting cuteness, one can avoid the responsibilities of adulthood, which more and more is becoming a frightening ordeal. The ties between this state of arrested development and androgyny are quite clear, as they are both methods of escapism, although androgyny seems more likely to be a by-product of escapism and not necessarily a form of it. Miller writes that the hype around the *bishounen* has been argued as an escape from Japan’s rigid sexism: “Some scholars have suggested that [comics] serve as vehicles for girls to fantasize themselves as these characters and to thereby escape gender role restrictions, a type of displacement necessitated by a sexist culture” (153).

Although women might get to read and fantasize about their freedom from the sexism of Japanese culture, it is only the male Visual kei artists who have in actuality turned the tables

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towards and which stimulates one’s feeling of wanting to protect something that is pure and

against the hypermasculine patriarchy by using cuteness as a tool to reject their authority by remaining cute and *bishounen* well into adulthood. At the same time they are reinforcing the rule of the transvestite patriarchy, which also affords women no actual escape from sexism.

Further establishing the transvestite (and *kawaii*) patriarchy are the many television talk shows featuring drag queens and “new half” as hostesses or regular guests. The new half are, admittedly, a very hard category to define; Wim Lunsing equates it with “what in Western contexts may be called ‘chicks with dicks’ or ‘she-male,’ i.e. men with breasts acquired through surgery and/or the use of oestrogen” (27). Bornoff finds that, to the largely female audience, “far from being seen as outlandish or freakish, it [drag] was extremely cute” (423). This form of *kawaii* is subversive to Western gender codes because, as Hasegawa states, “Intentionally remaining in a state of *kawaisa* (cuteness), an undefined or indeterminate state in which ‘determination’ (maturity) is never reached, has the potential to perform a political function of undermining current ideologies of gender and power” (140). The “undefined” in this case serve to shock and disrupt the accepted gender binary simply through the act of being undefined; they do not act as a determiner for patriarchal gender.

However, although drag, cross-dressing and Visual kei are subversive to contemporary Japanese (i.e. Western) gender binaries, they are not disrupting any traditional Japanese gender codes. Visual kei, for all of the genre’s deviant and overt sexuality, adheres to models of Japan’s inclusive masculine past. It serves as a reminder of the ubiquity of masculinity in the past. In fact, Visual kei has adopted both the *angura* sentiment of anti-modernity and the *kawaii* appeal to mass consumers to produce a compelling picture of contemporary Japanese inclusive masculinity. Merry uses the “collective memory” of Japanese *eroguro*, erotic and grotesque, combined with unisex *kawaisa* to deconstruct established gender roles. The *eroguro* and *angura* aspect of the performance comes across, for the most part, in the non-musical components of the show, such as the font man’s use of calligraphy and the costumes they

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innocent” (128). See: *Consuming Bodies*.

wear. Gara, the band's vocalist, is known for not speaking during the concerts, but instead writing his messages to the audience using traditional Japanese calligraphy. This part of the performance is an example of Merry's use of *angura* elements because calligraphy is something that is essentially Japanese. It is also anti-modern because it denies anyone outside of the Japanese culture an understanding of the messages he writes to the audience, in turn it is also a reference to the period before Japan was opened to the West. Additionally, during the Beautifulfools concert, Merry wore World War II Japanese Imperial Army uniforms. Without even playing a note, the image they present is one of anti-modernity, or a revision of the past. Immediately, the audience is clued in to the nostalgia inherent in the *angura* appeal to a pre-occupation Japan, a time when the nation was known for its military prowess. Though this image is inherently tied with a kind of imperialistic machismo and high male sexuality, Gara displays his sexual apathy through pantomimed failed orgasm; throughout the entire show he attempts to arouse himself and fails. It is through this inability to achieve sexual satisfaction that the *kawaii* charm comes into play; Gara is essentially transformed into a non-sexual prepubescent through his lack of sexual satisfaction. This is not "cute" in the way that pinkness and Hello Kitty are considered cute; it offers Gara the opportunity to show himself to be a non-threatening, non-sexual being (harmless). The idea, and the market attraction, of this type of "cute" performance, is that it forces the women in the audience to want to become a provider of comfort – to take a feminine role as a mother or as a sexual partner – for the artist.

Although there is much to be said about the pervasiveness of *kawaisa* in Japanese culture, I would like to look at the idea of the *kawaisa* culture as being yet another plurality: one that encapsulates both orthodox cuteness (*kawaii*) and creepiness (*kowai*). The visual aesthetic of most Visual kei artists has centered on things like bright primary colors, childlike whimsies, and ethereal beauty; however, complications to Miller's assessment of Visual kei's "beauty" or feminine aesthetic arise when considering contemporary movements in Visual kei that work to oppose traditional male beauty work. Newer Visual bands are moving away from the traditions



established by formative bands like X Japan, which emphasized feminine beauty. Less importance is being placed on overt and ethereal male beauty work, and thematic costumes have generally become passé; these kinds of performances reached their height of popularity in the mid-1990s. Its decline has come about at the same time as hegemonic masculinity with the decline of economic progress and the perceived failure of the salary man, by the youth of Japan, as a model of masculinity. It is still evident that there is a kind of inclusivity of masculinity being presented within the genre, but it is subtler. As one fan told me, “Nowadays [Visual kei] is not so big in Japan.” What she meant was, instead of donning costumes and role-playing on stage, many new Visual acts are opting to wear more common, typically Western-style clothing such as formal suits and casual jeans, which are characteristically masculine; therefore it seems that they see keystones of masculinity as playthings. That being said, elements of subversion and inclusive masculinity are still inherent within the contemporary movement. Makeup is perhaps the most ubiquitous tool of androgynous performance. Virtually all members of Visual bands are, as their predecessors, still fully made-up before every show; the only difference in the contemporary movement is that there is a split between those made up to look beautiful and those made to look frightening. Both of these styles are participating in the tradition of the transvestite patriarchy, but in a way, it expands beyond just transvestitism; because of this new and harsher style, Visual kei supports the rise of an androgyne patriarchy.

### 3.3 Merry: Erotic, Grotesque, and Underground

As mentioned previously, a large majority of contemporary Japanese pop culture is produced for a primarily Japanese audience, which means that Visual kei is meant first and foremost for the Japanese to consume; in other words, it relies more on its traditional subtext and less on conventional Western values like other cultural products meant for global consumption. In fact, the popularity of Visual kei outside of Japan is quite a shock to most Japanese. In 2004, I spent some time in Japan and lived with a family that had two daughters, both of whom were surprised that I had heard of the movement. They wanted to know how I

found out about Visual kei, and how well I understood it; and I told them that my exposure was limited to what was available on the Internet. It is not surprising that most Japanese artists produce music that is not available to or deemed sellable on the global market. However, this is especially true with Visual kei because much of their aesthetic is threatening to Western style patriarchy. Japanese also appear to prefer to be as unambiguous as their Western counterparts in what is produced for non-Japanese consumption. Japan has struggled to be thought of as a Western, modern nation, and to have a cultural product such as Visual Kei broadcast worldwide would undermine their ability to seem relatable to the West. Since, to the Japanese, perception is more important than reality, it is important to their governing body to appear Westernized, which is something that many Technology and mostly illegal pirating of music is how many people outside of Japan become interested in Visual kei if they cannot purchase albums and singles for import from Japanese stores. To (its very limited) Western audiences, Visual kei is often seen as mere cross-dressing due to a misunderstanding of Japanese cultural history. An understanding of the purpose of the *angura* movement is critical in order to comprehend the movement; and this purpose is to return Japan to its pre-Western state. Visual kei promotes inclusive masculinity, which rejects the contemporary Western-cum-Japanese ideal of manhood encapsulated by the salary man.

I am purposefully being vague in my use of the term androgyny regarding Visual kei because there are several different modes of androgyny at play in terms of Japanese culture. As mentioned above, in contemporary Japan cuteness is valued; but cuteness can take on a rather grotesque and pedophilic nature when taken to the extreme, which is often incorporated into performances by Visual kei artists. The interplay between cute and creepy, or *kawaii* and *kowai* is especially prevalent in Merry's visual performances. In the introduction to this chapter, I mentioned the vocalist's antics at a concert, which were not surprising for anyone in the audience (save myself and any other Westerner viewing it). Gara, the band's vocalist, is known for being somewhat enthusiastic and acrobatic on stage; but these actions are not without

purpose. He performs a kind of androgyny that I will refer to as *kowai* (see Figure 3.3). *Kowai* androgyny works in such a way as to thoroughly disturb the audience so that they ignore any gender performance. A similar Western concept would be to say that zombies, ghosts, and other monsters are androgynous simply because we cannot see any type of gender portrayed on their bodies (or lack thereof); zombies are not particularly masculine or feminine. They are *kowai*. It is the opposite of being cute; Gara acts like a demon-possessed Japanese man through his staged gyrations and extreme visual effects. He will typically find a time during the concert to climb on the structure of the venue, sometimes singing while hanging upside down from the ceiling; he is also famous for drinking the ink he writes with, spitting it out, and spreading it all over his body.

Merry is an *eroguro* band, which means that they perform Visual kei with elements characteristic of the 1930s *eroguro*, 'erotic and grotesque,' period of Japan. The era is typified by the phrase *ero guro nansensu*, or 'erotic grotesque nonsense.' Miriam Silverberg writes that this phrase "has been the means to make sense of a culture represented [by Japanese historians] as decadent – a culture ostensibly eager to celebrate the degradation wrought by sensual pleasures while ignoring the pleas of party politics and the unharnessed militancy in the streets" (xv). Silverberg goes on to explain that this culture "in no small part included fantasies, language, and gestures sold and created by 'consumer subjects,' including those rendered down and out by the vicissitudes of capitalism" (xvi). The decadence of the era combined with the increased military presence and the dawn of mass consumerism produced a period of excess and nationalism. In itself, this phrase suggests the confusion of the era as well. On the one hand, the erotic is in essence full of brightness and characteristically *kawaii* whereas the grotesque is dark and typically *kowai*. Putting these two terms together is nonsensical, but that is exactly what *eroguro* performers accomplish. The imagery Merry uses during performances such as the Beauti-fool's Fest concert is reminiscent of the era: Military costumes, Western style suits, bright colors, makeup used to both beautify and disfigure their faces, and erotic acts

Gara performs on stage, all of which reiterate the era's vitality and "nonsense." The changing of costumes from military style to Western suits signifies the transition of the Japanese from a warrior state to an occupied nation. The make up on their faces, which remains the same grotesque style throughout, insinuates a general feeling of disillusionment with the militaristic and Western models of masculinity, expressing their feelings of doubt while offering an alternative to those masculinities: androgyny.



Figure 3.3 Merry's frontman, Gara, performing at Beauti-fool's Fest, 2003

The duality of the erotic and grotesque aspects of the band highlights the deconstruction and reconstruction of Japanese masculinity occurring in their performances. Merry has chosen to represent the prewar Japanese male as both glorified and horrific. Imagery used in Visual kei mostly (but not always) signifies the kind of music a particular band performs. The subgenres in Visual kei often have distinct styles of costume; for example, Blam Honey, an industrial band that specializes in producing techno music, dress as androids;

Inugami Circus Dan, an *angura* band, dress in kimono. A feature common to most Visual kei bands is the event surrounding the reveal of their newest look. It will typically be launched in promotion for their newest band release (an album or single), and the costumes will generally have something to do with the theme of the release. Several images from *Ultra Veat*, a magazine that promotes Visual kei bands, depict the members of Merry in modified Japanese military uniforms (see Figure 3.4) to promote their album *Modern Garde*, which dealt with Japanese modernization. Their look changes continually, and the military uniforms were short lived, but noticeable is the spectrum of “normalcy” in the band. Several of the band members typically will look as if they are well-dressed 1930s businessmen with makeup used minimally to enhance their normalcy, whereas others look as if they have been in a tragic accident, their suits disheveled and their makeup used to mar their beauty; hence in one image we can see that there are both erotic and grotesque elements in the band’s music.



Figure 3.4 Promotional photographs of Merry dressed in military uniforms and Western style suits.

But it is not only the visuals that are reminiscent of the *eroguro* time period, but the music and lyrics as well. The Beauti-fool’s concert took place as Merry were promoting their

single, “Japanese Modernist.” The lyrics evoke the imagery of pre-war nationalism and military prowess often left unspoken and ignored in contemporary Japan:

Boys! Now, advance

Boys! Now, hold on to our ambition

Together we will steadily fix our eyes before us

Everybody, sky high, now die

What these lyrics refer to is the nationalist rhetoric that influenced military action during the Japanese launch toward expanding their empire. They also expose the folly of this imperialistic idiom – the call to arms and ambition is a call to death. During live performances, Gara will occasionally use a megaphone instead of a microphone, which imparts the feeling that this is a nostalgic call to arms. All of this is set to jazz-inspired rock music, what Merry have termed “retrock,” a shortening of retro rock. Merry reawakens the *eroguro* era in their live performances; and their fans, whether they know it or not, are participating in a recovery of history. What they project about masculinity, especially regarding the masculinity of contemporary Japan, is that it is a poor imitation of Western masculinity. Japan was, before its defeat in World War II, a proud nation with a strong sense of national identity and a strong ideal of masculinity, namely the soldier. However, the Japanese ideal of masculinity as militant is deconstructed in the final line, “Everybody, sky high, now die,” which refers to the *kamikaze* pilots during World War II. This kind of masculinity is depicted as following orders blindly until death, but heard in a contemporary context also invokes salary man masculinity. This more contemporary model of masculinity requires subordination to superiors and a blind willingness to follow orders. Overworked salary men are also known to suffer *karoushi*, which literally translates to ‘death from overwork.’

Through this *kowai* style of androgyny, Merry fully embraces and exhibits Japan’s historical inclusive masculinity while at the same time participating in the *kawaisa* that infantilizes the Japanese; however, though I use the term *kowai*, it is important to note that there

is an element of *kowai* within male beauty. Although I describe Gara as being monstrously aggressive on stage, he is still participating in *bishounen* style beauty at the same time. His eyebrows are immaculately manicured and he flaunts (as well as flagellates) his stylishly slender, minimally muscled body on stage, meeting some of the requirements of contemporary Japanese male beauty, which further indicates his participation in inclusive masculinity. These characteristics alone signify a rejection of Western hypermasculinity; when taken as a whole, this beautiful, cute, and grotesque androgyny signifies his participation in the androgyne patriarchy of inclusive masculinity.

Merry exemplifies an interesting phenomenon found in all models of Japanese androgyny: the *kawaii* factor. Even though Gara is not particularly cute, he does display some characteristics of what is considered cute in Japan – helplessness, vulnerability, and sexlessness. *Kawaii* works in male androgyny to instill in women the sense of motherly obligation; when Gara flings himself around on stage and behaves perversely it sends a message to women that he needs a mother figure. The more troubled he is, the more he needs a woman to soothe him. This is how the Japanese androgyne patriarchy works to undermine the liberties of public female femininity. The feminine “mother” figure is pervasive in Japanese culture, as discussed in Chapter 2, because of the social pressure placed on women to become stay-at-home mothers. She typically plays an important role in the upbringing of children, often playing the role of a single parent. But there is also a more sexual side to the mother figure, which features heavily in *hentai* (pornographic) comics with such titles as “Milk Mama,” by Yuki Yanagi, about a mother who continues to breastfeed her 18 year-old son while at the same time satisfying his sexual needs because of his inability to pursue girls his own age, rendering him slightly impotent (androgynous for lack his of sexual prowess). The mother/girlfriend, in this case, is not a true split – they are the same role, put into that position by the androgyne patriarchy.

### 3.4 Visual Kei: Subversion Through Performance

Visual kei works as a site of subversion because of its position within the public sphere via stage performance. Some of the bands wear clothes that suggest both fantasy sexlessness and budding sexuality. The portrayal of non-sexuality through *kawaii* and *kowai* behavior, and the acceptance it has found within the genre, suggests a larger movement away from hypersexual Western masculinity. In *angura* visual bands, the concept of pre-sexuality is implied through their clothes as well because they are historically placed in a pre-Modern, pre-Westernized Japan, where such performances would have been acceptable as a form of masculinity. While Western binaries are disrupted through this performance style, Japanese binaries are upheld – masculinity is fluid and plural whereas femininity is virtually static. Yano's analysis of the differences between male and female performances in *enka* provides a clear distinction between the gender roles on stage:

*Enka* constructs its men at the levels of song, performance, and performer with greater range and complexity. Whereas women are physicalized into a single ideal (whether or not that ideal is always met), and culturalized as patterned emotion, men are drawn within a range of types. There are not only the masculine stereotypes of *koha* (tough guy) and *nanpa* (romantic)[...], but also combinations and internal contradictions of these two" (81).

This idea of a plurality of masculinities, and the ability of men to perform them while remaining consistently masculine seems to suggest that in the public space of visual performance art, masculinity is a spectrum where femininity is fixed to a single cultural ideal.

The masculinity spectrum also serves to define levels of androgyny identifiable in Visual kei as particularly masculine, and is a key to deciphering the inclusive masculinity cycles found throughout Japanese history. True androgyny, the absence of sexuality and gender, is an extremely subversive feat, one that causes a disruption in the ordered world of binary



oppositions established by patriarchal forces. When Japan underwent the process of modernization in the mid-nineteenth century, it also assumed the ideology of the West. This meant an adoption of the gender binary, which serves to set up rigid roles for both men and women. But Japan also lost its collective memory of acceptable forms of masculinity. To bring about a cultural and collective reawakening of this more “feminine” version of Japanese masculinity, visual artists have set about disrupting the “normative” order founded by the hybrid Japanese patriarchy. Visual kei seeks to unravel the borderlines of tolerable male gender performance through the process of becoming androgynous. This form of subversion is suited for the male to meet male ends, in other words it expands patriarchal power and influence in society, By utilizing the *onnagata* and the *kawaii*, the men in *angura* bands act out androgynous subversion of the Western gender binary. Although the bands use visual tools to subvert these adopted Western gender categories, they uphold Japanese gender binaries. Japanese masculinity has traditionally wavered between being inclusive and being exclusive, and in the current cultural climate, there are multiple modes of masculinity.

In accepting Western concepts of gender, and the Japanese bureaucratic enforcement of Western hegemonic masculinity, traditionally pluralistic masculinity was momentarily pushed to the side; however traditional gender roles were not overcome by this cultural intrusion. In times of economic or political unrest, in which the governing body of Japan appears weak, masculinity reverts from its adopted western model to its more plural, more feminine pre-existing paradigm. Although this fluid model of gender seems poised to undermine patriarchal forces, because the fluidity is focused solely on masculinity, a different patriarchy is exposed – the androgyne patriarchy. Through this alternate patriarchy, femininity performed by biological females is held in stasis, whereas masculinity performed by biological males expands, forging an uneven and impenetrable binary of gender.

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