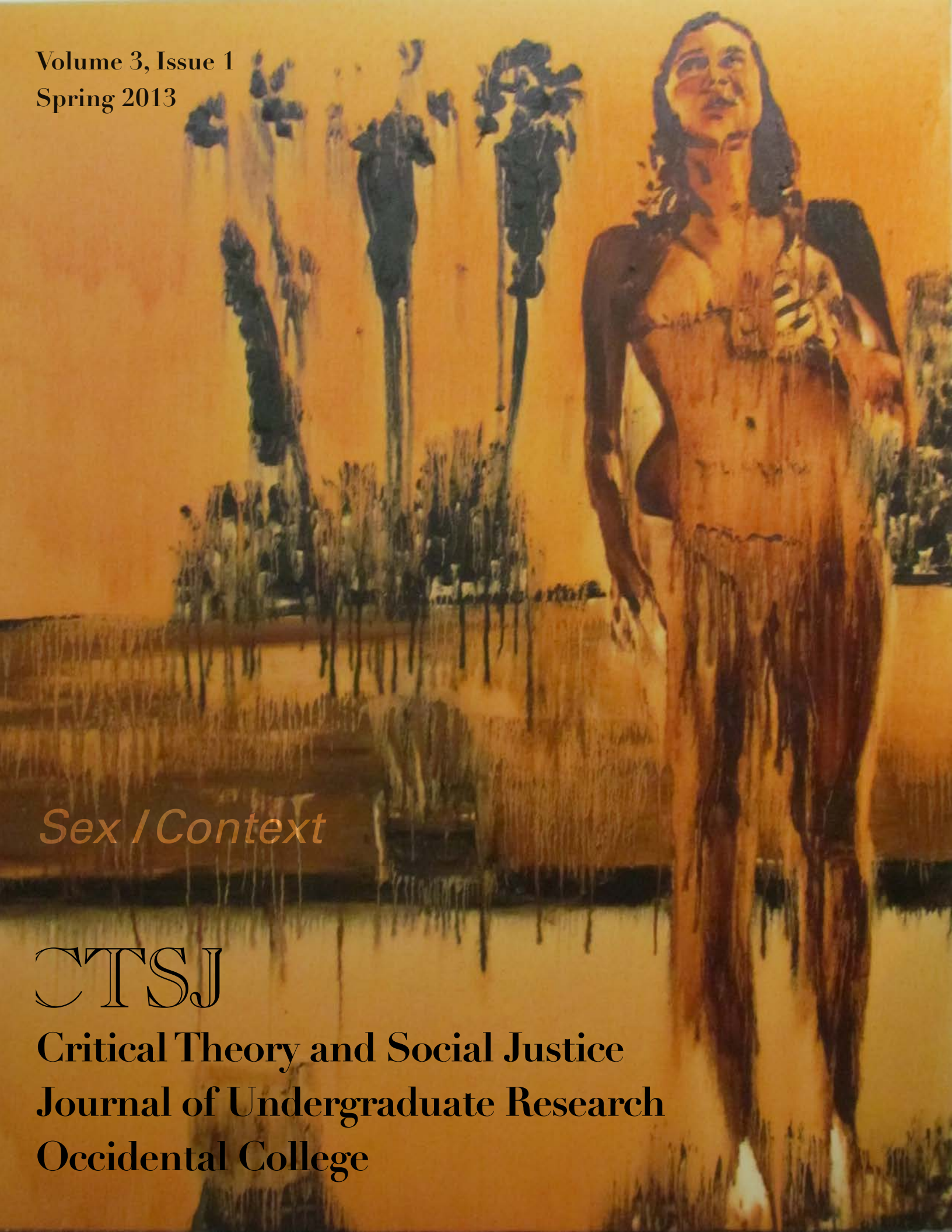


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## Gender Ambiguity and Liberation of Female Sexual Desire in Fantasy Spaces of Shojo Manga and the Shojo Subculture

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*Abstract: This essay examines Keiko Suenobu's shojo manga sensation LIFE in the context of Japan's cultural history of negotiated gender roles, female sexual desire, and alternative subjectivity. Teen female cutting emerges as a literal and figurative opening into a gendered contemporary version of Japan's "Floating World" tradition, portraying scenes ranging from middle-class pleasure culture to interactive fantasy-scapes. Using evidence ranging from the earliest examples of manga's graphic presentation of sexuality to gender regulation in the era of modernization to Western concepts of "lesbian panic," this essay demonstrates how seemingly self-destructive behavior and teenage melancholy in these "young girl comics" challenges normative gender as well as heteronormative sexuality.*

*Keywords: shojo manga, feminism, Japan, gender roles, LIFE (Keiko Suenobu), anime, Japanese teen subculture, Takarazuka Revue Theater*

## Gender Ambiguity and Liberation of Female Sexual Desire in Fantasy Spaces of *Shojo* Manga and the *Shojo* Subculture

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### *LIFE*

In 2006, the comic series *LIFE*,<sup>1</sup> written and illustrated by Keiko Suenobu, won the Kodansha Manga Award for *shojo* manga. Suenobu, known for her work on *Vitamin* and *Happy Tomorrow*, confronts many controversial topics in the 20-volume series *LIFE*, including self-mutilation, rape, and suicide. In Volume 1, the narrative follows Ayumu, a carefree junior high school student who applies to the same high school as her top-of-the-class best friend, Shii-chan. As Ayumu's grades improve, Shii-chan begins to struggle, and eventually, Ayumu is accepted to the school and Shii-chan is not. Shii-chan, resentful, ends their friendship by saying, "I wish you never existed." Having lost her only friend, Ayumu falls into deep depression and begins cutting her wrists. Now attending Shii-chan's dream school without Shii-chan, Ayumu tries to find her place in high school while battling depression and self-mutilation.

During her first class field trip, she befriends Manami, a bright and outgoing girl whose possessive and manipulative tendencies are slowly revealed. Manami confides in Ayumu about her boyfriend and makes Ayumu promise to help her with the relationship, and Ayumu casually agrees. In the final scene, Manami, after meeting with her boyfriend, tells Ayumu that he has broken up with her, and she walks onto the nearby train tracks to commit suicide. When Ayumu stops her, Manami yells at her, saying that Ayumu does not understand how she feels. The scene ends with Manami reminding Ayumu of the promise she made. Throughout this volume, Suenobu portrays Ayumu's sexual transformation in the context of homosocial sexual desire and highlights the eroticism of Ayumu's self-mutilation. While Western interpretations of Japanese pop culture may read *LIFE* as a maudlin story of a pathological teenage girl, this essay argues that the series must be framed outside these Western models to deconstruct the projected ideologies of sex, gender, and sexuality.

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1 Keiko Suenobu, "Raifu" [*LIFE*], 20 vols. (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2002).

My project, which focuses on the first volume of the *LIFE* series, examines issues of sex, gender, and sexuality in the culturally rich context of shojo manga, or “young girl comics.” I first outline the history and evolution of manga (Japanese comics), showing that the medium is a relevant resource for understanding Japanese culture. I then move on to shojo manga and explore how this visual communication medium creates spaces for readers to challenge normative gender and heteronormative sexuality. I review various critical interpretations of sex, gender, and sexuality in shojo manga to reveal female subjectivity and sexuality in *LIFE*, while also expanding the context of interpretation by discussing the usage of androgyny and gender performance in Japanese theater. In particular, I apply the fluid interpretations of gender and sexuality in the all-male Kabuki Theater to the use of androgyny in *LIFE*, and point out the historical relevance of gender ambiguity and sexual diversity deeply rooted in Japanese culture. Finally, I compare the all-female Takarazuka Revue Theater to the shojo manga genre and shojo subculture to demonstrate not only the historical control over female sexuality, but also the potential of these fantasy spaces to allow for the liberation of restricted sexuality.

## Manga History

Before discussing the relevance of *LIFE* in the analysis of female sexuality and female subjectivity in Japan, I first review the history and cultural significance of manga in Japan.<sup>2</sup> The earliest accounts of manga date back to the drawings of *fushi-e* (caricature pictures), found on the backs of planks in the ceiling of Horyuji Temple built in 607.<sup>3</sup> Although these first caricatures were seen only by a handful of the elite, the woodblock-printing technology introduced during the Tokugawa Period (1603–1867) allowed for greater production and wider distribution of caricatures for commoner audiences.<sup>4</sup> The term “manga” was first coined by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), a practitioner of the *Ukiyo-e* or “floating world” genre of caricature pictures that portray themes of fleeting beauty and pleasure divorced from the burdens of the real world. The Japanese government displayed his fifteen-volume *Hokusai* manga and other picture books

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2 For more reading on manga and manga culture see Frederik L. Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge, 1996).

3 Kinko Ito, “Manga in Japanese History.” *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, ed. Mark Wheeler MacWilliams (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008) 27.

4 Ito 27.



at the World Exposition in Paris in 1867, “a sign of how these popular picture genres were becoming increasingly accepted by the authorities as part of mainstream Japanese culture.”<sup>5</sup> Japanese manga has also been used for political satire in newspapers and magazines, particularly during the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement in the Meiji Period (1868–1912), when manga was used to promote antigovernment messages.<sup>6</sup> Manga during the Meiji Period reflected both Western influence and government and national agendas of modernizing Japan. After World War II, distinct genres of manga were published and popularized, starting with *shonen* manga (young boys’ comics) in 1959 and *shojo* manga (young girls’ comics) in the 1960s. In 1990, the Japanese Ministry of Education’s prize for manga officially recognized it as a Japanese artistic and cultural resource.<sup>7</sup>

Suenobu’s *LIFE* is a *shojo* manga, a genre intended for girl readers from their teenage years to their early twenties that developed not just as a subgenre of manga but also through *shojo bunka*, the subculture of young girls that originated in the early twentieth century. The popularity of *shojo* manga is closely linked to the aesthetic appeal and distinctive modes of storytelling that established this genre as “authentically” speaking to a girl audience.<sup>8</sup> In the following section, I show that *shojo* manga artists “developed a radically new style of visual expression” to portray the interiority of the characters, allowing readers to sympathize and identify with them.<sup>9</sup> This identification with the characters as self, not as Other, is inherent in the comic book medium, but *shojo* manga utilizes stylistic techniques to emphasize it and thus allows for the “exploration of the subjectivity of teenage girls.”<sup>10</sup>

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5 Ito 29.

6 Ito 31.

7 Ito 46.

8 Mizuki Takahashi, “Opening the Closed World of Shojo Manga,” *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, ed. Mark Wheeler MacWilliams (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008) 114.

9 Deborah Shamoon, “Office Sluts and Rebel Flowers: The Pleasures of Japanese Pornographic Comics for Women,” *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004) 83.

10 Shamoon, “Office Sluts and Rebel Flowers,” 85.

## Shojo Manga

The “shojo” in shojo manga directly translates to “young girl.” The word further implies a character that “personifies desirable feminine virtues,” embodying elements of *kawaii* (cuteness), naiveté, and sexual immaturity.<sup>11</sup> Since the first image of the shojo appeared in prewar girls’ magazines, illustrations have evolved and shojo artists have developed key techniques that have become standard. These methods include large eyes with many highlights, use of symbolic flowers, abstract background designs, and a collage-like panel arrangement (see Figure 1). The large eyes are meant to act as “the windows of the soul; by looking at the eyes, readers can intuit the character’s feelings,” allowing the readers to engage emotionally with the story and identify with the complex inner psychology of the shojo characters.<sup>12</sup> The flowers that decorate the backgrounds of shojo portraits further reflect the character’s inner personality and act as a “powerful affective link between audience and image.”<sup>13</sup>

Shojo manga employ a distinctive spatial arrangement of frames and collage-like panels invented by Shotaro Ishinomori in the 1970s. While in *shonen* manga “the panel arrangement moves seamlessly, unfolding the plot in a predictable temporal sequence from beginning to end,” the shojo manga style uses the space between the panels and full-body portraits to reflect the emotional significance of the images.<sup>14</sup> This “spatialization” disrupts the emphasis on the passage of time and temporal flow of the panels, allowing “the reader [to become] immersed in the character’s feelings, dreams, and memories.”<sup>15</sup> These unique stylistic qualities are meant to encourage viewers to identify with the shojo characters and to actively participate when reading the manga.

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11 Takahashi 115.

12 Takahashi 124.

13 Takahashi 122.

14 Takahashi 125.

15 Takahashi 127.



Figure 1. An Example of Shōjo Manga Techniques from Keiko Suenobu's LIFE  
*Source: Kodansha Comics.*

When shōjo culture began to develop through the images of the shōjo in prewar magazines,<sup>16</sup> writers and artists of these magazines were predominantly male and were mediated by both male editors and government control.<sup>17</sup> Under this patriarchal order, the designation of the

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16 For links between the culture of contemporary art and Japanese national identity, as well as an understanding of the historical and cultural context of image consumerism in Japan, see Fran Lloyd, *Consuming Bodies Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art* (London: Reaktion, 2003).

17 Deborah Shamoan, "Situating the Shōjo in Shōjo Manga," *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, ed. Mark Wheeler MacWilliams (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008) 138.



shojo entity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was closely tied to the modernization of Japan and emergent distinctions being made between Western and Japanese, male and female.<sup>18</sup> Starting in 1868 with the events of the Meiji Restoration that reestablished imperial rule, Japan entered a period of modernity. “Westernization was the declared goal of the government,” and Japanese men were encouraged to be “models for function and Western rationality,” while women were to be “models of traditional Japaneseness.”<sup>19</sup> The steady militarization of Japanese society, a component of this Westernization, further contributed to the delineation of sex and gender. The Meiji Civil Code enacted in 1896 institutionally condemned gender ambiguity by regulating people’s dress and appearance, for example by mandating short hair and Western clothing for men.<sup>20</sup> The Meiji Civil Code also encouraged the gender model of “good wife wise mother,” exercising control over female bodies and further restricting gender freedom for Japanese women. To maintain the “good wife wise mother” gender role, the sex-segregated educational system was enforced by the *chuutougakkou rei* (the junior high school law) of 1887, which sacrificed girls’ education in favor of boys’.<sup>21</sup> Even when opportunities for girls’ higher education were opened in 1899 by the *koutougakkou rei* (the high school law), these schools “inculcated what could be called the shojo ideal—the dream of becoming happy future brides.”<sup>22</sup> Prior to this, the term “shojo” was not customary in referring to young girls; instead, *shonen*, originally meaning “children,” was used for both young girls and young boys. This institution of the shojo entity on a national scale isolated girls within the shojo homosocial group and controlled female sexuality to “enforce their purity as virgins” in order to maintain a “traditional” and idealistic national image.<sup>23</sup>

Within these homosocial shojo groups, usually in all-girls’ schools, same-sex relationships between young girls were considered a “normal part of female development,” as long as

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18 For further reading on gender conflicts within the manga industry, see Sharon Kinsella, “Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: Otaku and the Amateur Manga Movement,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 24.2 (1998): 289-316.

19 Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, “Kimono and the Construction of Gendered and Cultural Identities,” *Ethnology* 38.4 (1999): 355.

20 Jennifer Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan: Sexuality and Subversion in the Theater and Beyond,” *American Ethnologist* 19.3 (1992): 424.

21 Takahashi 116.

22 Takahashi 116.

23 Takahashi 116.



both girls maintained a feminine appearance.<sup>24</sup> Same-gender romance between young girls in prewar Japan was “an accepted means of delaying heterosexual experience until girls were old enough for marriage” under the condition that they were *doseiai* (homogender) relationships between two properly feminine girls.<sup>25</sup> In prewar girls’ magazines, stories and illustrations featured what Shamoon calls an “aesthetic of sameness” in depicting these *doseiai* relationships, an element that remains prominent in shojo manga today.

Leading up to the 1970s, social changes brought on by “industrial transformation, the diversification of the employment structure, a declining birthrate, [and] the mechanization of housework” directly and indirectly contributed to opening space for women to reinvent the Japanese woman’s identity and set the stage for the women’s liberation movement.<sup>26</sup> Women began spending more time outside of the home seeking new identities beyond that of a wife and mother.<sup>27</sup> During this time, female artists gradually began to take over shojo manga, significantly helping to shape it into a fully developed genre. This shift contributed to its transformation into a space of resistance and exploration of female subjectivity. A group of young female innovative artists collectively known as 24 Nen Gumi, which indicated the year of their birth (Showa 24 or 1949), began to experiment with controversial topics such as politics and sexuality.<sup>28</sup> One of the subgenres of shojo manga introduced and popularized during this time was Boy-love manga, a sexually graphic genre in which female protagonists are replaced by androgynous beautiful boys (*bishounen*) who love other beautiful boys. Interpretations of Boy-love manga have opened up discussions on female subjectivity and female sexuality as questions of viewer identification.<sup>29</sup>

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24 Shamoon, “Situating the Shojo in Shojo Manga,” 140.

25 Shamoon, “Situating the Shojo in Shojo Manga,” 139.

26 Kazuko Suzuki, “Pornography or Therapy,” *Millennium Girls: Today’s Girls around the World*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) 246.

27 For more reading on Japanese Feminism, see Sandra Buckley, *Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1997).

28 Takahashi 130.

29 For writings on *yaoi* manga, an explicit subgenre of Boy-love manga, see Patrick W. Galbraith, “Fujoshi: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among ‘Rotten Girls’ in Contemporary Japan,” *Chicago Journals* (2011): 211-32; Gretchen I. Jones, “Bad Girls Like to Watch: Writing and Reading Ladies’ Comics,” *Bad Girls of Japan*, eds. Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Andrea Wood, “‘Straight’ Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 34.1-2 (2006): 349-414.



## Androgyny and the Female Spectator

Challenging the heteronormative gender ideals of sexuality, Boy-love manga “offered a liberatory sphere within which presumably heteronormative readers could experiment with romance and sexuality through identification with the beautiful boy characters.”<sup>30</sup> The *bishounen* characters in the Boy-love manga and female readers’ receptivity to and fascination with same-sex love represent a transformation in understanding female agency and female desire.

James Welker’s “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: ‘Boys’ Love’ as Girls’ Love in Shojo Manga” recognizes the potential of Boy-love manga as “that of liberating readers not just from patriarchy but from gender dualism and heteronormativity.”<sup>31</sup> Welker analyzes the female spectatorship of Boy-love manga by outlining multiple interpretations of the *bishounen*. For example, Midori Matsui commends Boy-love manga for its ability to “expos[e] readers to sex and sexuality without directly making them participants in it.”<sup>32</sup> However, this interpretation underestimates the potential of Boy-love manga to be an active form of sexual liberation for female readers and denies the impact of viewer identification with the *bishounen*. For Matsu-mura Eiko, a Japanese writer and manga critic, the *bishounen* characters are “sexless”; they are neither man nor woman, male nor female, disrupting the commonplace notions of sex, gender, and sexuality.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the *bishounen* allows readers to escape sex and gender altogether. Ueno Chizuko, a prominent Japanese feminist scholar, agrees that the *bishounen* are positioned outside of the gender binary but further argues that the beautiful boy is the graphic embodiment of the “girl’s ‘idealized self-image’” and constitutes a “third sex/gender.”<sup>34</sup> The beautiful boys exist as borrowed male bodies, allowing girl readers, through viewer identification, to participate in expressions of sexuality. Manga critic Fujimoto Yukari goes further, asserting that the body of the *bishounen* should not be interpreted as an “object of desire” but instead as a “device” for the liberation of desire.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, female readers are not spectators looking *at* the

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30 James Welker, “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: ‘Boys’ Love’ as Girls’ Love in Shojo Manga,” *Signs: New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture* 31.3 (2006): 842.

31 Welker 843.

32 Welker 855.

33 Welker 852.

34 Welker 852.

35 Welker 855.



beautiful boys as objects of a female gaze; instead, they experiment with sexual desire in these spaces that the bishounen create.

According to Welker, these various interpretations generally reject Boy-love manga as narratives of homosexuality and suggest the manifestation of “lesbian panic” in both the writers and the readers of Boy-love manga.<sup>36</sup> Patricia Smith defines “lesbian panic” as “the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character—or conceivably an author—is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desires.”<sup>37</sup> This tendency to avoid implications of homosexuality is symptomatic of a Japanese cultural stigma surrounding female homosexuality that originated in the early twentieth century as Japanese psychologists began to draw distinctions between “‘real’ or ‘permanent’ (*shin*), and ‘provisional’ or ‘transient’ (*kari*) homosexuality in females.”<sup>38</sup> The former condition, seen as “incurable” and embodied by the masculine woman, was often referred to as “Western,” while the latter, seen as a “short-lived ‘spiritual hedonism’” embodied by the feminine woman, was referred to as “Japanese.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the Western “permanent” form of homosexuality was not only deemed “deviant,” but also was perceived to be a result of mental insufficiency or illness.<sup>40</sup> In this way, while “Japanese society accommodated (and still does) a diversity of sexual behaviors,” assuming a politicized sexual identity, especially a female homosexual identity, has largely been rejected and condemned.<sup>41</sup>

Azusa Nakajima, a Boy-love writer and critic, comes closest to acknowledging a homosexual possibility in an autoerotic identification with the bishounen. According to Welker, she claims that, “the beautiful boy characters ‘mediate spectatorial identification and ... act as a figure of spectatorial desire’ in a ‘specularization [that] involves both the self and other ... producing the subject as both subject and object, autoerotically doubled and yet split from itself and invested in the fantasmatic pursuit of the other.”<sup>42</sup> According to Nakajima, the reader is

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36 Welker 856.

37 As quoted in Welker 856.

38 Jennifer Robertson, “Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan,” *Queer Diasporas*, eds. Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000) 57.

39 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 57.

40 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 56.

41 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 56.

42 As quoted in Welker 856.



capable of moving back and forth between the subject and object, emphasizing the subjectivity of the reader in her active participation in both the identification with and objectification of the bishounen. The gender ambiguity of the bishounen creates a liberating space where readers can escape the binary gender construction of male and female, allowing for the fluid movement between sex, gender, and sexuality.

### Edo Ideologies of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

While images of androgynous bishounen for female spectatorship were introduced with the Boy-love manga subgenre in the 1970s, this type of androgynous beauty has a deeper history dating back to the Tokugawa (Edo) Period (1603–1868). In Edo Japan, the term “boys’ love” encompassed a pederastic meaning in reference to the *wakashu*, the “adolescent who excite[d] a man’s sexual interest” and who performed female roles after women were banned from the stage.<sup>43</sup> This period of Japanese history introduced notions of gender and sex that remain deeply rooted in Japanese culture today.

Sexuality and gender ideologies were first depicted in *shunga* art, a popular type of *Ukiyo-e* during the Edo Period. *Shunga* (spring drawings) explicitly illustrated various kinds of lovemaking, “including lesbian sex (which was then considered perfectly natural), *ménage à trois*, voyeurism, female autoeroticism, male homosexuality, and bestiality.”<sup>44</sup> These images of Edo erotica have been interpreted to be distinctly “Japanese” sexual practices and ideologies, and artists have evoked them in contemporary manga.<sup>45</sup> Gender fluidity likewise marked the Edo Period. In *Sex and the Floating World*, Timon Screech discusses the fundamental differences between Western and traditional Japanese constructions of sex and gender and claims that, “[in] the Edo sense, and that of its antecedents, was that concerted comportment in a given gender role will shift the person across into that gender; since sex is barely encoded on the outside of the body, this new gender will to all intents and purposes become the person’s new sex.”<sup>46</sup> This ability to flow across what is now seen as distinct sexes, genders, and sexualities

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43 Welker 854.

44 Ito 29.

45 Ito 29.

46 Timon Screech, *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700–1820* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai’i Press, 1999) 100.



mirrors Nakajima's interpretation that the bishounen in Boy-love manga, allow readers to move between these socially constructed binaries. This fluid ideology of sex and gender is best represented and embodied by the Kabuki *onnagata*, the actors who played female roles in the all-male Kabuki Theater established during the early Edo Period. The ideologies of Edo sexuality reflected in Kabuki through the onnagata actors represent the uniquely Japanese understanding of the performance and construction of sex and gender.

### Gender Performance and Kabuki Onnagata

Prior to the introduction of the Kabuki Theater, there was no formal concept of androgyny in Japan. Yoshizawa Ayame, himself an onnagata, was the first to develop a theory and method for interpreting and understanding the Kabuki onnagata.<sup>47</sup> He borrowed the Buddhist concept of *henshin* (bodily transformation or metamorphosis); *hen* is the term for change, and *shin* means "body in the most comprehensive sense: that is, a physical, mental, social, historical, and spiritual entity."<sup>48</sup> According to Ayame, the onnagata "becomes Woman, as opposed to impersonating a given woman."<sup>49</sup> The androgynous onnagata becomes *futanarihira* (double-bodied), blurring the boundaries between sex and gender, male and female, femininity and masculinity.<sup>50</sup> During Ayame's time, "the onnagata could bathe with females at public bathhouses," suggesting that for the Kabuki actor the "'female' gender superseded and even negated a male body."<sup>51</sup> This form of metamorphosis is reflected in various forms of Japanese anime and comics including *henshin dorama*, literally "morph dramas" and in pornographic anime in which female characters undergo "intimidating transformation."<sup>52</sup> The influence of the traditional form of androgyny represented in Kabuki Theater, however, must be contextualized alongside the "new form of androgyny" exhibited in fashion and visual and performance art in contemporary

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47 Robertson, "The Politics of Androgyny in Japan," 423.

48 Robertson, "The Politics of Androgyny in Japan," 423.

49 Robertson, "The Politics of Androgyny in Japan," 423.

50 Robertson, "The Politics of Androgyny in Japan," 424.

51 Robertson, "The Politics of Androgyny in Japan," 424.

52 Susan J. Napier, "Controlling Bodies: The Body in Pornographic Anime," *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 65.

Japanese culture.<sup>53</sup> Much of shojo manga embraces this newer form. Nonetheless, as I discuss further below, the “new” form of androgyny, as seen in Suenobu’s *LIFE*, has its roots in Ayame’s gender theory around the onnagata, including the recognition that “sex and gender were not ‘naturally’ aligned in any one body” and the fluidity of sex and gender.<sup>54</sup>

### Meiji Gender Codes and Modernization

Starting in the late-nineteenth century, modernization produced huge changes in perceptions of gender and sexuality in Japan. During the Meiji Period, a “new” form of androgyny largely influenced by Western categorizations and boundaries moved sex, gender, and sexuality away from the flexible Kabuki ideology of gender. The influence of dominant medical and psychological discourse in the 1910s through the 1930s, particularly in regard to Western sexology, began to move Japanese attitudes about sex and gender toward rigid anti-androgynous, heteronormative ideologies.<sup>55</sup> Euro-American loanwords such as “heterosexual” and “homosexual” spread rapidly through a wide range of printed media, marking the beginning of a shift in social norms. Under this new conceptualization of sex and gender, the new form of androgyny emerged as a central role in certain subcultures that allowed the exploration of these sex and gender boundaries.<sup>56</sup>

The push for Westernization conflicted with the insistence on the traditionally Japanese “good wife wise mother,” and “females almost exclusively were singled out as the source of sexual deviance and social disorder.”<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, as women began adopting Western looks and “masculinizing” their appearance, they were deemed un-Japanese, blurring distinctions between Western and Japanese and thus also challenging the boundaries of male and female. In the early-twentieth century, the nation’s gender model of “good wife wise mother” saw a competing

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53 Erica Stevens Abbitt, “Androgyny and Otherness: Exploring the West through the Japanese Performative Body,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 18.2 (2001): 250.

54 Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan,” 424.

55 Anthony S. DiStefano, “Suicidality and Self-Harm among Sexual Minorities in Japan,” *Qualitative Health Research* 18.10 (2008): 1429.

56 Abbitt 251.

57 Jennifer Robertson, “Theatrical Resistance, Theatres of Restraint: The Takarazuka Revue and the ‘State Theatre,’” *Anthropological Quarterly* 64.4 (1991): 168.



moral ideal for women, the “New Woman,” encouraged by Western feminist influence and the women’s liberation movement. The New Woman, associated with the West and the masculine female, was perceived as the personification of social instability and was defined in the press as “an indulgent and irresponsible young Japanese woman who used her overdeveloped sexuality to undermine the family and to manipulate others for her own selfish ends.”<sup>58</sup> Whereas the “good wife wise mother” ideals were projected onto the image of the shojo, representing social stability and cultural integrity, the New Woman ideals were embodied by the “modern girl” (*modan garu*, or *moga*), the sexually deviant antithesis of the shojo. Although these competing sets of ideals fueled debates surrounding female subjectivity and female sexuality, the subcultures of girls and women representing these ideals were not mutually exclusive. Despite the contrasting ideals placed onto the images of the shojo and *moga*, both of these characters found a place within the fantasy space of the all-female Takarazuka Theater, one of the most widely recognized and watched theaters in Japan and the epitome of the “new” androgyny.<sup>59</sup>

### The Takarazuka Revue Theater

The Takarazuka Revue Theater’s establishment in 1913 marked the return of female actors to the major public stage after being banned from the Kabuki Theater in 1629.<sup>60</sup> Similar to the Kabuki actors, the Takarazuka actors were assigned gendered roles; this included the *otokoyaku*, the “male” gender specialists, and the *musumeyaku*, the “female” gender specialists.<sup>61</sup> The audience of the Takarazuka Theater and the shojo manga readership overlap, and the two art forms share themes of cross-dressing and gender-bending.

*Moga*, the deviant “modern girl,” was often associated with the Revue, and she was also the target of shojo manga. The Takarazuka Theater and shojo manga are conceptually linked, as both “offer ... audiences a chance to dream of other worlds.”<sup>62</sup> Welker also notes that the female cross-dressing characters and the bishounen in the Boy-love manga are actually

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58 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 47.

59 Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan,” 422.

60 Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan,” 422.

61 Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan,” 422.

62 Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998) 7.



descendants of Takarazuka male-role actors, who similarly “represent ... an exemplary female who can negotiate successfully both genders and their attendant roles and domains without—at least theoretically—being constrained by either.”<sup>63</sup> The link between the Takarazuka Revue and shōjo manga is particularly evident in the dramatization of *Berusaiyu no Bara* (“The Rose of Versailles,” 1974–1976), originally a shōjo manga series written and illustrated by Ikeda Riyoko, and now considered a Takarazuka classic responsible for the theater’s boom in the mid-1970s.<sup>64</sup> *Berusaiyu no Bara* centers on the adventures of Oscar, a female raised as a boy who is the object her childhood companion Andre’s affections and a figure who “represents a slippage between sex and gender.”<sup>65</sup>

Although this performance of gender resembles the ideologies of the Kabuki Theater, Takarazuka Revue founder Kobayashi Ichizou’s (1873–1957) concept of gender contrasted with Ayame’s theory and methods of the Kabuki onnagata. The words used to describe the actors in these two art forms demonstrate this difference. “Onnagata” breaks down etymologically as *onna* (female/woman) *gata* (way), and “otokoyaku” means *otoko* (male/man) *yaku* (role). For Kobayashi, the Takarazuka *otokoyaku* did not represent a transformation (*henshin*); instead “he believed that a masculine female outside the context of the Revue was something abnormal and perverted.”<sup>66</sup>

Scholar Jennifer Robertson, however, points to resistance among the Takarazuka actors who exported their secondary gender roles from the stage and “sought to present the otokoyaku as an alternative ‘female’ gender role.”<sup>67</sup> According to Robertson, Kobayashi manipulated the Takarazuka Revue to align with the ideological parameters of the state-sanctioned civil code of “good wife wise mother.”<sup>68</sup> Recognizing the potential of theater to be an agent of the state, Kobayashi enforced gender regulations on the Revue actors to uphold gender roles of society.<sup>69</sup> For example, all Revue actors had to maintain the regulation long hair, and the otokoyaku were given a variety of headgear for their roles as male characters. In 1932 several otokoyaku

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63 Welker 847.

64 Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan,” 430.

65 Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan,” 430.

66 Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan,” 424.

67 Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan,” 427.

68 Robertson, “Theatrical Resistance, Theatres of Restraint,” 165.

69 Robertson, “Theatrical Resistance, Theatres of Restraint,” 165.





cut their hair short and declared publicly that “‘marriage’ was the vocation of boxed-in gals.”<sup>70</sup> Many otokoyaku further challenged Kobayashi’s patriarchal control by expressing their male personas off-stage through the use of gendered terms for “I” (*boku*) and “you” (*kimi*), both masculine signifiers.<sup>71</sup> In this way, demonstrations of resistance and gender-bending themes have positioned the Takarazuka Revue as a site of gender deviance and a host for debates regarding female subjectivity and female sexuality.<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, restrictive policies implemented at the founding of the Revue still continue today: all Takarazuka actors “must remain unmarried, and ostensibly heterosexually inexperienced, throughout their tenure in the Revue.”<sup>73</sup> This prescribed asexuality was a necessary means to establish the Takarazuka Revue as socially acceptable and legitimate by erasing the possibilities of a same-sex different-gender or “butch-femme” sexual desire among actors and female fans of the otokoyaku. Despite these restrictions, in the 1930s, starting with the nationally publicized story of an attempted lesbian double suicide between a popular Revue actress and her “masculine” partner, issues surrounding female sexuality began to surface as press coverage of the event highlighted the presence of female-female homosexuality in Japan.<sup>74</sup>

### Lesbian Double Suicides and Sexual Citizenship

Suicide, or *jisatsu*, has been called a “key component of a Japanese national allegory” and for centuries has been linked to a quintessentially “Japanese” form of self-expression.<sup>75</sup> From the glamorized practice of *seppuku* (ritual suicide by disembowelment) by the elite samurai class, to the institutionalized military suicides of World War II, both Japanese and non-Japanese continue to associate *jisatsu* with Japanese-ness.<sup>76</sup> Further romanticized is the act of *shinju*, double suicide, often translated as “love suicides” or any suicide that involves the death of more than one person. Yasuda Tokutaro, one of the prominent sexologists in Japan during

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70 Robertson, “Theatrical Resistance, Theatres of Restraint,” 172.

71 Robertson, “Theatrical Resistance, Theatres of Restraint,” 172.

72 Robertson, “Theatrical Resistance, Theatres of Restraint,” 172.

73 Robertson, “The Politics of Androgyny in Japan,” 433.

74 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 39.

75 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 48.

76 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 49.



the 1930s, responded to the number of lesbian double suicide reports in the daily newspapers, inferring that “females these days are monopolizing homosexuality.”<sup>77</sup> Komine Shigeyuki, another Japanese sexologist, confirmed that lesbian double suicides made up about 31 percent of all categories of suicide, when overall rates of suicides increased during the “nervous and jumpy” national and international climate of the 1930s.<sup>78</sup> This large number of documented lesbian double suicides and their coverage in the mass media suggests the public presence of lesbian homosexuality in a society where previously lesbianism had largely gone ignored and unrecognized.<sup>79</sup>

The press and Japanese society, however, rejected lesbian double suicides as being “Japanese,” instead categorizing them as pathological and problematic. Consequently, much of the coverage of lesbian double suicides appeared in the humor columns of newspapers; in contrast, media coverage of heterosexual double suicides continued to memorialize the sincere purity of love.<sup>80</sup> This distinction between heterosexual and homosexual double suicides is reflected in Komine’s claim that while a “heterosexual couple’s double suicide was premeditated and often provoked by their inability to marry, a homosexual couple’s decision to commit suicide was spontaneous and carried out for apparently ‘trivial’ reasons.”<sup>81</sup> Komine’s stance represents the public perspective toward Japanese lesbian practices during that time and is symptomatic of the historical and culturally acceptable criteria of female-female relationships in contemporary Japan.

Despite the mainstream media discouraging the New Woman and female-female homosexuality, sexologist Yasuda Tokutaro saw Japanese lesbian practices in a favorable light. Provoked by press coverage around lesbian double suicides, he acknowledged the potential of these relationships to represent “female and ultimately cultural emancipation.”<sup>82</sup> The act of suicide in Japan is historically seen as a “culturally intelligible act that turned a private condition into a public matter,” and has effectively integrated controversial ideas with the popular discourse of

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77 As quoted in Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 38.

78 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 61.

79 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 48.

80 Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 40.

81 As quoted in Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 60.

82 As quoted in Robertson, “Dying to Tell,” 50.



sexuality.<sup>83</sup> Accounts of lesbian double suicides made a publicized claim for sexual citizenship and subjectivity among women while placing issues of sexual relations between females onto the public stage.<sup>84</sup> Comparable to the acts of lesbian double suicide, Suenobu uses images of self-mutilation in *LIFE* to emphasize moments of Ayumu's self-expression, highlighting Ayumu's active interior as she challenges heteronormative notions of sexuality.

### *LIFE*

Only by deconstructing the cultural implications of homoerotic sexual desire and placing *LIFE* within the historical context of both manga evolution and Japanese modernization do the complexities of Ayumu's gender ambiguity and the significance of her eroticized cutting become apparent. In *LIFE*, Ayumu's physical appearance transforms from distinctly "female" to androgynous, demonstrating a form of *henshin*. Similar to the Kabuki onnagata, this transformation is seen not only in her physical appearance but also in her interior, depicted in her inner thoughts and sexual desires.

In the first volume of *LIFE*, Ayumu begins as a "typical" shojo who is sexually immature, content in her platonic relationship with Shii-chan. Figure 2 shows Ayumu and Shii-chan smiling for a picture before their junior high school graduation. Ayumu and Shi-chan are wearing the same clothing and have similar hair styles and facial features, accentuating their gendered female attributes.

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83 Robertson, "Dying to Tell," 64, 65.

84 Robertson, "Dying to Tell," 48.

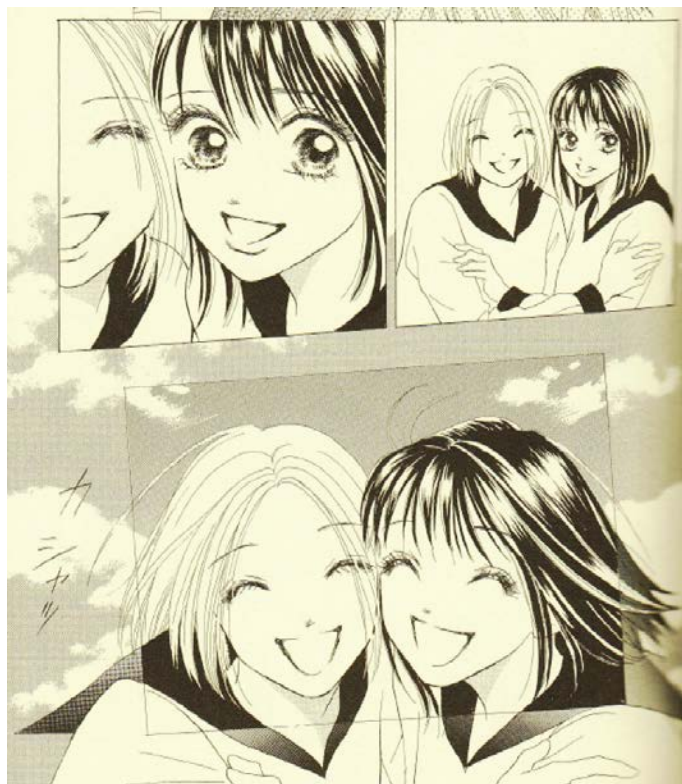


Figure 2. Shii-chan (left) and Ayumu (right) in Keiko Suenobu's *LIFE*  
Source: Kodansha Comics.

The “aesthetic of same-ness” between the two girls emphasize their *doseiai* (homogender love) relationship and highlights a platonic romance rather than a sexual one. Ayumu’s physical appearance transforms after Shii-chan ends their friendship and Ayumu begins high school. In later scenes, Ayumu has cut her hair short and is portrayed with masculine characteristics, taking on an androgynous appearance compared to her distinctly feminine classmates. Figure 3 shows one scene illustrating this change: Ayumu’s appearance contrasts with that of Mika Hatori, a beautiful girl at her new school. Mika, with her long hair and open-collared shirt, is clearly female, and her colored lips and large eyes further emphasize her femininity. Ayumu, on the other hand, has short hair, a necktie, and a blazer, and her facial features lack gender distinction. This androgyny, as seen in the bishounen of Boy-love manga, creates a space for readers to liberate their desires and experience Ayumu’s transformation through “spectatorial identification.” In addition, Ayumu’s gender ambiguity escapes the control of sexuality exercised on the shojo and brings attention to Ayumu’s sexuality in her interactions.



Figure 3. Ayumu and Mika Hatori in Keiko Suenobu's *LIFE*  
Note: Read from right to left, top to bottom. Source: Kodansha Comics.



Figure 4. Ayumu and Manami in Keiko Suenobu's *LIFE*  
Note: Read from right to left, top to bottom. Source: Kodansha Comics.

For instance, in the set of frames in Figure 3, Ayumu's interactions with Mika suggest a move past the platonic *doseiai*. As Mika enters the room, the sexual tension is illustrated in the free-floating onomatopoeic words around Ayumu revealing her nervous beating heart, "*dokin dokin*" (ドキンドキン). Mika glances over at Ayumu, who blushes and watches Mika exit as she thinks, "[Mika] is so pretty." Mika's overt femininity in contrast to Ayumu's androgyny, along with Ayumu's active gaze on Mika's physical body and appearance, provides evidence of Ayumu's sexuality.

Figure 4 again shows this eroticization, with Manami confiding in Ayumu. In the first frame Ayumu blushes as Manami says, "I'm only telling you, Ayumu." The dialogue continues over the empty classroom, and in the final frame we see the close-up on Manami's lips with Ayumu's thoughts narrating, "What pretty lips...." The flowers in the first frame, a common shojo manga technique, emphasize the importance and intimacy of the scene; in addition, Ayumu's open eyes imply her active gaze on Manami's lips. In the same way that bishounen characters allow girl readers to liberate and express their sexuality, Ayumu's androgynous appearance allows for a unique expression of sexuality that lies outside the homosexual/heterosexual binary. This concept of sexual desire as a continuum rather than an opposition that we see in *LIFE* reflects the traditional form of androgyny stemming from Edo ideologies.<sup>85</sup> In the scenes depicting Ayumu's sexual transformation, the use of gender ambiguity moves both Ayumu and the reader between subject and object, allowing the reader to actively participate in Ayumu's sexuality through viewer identification and objectification. In contemporary Japanese society, however, this notion of fluidity and movement in sex and gender has largely been rejected since the start of the Meiji Period and the importation of Western theories on sex and gender.

Recognizing this cultural rejection of sexual diversity, Suenobu introduces the eroticization of Ayumu's self-mutilation to demonstrate resistance to heteronormative sexuality and acceptance of homoerotic sexual desire. Ayumu's self-expression through self-cutting parallels the symbolic significance of lesbian double suicide in a culture that depicts suicide as a morally rational and romanticized act. Both lesbian double suicide and Ayumu's expressive self-cutting demonstrate this move from private to public and "effectively highlight[s] the connection between self/social destruction and self/social-reconstruction."<sup>86</sup>

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85 Abbit 250.

86 Robertson, "Dying to Tell," 48.

In Volume I of *LIFE*, Ayumu practices self-cutting twice: first in her shojo stage during junior high school and second in high school as she struggles to fit in. The frames in Figure 5 (reading from right to left) show the second self-cutting incident and illustrate Ayumu's active interior in this moment of self-expression. In the first frame, Ayumu is wearing her high school uniform as she sits at her desk. The next set of frames shows her shaking hand as she reaches into her pocket for her knife, followed by a close-up of Ayumu's face. The remaining frames on the second page show Ayumu as she runs through darkness heading toward an opening of light. In the final frame, Ayumu is pulling apart the sides of the opening and is beginning to enter. Suenobu uses a number of techniques that emphasize movement to depict Ayumu's active interiority.

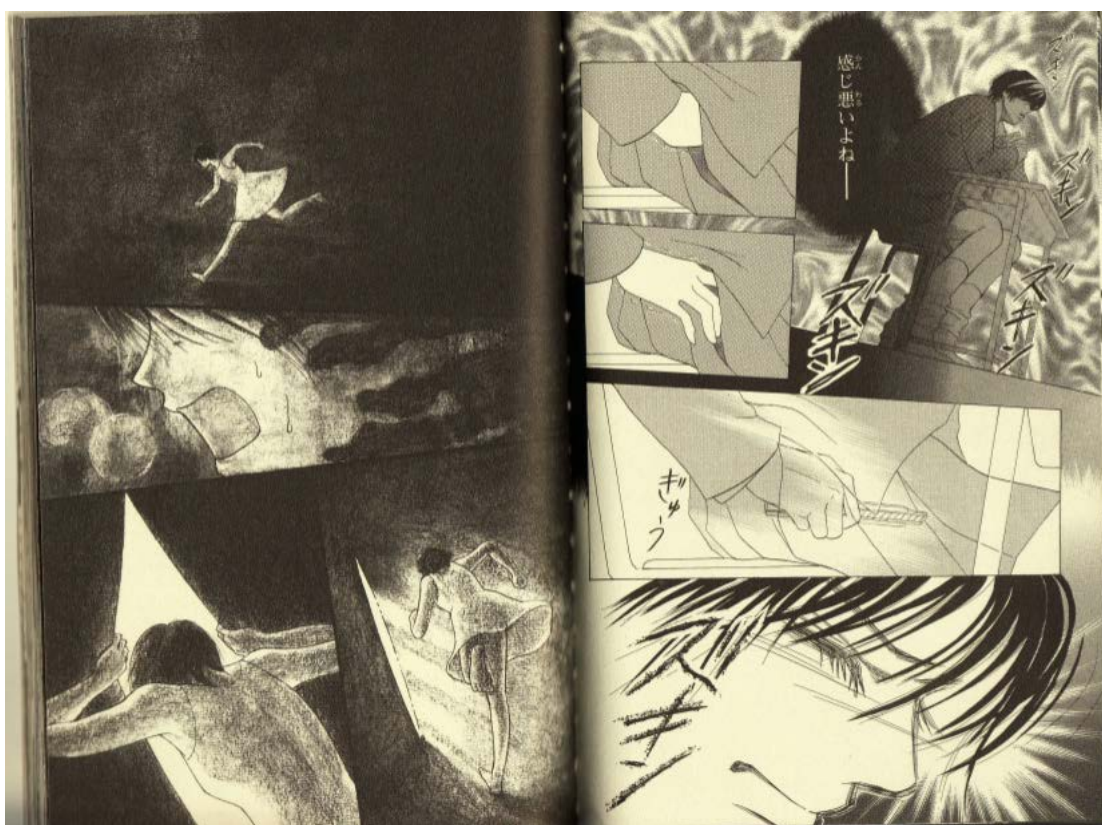


Figure 5. Ayumu's Self-Mutilation in Keiko Suenobu's *LIFE*

*Note: Read from right to left, top to bottom. Source: Kodansha Comics.*

For instance, while the full-body image of Ayumu shows her as physically stationary, the zoom-in on her shaking hand and the use of multiple frames as she reaches for her cutting knife

intensifies the moment and emphasizes this movement. Both the free-floating onomatopoeia “*zugin zugin*” (ズキンズキン), which illustrates a growing pulsating pain, and the onomatopoeic word for squeeze, “*gyuu*” (ぎゅう) as her hand tightens around the knife, further accentuate the weight of this movement. All of these techniques draw attention to Ayumu’s subjectivity and the anticipated movement of her hand as she actively reaches for the knife. On the following page, we see images of Ayumu as she envisions herself running through darkness and ultimately escaping from her physical body. The opening in the darkness representing the open cut on the surface of her skin also resembles a vaginal opening, suggesting her escape from a female body. This escape demonstrates Ayumu’s rejection of her physical body and is an acknowledgement of the restrictions controlling the female body and female sexuality.

Essentially, while her androgynous physical appearance challenges the binaries of normative gender in an exterior representation, this moment of self-expression reveals her active interiority in escaping and thus resisting heteronormative sexuality. For the reader, identification with and objectification of Ayumu as she blurs the boundaries between distinct conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality provides an opportunity to explore female sexuality outside the gender regulations of society. The movement between this identification and objectification highlights the subjectivity of the readers and the potential for sexual liberation. In this way, despite social control of female sexuality, themes of gender-bending and homoeroticism in shojo manga create fantasy spaces where readers can actively participate in the exploration of female sexuality.

## Conclusion

“In the past few decades, manga has become one of Japan’s most important pop culture industries.”<sup>87</sup> However, shojo manga has long been marginalized and often regarded as “second-class citizens” in the world of Japanese comics.<sup>88</sup> This has been due in part to gender prejudice among manga critics and to the distinct aesthetic styles that, to uninformed readers, have been seen as poorly drawn and unsophisticated.<sup>89</sup> In the 1970s, shojo manga finally began to receive some

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87 Takahashi 114.

88 Takahashi 114.

89 Takahashi 122.





critical attention; however, “the history and generic structure of girls’ comics have not been studied as thoroughly as those for boys.”<sup>90</sup> Contemporary shojo manga reflect the increasing involvement of female writers and artists and highlight issues of subjectivity and sexuality in young girls. However, by placing gender and sexuality outside of conventional heteronormative ideologies, the characters and narratives reveal a conceptualization of sex and gender ideology reminiscent of sexuality in Edo Japan. The fascination around the androgynous bishounen in Boy-love manga, the Takarazuka otokoyaku, and the gender-bending shojo characters indicate a general acceptance of “unconventional” gender and sexuality among Japanese girls and women. This uniquely Japanese ideology of fluid sex, gender, and sexuality manifested in the shojo manga and the shojo subculture challenge stereotypes of a homogenous Japanese society and suggest the existence of a variety of gender identities and sexualities in contemporary Japan. The themes and issues presented in Suenobu’s *LIFE* show that shojo manga has been greatly underestimated as a significant genre in Japanese popular culture and demonstrate the genre’s potential for creating fantasy spaces for the exploration of sex, gender, and sexuality.

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90 Takahashi 114.

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