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Transgender Identity in Premodern Japan

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Abstract

This paper examines the documented history of transgender identity in pre-modern Japan. Through literary analysis of the Torikaebaya Monogatari and depictions of Kabuki actors and sex workers in woodblock prints, transgender individuals's place in Japanese society is deconstructed, societal view of LGBTQIA+ individuals during these periods is interpreted, and where transgender people were most prevalent in society is determined.

*Keywords:* Japanese history, transgender identity, LGBTQIA+, kabuki, Torikaebaya Monogatari, sex work

In western LGBTQ+ history, we often link the world of abrahamic religion and queer identity in an ideological tug-of-war. When we observe cultures where western faith is not the

predominant religion, we have a tendency to carry that perspective with us and then unintentionally project that onto other cultures. A poignant example of this often occurs in literary analysis of pre-modern Japanese writing. Margaret H. Childs, in her article “The Value of Vulnerability,” brings up how emotions of “love, hate, jealousy, anger, joy, and sadness are popularly taken to be universal human emotions.” (pg. 1060) However, she points out that a research project, conducted by Philip R. Shaver, Shelley Wu, and Judith C. Schwartz (1992), linked the emotional association between American and Chinese subjects to the emotion of love, to completely different secondary emotions. For American individuals, love was associated with joy; “desire, passion, and longing.” Chinese individuals, the other hand, associated love with sadness; “infatuation, unrequited love, attachment, remote concern, nostalgia, compassion, tenderness/pity, sorrow/love, and sorrow/pity.”

It might be baffling that such a fundamental emotion, often considered the most fundamentally human feeling in existence, stems from two completely different emotions between Western culture and Chinese. However, it would make sense that emotions, just like beauty, intelligence, and purpose of life, would have different associations and importance between cultures and during different time periods. In the same way, it’s important that when speaking about the clash between society and minority groups that we understand where that point of conflict comes from. Returning to the subject of the fundamental feud between religion and sexuality, westerners tend to make a broad assumption that transphobia and homophobia stem from a dispute between morality and sin, when, in fact, the impacts of the traditional Christian value system is what directly fuels our concept of these dichotomies. In a culture such as Japanese, where there really isn’t even a religious practice that the Japanese are dedicated to, our understanding of ‘sinful behavior’ is not applicable until the introduction of forced Western

influence in 1790's (Huffman, 2010, p. 70). The religions that manifest as more 'loose' spiritual practices, but act as major philosophical influences to Japanese culture are Shintoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

Shintoism explains much of the early childhood traditions, mythology, patriotism, duality between the pure and polluted, and reverence for nature in Japan, whereas Confucianism explains much of the pre-modern social practices, feudal structure, and male/female relations. Buddhism, on the other hand, is often a mode of coming to terms with the reason for the way one's life is the way it is, how to deal with it, and what is to come after death. Each religious practice helps to give us an understanding of the Japanese feelings towards gender nonconforming individuals, how they understand them, and how they've historically responded to them.

One of the earliest fictional representations of transgender people, is through the *Torikaebaya Monogatari*. While the author remains unknown, this story dates back between the late 11th and early 12th century (Videen, 1984, p. 469). The plot of the story begins with two half-siblings, more easily discernible through Gregory Pflugfelder's use of the literal translation of their status in the story, rather than their assigned/chosen names. The child (Himegimi; literally aristocratic female child) is born of the female sex, but of male gender, while the other child (Wakagimi; aristocratic male child) is born of the male sex, but of the female gender. In this context, similarly to Pflugfelder, I refer to biological sex at birth as "female and male" and expression of social/personal expressions of the masculine and feminine roles through the terms "woman/girl and man/boy (Pflugfelder, 1992, p. 347-348). The two are described by Thomas H. Rohlich as having an "aberration of the psyche then with one of the body: the boy...is absorbed with the toys and games of little girls and prefers life with women behind the curtains, while the

girl...prefers the roughhouse play of little boys (Rohlich, 1984-85, p. 94).” Though they act in a way that others of the time might perceive as unbecoming of a young girl and boy, no one seems to question them throughout the novel. Even the father, a court minister of relative high standing, doesn’t seem to question or turn their behavior forcibly. In fact, it is stated that while expressing his confusion and slight annoyance at the two “misfits,” a Buddhist priest explains to the father that the siblings act as they do because it is their fate and similarly, much later in the story when the two must switch gender presentation again, Wakagimi’s mother responds to her son switching to the male role “appropriate” to her male sex with the passive comment, “If this is how you see it, it is apparently fated (Pflugfelder, 1992, p. 353).” Thus Pflugfelder comments, “fate has a hand both in making and remaking the gender of the siblings.” The Buddhist monk does explain that technically this can be perceived to be the father’s fault for not following the Buddhist path in a past life, during which he offended a *tengu* (The Japanese term for the mythical creature, somewhere between a goblin and a spirit.) In retribution, the *tengu* switched the son into a female body and the daughter into a male body, only in this life, as time has passed, did the father pay for his actions and by the end of his life, the Buddhist monk explains, he will witness them switch back to their expected roles, but they will still be in the ‘incorrect’ bodies (Pflugfelder, 1992, p. 353).

Buddhism and Shintoism play a major role in this part of the story and they play a major role in social customs and group beliefs in Japan. While Westerners often anticipate that family and religion will come in the way of transgender people living their life or gaining acceptance, they misinterpret how exactly that is the case. In *Torikaebaya*, the father accepts the oddity of their behavior and allows the siblings to undergo their coming of age ceremonies with the gender they identify with. At least from a literary standpoint, it seems that the idea of the father’s

reaction must be based in some reality given that all other aspects of the novel are consistent with the classic pattern of *monogatari* plot structure which are comparable to the historical-fiction genre (Gatten, 1984, p.259-261). Which is to say, that it is fictional, but is probable under the alternative events presented as the point of the plot. Moreover, instead of the anticipated critical response given by religious figures in the west, the monk is the one who explains the situation to the father in a spiritually compatible way to encourage him to understand that because this was fated, he must accept his children as they are. This combined with the reverent fear towards the spiritual and natural world would have been enough to pacify the father's dismay (for if he angered this *tengu* in a past life; is there a chance that interfering with fate might anger the *yokai* to curse his family in worse ways?). Of course, these explanations are completely circumstantial and could be perceived as a means of grounding a fantastical plot in some sort of logic. However, I would argue that there is a bigger concept that is present in this scene and in the entirety of the plot.

Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to Japan through Prince Shotoku through Korea around 552 (6th century CE). Two of the major concepts of this sect are emptiness and impermanence. Emptiness is described in *Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide* through the doctrine of Dependent Origination, "all known realities are constructed realities whose identities are merely intellectual conveniences used to order the world so that it can be understood." Meaning; all of the definitions that we use to differentiate each other (male, female, black, white, poor, rich...) are irrelevant to our true nature. At the very center of our being is a soul that is part of a universal energy which connects us; our Buddha nature (or the idea that we are all divine). As human-beings, whose nature is to suffer, we try to gain control of and eliminate that suffering by inflicting more suffering onto others rather than looking inward and letting go of our attachment

to temporary happiness. The text goes on to state that, “The Emptiness doctrine liberates us from the distorting impact of the prejudices which accompany opinions. Liberation is found at the point at which identities disappear, where there are no interpretations or judgements, where the self and the world are seen for what they are, not for how they relate to our preconceived categories of how we think things are or should be (Trainor, 2001, p. 140).”

Like most countries, religious text that influences the masses, is used as a source of crowd control and a way of establishing non-negotiables that can be turned into laws. The concept of emptiness is the start of group dynamics in Japan. Rather than focusing on the self, everyone is encouraged from a young age to be cooperative and think of the bigger picture (aka your society, the country, your family, etc...). Where the line between altruism and herd mentality blurs, is in the response that Japanese people have to ‘outsiders.’ Those that are different from others are either perceived as foreigners (who are characterized as being too selfish or too individualistic to understand and be part of Japanese society) or they are perceived as ‘a nail that sticks out.’ These people are unquestionably “Japanese” in the broadest sense of it, yet, ‘refuse’ to play by the rules and expectations of everyday Japanese life.

Many groups throughout history have been the subject of discrimination based on the perception that their exceptionalities are proof of uncooperation. Historically, immigrants (especially of Korean descent), lepers, *Burakumin*, *Ainu*, *Ryukyuan*, the disabled, and mentally ill have all fallen into this category. It’s no surprise then, that when LGBTQ+ identity becomes more than just a recreational interest, that it’s perceived as a threat to the status quo.

This may seem counterproductive to the original concept, especially since prejudice against others is, in itself, a form of attachment and defeats the whole point of emptiness. However, it’s similar to the way that the Bible is used against LGBTQ+ people as a way of



justifying prejudice rather than focus on the major teachings. The most common scripture often being the infamous Leviticus 18:22; “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” rather than focusing on, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. (John 8:7)” Preferring one reference exclusively over another is a means to maintain hierarchy and control over underprivileged groups. Shinto and Confucian philosophy are also conflated with Buddhist teachings in a way that is almost personalized to Japanese audiences, resulting in a patchwork of spirituality that flow in and out of each other.

For example, the gender roles established by Confucian philosophy reinforce the group dynamic through it’s concept of the ‘Five Cardinal Relationships.’ These consist of a deep emphasis on the superiority and responsibility of one figure over another. The first four are between a ruler and subject, father and son, elder to young, and husband to wife. The last is the only emphasis of equal standing and is between friends. The concept of these relationships when merged with Dependent Origination establishes that while status is only natural to our human nature and must be respected, individual interest is nothing in comparison to the duty we have to the bigger picture. In this way, Confucianism and Buddhism create a dynamic in which ‘the act of being homosexual’ doesn’t necessarily pose a threat to society, but LGBTQ+ identity does. In the same way that indigenous Ainu and Ryukyuan people were othered for their alternative religious, political, and social customs, which set them apart from the “Japanese” way of doing things, identifying as transgender is viewed as catering to one’s self interest. For the indigenous Japanese, the fact that they lived on the islands before immigrant settlers established what is known today as “Japan” is not the issue, what *is* an issue is the fact that they are identifying themselves as separate from the rest of Japan. Viewing yourself as someone separate from the bigger picture/community/nation is catering to personal self interest and acting in opposition to

superiors. Being transgender is viewed completely differently than merely doing the actions that a transgender person might do (cross-dressing, homosexual relations, voice training, tucking, binding, changing one's name, etc...). It is by othering oneself from Japanese identity (which includes societal expectations for every age, sex, SES, etc...) a disruption is created in the flow of society. This disruption is viewed as a refusal to contribute to the 'way of things' and a form of self-interest which is unfair and offensive to the group doing what they are supposed to. In terms of spirituality, Buddhist philosophy views this as a form of self-delusion and Confucianism views it as an affront to the natural order of things. It's no coincidence that one of the most famous Japanese proverbs is, "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down."

In the *Torekaebaya Monogatari*, the siblings do not necessarily "other" themselves in way that transgender people would be viewed as othering themselves today because they don't view their lives separate from the big picture or personal duty. Nobility, though they are, they do not have the freedom to change what is expected of them during their lives. Their father appeals to their self-interest only because he believes, in the end, the result will be the same; the son will carry on the same legacy of his father, they will both marry other nobility, and they will both bear children to further the line. Whether a son is born with the same bloodline is inconsequential as appearances are generally more important than anything else (another philosophy that aids in his acceptance of his children).

That being said, it's obvious that acceptance of being an 'other' is completely dependent on fooling those around you that you don't view yourself as an 'other,' and regardless of what lovers you take, wardrobe you wear, and feelings you have in your heart, you will fulfill the destiny expected of someone of your status, gender, and age. A task in which the stakes are much

higher for nobility; whose environment is often that of vying for status by gossiping, sabotage, and playing the game better than those around you.

For the lower class, however, transgender individuals found more opportunities to live out a more validating lifestyle, especially during the Edo Period, where economy flourished and the romanticism of the *Floating World* attracted varying classes to sample all that the entertainment districts had to offer.

Among images that are symbolic to Japan's national identity, is its association with Buddhist practices, specifically, Zen Buddhism. As we speak, the philosophy of Zen, which for a long period of time was considered almost an eccentricity of the east, has made a major imprint on the western psychological practice. The concept of "mindfulness" is associated with meditation and appreciation of the moment, however, what wasn't necessarily exported was the linked concept of impermanence. Appreciating the moment for what it is, doesn't mean much unless the moment is ever-changing. That's where impermanence comes in. This concept can be defined by the belief that attachment to things that are purely temporal causes suffering because they never truly stay the same. In the consumerist world that we live in, the idea that none of our worldly belongings matter and in fact inhibit our growth spiritually is much too radical to be popularized. However, in Japanese philosophy, this concept has found a home in the artistic sphere. This philosophical term, *mono no aware*, is defined as, "[the] sensitivity to the pathos of things, to life's fragility and thus its beauty (Huffman, 2010, pp. 34)," or to put it simply, things that are impermanent are beautiful. The most common example of this is the sakura tree (or cherry blossom). Considered one of the most beautiful sights in Japan, sakura trees bloom magnificently in the spring creating a canopy of pink all over Japan. However, the reason for the tree's beauty is not only because the tree itself is beautiful to look at, but because it is

impermanent. Unlike many other blossoming trees, sakura trees are known for having a bloom time for only a week before all of the pink petals drop. The concept that you can only see this bloom period for that short time has resulted in much adoration of them and even a festival celebrated nationwide to observe the trees for the day.

There are many other comparable views found to be contemplated in Japanese poetry, literature, art, and song, however, the most relevant is the distinct *wakashu* figure of the Edo period.

The Edo period, spanning from 1600 to 1868, was a period of reunification for Japan. Even after opening its gates to the west in the late 1500's, Japan saw more threat to their nation than prosperity to the trade; namely because of religious threat to its establishment. Upon closing the ports to the west, Japan focused inward and soon a prosperous period began; moving away from the uncompromising feudal system to a prosperous nation where career was much less hereditary and new options for occupation popped up for the working class. With more money circulating and the entrepreneurial spirit at its apex, most towns began to advertise "floating worlds (Huffman, 2010, pp. 55-66)." These areas attracted both men and women as an escape from mundane life, promoting arts and entertainment; especially that of the adult nature.

As sex work flourished, suddenly in 1629, a ban was set for women in kabuki theatre due to the prevalence of sex workers as lead female roles (Mostow, 2016, pp. 26). While this didn't stop the advertisement for sex work in theatre, the population shifted from young biological women to female role players assigned male at birth. Those who performed female roles in kabuki came to be known as *onnagata*. Because of the normality of homosexuality in this point in history, the affection that male patrons previously gave to women in kabuki were now given to *onnagata*. *Onnagata* themselves were not considered homosexual or transgender, but their role in

theatre granted them much of the sexualization and desire that women received. Moreover, rarely were onnagata illustrated in men's attire, and some were even depicted as biologically female (Mostow, 2016, pp. 28). For this reason, needless to say, the floating world was a place where LGBTQ+ individuals would easily fit in and trans-women, in particular, could build a decent career.

More popular than onnagata were the subset of young (biologically male) female-role actors called *wakashu*. These young people often supplemented their acting job with sex work much like onnagata. Because of their youth and beauty they were considered almost a "third gender," walking a tight line between male and female. In this way, they became a target of the same admiration as sakura trees. Like sakura, *wakashu* only had a short period of their lives "in bloom." *Wakashu* could be easily determined by their "shaven pate and long forelocks and sidelocks." This hairstyle was adopted at a boy's coming of age ceremony (normally between eleven and thirteen years old), though *wakashu* vary in age and often the most important characteristics were their "passive nature and the external marks of youthfulness coded by clothing and hairstyle. (Mostow, 2016, pp. 12). These characteristics are the fleeting ones. Manhood is often associated with burliness, strength, and assertiveness. *Wakashu*, while born into a role where they are supposed to grow up to be a stereotypical man, express mannerisms that are submissive and a youthful appearance, such that they could be mistaken for either gender. The ambiguity in this identity is heightened by the normativity of *wakashu* being with both men and women. In this way, "...*wakashu* represent a third gender due to the fact that "he" can do something that no other gender can: he is sexually ambidextrous and assumes the passive role when with an adult man, but the penetrative role when with any kind of female (Mostow, 2016, pp. 23)." This role would be compared to non-binary or agender identity because they play

off of both physical ambiguity and irreverence for socially constructed gender roles. Though, it is only AMAB (Assigned male at birth) individuals who could express their gender identity in this way.

It's no surprise that AFAB (Assigned female at birth) exclusion resulted in a turf war between *wakashu* and female sex workers; the latter being depicted in woodblock paintings in an often unflattering light. However, the solution resulted in further defiance from the binary.

While lesser documented (unsurprisingly), AFAB individuals presenting as male, were just as present as *wakashu*; though it seems that this gender expression was significantly less popular and often the target of discrimination. Joshua S. Mostow describes such individuals; "...there is evidence of cross-dressing female sex workers in the seventeenth century. Pflugfelder sites a 1694 Edo decree that forbade, among others, *kagama onna*, female prostitutes, who seem to have dressed as "professional youths." In Osaka, such figures were called *wakashu-joro* (literally "young-man ladies"). (Mostow, 2010, pp. 35)." Being that both female sex workers and *wakashu* would have been banned from kabuki theatre by this point in history, it would make sense that by the beginning of the 18th century AFAB sex workers would try to figure out a way to set themselves apart from *wakashu*. Thus, space for female crossdressers in the adult entertainment sphere came about similarly to that of *onnagata* in kabuki.

In the 19th century, another wave of crossdressing 'women' came about. These sex workers were referred to as *haori/tatsumi geisha* and they were characterized as, "[wearing] men's over-jackets (*haori*), and shaved the top of their heads like *wakashu*. They wore lighter makeup than the professionals of Yoshiwara, and their professional names were often indistinguishable from those of men (Mostow, 2010, pp. 36)." It's interesting to note that while *wakashu* are known for not fitting in the binary, they are visible because of their hairstyle and

noticeable *masculine characteristics* underneath their kimono. Haori geisha, on the other hand, submerge themselves entirely into the male role. Not only are they just as androgynous as wakashu, but they take on a male name and have no distinguishable features to separate them from wakashu on the streets. Being that haori geisha embody masculinity to the fullest, there is room for the presence of trans-men or AFAB gender-nonconforming individuals just as there would be in the realm of wakashu or onnagata.

Regardless the visibility or acceptance transgender people might receive from friends, family, society, etc... their identity is not defined solely by how others view them, there is an aspect of being transgender that often results in much of the struggle they face in even asking for acceptance from others. This is a concept that defies nationality, age, socio-economic status, mental health, etc... and it is the concept of gender dysphoria.

In the *Torikaebaya Monogatari*, both wakagimi and himegimi are given the freedom to pursue the gender identity that they identify with, however, their father's approval cannot be mistaken for kindness. As stated before, one's station in life is not something that can be easily escaped; this is something the father is well aware of. Because he is promised by the monk that allowing his children to live as each other will end in a way that benefits his ideal, he sacrifices his momentary satisfaction for the inevitable return of his daughter and son to their "rightful" positions.

There are three major reasons that the siblings couldn't continue their lives as they wished to identify; 1.) segregation of the sexes, 2.) societal/familial obligation, and 3.) gender dysphoria. These three elements create the perfect storm for our protagonists.

Japanese society is heavily divided into gendered spheres, and the major differences between Wakagimi and Himegimi, comes down to where they prefer to situate themselves. The

outside is associated with masculinity, whereas inner quarters are associated with femininity.

These spheres become indicators to the outside world that the two siblings are not fulfilling their appropriate station in life and therefore are not like everyone else. When they place themselves into the sphere they feel is appropriate, there is an unavoidable sacrifice that must be made in terms of social customs and recreation. In both male and female spheres bonding can often involve nudity and platonic intimacy. Being in close contact with the opposite sex poses serious obstacles in maintaining pseudo-cisgenderism. Normal tasks such as bathing, getting dressed, going to the bathroom, close proximity in terms of personal space, and even social customs differing between the two spheres can be a dead giveaway that something doesn't seem quite "right." This is exactly the case in *Torikaebaya* as the plot begins to describe the siblings' separate adult lives. Focus is set on how the siblings navigate their marriages, social obligations, and sexual life without giving away their biological sex. From a queer lens, this is representative of how transgender people often have a perpetual awareness of self, usually coinciding with 'imposter syndrome'. The fear of being 'found out' and subsequently invalidated can be unbearable. This manifestation of both internal and external stressors about one's physical body is often a symptom of gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is characterized by the negative feelings towards one's body coinciding with anxiety and disgust that it doesn't match what one is feeling inside. Many of the scenes featuring the siblings' struggles taps into the psyche of trans people who struggle with dysphoria. Pflugfelder aptly explains, "...the fear of discovery exacts a psychic toll on the siblings, affecting the way in which they interact with others. Himegimi is remarkably aloof and reserved for a young man of court, while Wakagimi is even more painfully shy than other palace ladies (Pflugfelder, 1992, p. 352)."



During one scene, Himegimi realizes that he will never be able to satisfy his wife and produce an heir. This thought seems to haunt him throughout the story, so much so, that he refuses to teach his wife what sex is, resulting in her being sexually assaulted for her lack of socialization. In another similar scene, the plot describes Wakagimi's desperate struggle to elude a suitor's romantic/sexual pressure for fear that he'll discover her true sex. Because of Wakagimi's socialization with the other women of the court (unlike Shi no Kimi), she knows that she must not show fear, but to act cold and unfeeling in order to fend him off.

Following these events, it's unsurprising that Himegimi is also pursued by a male suitor, in fact the same one that assaulted his wife. Wakagimi, much like his wife Shi no Kimi, is uneducated in the ways of courtship, this results in him being perceived as submissive (similarly to wakashu), thus, when the man comes onto him, he reacts in fear rather than frigidness, a reaction perceived to provoke arousal in Heian period courtship practices, resulting not only in him being found out, but resulting in a pregnancy.

Out of fear, Wakagimi runs away from his role only to be retrieved by his sister who sacrifices her position by cutting her hair, in order to take back the male role that her father expected of her. Likewise, Himegimi is forced to marry the man that impregnated him and perform domestic roles expected by his father. While Wakagimi, very obviously unwillingly takes on her role as head of the household, she marries one of the women of court that she had feelings for while she was presenting as a female and, obviously, fills a position where she is perceived as a man and therefore respected more. Himegimi, on the other hand, stays with the biological father of his son before suddenly leaving in the middle of the night without him or his child. He is described as feeling suffocated by the role of housewife, though, regardless of his

masculine nature, he ends up marrying an emperor and ascending to a much more powerful female role.

Though the story ends in an ambiguous way, and perhaps doesn't really have a happy ending or any kind of conclusion at all, there's something to be said about the action of writing such a story in the first place. Neither did this writing uplift gender non-conforming people nor did it abhor them. In fact, the *Torikaebaya Monogatari* is probably rather basic by Heian period standards of monogatari. However, it is in its uninspiring nature that perhaps the most validation can be had. This is because the lives of the siblings are, by all accounts for the time period, regular. It's in the way that their lives are presented no different from anyone else's that proves where the Japanese mindset is at the time.

Unlike western documentation of LGBTQIA+ discrimination, lynchings, and moral objection, premodern Japan had little exposure to other philosophies which condemned such acts. While there was no active identity, that doesn't mean transgender people weren't visible, they were just considered unexceptional like the rest of the working class.

Moreover, the socialization of Japanese people was completely different from that of the west. Emphasis on individuality has always been a major influence in the western psyche; what sets you apart is viewed as a potential asset. However, Japanese identity is based on cooperation, what makes you different is viewed as a liability. For that reason, it probably never occurred LGBTQIA+ people to assert themselves as something separate from the rest of society. A good example of this is in stories about court romance. In the west, focus is often set on two people marrying that do not love each other, the plot arises from one or both trying to escape the marriage or cheat without being caught. In the east, however, adultery was common. As part of one's station, Japanese royals were expected to marry for family alliances and heirs to the throne,

but the private life of the two is a completely separate sphere in which they appeal to personal desires in a way that doesn't affect the flow of society. One's station is whatever society expects of a person, as long as they fulfill that, what they do in their free time is no one's concern. This coinciding with a lack of religious pressure to act in a way that objects to LGBTQIA+ lifestyles makes the transgender identity irrelevant to social norms. If no one is questioning what you're doing, there's no reason to think of it as odd.

It is exactly in their underwhelming representation during pre-modern eras that makes it apparent that transgender people were just people. There was no need to pick them out from the rest because they were no more exceptional than cisgender people.

That in itself is pretty exceptional.

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