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Exclusive Liberation and Lesbian Suicide in Interwar Japan
Scott Reynen

Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle.
- bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture*.

There were 342 cases of “female same-sex double (or ‘love’) suicide” reported in the Japanese daily press between 1925 and 1935 (Komine 1985, 175). Assuming unreported and individual cases, the actual sum of lesbian suicides during this period was probably much higher than twice this number. Still, only these recorded lesbian double suicides constituted about thirty-one percent of all suicides in Japan during this time period (Komine 1985, 174-5). The disproportionately high rate of suicide among lesbians in interwar Japan is an indication of widespread exclusion of lesbians from the major social and economic trends during this time.

Interwar Japanese recognized these high rates of lesbian suicide as an unusual phenomenon. Komine’s research is based on data collected from public news sources that reported and made commentary on the suicides. In 1935, a psychologist, Yasuda Tokutaro, publicly inquired,

“Why are there so many lesbian double suicides reported in the society column of the daily newspaper? One can only infer that females these days are monopolizing homosexuality” (quoted in Robertson 1998, 192). Other periods offer insufficient information with which to compare interwar lesbian suicide rates. However, the lack of similar studies and public commentary both preceding and following this period suggests that the rates of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan was in contrast to lower rates in other times. The specific circumstances of interwar Japan had a unique effect of encouraging lesbian suicide.

Robertson (1999) makes the only contemporary attempt to draw attention to and account for the phenomenon of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan. She concludes: “Lesbian double suicides and attempted suicides were predicated on – and both used and criticized as a trope for – a revolt against the normalizing functions of tradition (qua the Good Wife, Wise Mother) as sanctioned by the civil code” (Robertson 1999, 15). Robertson calls the phenomenon of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan “an effective way to get controversial ideas into print and integrated with the popular discourse of sexuality” (1998, 15). However, Robertson neglects mentioning how ineffective these suicides were in changing the very conditions from which the suicides arose. That these double suicides

repeated at an average interval of ten days over a period of ten years suggests that if such suicides were a method of political dissent, this method failed to create much-needed changes in society.

The popular discourse of interwar Japan changed only in its inclusion of discussion of lesbianism; however, such discussion was overwhelmingly negative (Fruhstuck 2000). Thus while the suicides may be viewed as effective in communicating political dissent, the dissent itself was not effective. Effective political dissent brings desired change, and lesbian suicide in interwar Japan did not bring such change for Japanese lesbians. Instead, the suicides served to negate the value of lesbian life. As a result, the dominant ideologies affecting lesbians in Japan today are still not significantly different from those of interwar Japan. Lesbians continue to be excluded from major trends in Japanese society (ILGA 1993).

Robertson's explanation emphasizes the role of dominant ideologies of interwar Japan, e.g. "Good Wife, Wise Mother," in prompting lesbian suicide. However, ideologies alone do not prompt people to commit suicide. Behind every apparently ideological suicide are actual living conditions unpleasant enough to make voluntary death an appealing alternative to life. The vast majority of people, even those burdened by

the very ideologies Robertson discusses, prefer life to death. Whatever the varying explicit statement accompanying suicides, the unvaried implicit statement is always a rejection of life itself. To explain a suicide, one must explain what factors made life so unappealing for the subject.

Even if one focuses on only explicit suicide statements as Robertson does, her explanation could only account for a small fraction of Japanese lesbian suicides in interwar Japan. The majority of interwar Japanese lesbians had neither the wealth nor the fame to anticipate that their suicide would have some positive impact on the ideologies concerning lesbians in interwar Japan. A politically-motivated suicide presupposes a political voice and the vast majority of lesbians, as both women and homosexuals, had no such voice in interwar Japan.

Robertson's analysis, examined either on its own premises or as methodologically flawed, prompts a new question. How was the practical application of "tradition" for Japanese lesbians notably different than that of the rest of Japanese society, particularly other oppressed groups and unmarried heterosexual women, who shared the same tradition yet expressed or withheld dissent by some other means than suicide? The will to commit suicide arose most directly from the material conditions in the lives of lesbians in interwar Japan, rather than abstract ideologies

such as “Good Wife, Wise Mother,” which were not specific to lesbian women. An examination focused primarily on specific material conditions of life for lesbians in interwar Japan reveals a more convincing explanation of the phenomenon of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan.

Specifically, lesbians of interwar Japan were generally excluded from the benefits of industrial modernization as administered by the Japanese state *and* from socialist and feminist critiques of the interwar society, but nonetheless experienced the negative repercussions associated with each of these trends. Whatever these suicidal lesbians were “dying to tell,” their suicides are indicative of not only their lack of political voice in life but also their inability to exist within the dominant trends of Japanese interwar society. In short, lesbians of interwar Japan were simply “dying to be” in death what they could not be in life.

Before examining the practical motivations of suicide for these women, lesbian suicide in interwar Japan must be understood in the historical contexts of both suicide and lesbianism. Although Japan is often cited as a “suicide nation,” suicide rates in Japan have actually been lower than rates in other countries such as Denmark and Austria (Pinguet 1993, 14). Japan’s image as a “suicide nation” comes from the especially public reaction to suicide in Japan rather than statistically

higher rates. Suicide has been somewhat idealized in Japan because of the voluntary deaths of famous Japanese and the public discourse concerning these deaths throughout history (Pinguet 1993). Thus Japan's "suicide nation" status does not help to explain the disproportionately high rates of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan.

Instead, the history of suicide in Japan explains why suicide functions as an indication of broader problems in Japanese society. "Suicide is a symptom, that is, a surface result of factors uncontrolled by the subject . . . It is a rejection: firstly of a given situation, but beyond that, a blanket judgement on the value of life" (Pinguet 1993, 35). The high rate of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan is symptomatic of factors in larger Japanese society that made life unbearable for lesbians. Identifying these factors and their practical effects on the lives of lesbians of interwar Japan will provide a basis from which to explain the suicides.

The scarcity of historical documents (and consequent scarcity of modern research) regarding lesbianism in Japanese history makes the task of understanding interwar Japanese lesbianism within historical context difficult. "In traditional Japanese society homosexual behavior was viewed as a diversion or hobby that was separate from one's serious procreative duties and public identities" (Hawkins 2000, 37) and was

therefore rarely a topic of discussion. Lesbianism was apparently not part of the pre-interwar popular Japanese discourse. Little more is currently known, but this much is sufficient context for understanding lesbianism in interwar Japan. Interwar Japan was the time period in which lesbianism entered the public discourse.

The continuously emerging history of male homosexuality (Pflugfelder 1999) suggests there is good reason to believe that the lack of public discourse concerning lesbianism in pre-interwar Japan is not indicative of a lack of lesbianism itself. Attitudes toward male homosexuality underwent a significant shift in the early twentieth century. Hawkins notes “the gulf that separates the Japanese gay cultures of today and those that flourished prior to the turn of the 20th century” (Hawkins 2000, 36). This same gulf separates modern and historical Japanese lesbianism, and is bridged by the interwar period. Interwar Japan was, as Robertson suggests, a time of ideological change concerning sexuality in general, and lesbianism specifically. The material causes of such ideological change form a basis from which to understand changes in both ideology and suicide rates.

The interwar period in Japan was marked by the late Taisho (1918-26) and early Showa (1926-37) government’s failure to effectively deal

with the problems brought about by rapid industrialization. For example: in 1920 a financial panic followed the industry boom associated with the First World War; the Great Kanto Earthquake and Fire of 1923 again destabilized economic development; the Showa panic of 1927 and the depression of 1930 continued the regular pattern of economic fluctuation. One example of the very practical effects of such economic instability on Japanese citizens is the production of rice, a staple food in Japan. In 1921 rice prices dropped by over fifty percent, leaving many rice producers unable to continue their work. Government attempts at rationing rice led only to a further price drop by over twenty five percent by 1930 (Allen 1951, 109). The government was generally unresponsive, or even repressive, regarding the public demonstrations of dissatisfaction that accompanied these major economic problems.

Lesbian relationships depend materially on the economic independence of women from men, and industrialization as administered by the interwar Japanese government failed to achieve such independence. Lesbian women were particularly vulnerable to economic fluctuations. Because women were more frequently the first to be fired during times of economic recession, the proportion of female workers in the total factory workforce fell below fifty percent for the first time in

1933 (Masanori 1994, 13). Female participation in the workforce continued to fall until the end of the Second World War (Miyake 1991, 282). The lesbians committing suicide in interwar Japan were most often factory workers by trade (Robertson 1999, 13) and were therefore very directly affected by economic problems within the industrial sector. The inability to earn wages is one factor that commonly increases the likelihood of suicide (Pinguet 1993, 30).

In addition to disproportionately hurting women, economic troubles further focused on unmarried women. Over eighty-one percent of those women who *were* able to work were married (Masanori 1994, 120). While marriage provides no clear indication of heterosexuality, those lesbian women who did enter into systemically patriarchal marriages did so at the loss of their identity *as lesbians*. Most women could only temporarily afford to live outside of a married relationship with an employed man. “Considered auxiliary, female labour . . . provided the source of supplementary income for the household. For these reasons, women’s wages have invariably been low and working conditions poor” (Masanori 1994,193). Because of the disparity between male and female income levels, lesbians were unable to financially support each other at levels of

economic stability comparable to those found within the socioeconomic standard of heterosexual marriage.

Married women “strongly desired to find jobs of whatever kind, even at low wages, because the family budget could not be balanced otherwise” (Masanori 1994, 127). However desperate married women were to balance a greater male income, women in lesbian relationships were even more desperate to balance their own lesser female incomes. In the rare situation that both women in a lesbian relationship could find employment, two women would have found it difficult to sustain themselves within a “family budget” of only lower female income levels. Because unmarried women in interwar Japan constituted a disproportionately large segment of the unemployed, interwar lesbians were often faced with two unappealing options. They could disregard their own desires either by adapting themselves to a heterosexist patriarchal economic marriage system or by rejecting that system and facing poverty. As the high suicide rates suggest, many lesbians saw death as an appealing third option.

Japanese suicide expert Ohara Kenshito tells the story of two young lesbian women who committed double suicide after the pressure of school entrance examinations (Ohara 1973, 241-42). These

examinations would have played a major role in determining the paths of the women's future lives. Depending on their scores, they could expect to end up in either poverty or marriage. Rather than allow their own identities to be so determined, the two women overdosed on sleeping pills together.

At the same time, working conditions for women in many ways encouraged sexual relationships between women. Factories commonly recruited young women from rural homes and brought them to unfamiliar urban environments (Molony 1991), where they were required to live in female-only company dormitories (Masanori 1994, 194-5). Such practices gave women new opportunities to form close, often sexual, relationships with other women, and separation from men made heterosexual relationships more difficult to maintain. Sharing harsh working conditions also encouraged women to form close relationships.

Social historian Sabine Fruhstuck writes:

By pointing out that only the better-equipped dormitories of the factories provided a single futon for each girl, while in most cases two girls shared a futon, Hosoi suggested that the cramped housing conditions may have furthered their activities. In the morning one could find at least 30 percent of the girls in "strange positions," another 30 percent had unintentionally embraced each other while sleeping, and 40 percent had intentionally done so. Hosoi concluded "The phenomenon of lesbianism is quite common and includes a wide range of practices ranging from mutual psychological love to

extremely lustful activities which are accompanied by a strong sense of jealousy” (Fruhstuck 2000, 343).

Behind the peculiar designations of “strange positions” and “unintentional” embrace is an assertion that one hundred percent of women in factories had some form of physical relationship with other women. This figure is likely an exaggeration of a more general truth that living conditions within female factory dormitories encouraged lesbian relationships.

This information contradicts Hawkins’ assertion that “Urbanization led to a breakdown of the traditional segregation of the sexes, as men and women mingled freely in the new environment” (Hawkins 2000, 38). While men and women *did* mingle freely as consumers in a newly industrialized Japan, the working conditions which allowed such consumerism, and which had a more significant impact on the lives of women, were commonly segregated by gender. However, the social expectation was that after working in such factories women would turn, or return, to patriarchal families. Nonetheless, factory work provided women with opportunity to explore sexual desires that were ultimately unacceptable in larger society. The modernization of industry in interwar Japan simultaneously provided a basis for limited sexual relationships

between women, but made the economic reality of long-term lesbian relationships nearly impossible.

The relationship between Yuriko Nakajo and Yoshiko Yuasa was a rare, and temporary, exception to the difficulty of maintaining a lesbian relationship in interwar Japan. After this relationship had ended, Yoshiko observed, "Being able to support each other, to fill each other's various needs, we had it pretty good" (Hitomi 1990, 28). It was not until the conclusion of the relationship that Yoshiko was able to gain some comparative perspective and realized how difficult it was for two women in interwar Japan to support each other, particularly economically.

The relationship of Yuriko and Yoshiko is also an example of how socialism affected the lives of lesbian women in interwar Japan. As the popular response to the problems of industrialization in interwar Japan, socialist movement successfully challenged many of the government policies responsible for such problems, but failed to address the specific problems of lesbians. Biographer Hitomi Sawabe describes the conditions under which Yuriko and Yoshiko's relationship ended:

During this period, when Yuriko threw herself into the wider stream of history as a left activist, she also abandoned the woman's friendship that she had shared with Yoshiko and chose the love of the man Kenji. It seems that even her love was to be revolutionary. It would not be an unnatural, decadent love, "perched on a board laid over a ditch," like [that of cross-dressing women] they had

seen in Berlin, but a healthy, natural productive, revolutionary love like [that of the woman's committee chairman with her family] they had seen in the Soviet Union. Running to join Kenji, Yuriko brushed Yoshiko aside with the words, 'You are not my tavarisch [Russian for 'comrade']" (Hitomi 1990, 27).

Lesbianism, at least in Yuriko's view, was incompatible with socialist revolution. The declining role of women in the industrial workforce meant a paralleled decline in women's participation in socialist struggle for workers' rights. However, female participation in socialist movement was actually *less* significant than the lower female employment rates alone can account for.

Heterosexism was perhaps also a result of the association of harsh factory work with lesbian sexuality. Socialists may have mistakenly understood factory work as a cause of, rather than simply an opportunity for, same-sex relationships. Historian Gregory Pflugfelder describes antagonism between socialism and homosexuality:

To expose the inequities of the current social system, thus helping to generate support for socialism, was one of the objectives of the proletarian literary movement . . . In the writings of this school, as in the works of Morita and Sakai, "same-sex love" offered a convenient emblem for the structural defects of contemporary society (Pflugfelder 1999, 309).

Rather than using the exclusion of homosexuals from the benefits of industrialization as a critique of capitalism, Japanese socialists used homosexuality itself as a symbol of the failures of capitalism, suggesting,

as Yuriko did, that under an ideal socialist economic system, homosexuality would cease to exist. More generally, such heterosexism was simply the result of socialist movement's unchecked adoption of the prejudices of larger society. While socialists were not exclusively heterosexist, such patterns of oppression were an ironically common trend in the struggle for economic rights in interwar Japan.

In addition to heterosexism, patriarchy within interwar Japanese socialist movement resulted in the exclusion of women in general, but also specifically lesbians, from the popular struggle for rights. Some of the patriarchy within interwar Japanese socialist movement can be attributed directly to the government. Article 5 of the Police Security Regulations banned women from participation in the *Nihon Shakaishugi Doumei* [Japanese Socialist Federation] (Hane 1988, 126). The *Nihon Shakaishugi Doumei* was the primary socialist organization in interwar Japan, and the exclusion of women from this organization resulted in the exclusion of women from many smaller associated organizations. This law cannot fully explain patriarchy within interwar Japanese socialist movement, however, because laws restricting socialist organizations were frequently broken (Totten 1966, 186). The decision to obey this

particular law indicates that women's participation was not fully valued by many influential socialists.

Another example of the socialist readiness to adopt patriarchal attitudes can be seen in the manifesto of the *Sekirankai* [Red Wave Society]. The *Sekirankai* was a separate women's socialist group formed in 1921 in reaction to the legal exclusion of women from the *Nihon Shakaishugi Doumei*. The manifesto reads, in part:

Women and workers have endured together a history of oppression and ignorance. . . . The capitalist society turns us into slaves at home and oppresses us as wage slaves outside the home. It turns many of our sisters into prostitutes. Its imperialistic ambitions rob us of our beloved fathers, children, sweethearts, and brothers and turn them into cannon fodder. . . . Socialism offers the only way to save mankind from the oppression and abuses of capitalism. Women who wish to be liberated, join the *Sekirankai*! (Hane 1988, 126-7).

The manifesto acknowledges gender-structured oppression of women, but clearly prioritizes the effects of capitalism on *male* workers. The description of "women and workers" subtly implies that women *were not* workers. The oppression of women as "slaves at home" or as prostitutes is acknowledged, but without any indication that the very fathers, sweethearts, and brothers the *Sekirankai* sought to help liberate were primarily responsible for such oppression. Women were asked to join socialist movement primarily to fight the economic oppression of men,

and only secondarily to fight their own gender-structured oppression. Socialism, as exemplified by the manifesto of *Sekirankai*, failed to apply the same critical analysis of oppression to patriarchy as was applied to capitalism.

Hashiura Haruko offers an account of how patriarchy within socialist movement affected the lives of women with interests in liberation. Despite her own socialist activity, she was asked to leave the home of her socialist brother, who told her, "I have to live my own life" (Hane 1988, 137). Hashiura's incentive for marriage validates the earlier suggestion that marriage in interwar Japan functioned as a means of perpetuating the patriarchal *economic* structure of society. "Because I was convinced I wouldn't be able to make a living by sewing alone," she recounts, "I decided to get married" (Hane 1988, 137). She married a man who refused to work, forcing her to work long hours to support both herself and her new husband.

Hashiura's situation left her with neither the time nor desire to participate in further socialist action (Hane 1988, 138). She met her husband through socialist connections, who cautioned her against the marriage, but offered her no alternatives for her own survival. Ultimately, she blamed her own situation on socialism itself, remarking "I did not

agree with the idea of sacrificing some people to attain that goal” (Hane 1988, 138). Hashiura recognized a divorce between harsh critiques of capitalism and significantly less resolute, and sometimes nonexistent, rejections of patriarchy within socialist circles. Although there is little evidence suggesting Hashiura was herself a lesbian, her story could easily be the story of many lesbian women in interwar Japan, for whom socialism offered inadequate responses to the inequities of interwar society.

Kutsumi Fusako’s relationship with socialist movement involved a similar discrimination between forms of oppression. Kutsumi, like many socialist women, married a socialist husband, Mitamura. “Kutsumi was absolutely faithful and submissive to Mitamura and attended to him like an old-fashioned, self-effacing wife. The contrast between her politics and her behavior is intriguing” (Hane 1988, 140). The contrast between the politics and behavior of many socialists was similarly “intriguing.” Mitamura, like most socialist men, unquestioningly perpetuated gender-structured oppression *despite* consciousness of class-structured oppression.

The stories of Yuriko and Yoshiko, Hashiura, and Kutsumi show patterns of patriarchy and heterosexism within socialist movement of

interwar Japan. While socialism addressed the failings of the capitalist economic system in Japan, it failed to address the economic issues of specific concern to women and of even greater concern to lesbian women in particular. Furthermore, as Yoshiko's story shows, socialist movement at times functioned as an active factor working *against* the material concerns of lesbians in interwar Japan.

The common trends of patriarchy and heterosexism within socialist movement in interwar Japan may not be endemic to socialism in general. Concurrent Chinese Communist revolution, for example, was perhaps more accepting of women in general, or lesbians in particular. However, the emphasis of any socialist movement has always been economic class oppression, and it is the rare case in which this emphasis does not come at the expense of groups suffering from other forms of oppression. To successfully address the material needs of lesbians, socialist movement would need to accept lesbians *as oppressed women*, and *as lesbians* and not *only* as members of the oppressed economic class. Interwar Japanese socialist movement failed to address oppression in its many forms.

Many women, and some lesbians, continued to work within interwar socialist movement despite these trends of oppression (Molony 1991,

224). However, socialists generally failed to take advantage of unique perspectives on the problems of capitalist industrialization that lesbians offered. Socialist failure to adequately address the very immediate need for women's economic independence hurt not only interwar Japanese lesbians, but also socialist movement itself.

The Japanese government responded to socialist critiques with broad repressive laws that negatively affected socialist movement and, more generally, minorities in interwar society, including lesbians. The late Taisho government enacted the Peace Preservation Law (PPL) of 1925 as a response to "radical" movements such as socialism and anarchism.

Article 1 of this law reads:

Anyone who organizes a group for the purpose of changing the national polity (*kokutai*) or of denying the private property system, or anyone who knowingly participates in said group shall be sentenced to Penal servitude or imprisonment not exceeding ten years. An offense not actually carried out shall also be subject to punishment.

Although the PPL was specifically aimed at socialists, it had the practical effect of treating any deviation from an arbitrarily-defined "tradition" as a potentially criminal transgression. *Kokutai* referred specifically to the family system under which the lineage of emperors proceeded, but was also more generally understood as a symbol of "traditional" Japanese society (Hopper 1996, 61). This tradition included the heterosexual

family structure, and thus the PPL implicitly criminalized homosexuality (Miyake 1991, 271).

In practice, the government and society commonly associated any deviation from the standard heterosexuality of marriage with an attack on tradition. Sawada Junjiro wrote “There is no crime, large or small, that can not be traced to the lust that lies hidden beneath its surface” (quoted in Pflugfelder 1999, 311). Many viewed lesbianism, one such lust, as a direct criminal attack on the *kokutai*, while others understood any sexual “deviance” to be an indication of future criminal behavior.

Repressive measures such as the PPL were part of the interwar government’s failed attempt to drive industrialization toward specific controlled results. Because the planned modernization of Japan had included neither the changing family structure nor socialism, the PPL practically criminalized both. “Against the background of growing concern over the forces of familial disintegration threatening Japanese society, the entry of middle-class women into the work force came under the worried scrutiny of government officials and opinion leaders” (Nagy 1991, 200). Although far from realized, the mere threat of women economically supporting themselves or each other independently of men was enough to elicit a response from the interwar Japanese government.

The government's reverence for "tradition" stopped short of questioning the pace, much less the value, of its own attempts at industrialization. The criminalization of "denying the private property system" was an implicit acknowledgement that capitalism was not part of Japanese tradition, but would nonetheless remain a significant part of interwar Japanese society. That the private property system was itself a threat to the *kokutai* was overlooked. The goal of the PPL was to enforce economic and only economic change in Japan, and to develop a form of Japanese capitalism rooted in tradition (Pinguet 1993, 31).

The decline of the patriarchal and heterosexist family structure and the increasing popularity of socialism were also directly related, although the government rhetoric did not explicitly acknowledge the relation. Socialism offered a replacement for the historical organization of workers within the family structure. Laborers who once relied on family patriarchs for both guidance and protection began to rely on socialist leaders instead. "Capitalist economic development . . . had undermined the ie [family] as a kinship organization and as a labor organization [*italics mine*] for agricultural production" (Miyake 1991, 270). Both socialist labor organization and the decline of the "traditional" family were unexpected results of industrialization, and the Japanese government attacked both

through the PPL.

In addition to repressive measures such as the PPL, the interwar Japanese government also tried to calm socialist protest through limited appeasement. At the same time the PPL was enacted, the government extended suffrage to all men, removing the previous barrier of property ownership (Mitchell 1976, 58-9). Universal male suffrage was of little benefit to lesbians. Perhaps because of the patriarchal structure of socialist movement, the government's measures were effective.

“Undoubtedly, the Peace Preservation Law system was extremely effective: the communist movement was crushed” (Mitchell 1976, 140).

Socialist movement in interwar Japan was effective enough in its struggle for economic rights to draw a backlash of repression from the government, but socialists failed to substantially improve the lives of interwar Japanese lesbians.

Feminist movement of the interwar period likewise failed to address the particular concerns of lesbians. Internationalization and modernization created new opportunities that many women found more appealing than the life of a “good wife, wise mother.” Exposure to women, and particularly feminists, from around the world demonstrated the potential of women's liberation for Japanese women. At the same

time, industrialization created new economic conditions that required more women to work in order to support themselves and their families. The gap between dominant ideology and material conditions concerning interwar Japanese women expanded more quickly than the government was able or willing to respond.

Instead, the interwar government acted to normalize such ideology in the face of changing conditions. The adultery laws of interwar Japan provide one example of state-sponsored patriarchy. These laws automatically punished women for extramarital affairs, while punishing men more leniently or not at all (Hopper 1996, 31). The death of Hatano Akiko provides an example of how such laws practically affected the life of an interwar Japanese woman. Hatano began an affair with a man, Arishima Takeo, and was unwilling to end it despite the harsh adultery laws. Rather than face legal punishment and public scorn, the couple committed double “love” suicide in 1923 (Hopper 1996, 31). In Hatano’s case, death was a more appealing option than criminalization or denying her own desires. While this particular story involved a heterosexual affair, the same circumstances affected lesbian relationships.

Women also received contradictory demands from interwar civil society. The common economic necessity of women’s income to balance

“family budgets” was rarely acknowledged as working women were condemned for abandoning their familial obligations. The view was common that “employed women represented a deviation from woman’s basic calling as wife and mother and must therefore be women of either low class or questionable virtue” (Nagy 1991, 211). The impossibility of women fulfilling irreconcilable economic and social obligations was not addressed nor even acknowledged by the interwar government.

The government had little immediate incentive to address the concerns of women as these contradictions functioned to support the progress of industrialization and militarization by providing a cheap and compliant labor force. Government action and inaction implicitly supported such exploitation. The 1925 extension of universal male suffrage furthered gender-stratification in civil society to the benefit of industrialists. A 1926 survey asked employers to describe the positive and negative features of female employees. “Over half of the 111 employers who described the positive traits of their women workers used words like ‘docile,’ ‘meek,’ and ‘gentle’” (Nagy 1991, 212). Female workers were valued by employers for their willingness to accept poor working conditions with little complaint. However, interwar Japanese women had much about which to complain.

Feminist movement responded to these negative effects of industrialization, and general government inaction, by promoting an alternative ideal for women known as the “new woman.” However, interwar feminist movement emerged primarily from the wealthiest portions of society, and spoke little of the material concerns of the majority of women. “These women, predominately, though not exclusively, upper class, were well educated and enjoyed debating the political and social issues of the day. They were acclaimed or branded, depending on one’s point of view, as ‘new women’” (Hopper 1996, 19). The “new women” feminists had a self-serving interest in avoiding confrontation of economic disparity between working males and females. Accordingly, “feminists produced no systematic critique of the imperial system” (Miyake 1991, 274).

Instead, the “new woman” feminists focused on topics such as birth control as a means of liberating women from the compulsory role of “wise mother.” Birth control was of little concern to lesbians. Nevertheless, women such as Katou Shidzue, branded the “Margaret Sanger of Japan,” played primary roles in organizing women’s political associations in interwar Japan (Hopper 1996, 24). The “new women” emphasis on birth control, influenced heavily by American birth control

advocacy, was in direct contradiction to the government's goals of increasing population in order to build a stronger nation and military.

The "new women" also questioned the assumption of a submissive female gender identity, and instead promoted an ideal female who was actively engaged in political struggle. "In drawing attention to a feminine self that broke down the psychological barriers of delicacy and submission. . . . the spokesmen for the 'new woman' forced the reading public to reconsider the Meiji legacy of sexual hierarchy and discrimination" (Roden 1990, 44). While such feminist critique made significant gains in the struggle against patriarchy, it generally avoided demands for the economic independence of women that was of primary concern to lesbians. Interwar feminists generally failed to question how they themselves had benefited from patriarchy within industrialization.

The "new woman" ideal also challenged the standard of sexual monogamy enforced by the strict adultery laws, calling instead for sexual freedom. While the topic of lesbianism was generally beyond the boundaries feminists imposed on their own "sexual freedom," the realization of full sexual independence for women implicitly suggested a wider scope of women's liberation. Lesbianism was at least an unspoken possibility for liberated "new women."

Social critics, in support of the government's attempted merger of capitalism and "tradition," recognized that the threat of women gaining control over their own bodies was a direct challenge to the patriarchal economic system. Some suggested the "new woman" would lead to an inability to distinguish between the "natural" categories of male and female, but "of greater concern to some male critics was the suspicion that once the new woman had internalized the masculine ethos, she might prefer single life to marriage, and, perhaps, the company of other women to men" (Roden 1990, 44). Outside of the patriarchal and heterosexist family structure, "new women" would no longer be materially dependent upon men. The "new woman" critique of "traditional" gender identity had implicit, though not explicit, economic significance for all women, but particularly lesbians.

The interwar Japanese government produced a variety of responses to "new woman" feminism, "most of which were decidedly negative" (Roden 1990, 52). As with socialism, the government response to feminism went well beyond addressing feminism alone to attack all unexpected consequences of industrialization.

Spokesmen from the ministries of Education and Internal Affairs [as well as many other organizations] waged a vociferous campaign against . . . feminism, homosexuality, recreational sex, and the

blurring, whether intended or not, of the sacred and inviolate lines between the masculine and feminine (Roden 1990, 52).

This campaign was in some cases waged through the discourses of popular opinion and legal codes, but more often through an increasingly popularized pseudo-scientific discussion of sexuality.

Framing the highly-opinionated discussion within the increasingly venerated realm of science achieved a new legitimization of public discussion of sexuality. However, the discussion itself was far from the scientific ideal of objectivity. “Japanese scholars and practitioners in medicine, psychiatry, psychology, and sexology, as well as philosophers and bureaucrats, developed a new understanding of the management of the Japanese body and, through it, of the entire population” (Fruhstuck 2000, 334). In the context of feminist movement, the “management of the Japanese body” meant the patriarchal management of Japanese women.

As the “scientific” discourse became increasingly popularized, it was hardly distinguishable from less sophisticated discussion of sexuality in civil society. “The popular sex discourse of the time heavily criticized women’s growing independence, which writers argued manifested itself in a variety of negative ways, including young women’s self-determination with regard to their sexual life styles” (Fruhstuck 2000, 352). The

psuedo-scientific understanding of sexuality served as an intermediary between the government and larger society, and successfully promulgated the very fate of Japan rested upon the control of women. The government response to feminism provided a basis from which the interwar Japanese government became increasingly authoritarian, resulting in the loss for lesbians of both the promise of liberation and the past comfort of being generally disregarded.

The emergence of a public discourse of sexuality did have some positive impact on lesbians by simply publicly acknowledging the existence of female homosexuality and allowing research into the subject. The recognition that lesbians exist is a necessary precursor to attending to their oppression. However, the public discourse which began in interwar Japan and continues today has rarely moved beyond simply acknowledging that lesbians exist to acknowledging that they exist as an oppressed group.

Interwar “sexologists” went to great lengths to categorize lesbianism in such a way as to provide a scientific basis for the already-existing social disapproval of lesbianism. One topic of discussion during the interwar period was the newly-recognized practice of lesbianism in girls’ schools. Lesbian encounters among girls at girls’ schools, previously

unknown to the general public, were discovered to be quite common (Fruhstuck 2000, 342). These relationships presented a particularly difficult problem for sexologists, who were unable to draw a clear line between lesbianism, which was generally viewed negatively, and intimate female friendship, which was part of the identity interwar society suggested for women (Furukawa 1994, 116).

Publicly noticeable and condemnable actions, such as holding hands or exchanging admiring letters, could be indicative of both a lesbian relationship and close female friendship. “Scientists” responded to this ambiguity by creating two new categories to identify more and less “harmful” forms of lesbianism. Sexologists identified *doseiai* as a form of lesbianism in which lesbians retained female genders in female-female relationships. *Ome*, on the other hand, described a form of lesbianism in which one woman would assume a “husband,” or male, role.

Doseiai, as outwardly indistinguishable from intimate female friendship, was generally considered less “harmful” than *ome*. “Even an overheated *doseiai* relationship was not pathological in the way that an *ome* relationship was, the latter being not only explicitly sexual but also a heretical refraction of the heterosexual norm formalized” (Robertson 1998, 69) as part of the *kokutai* tradition and protected under the PPL.

The distinct treatments of these two forms of lesbianism within the scientific and later popular discourse was implicitly rooted in economic concerns. The threat lesbianism posed to patriarchal and heterosexist trends in Japanese society was greatest when female-female relationships could not be viewed simply as an aberration that would inevitably lead back to heterosexuality in marriage and economic dependence on a male husband. *Ome* was viewed as a potential replacement for the traditional economic system as formalized in the heterosexual family and was thus a greater threat and more widely criticized by sexuality “experts” within both government and civil society.

Such “science” successfully fitted young women into new categories of sexuality, while doing little to address their actual concerns. Sociologist Furukawa Makoto tells the story of two young women who had met in a girls’ school and committed double suicide “out of fear that their homosexual relationship would be censured by their families” (Furukawa 1994, 114). Knowing what type of lesbian they were was of little comfort to these young women.

The threat of lesbianism to the patriarchal economic system of marriage is also seen in the comparison of homosexuality with another “perversion.” “‘Same-sex love’ was one in a long list of such ‘perversions,’

counting among its neighbors . . . ‘metatophism’ (where the wife became the more assertive partner in a marital relationship)” (Pflugfelder 1999, 289). This association indicates that lesbianism was not condemned on the grounds of any particular sexual activity, but merely the assertion that men are neither necessary for nor superior to women.

The interwar government also responded to the “problem” of working women through attempted appeasement. Rather than recognize its own inability to control industrialization, the government looked at female employment as a cause of male unemployment. A “Standing Committee on Women’s Associations to Encourage Thrift” [Kinben Shourei Fujin Dantai Jounin linkai] was formed to study and encourage more frugal family budgets (Nagy 1991). Government agencies encouraged women to take more control of family budgets, while discouraging women from working. Thus, women were simultaneously encouraged to spend money and discouraged from earning money, resulting in their increased dependence on men.

As a result of government pressures, feminist demands such as birth control and voting rights were successfully quelled. “Women, who had seen their hopes for even local enfranchisement dashed at the beginning of the decade, continued to agitate for women’s emancipation,

but in a more modulated manner” (Hopper 1996, 61). “Women’s liberation” instead became an ideal of women as liberated consumers.

The “modern girl [*modan gaaru*]” identity began to replace the “new woman” as the new ideal woman, “with time and money to fashion herself a brightly colored ensemble of Western clothing with matching hat in order to attend the cafes on Ginza” (Silverberg 1991, 249). The modern girl was defined by her new freedom and self-expression through the consumption of a newly available variety of international goods. Such consumerism increased patriarchal economic dependence for women, and had a particularly negative impact on the material conditions of life for lesbian women in interwar Japan. Socialist and feminist movements both implicitly threatened (or promised) to replace the traditionally patriarchal and heterosexist economic structure (and not merely its form) with more egalitarian systems. However, neither socialist nor feminist movements successfully realized such aspirations. Lesbianism, as a more explicit form of the same threat, experienced the government backlash against both movements.

Government management of interwar Japanese society proved inadequate in addressing the material concerns of lesbians. Both socialists and feminists in interwar Japan also fell far short of addressing

these needs. The extraordinarily high rate of suicide among lesbians in interwar Japan was one consequence of these trends.

While interwar Japanese government made no claims to be a liberator of oppressed people, both socialist and feminist movements would have been reasonably expected to address the economic independence of women in general or acknowledge the particular oppression of lesbians. Instead, both movements failed to question the heterosexist and even much of the patriarchal biases of larger society.

Unfortunately, such exclusion of one oppressed group by another is commonplace throughout history and still in modern liberation movement. The modern popular critique of capitalism is accused of widespread racism (Sivesind 2002). Modern feminists are accused of attacking other feminists (hooks 1994). The commonness of such phenomenon makes the consequences no less dire. For Japan in particular, the “tidal wave of suicide in the 1950s” may have been partially prevented had the tidal wave of lesbian suicide in the 1920s and 30s been sufficiently addressed by either the socialism or the government (Pinguet 1993, 17). In modern Japan, the problem does not manifest itself in suicide so much as emigration. Lesbian women, or others, who do not find a place for themselves in modern Japanese society are not faced with a singular

means of escape in death; they may simply flee to another country (Kelsky 1999).

For liberation movement in general, the conclusions here are more far-reaching. The burden of any liberation movement is great; such movements must move beyond narrow binary definitions of oppressed and oppressor and develop more generally applicable understandings of oppression that can serve the needs of all marginalized people. The consequences of doing so involve an increased public perception of “radicalism” (Rothschild 2000). But by failing to do so, liberation movement will forever be condemned to reproduce the very oppression it works against while simply shifting the lines of division. Lesbian suicide in interwar Japan provides a disturbing example of the results of such failure.

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