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Lesbian Suicide and Gender Identity in Interwar Japan

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Oral Presentation O3.3

LESBIAN SUICIDE AND GENDER IDENTITY IN INTERWAR JAPAN

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Interwar Japan saw extraordinarily high rates of suicide among lesbian women. The only explanation of this phenomenon comes from Jennifer Robertson, who attributes the suicides to ideological pressures and specifically the pressure on women to conform to gender stereotypes. However, a study of the conditions of life for lesbian women in interwar Japan suggests that socially-standardized gender identities, as well as feminist critiques of such identities, generally arose from and further served to perpetuate a patriarchal and heterosexist economic system. Within such an economic system, and amidst fluctuations of industrial modernization, lesbian women were unable to sustain themselves and turned to voluntary death as an escape from the very tangible restraints of life.