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Introduction to the Special Section

Bodies in Pain, Pleasure, and Flux: Transgressive Femininity in Japanese Media and Literature

Marianne Tarcov and Fareed Ben-Youssef

Two women sit combing their hair together, inhaling the scent of fresh mint in an intimate moment. A newly-human mermaid experiences excruciating pain each time she takes a step in her new body. A woman in a white *ch'ima chōgori* dances alone on a city rooftop, her clothing fluttering like butterfly wings. A pro wrestler in full samurai regalia faces the press after her last match with quiet stillness, not revealing what she may be feeling.

Across a diverse set of texts from Japanese media and literature, including professional wrestling, avant-garde writing, and Zainichi Korean literature, this special section explores the fluid relationship between femininity and the body, where one is neither defined nor determined by the other. At the crossroads of Asian studies, gender studies, media, and literature, this collection offers an interdisciplinary and transnational lens to consider this relationship in a Japanese context. To borrow from Lee's deployment of Gloria Anzaldúa's "Border Women," transgression provides these papers with a theoretical framework of



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inherent ambiguity that lingers between worlds—between the sanctioned and the unsanctioned, between performer and persona, between the reader and text. The papers presented here all treat femininity, not as an essentialized category of gendered experience, but as a liminal border zone in which conventional notions of gender, sexuality, and media become fluid and ambiguous. Whether it is the border between perfume advertising and avant-garde poetry, literary criticism and *butō* dance, autobiographical writing and oral forms of nonverbal performance, or professional wrestling and documentary film, the papers featured here all transgress disciplinary borders of media and genre while interrogating and disrupting conventional notions of femininity.

Throughout each of these papers, femininity becomes disrupted via differing encounters with the body. The corporeal experiences that these papers deal with range from being fully rooted in the fleshy reality of the body, to being dissociated or alienated from the body. When does aesthetic experience make us readers or viewers more aware of ourselves as bodies, more immersed in the corporeal reality of experience, whether painful or pleasurable? When does it offer moments of numbness or dissociation? Why do people crave these sensations, or lack thereof, and what is at stake when we experience them? Aesthetic texts, the papers here argue, are above all a corporeal experience, and the scholars here all offer embodied, physical readings of their various texts that engage with their material reality.

Ben-Youssef, Lee, and Osborne all focus on the body in pain. For both Ben-Youssef and Lee, pain appears masked or obscured by externally imposed identities, whether imposed by national origin or by the exigencies of the professional wrestling business. For Osborne, pain is associated with the origin of text and selfhood, an experience that enables those who are subject to it to know and experience their bodies more fully. Tarcov's paper focuses more on the question of sensory pleasure, how it can be radically politicized by the avant-garde or marketed by commerce. All four papers feature bodies in a state of flux, a constant state of becoming that resists established categories of being and knowing. In these papers, the body is not a stable entity but a dynamic constellation of sensory experiences that exceed and challenge knowability.

In "Fragrant Spaces Between Words: Prolonging Shōjo Liminality into Adulthood in the Poetry of Yonezawa Nobuko," Marianne Tarcov argues that in 1920s Japanese Symbolist poetry and perfume advertising, women inhabit a space of ambiguity, where bodily experience is elevated

as the highest form of creativity and knowledge. Yonezawa's poems prolong the liminality of the *shōjo*, or girl, archetype into adult womanhood, thereby transgressing the border between womanhood and girlhood. In her poetry, Yonezawa uses fragrance to portray the inherent sexuality of poetic creation, creating a feminine, sexual creative voice. Yonezawa uses the idealized homosocial relationships found in *shōjo* culture to imagine a world determined by the creativity and community of women. The relationships between women feature ecstatic sensory pleasure and shared poetic inspiration, brokered by the sense of smell.

In "Kanai Mieko's Corporeal Text and the Figure of the Dancing-Girl-in-Pain," Hannah Osborne analyzes the figure of the dancing-girl-in-pain in Kanai Mieko's 1968 essay, "Nikutairon e josetsu dai-ippo" (Towards a Theory of Corporeality). She advances that, through its discussion of this transgressive figure's manifestation in both the folk stories of Hans Christian Andersen and the *butō* of Hijikata Tatsumi, Kanai's essay articulates a radical understanding of both body and text whereby the body (and its consciousness) serves as a template for text, and the two are seen to intersect with each other across performance spaces. As such, the figure holds profound implications for a re-understanding of literature as a shared event akin to performance, and of the act of reading as an active re-writing (rather than a passive reception) of the text's meaning. Osborne moves us towards a theoretical framework that prioritizes corporeal experience in the reading of aesthetic texts, a priority that all four papers share. To read is to corporeally experience, in the view of Kanai Mieko, and this corporeal definition of reading appears in the other papers, as well.

In "Narrating the Diasporic Self as Shaman: A Quest for Self-healing and Social Transformation in Lee Yang-ji's *Nabi T'aryōng*," Lee Soo Mi analyzes a new feminine voice of the Korean diaspora in Japan, constructed by *zainichi* Korean writer/dancer Lee Yang-ji. Special attention is paid to how Lee's autobiographical writing constructs a shamanistic identity for herself, symbolic of accepting an in-between identity rooted in her diasporic existence in postwar Japan—where she is regarded as neither completely Japanese nor entirely Korean. Lee represents a young *zainichi* woman's body in a state of diaspora that can never settle down in a safe, stable position in society under any formal categorization of human groups. In so doing, Lee presents her autobiographical expression as a gesture of resistance to the objectification of her (reading) audience's gaze, which searches for the differences between self and other in the realms of race, culture, gender, and nation.

In “The Birth and Death of a Professional Wrestling Alter-Ego: Takahara Hidekazu’s *Gamushara* and the Loss of a Transgressive Identity,” Fareed Ben-Youssef situates the recent *Gamushara* cycle of women’s professional wrestling documentaries—in which a villainous wrestler retires after severe injury in the ring—as a unique meditation on the loss of a transgressive feminine identity centered around violence. He considers the films through a diverse set of lenses, including Meiji Gakuin University sociologist Aiba Keiko’s writings on female professional wrestlers’ relationship to physical pain, and in-depth interviews with the filmmaker Takahara Hidekazu and wrestler-subject Yasukawa Act. To consider the possibilities and limits of Yasukawa’s multivalent transgression of both gender and identity norms as well as the operating scripts of professional wrestling and trauma, the article also engages with gender scholar Sharon Marcus’ writing on how the rape script might be transcended via the development of a woman’s capacity for violence. Through such a critical prism, the *Gamushara* cycle ultimately emerges as a vital and crucially murky documentary series for gender and media scholars concerned with the tensions of identity formation within spaces of spectacle wherein one’s performed screams might mask one’s real cries for help.

Beyond their individual contributions, when taken together, these various articles on Japanese media provide a new means to theorize transgressive femininity. Such femininities are often brokered or emerge from patriarchal systems. In Lee, they spring from the words of a self-hating *zainichi* father and the destabilizing portrait of the emperor depicted within Lee Yang-ji’s autobiographical narratives. In Ben-Youssef, such resistant womanhood emerges against male gazes, be it that of the wrestling audience or the documentary camera of Takahara Hidekazu. For Osborne, the uniquely corporeal theory of Kanai Mieko encourages reader’s to actively engage with interpretive boundaries. For Tarcov, fragrance stands as an invasive presence that roots the smeller in her body, “a thing made of blood.” Indeed, each of these articles reveal a transgression rooted within women’s bodies—in how it might be transcended through the act of poetic creation, strengthened into a subject of violence, or melded into the musical instrument that offers a pathway for non-normative and non-Japanese identity.

The very interdisciplinary and cross-media nature of the featured scholarship underlines the way such visions of transgressive femininity can ultimately act as a critical lens to inform similarly boundary-dissolving

modes of scholarship. Our selection demonstrates that advertising copy may be read as Symbolist poetry, that the wrestling ring can be framed as a spectacular site for a resistant identity creation, that autobiography becomes a means to create a self beyond set boundaries of gender/race/nation, and that Hans Christian Anderson's fables can be connected to avant-garde *butō* dance to articulate the origin of the self through the body. Conceiving of transgression as a continual border crossing, as inherently an ambivalent and ambiguous act, encourages a mode of thinking that brings notions of instability in identity formation (foregrounded by gender theorists such as Judith Butler) to the aesthetic objects under review and to our very critical apparatus itself. Butler speaks of an "identity tenuously constituted in time," through acts of repetition.¹

Spanning so many fields of studies, our selection more fully articulates and enacts the central features of this tenuousness—such transgressive femininities remain in a constant act of push and pull, wrestling against societal expectation and their own mutable self-images. Only by bringing a plurality of texts together into conversation, as we do on both the level of individual articles and within the special issue on the whole, can scholars glean what it means to live between worlds, across different subjectivities and media modes. Osborne, in her exploration of Kanai's writing, employs Barthes notion of the plural text that exists in contrast to the readerly text produced by the (male) establishment. In so doing, she considers both identities and texts that "can never be fixed, predicted... or ascribed any definite locatable origin." This special issue on transgressive femininity thus offers the critical frame to do the necessary work of holding and working through identities and texts that "exceed interpretation, cannot be reduced to a singular signification," and which offer new routes for subjectivities always in the state of becoming that resist established categories of being and knowing.

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NOTE

¹ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519–531, 519.