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Two-Dimensional Imagination in Contemporary Japanese Women's Performance

Nobuko Anan



Introduction

Contemporary visual artist Murakami Takashi defines Japanese visual art (from the traditional to the contemporary), as well as society in general, as “super flat.” He writes in his “Super Flat Manifesto”:

Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional. It is particularly apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history. Today, the sensibility is most present in Japanese games and anime, which have become powerful parts of world culture. One way to imagine super flatness is to think of the moment when, in creating a desktop graphic for your computer, you merge a number of distinct layers into one. [...]he feeling I get is a sense of reality that is very nearly a physical sensation. The reason that I have lined up both the high and the low of Japanese art in this book is to convey this feeling. (2000:5)

In another chapter from the same book (“A Theory of Super Flat Japanese Art”), he further elaborates on his theory of super-flat aesthetics and argues that it is something that has neither any depth nor hidden truth beneath the two-dimensional surface (9–25). This conceptualization actually manifests his nationalist sentiment, as he writes, “‘Super flatness’ is an original concept of the Japanese” and “The world of the future might be like Japan is today—super flat” (5), suggesting his desire for Japan to have hegemonic power in the global art field. It is noteworthy that Murakami’s conceptualization of super-flat Japan excludes women, as it is based on the sexualized power dynamics that he perceives between the West/Western art and Japan/Japanese art. I will not discuss this in detail here, but he elaborates on his view in essays from his book, *Little Boy*, “Earth in My Window” and “Super Flat Trilogy: Greetings, You Are Alive” (2005). In sum, with the “cool,” super-flat aesthetics, Murakami attempts to turn a “castrated” Japan into the world’s hegemonic power in the field of art hitherto dominated by the West.

While critiquing Murakami, performance scholar Uchino Tadashi sees some relevance in his theorization of Japanese society and arts and uses the concept of super flatness to describe a certain type of urban, young people’s theatre and dance performance in contemporary Japan, or what he calls “J” performance” (2009:131). “J” signifies the “junk bodies” of performers, which are simply “physically present, burdened with nothing” and are thus super flat (128).

Uchino compares and contrasts these junk bodies with the preceding generations of theatre practitioners. In *shingeki*, modern theatre that originated in the late 19th century under the influence of Western realist theatre, the bodies of Japanese actors were marginalized not only in the sense that actors’ bodies sought to merely represent characters as linguistic constructs but also in the sense that the Japanese bodies were supposed to represent Western characters’ bodies (126). Even in realist plays, pioneering shingeki actors wore fake noses and blond wigs to play the roles of Euro-American characters. As Uchino points out, shingeki thus aspired to the “transparent representation of the Westerners’ bodies” but ended up exhibiting the Japanese bodies while marginalizing them (126). Challenging such marginalization, *angura* (meaning “underground”) theatre practitioners in the late 1960s negotiated and reclaimed Japanese bodies through a struggle with language-oriented theatre or, in a larger frame, what they perceived as Western modernity. Angura actors’ bodies were thus understood as an “aesthetic metaphor” for Japaneseness by the audience (126).¹

Uchino argues that in contrast to angura practitioners, whose struggle was possible in the political upheaval of the postwar decades, contemporary young Japanese theatre practitioners under neoliberal sovereignty are already deprived of the language through which they can express antagonism and negotiate their subjectivity (130). I assume what he means

1. Shingeki continues into the present. Likewise, angura practitioners still constitute an important part of Japanese theatre, although their performances do not always have the same cachet since the end of the season of political activism in the early 1970s.

Figure 1. (facing page) Emoto Junko (center) in DEEP kirisuto-kyō (DEEP Christ/insanity), 4–28 March 2004, by Emoto Junko, directed by Emoto Junko at Ekimae Gekijō. As in Jacob Yokosuka and Republic of Kegawa-zoku, this piece produces decontextualized space onstage by parodying various cultures. Targets include Christianity, Michael Jackson, Marilyn Monroe, and Hachiji dayo! Zen’in shūgō, a Japanese TV comedy show that aired from the 1960s to ’80s. (Photo by Kegawa-zoku)

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by “language” is twofold: the clear target of resistance that angura practitioners had (i.e., the modernity that they associated with Western realist theatre), and the ability to articulate political positions through language. The angura generation indeed often published their political statements as well as their theories of theatre.² Unlike these predecessors, young contemporary theatre practitioners suffer from “depersonalization disorder,” with their bodies being neither the representation of text nor the metaphor of anything (130, 139). The contemporary performer has a “junk body—which betrays and exhibits the postmodern rupture between language and the body by using super-flat surfaces on which diverse simulacra are projected” (Uchino 2009:133).

Nevertheless, super flatness or junkness can function (un)consciously as a strategy of resistance, but without the direct confrontation with authority exhibited by the angura generation. Uchino explains that junk bodies in theatre “defy and ignore history, shared values and ‘common sense,’” and those in contemporary dance pursue an “idiosyncratic movement vocabulary,” without any interest either in “a linear narrative” or “inner emotions and personalities” (162–64). Through these performances, “J” performers bring up the issue of a “politics of representation” in their work, although they often seem to be unconscious of the political nature of their works (163).

The all-female revue/musical company Takarazuka kagekidan (The Takarazuka Revue), female visual artist Yanagi Miwa, and female theatre director/playwright/actor Emoto Junko of the troupe Kegawa-zoku (meaning “fur tribe”) are three strong examples of how super flatness or junkness can be thought of in relation to feminist aesthetics. These artists employ two-dimensional aesthetics in order to detach their bodies from the historically charged notion of “essentially Japanese femininity,” which still haunts nationalist, masculinist, and heterosexist Japan.

In contrast to the field of visual art where there are consciously feminist artists, including Yanagi herself, Uchino suggests, “[P]erhaps, there was (and still is) no feminist theatre in Japan” (2009:14). This may be the case, if an artist, or anyone else, needs to make a public declaration to be considered a feminist. In this sense, Emoto, whose troupe is actually included in “J” theatre by Uchino, is probably not a feminist. However, it is possible to see feminist politics in her work, at least from the perspective of a feminist audience member like myself.³ Likewise, although Takarazuka is officially a conservative institution, audience members, including Yanagi and Emoto, find subversive pleasure in participating in a homosocial and homosexual community.

Takarazuka Revue

The Takarazuka Revue was founded in 1913 by Hankyū Railway and Department Store tycoon Kobayashi Ichizō (1873–1957) as “wholesome family entertainment” for the purpose of attracting households along the railway to the spa near Takarazuka Station. In the company, women performers play both female and male roles in excessively melodramatic, heterosexual romances

2. For a detailed discussion of angura practitioners, see Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei’s *Unspeakable Acts: The Avant-garde Theatre of Terayama Shūji and Postwar Japan* (2005) and David G. Goodman’s *Japanese Drama and Culture in the 1960s: The Return of the Gods* (1997).

3. Also, perhaps Uchino was only considering a select group of theatre artists. Although it was not produced by a professional theatre troupe, there was a feminist production titled *Onna no kaihō* (Emancipation of Women) written and directed by Tanaka Mitsu, a standard bearer of the women’s liberation movement in Japan. *Emancipation of Women* is a musical comedy (“muse-cal” as they call it) first produced in Tokyo in 1974 by the company Dotekabo-ichiza, formed by members of Lib Shinjuku Center, a collective that opened in 1972. The members of the company were all women except one man, and none of them were professional theatre practitioners. With themes such as abortion, infanticide, Japan’s economic growth, and Japanese men’s prostitution tours to neighboring Asia, the “muse-cal” toured around Japan until 1980 (Dotekabo-ichiza 2005:1; Tanaka 2005:329, 331).

mostly set in nostalgic (pseudo-)Western countries. Since its inception, the company has been enormously popular and still is to this day. Although it enjoyed both male and female audience members from different generations in the prewar period, since the 1950s it has attracted mostly women in their 30s or older (Robertson [1998] 2001:142).⁴

In 1919, the surprising success of the revue led Kobayashi to establish it as an independent theatre apparatus associated with the newly founded Takarazuka ongaku gakkō (Takarazuka Music Academy). Ever since, Takarazuka performers are all graduates of the academy. In addition to theatrical training, they are also required to learn traditional Japanese female etiquette.⁵ For this reason, even though Takarazuka stages Las Vegas- or Broadway-style shows, the academy is known as the best school for training future *ryōsai kenbo*, “good wives, wise mothers”—the modern construction of ideal Japanese womanhood. Takarazuka’s famous motto is “Purely, Righteously, Beautifully,” and the performers must leave the company when they get married. However, many of them leave for a variety of other reasons, such as pursuing an acting career outside of Takarazuka.

The Revue operates on a strict gender hierarchy, even though it is an all-female company. In the academy, students are assigned what Jennifer Robertson calls “secondary genders,” either male-role or female-role, by the management ([1998] 2001:11). The assignment is based on “both physical (but not genitalia) and sociopsychological criteria: namely, height, physique, facial shape, voice, personality, and to a certain extent, personal preference,” and the students carry their secondary genders throughout their tenure at the company (11–12). Selected male-role players are acclaimed as the top stars, while the female-role top stars are seen merely as foils. Takarazuka is thus structured first by gender hierarchy between the male administrators and the female performers, and secondly, by a stereotypical gender-role hierarchy among the performers.

Takarazuka undermines its (unconventional) conformity to conventional gender hierarchy through the subversive allegoric nature of its works. Celeste Olalquiaga argues that allegory, as opposed to the symbolic system, does not promise the direct, one-to-one relationship of signifier and signified, as “[a]llegory’s metaphorical comment on reality is the perfect emblem for a perception always one step removed from its source” (1992:21). She explains that allegory, even though it longs for the condensation, fails to achieve it, and that in its obsessive efforts, allegorical production ends up being saturated with floating signs that are not anchored in the specific meanings of symbols. Moreover, in its repeated failure, allegory ends up annihilating the progression of time or historicity (22). Olalquiaga suggests that postmodern cultural anxiety caused by the disruption of the symbolic system turns people, who long for intense and concrete experiences, to allegory, which, in its efforts to fill the signifying gap, ironically “replenishes the ensuing vacuum with the multiplication of signifiers” (22). The perceived loss of specific meanings drives more allegorical production.

Takarazuka’s production of *Kaze to tomo ni sarinu* (*Gone With the Wind*), first produced in 1977 and still staged as one of the troupe’s most popular pieces,⁶ functions as allegory for the

4. As of 1990, over 90 percent of the audience consisted of women (Brau 1990:80) and the percentage remained the same as of 2008 (Stickland 2008:7).

5. One of the famous student activities at the academy is an extremely thorough, daily cleaning of the school building, as recorded in the documentary film *Dream Girls* (1993) by Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams. This practice started around 1970 and persists today (Kawasaki 1999:204–07). However, it is noteworthy that while sewing was taught in the early days of the academy, there are no classes in homemaking skills in the current curriculum (Stickland 2008:81). For traditional Japanese female etiquette, only a class for tea ceremony has been offered (81).

6. It was adapted and scripted by a male Takarazuka scriptwriter/director, Ueda Shinji. He has been codirecting the piece with different directors. In this article, I am referring to the 1994 production, which was aired on the Japan Broadcasting Corporation on 22 December 1994.

male management of the company, which desires to resist what it perceives as the disruption of the gendered and sexualized symbolic unity. This melodrama depicts the Southerners mourning the vanishing Old South in the face of modernity, blaming the loss on the destruction of traditional gender values: the male Southerners despise the Northerners who cannot understand “a good tradition of the South,” which keeps “men for work and women for housekeeping.”⁷ Scarlett, who cannot conform to traditional womanhood, is of course punished: she loses Rhett. Unlike the original novel and film, Takarazuka’s Scarlett does not get to declare at the end, “I’ll think of it all tomorrow” (Mitchell [1936] 1964:1037).⁸ She simply laments the loss of her loved one.

It is noteworthy that, while much emphasis is placed on gender, racial issues and the tension between the Southern slave owners and the Northern abolitionists are not problematized in this production. While the fact that performers who play the roles of black servants are in blackface in and of itself raises issues of racism not addressed in the film, the Takarazuka performers make no attempt to do anything more than represent the black servants from the original. It is true that Takarazuka performers use different makeup techniques for different races and thus they also perform what they think of as whiteface—with Western double eyelids and chiseled facial features, etc. (Umehara and Otohara [1994] 1997:106–13), but this is too subtle to be noticed by audience members.⁹ Compared to such whiteface characters, blackface characters stand out as Others at whom the Japanese audience members can laugh. This production blatantly portrays these characters as “silly,” although Scarlett’s maid, Mummy, is presented more respectably than other servants. As John G. Russel points out, representations of blacks in Japanese culture are influenced by racist Western perceptions (1996:19), and the Japanese tend to identify themselves with the white, or at least place themselves in a higher status than blacks (29). Takarazuka reflects this mentality.

While Takarazuka is not critical of the representations of blacks in the original *Gone With the Wind*, it does take issue with Scarlett’s transgression of gender. As mentioned, in the Takarazuka version, she is punished for her “unwomanly” behavior and loses Rhett. Unlike the original Scarlett, the Takarazuka version plays the victim, wailing without demonstrating her will to get him back. However, I would argue that despite the management’s efforts to restore and reaffirm conventional gender roles by taking the fight out of Scarlett, Takarazuka’s *Gone With the Wind* does not succeed on this level. As allegory, the production instead exposes the constructed nature of the symbolic system. Olalquiaga writes:

[I]t is precisely in this failure [of allegory] to achieve condensation that the arbitrariness of the symbolic is exposed. Allegorical distance underlines the constitutive difference between referent and representation. So, while allegory fails to reestablish an origin and its consequent truth, it succeeds in pointing out the obviously constructed quality of symbolic truth. (1992:22)

As an example of the nature of allegory, Olalquiaga discusses the popularity of 1950s and ’60s space-age films in the US during the 1980s, specifically science fiction films. For instance, B movies from the 1950s and ’60s, with their excessive melodrama, satisfied the desire of many in the 1980s for a degree of intensity that would fill in the vacuum generated by the collapse

7. All translations into English, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

8. In the film, the final line is: “Tara! Home. I’ll go home. And I’ll think of some way to get [Rhett] back. After all, tomorrow is another day.”

9. For example, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. also writes that Takarazuka keeps African American characters as the Other by performing them in blackface (2006:243), but he does not recognize that the performers are playing the roles of white characters in what they think of as whiteface. While he maintains that Japanese theatres do not stage white characters in whiteface (243), this is actually not the case.



Figure 2. Emoto Junko (center, with stick) with Machida Marie and Sawada Ikuko on the stairs to her left, in *Zeni wa kimi (Money Is You)*, 23–31 July 2005, by Emoto Junko, directed by Emoto Junko at Honda Gekijō. Like Jacob Yokosuka and Republic of Kegawa-zoku, parodies of various cultures from different time periods produce a decontextualized space onstage. (Photo by Kegawa-zoku)

of the symbolic (1992:23, 33–34). However, these melodramas are too excessive to be taken as real, and thus allow viewers to remain detached, with enough distance to reflect upon their anxiety (34). Likewise, in the melodramatic space in Takarazuka’s *Gone With the Wind*, the intense emotions become hyperbole, never coming to rest on single meanings. In addition, most importantly, women enacting heterosexual romances can never achieve the unification of their bodies and the gendered and sexualized ideal promoted by the Takarazuka Music Academy administration and the company’s management. The decontextualized space of the Takarazuka stage—Japanese (masculinist) ideology that comes out of American male characters (played by Japanese women) supposedly from the time of the Civil War—gets saturated with floating signifiers. This is probably what many fans enjoy. Under Takarazuka’s conventional motto of “Purely, Righteously, Beautifully,” they can secretly harbor this space, in which their sexual desire is not forced to rest on patriarchal heterosexism. In other words, the fans find pleasure in witnessing the possibility of Takarazuka performers’ bodies being junk without any historicity, as the result of male management’s failure to achieve the symbolic condensation.

From this perspective, it is possible to subversively reinterpret the masculinist discourse of Takarazuka’s *Gone With the Wind*. A good example of signifier slippage is seen in the presence of two Scarletts, which is unique to the Takarazuka version. Scarlett II is an alter ego for Scarlett that only she can see. Although Scarlett is a female character, due to her masculine nature, according to Takarazuka male director/playwright Ueda Shinji (Ueda 1997:156), a male-role player is often cast in this role, and therefore she performs a female gender in this play. Scarlett II is performed by an actor who is a specialist in the opposite gender of the one who performs Scarlett, and the actors alternate roles during the run. Narratively, the function of two Scarletts is clear. The unwomanly Scarlett is seen as schizophrenic, and it is the revelation that she loves Rhett that brings the two Scarletts into one. As Scarlett II disappears, Scarlett says,

“I have finally become who I am,” suggesting she has achieved organic femininity. Yet, such representation of gender as the stable referent is unwittingly undermined by the very assignment of a male-role player to either of the two Scarletts, because it demonstrates that both Scarlett/Scarlett II and male-role players can go back and forth freely between female and male gender roles. Moreover, having a female-role player perform the same role as a male-role player contains another subversive possibility: it shows that a female-role player (typically hyperfeminine) can also perform as a sensuous woman. In Takarazuka, sensuousness is regarded as the purview of male-role players, while innocence is a typical attribute expected of female-role players. Seeing both male-role players and female-role players perform the two Scarletts complicates the clear boundary between these two genders. While one reason for the daily alternation of the two Scarletts is financial—it encourages fans to return to see both Scarletts—I would argue that despite the profit motive, the alternation also satisfies fans’ transgender desires.

It is true that Takarazuka’s assignment of male gender to female students itself deconstructs the conventional idea that female gender resides in female bodies and vice versa, but Takarazuka continues to reproduce a strict patriarchal gender hierarchy, with male-role players always placed in a privileged position. For example, only a top male-role player can announce the opening of a show while serving as the star of a troupe, and only top male-role players can have their photographs printed on novelties sold at Takarazuka theatres. In Takarazuka’s version of *Gone With the Wind*, the allegorical space of the American Old South in contemporary Japan or contemporary Japan in the American Old South is where female audience members can see other women’s bodies as junk, freed from the burden of nationalist and masculinist history. These bodies without any depth float seductively on the Takarazuka’s stage.

Nevertheless, the Takarazuka management commodifies the erotic appeal of androgyny while not acknowledging the lesbian and transgender desires surrounding the company. It is indeed difficult to accept the company’s heterosexist motto “Purely, Righteously, Beautifully” when one enters the Takarazuka shops, which sell novelties with male-role stars’ images printed on them. The shops are filled with the erotic desires of the fans who packed them after the shows.¹⁰ Robertson suggests,

[T]he marketing of [...] the [Takarazuka performers] alerts us to the operations of the “libidinal economy” of the capitalist market and corporate world, which [...] is quick to incorporate alternative or marginal trends into the commonsensical mainstream, thereby minimizing the possibility of social disruption. ([1998] 2001:207)

If so, the management may subtly leave space for the desires of female fans and performers in order to keep them under surveillance and to keep the fans consuming Takarazuka performances and products.

Female Artists’ Reactions to Takarazuka

Yanagi Miwa

Officially, Takarazuka performers are still seen as future good wives and wise mothers by its management. The concept is actually a prewar, nationalist, and masculinist construction of Japanese womanhood. In the decontextualized space created on the Takarazuka stage, the signifier does not always rest on a single signified, and as a result, the performers’ bodies float among multiple signifiers. Both Yanagi and Emoto seem to recognize this flattening effect and respectively reproduce it in their Takarazuka-inspired work.

Although her works do exhibit her attraction to Takarazuka, interestingly, visual artist Yanagi Miwa often critiques, or perhaps tries to critique, the company. She condemns both the com-

10. The items on sale include stationery, bags, T-shirts, handkerchiefs, accessories, sweets, photographs, books, CDs, and DVDs.

pany's valorization of its performers' (supposed) virginity and the fan's support for the policy (Yanagi 2003:83). She sees Takarazuka as the place that isolates both the performers and their fans from the outside reality, and she maintains that these "girls" ultimately need to become mature by getting out of what she calls a "carnavalesque space," which she regards as a confined rather than liberated space (2005:67). She critiques both the management's regulation of the women's sexuality and the women's manipulation of this space for their imaginative, subversive sexual pleasure. The problem is that she associates outside reality with heterosexual maturation. She argues that Japanese women in general, not just Takarazuka performers and fans, "still" show sexual interest not in men but narcissistically in women, and according to her, this is something that these women eventually need to overcome (2003:83, 85; 2004b:92). In short, Yanagi perceives Japanese women's immaturity as a problem, which is their unwillingness to conform to heteronormativity. While her critique is directed at Takarazuka fans who (she thinks) do not confront patriarchy by keeping Takarazuka as a shelter from the oppression they experience in their everyday lives, she also reveals her heteronormative attitudes. However, contrary to what she says, in her own works she creates a utopic world where only women reside. Her works reveal her inability to reject the allure of a homosocial and homosexual community. She often relies on what I would call "girls' aesthetics." These aesthetics reject historicity and material bodies as reproductive organs, and thus resonate with super-flat junkness.

Yanagi's *Windswept Women* (2009)¹¹ seems to comment on Takarazuka. Comprising photographs and a short film titled *The Old Girls' Troupe*,¹² it was exhibited in the Japan Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale as well as at the National Museum of Art in Osaka in 2009. In *Windswept Women*, Yanagi presents an alternative troupe of women who are not constrained by conventional womanhood. For example, the film depicts members of the troupe semi-naked, exposing their breasts and legs, dancing wildly to simple rhythms. They dance around their small black tent without audience. These women—who are of an indeterminate race, ethnicity, and age, and whose appearances do not satisfy the standard idea of feminine beauty—laugh wildly, hum a melody, and muss up their long hair. After the dance, they carry their tent to another location. Their travel continues. The association of women with the untamed and the animal is stereotypical and too familiar, but the film creates a utopic, homosocial space, in which women live together like family members, without being tied to a single locale and the conventional family structure, and also without being objectified by the masculinist gaze.

Yanagi's most direct reaction to Takarazuka is demonstrated in her work *Gloria & Léon*,¹³ a short film screened in the exhibit *Yumemiru Takarazuka ten* (Takarazuka: The Land of Dreams) in Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery in 2004.¹⁴ As the title suggests, scenes from the films *Gloria* (John Cassavetes 1980) and *Léon* (Luc Besson 1994) are enacted, and the actors are meant to appear to be high school girls (Yanagi 2004c). More precisely, the actors are performing girls in school uniforms who are rehearsing adaptations of these films at a school hall for a school activity. In the middle of a stage in the hall is a small staircase, which reminds viewers of the grand staircases that are the hallmark of the finale of Takarazuka productions. The screen is divided into two; on the left side of the screen scenes from *Gloria* are enacted and on the right side are those from *Léon*, and they take turns. While *Gloria* is enacted, the girls on the right side are shown facing left, thus looking like they are watching the performance on the left, and the opposite is the case when *Léon* is enacted on the right. The same group of girls rehearses

11. The original title is in English.

12. The original title is in English.

13. The original title is in English.

14. The website of the exhibit is www.operacity.jp/ag/exh53/index.html. The five artists who participated in the event are all important in the contemporary visual art scene in Japan. Female artists are Yanagi Miwa, Ninagawa Mika, and Nishiyama Minako, and male artists are Yokoo Tadanori and Morimura Yasumasa.



Figure 3. *Gloria* (left) in *Gloria & Léon*, 24 July to 26 September 2004, by Yanagi Miwa at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery. (Screen grab by Kimura Sansei)

but with a gender reversal and the difference in race. Yanagi maintains that while it may be possible to stage *Léon*, with a white “couple,” in Takarazuka, it is impossible to stage *Gloria* with a protagonist pair of a middle-aged white woman and a Puerto Rican boy (2005:74). Her critique is partially correct here. If *Gloria* cannot be staged in Takarazuka, it is not because of the pair’s racial difference (or the nonwhite race of the boy) but because of the pair’s twisted gender roles (coupling of a strong, older woman and a helpless boy). As pointed out in the previous section, Takarazuka stages various races and ethnicities. Again, the problem is more in the fact that the company either casts a racist gaze on the Other or ignores the racial and ethnic tensions implicit in the works Takarazuka adapts. What is ironic about *Gloria & Léon* is that it reproduces some of the very characteristics of Takarazuka that Yanagi is trying to critique. Gloria and Phil, performed by Japanese women acting as high school girls in uniforms, do not expose the racial features of the original film. Those who have not seen the film might think that they are both white (as the default of protagonists in Western films), because there are no lines suggesting their racial difference. Therefore, the juxtaposition of the two stories does not create as strong a contrast as was apparently intended.

In addition to the gender and racial issues, by presenting adult women (who appear to be in their 20s) performing high school girls, Yanagi seems to critique the “immaturity” of Takarazuka’s women performers. Indeed, Takarazuka symbolically operates as a school. Even after performers complete their training at the academy, they are referred to as students, not actors (Braun 1990:86). Audience members form fan clubs dedicated to particular stars, and hardcore fans voluntarily support their favorites even offstage by making meals for them, chauffeuring them, and writing letters to them with suggestions about the productions (Braun 1990:91, Kawasaki 2005:173–74, Stickland 2008:160–69, Robertson [1998] 2001:164–65). Thus, it is easy for the fans to fantasize that they too belong to this “school.”

Despite what Yanagi says about Takarazuka, I would argue that *Gloria & Léon* demonstrates a fascination with a feminine, “immature” space. The film portrays girls in an intimate, self-contained, or self-sufficient space. With such a utopic atmosphere created in the film, it is difficult to perceive Yanagi’s critical perspective on Takarazuka. The setting may remind some viewers of Yoshida Akimi’s girls’ manga, *Sakura no sono* (Cherry Orchard) (1986). It is set in a girls’ high school with proud traditions where students also stage a play (Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard*) in a school festival. This manga lyrically depicts friendship and same-sex eroticism

both pieces, but there are only two main performers. One of them plays roles of both Gloria and Léon and the other does the roles of the children Phil and Mathilda. Other girls play supporting roles when necessary, but they are mostly in charge of other activities such as shooting the film or simply watching the performances.

Yanagi intends *Gloria & Léon* to be a critique of the gender and racial politics of Takarazuka (2005:74). The film is the juxtaposition of two stories with the same pattern of adults (Gloria and Léon) protecting children (Phil and Mathilda) from gangsters (or gangster-like people)

among girls. Like *Sakura no sono, Gloria & Léon* seems to cherish the brief period of adolescence when girls can be isolated from “real” society, before their bodies are expected to function as reproductive organs.

Indeed, girls’ school, same-sex eroticism, and performance all come together in what might be called a “girls’ aesthetics,” which challenges modern constructions of Japanese womanhood. The category of adolescence is a modern construct in Japan. In the premodern period, people were simply divided into children and adults, but capitalist modernity produced the new category of adolescence, during which those between childhood and adulthood are trained to become the future labor force (Treat 1996:280). This investment took place at school. As Honda Masuko points out, female students were invested as future “good wives, wise mothers” who would serve as the moral core of the developing middle class and, I would add, as (re)producers of loyal Japanese citizens for Japan’s growing empire. It is these female students who formed the social category of “girls” (1983:214). What is important to note here is that the term “girls” referred to women in adolescence who belonged to upper- or middle-class households wealthy enough to send their daughters to secondary schools. Poor, lower-class young women were excluded, although now, after the economic growth in the postwar decades, the category of girls is more inclusive.

While confined to disciplinary institutions, however, girls appropriated the confinement to stage their resistance to wifehood and motherhood. Honda further posits that if a social category of girls is the product of capitalism intertwined with the school system and gender ideology, a fictional category of girls is the product of girls’ magazines, which were first published in the 1900s and 1910s (222–29). While they endorsed the educational policy for future good wives, wise mothers, they also—whether intentionally or not—provided female students with a space where they could freely perform fictional selves, ignoring gender ideology (225–27). For instance, girls used readers’ columns as a site for personal communication with other girls, and they often used such lovely pen names as Harunami (spring wave) or Kain (flower shadow), as if to leave their actual names and lives behind (225). In addition, in prose pieces they sent to magazines, they expressed their erotic desire to/for other girls in excessively romantic and decorative sentences (Kawamura 1994:61–64). They also described in readers’ columns the images of their eternally young and beautiful bourgeois bodies, which would not produce anything (55). They even fantasized death to be the ultimate way to remain young and beautiful (64–66).¹⁵ Jennifer Robertson reports in her research on Takarazuka that there were actually attempted double suicides among performers and fans in the 1930s as a way to resist wifehood, motherhood, and heteronormativity ([1998] 2001:192).¹⁶ Thus, girls fetishized their fictional, everlastingly young and heterosexually innocent bodies, which they created through language in magazines. As such, they rejected their physical bodies, which eventually would be exploited as reproductive organs. They also fantasized the nullification of time, suggesting their wish to stop the progression of time and never grow old. In this sense, girls, although they are a construct of the modern, deny the modern. However, it must be noted that it is not clear from Honda’s writing if the actual girls performed the girls constructed by the magazine or if the magazines’ editorial policy was a reflection of what girls were actually doing. In any case, at least in girls’ magazines, girls performed “inhabitants of an ahistorical world” (229).

While girls’ aesthetics originated in the modern period, it is applicable to contemporary artworks because the modern construction of womanhood still haunts Japanese society. In light of

15. The peak of such erotic imagination in girls’ magazines was in the 1930s (Imada 2007:189). Interestingly, around this time, photographs and articles about stars of Takarazuka and Shōchiku kagekidan (The Shōchiku Revue) filled these magazines (117). The Shōchiku Revue is another all-female musical/revue company, which was in operation from 1928 to 1990.

16. But the case she discusses in detail is the one conducted by a performer of the Shōchiku Revue and her fan.

girls' aesthetics, the space in Yanagi's *Gloria & Léon* resembles the space produced in modern girls' magazines. In the film, high school girls are performing fictional selves, whose names (Gloria, Léon, Mathilda, and Phil) are presumably not remotely similar to their own. There is nothing that shows their "real" identity. Moreover, there is nothing that shows the locale or the time (except that it must take place after *Gloria & Léon* came out). It is as if fictional girls are playing in a confined, ahistorical space of some school hall. Like characters in Yoshida's manga *Sakura no sono*, their bodies function as images. The girls resist their historically charged physical bodies. In this sense, their bodies are super-flat junk.

Witnessing these bodies generates a pleasure similar to the pleasure the Takarazuka audience experiences in witnessing performers' bodies as possible junk. As super-flat junk bodies, the girls in *Gloria & Léon* freely transgress the gendered and sexualized boundary. They perform both females and males and they express their love toward other girls. The film often shows girls gazing at the two main performers, and one of these girls even sheds tears while watching them, suggesting not just their envy toward those performing the title roles but also their longing for these girls. Men are not needed in this space, neither as performers of male roles nor as the object of their desire. This is the self-sufficient, "unproductive" space of women, which allows no room for historicity and physicality. The fact that it is adult women who are performing high school girls performing fictional selves strengthens the interpretation that these women are challenging the heteronormative "real" world by employing girls' aesthetics, because they know what the outside reality is like from their own experiences. In spite of her negative comments on Takarazuka, Yanagi is an adult woman who probably feels sympathy for this women's space. She mentions in an interview, "[*Gloria & Léon*] ends up being like [Yoshida's manga] *Sakura no sono*. After all, I like things like that" (2004a:84). Perhaps Yanagi is trying to reconcile her critique of patriarchy in Takarazuka with a contradictory pleasure invoked in the theatre but cannot find a way to do so.

Lastly, I must clarify that girls' aesthetics does not always function as a politically subversive tool. I noted above that Yanagi's critique of Takarazuka's racism is not effectively presented in *Gloria & Léon*. This may be inevitable, because girls' aesthetics flattens lived bodies. As such, it can work both ways: problematizing the politics of representation (which certainly controls the lived bodies) and silencing the lived experiences that bodies carry. Yanagi's ambivalent critique of Takarazuka might reflect her frustration on this matter.

Emoto Junko

Emoto Junko, unlike Yanagi Miwa, is a Takarazuka fan actively representing the erotic effects of Takarazuka performances on its audience. As the director/playwright/actor of the troupe Kegawa-zoku, which Uchino includes under his "J" theatre rubric, Emoto pushes forward the junking effect of Takarazuka performance in her parodic works filled with "fakes." Founded in 2000, Kegawa-zoku's "terroristic, erotic revue"¹⁷ often parodies Takarazuka with Emoto playing a male role, making explicit the lesbian and transgender desires surrounding Takarazuka. Kegawa-zoku's members are women, but the troupe often brings in one or two male actors as guests.

As opposed to Takarazuka's motto "Purely, Righteously, Beautifully," Kegawa-zoku's could be "Erotic, Grotesque, Nonsense," a phrase used by mass media to characterize Japanese popular culture in the 1920s and 1930s. This phrase connoted decadence, lasciviousness, and obscenity, but according to Miriam Silverberg, the "Erotic, Grotesque, Nonsense" culture also critiqued contemporary society (2006:xv, 29–30). For example, the mixed-gender revue company Casino Folies (named after the Folies Bergère and the Casino de Paris), which was

17. From the company's website at www.kegawazoku.com/index.html.

inspired by European and American cabaret, staged erotic dance by showgirls who exposed their arms and legs while staging witty parodies critiquing social inequities (2006:235–44).¹⁸

Somewhat reminiscent of Casino Folies, Kegawa-zoku mocks Takarazuka’s commercial strategy of associating itself with middle-class morality. Kegawa-zoku’s often musical-like shows are crammed with dirty jokes, silly violence, transvestism, and topless women with their nipples covered by pasties. While the troupe’s performances are often explicitly lesbian, it does not label itself as lesbian. Unlike lesbian and gay activists, such as members of the Japan Association for the Lesbian and Gay Movement (a.k.a. OCCUR)¹⁹ and Peer Friends,²⁰ Kegawa-zoku’s performance is not overtly political. Rather, the troupe calls attention to the politics of naming for those who would label them as lesbian, as I just did.

Kegawa-zoku’s “glaring porno revue war” *Yakobu Yokosuka dorodarake no sekkusu* (Jacob Yokosuka, Sex in the Dirt) and the accompanying “grand glaring revue” *Kegawa-zoku minshu shugi jinmin kyōwa koku* (The Democratic People’s Republic of Kegawa-zoku) were first produced in Ekimae gekijō (Ekimae Theatre) in Tokyo in 2003 (Kegawa-zoku n.d.). The production assumes knowledge of the Takarazuka production, parodying Takarazuka in terms of structure, and *Jacob Yokosuka* includes some send ups of Takarazuka’s *Gone With the Wind*, although the *Jacob Yokosuka* story has no direct connection to it. It roughly revolves around a lesbian performer in “East Korea,” played by Emoto herself, who dreams of becoming a Takarazuka male-role star. She visits post-war Yokosuka, a city not far from Tokyo, with her Japanese lover, but rather than becoming a Takarazuka star, she ends up kidnapping local women and forcing them to work as divers to collect pearls from the harbor, which she and her lover then use as sex toys. Emoto was clearly inspired by the news report of North Korea’s abduction of several Japanese people, which attracted public attention at the time of the production.²¹ However, she does not make any political judgment about the events. *Jacob Yokosuka* is rather a product of an idea-association



Figure 4. Emoto Junko (center) in *Yakobu Yokosuka, dorodarake no sekkusu* (*Jacob Yokosuka, Sex in the Dirt*), 6–11 February 2003, by Emoto Junko, directed by Emoto Junko at Ekimae Gekijō. (Photo by Sugimoto Seiko)

18. However, the company was blind to the inequities between Japan and its colonies even when their play was set in Manchuria (2006:244–48).

19. The group’s website: www.occure.or.jp/.

20. The group’s website: www.peerfriends.jp/.

21. *Seifu rachi mondai taisaku honbu* (Headquarters for the Abduction Issue, Government of Japan) claims that one of the purposes for North Korea’s abductions, which took place in the 1970s and 1980s, was to have Japanese persons teach their language and culture to North Korean spies who would work in Japan. According to their website, there are 17 or more abductees. In 2002 five of them were permitted to return to Japan as a result of the negotiation between the governments. However, the two governments are still negotiating the fate of the rest of the abductees. See the Headquarters’ website, “Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea”: www.rachi.go.jp/en/ratimondai/index.html (n.d.).



Figure 5. *Emoto Junko (center) in Kegawa-zoku minshu shugi jinmin kyōwa koku (The Democratic People's Republic of Kegawa-zoku), 6–11 February 2003, by Emoto Junko, directed by Emoto Junko at Ekimae Gekijō. (Photo by Sugimoto Seiko)*

game—Takarazuka, *Gone With the Wind*, the South vs. the North (Korea), war in America, Pearl Harbor, Japan's defeat, and Yokosuka (a city with a US military base). The revue *Republic of Kegawa-zoku* consists of a parody of the revue part of Takarazuka's *Gone With the Wind*, plus musical sequences that use Japanese pop songs.

Jacob Yokosuka includes a spoof of the dance of Scarlett and Scarlett II. In the Takarazuka version, there is a scene in which they dance together to the score composed by Takarazuka for this production, singing, “You and I are *ura* [beneath] and *omote* [sur-

face].” Their movements are almost identical. The dance and song are presumably intended to express the interiority of Scarlett, but in the allegorical space of Takarazuka, this interestingly psychological yet formal and unrealistic scene does not convey to everyone in the audience the intended meaning. One possible subversive interpretation of their singing and dancing together is that Scarlett and Scarlett II can both be “beneath” and “surface,” and thus they are reversible. The same holds for both the male-role player and a female-role player, who play these roles. In the *Kegawa-zoku* version, the East Korean woman and her Japanese lover nonsensically appear as Scarlett and Scarlett II out of the blue in a hair salon named Scarlett, which is actually a place where they trap and kidnap women. *Kegawa-zoku*'s Scarlett wears a long black dress like Takarazuka's Scarlett, but here the top is transparent, showing her breasts. Moreover, an artificial penis is sticking out of her crotch area, and she touches it frequently during the scene, possibly parodying the “manly” qualities of the Takarazuka version. *Kegawa-zoku*'s Scarlett and Scarlett II basically copy the Takarazuka's surface/beneath dance, but due to the appearance of *Kegawa-zoku*'s Scarlett, the parody makes the subversive implication of the performance much clearer than in the Takarazuka version. The *Kegawa-zoku* Scarlett, with breasts and penis, further blurs the distinction between biologically female and male bodies. Thus, if Scarlett and Scarlett II are reversible, Scarlett II, even without a penis, could be identical to the hermaphroditic Scarlett. This suggests that women have access to the phallus as a symbol of power rather than as material reality.

Emoto's appreciation of Takarazuka is thus similar to the popularity of the space-age retro films in the 1980s US. Indeed, Takarazuka, with the excessively melodramatic acting style, flashy costumes, cheap-looking stage sets, anachronistic settings, and adaptations of existing works, might be seen as camp to those who view it with a postmodern sensibility, even though the company does not intend to look that way. (This perspective of looking at Takarazuka's performance as camp is exactly what Yanagi Miwa lacks in her critique of the company.) Emoto works off of the camp potential in Takarazuka for her lesbian aesthetics.

Emoto further pushes forward discrepancies between signifier and signified. While I presented a subversive interpretation of *Kegawa-zoku*'s parody of Takarazuka, what is crucial in the troupe's performance is that Emoto does not allow the audience to settle comfortably on a single, fixed interpretation. She constantly undermines her own perspective; nothing is stable in her works. While she critiques heterosexism, she also makes fun of lesbianism, as the ending of the play demonstrates. The couple, who exploited the local women for their own sexual plea-

sure, is killed by their victims in an absurd, nonsensical way: a huge iron ball is dropped onto them while they are having sex in a shed. Yet, this murder is not put forward as a serious critique of the lesbian couple, which would end up affirming a masculinist exploitation of women. On the contrary, it is just one example of the abundant nonsense in the play. Emoto flippantly avoids arguing for or against anything.

Emoto's negation of the belief in stable referents is most clearly suggested by the fact that Kegawa-zoku's works often consist totally of citations and parodies of various popular cultural phenomena, not just Takarazuka. *Jacob Yokosuka* and *Republic of Kegawa-zoku* also include parodies of Japanese pop singers, manga, films, avantgarde art, and so on. Emoto appropriates all of the material that comprises her works, and I would argue that herein lies her critical attitude toward essentialized womanhood, which Takarazuka officially valorizes. She celebrates the essential phoniness of her work: "Basically, Kegawa-zoku likes fakes" (Emoto 2007:123).

What emerges on Kegawa-zoku's stage is a series of mimicries. This evokes Elin Diamond's theorization of feminist mimesis, particularly her discussion of Luce Irigaray's deconstruction of Plato's myth of the "cave," which intervenes in the traditional and powerful regime of the representation of gender and, I would add, sexuality. Irigaray reconfigures Plato's association of women with mimesis or deceptiveness and makes use of it to critique the masculinist Truth/Ideal model. In the *Republic*, Plato envisages the cave wall as "a metaphor for the illusory nature of worldly objects that keep man from contemplating true Forms, the unseeable Ideal" (Diamond 1997:xi). According to him, it is only after painful expulsion that men can see the Truth/Ideal. Irigaray takes advantage of the birth metaphor he implies and reconfigures the cave as the "womb-theatre," functioning as the "illusionistic apparatus," which "obscure[s] the mode of production" (in Diamond 1997:xi). The womb-theatre is, hence, like conventional mimetic (realist) theatre in one sense, but what is important is that in the womb-theatre, reflections have no origins. Since those who are in the cave cannot even imagine the existence of the images' origins, they experience the reflections as the origins; hence, they experience "mimesis without truth" (xi). What is more, the womb-theatre "opens and delivers [...] fake offspring" (xii), suggesting that things in the world outside of the cave are also examples of mimesis without origin. Thus, by manipulating the very logic Plato uses, Irigaray disrupts his masculinist Truth/Ideal model.

Likewise, Kegawa-zoku, as the womb-theatre, repeatedly delivers fake offspring onto the stage. Just as Irigaray manipulates Plato's birth metaphor, Kegawa-zoku breaks open a crack in the Takarazuka theatre apparatus, through which emerge subversive offspring that reject any single Japanese womanhood. On a stage filled with fakes, there is no "true" womanhood. One may argue that the troupe's mimesis does have an origin, since it is possible to detect the originals (as I did above). However, it is important to note that Emoto, born in 1978, has no direct experience of many of the cultural products or phenomena from the Showa Era (1926–1989) that she mostly cites. She says, "[What I portray onstage] is not real Showa, is it? [...] It's not my original experience. It's more like I'm sniffing at the lingering smell" (2002:56). Thus, what Kegawa-zoku parodies is not what Emoto believes to be the real, and the audience members are aware of the fakeness of the original. Emoto is thus dealing with images loaded with nothing. These images are junk. On Kegawa-zoku's stage, the signifiers that are constantly delivered slip back and forth among multiple referents, destabilizing the sense that the signifiers can be attached to a single referent or the production to a single meaning. Just as the troupe's parodies of popular cultures have no real originals, so too do their hyperbolic representations of gender and sexuality lack clear referents.²² I suggest that such representation of super-flat junkness

22. In this regard, Kegawa-zoku's production is similar to the Split Britches performances discussed by Sue-Ellen Case in her article "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic." She argues that the identification not with reality but with fiction lets Shaw and Weaver evade being tied to a single narrative, which is the hallmark of realist theatre (1989).

functions as resistance against conventional, single-minded notions of femininity and that this constitutes a type of feminist theatre.

Lastly, Kegawa-zoku's performance does not work toward the same kind of closure that Takarazuka's *Gone With the Wind* realizes. Takarazuka's version begins with the scene where Rhett leaves Scarlett and ends with the same scene; the play explains why he leaves her. In contrast, while *Jacob Yokosuka* also begins with the scene of Rhett's departure, it ends with the war cry of women divers in the nonsensical war at "Pearl Harbor." Moreover, the troupe demonstrates that the performance continues outside of the theatre. At the end of *Republic of Kegawa-zoku*, the actors perform a finale that parodies a typical Takarazuka one. But unlike a normal finale that is performed once, Kegawa-zoku's finale is performed several times. The curtain comes down but immediately rises again, and the finale is repeated. With the final performance of the finale, the actors go out of the theatre, leaving most of the audience confused as to whether the play is actually over. By failing to offer a clear ending, Emoto does not give the audience the pleasure or satisfaction of an ending, cathartic or otherwise. Without any real closure the actors exit the theatre, blurring the distinction between theatrical performance inside the theatre and reality outside. The members of Kegawa-zoku, fake offspring delivered from the womb-theatre, invade the outside world. As their stage is constructed by floating signifiers, what is perceived as reality also becomes fraught with slippery copies.

Towards a Japanese Feminist Aesthetics

Of the women that I discussed in this essay only Yanagi gives utterance to feminist issues, yet they all rely on a two-dimensional aesthetics from what I believe to be a feminist perspective. For these women, two-dimensionality is a means to release their physical bodies from historically charged Japanese gender and sexual ideologies. Thus the eroticism in their works is provoked not by their material bodies but by bodies as floating signs that violate or transgress the conventional gender and sexual norms. Takarazuka performers embody a possibility of their bodies being slippery signs in allegorical space, and the fans, including Yanagi and Emoto, respond to this subversive possibility. Yanagi and Emoto respectively evoke girls' aesthetics and camp, both of which reject bodies associated with a single way of being a woman. It is in this dialogue of women that I hear feminist voices and see a genealogy of transgressive women in super-flat junk Japan.

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