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# (Book review). Gregory Pflugfelder's *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950*

Ayako Kano

*University of Pennsylvania*, [akano@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:akano@sas.upenn.edu)

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Ayako Kano. Review of *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950* by Gregory M. Pflugfelder. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer, 2002), pp. 448-452

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**Abstract**

*Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950*. By Gregory M. Pflugfelder. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999. xi, 399 pages. \$45.00.

**Comments**

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resemble avant-garde drama . . . in their form and themes: a countercultural critique of their society; a rejection of rational and positivist notions of humanism; an antitragic dramaturgy that draws upon premodern theatrical techniques and religious beliefs; a penchant for the irrational, the supernatural, the erotic, and the violent; and finally, a tendency toward an absurdist deconstruction of narrative and dramatic language. (p. 315)

Poulton has done a masterful job of faithful translations of exceedingly difficult material. The translations do read strangely in English, but this is not to suggest that some fault lies with Poulton. Perhaps his translations come close to Walter Benjamin's notion of a nonethnocentric translation, in which the "original" is allowed to infect and affect the "native." Perhaps it is the nature of Kyōka's texts themselves that insists on this infection. Regardless, I want to acknowledge Poulton's bravery in taking on the ridiculous proposition of translating Kyōka's plays into modern English. To translate Kyōka's prose narratives is tough enough, but how much more so the grating incongruity of Kyōka's florid, sometimes excessive descriptions filled with intertextual allusion and poetic reference issuing forth from one character's mouth side by side with the rough colloquialism of a local dialect from another. I would not be so arrogant as to suggest that I, or any other Japanologist, could have done a better job.

*Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950.* By Gregory M. Pflugfelder. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999. xi, 399 pages. \$45.00.

Reviewed by  
 AYAKO KANO  
 University of Pennsylvania

Several years ago, in concluding his carefully measured but critical review of Gary P. Leupp's *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*, Gregory M. Pflugfelder called for "a more theoretically nuanced discussion of how such representations relate to the social contexts in which they were produced and consumed and to the larger systems of meaning in which they were embedded."<sup>1</sup> Such a study has now been produced by Pflugfelder himself. *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950* is a book eagerly awaited by many

1. Gregory M. Pflugfelder's review of Gary P. Leupp, *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), in *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (1998), p. 280.

of us in the field. It combines meticulous research and superb analysis, and is indeed a theoretically nuanced discussion of representations of male-male sexuality that renders justice to the scope and significance of the topic.

The book has already received high praises from reviewers such as Margaret H. Childs (*Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 55, No. 3), Jim Reichert (*Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 1), and Anne Walthall (H-Japan, H-Net Reviews, May 2000). The book has also won honorable mention for the John Boswell Prize for the best book in lesbian and gay history published in 1999–2000, awarded by the Committee on Lesbian and Gay History, an affiliated society of the American Historical Association. This review appears belatedly here in the *Journal of Japanese Studies* because it was assigned late, but the time-lag affords a chance to further reflect on a book whose reputation has already been established.

According to an interview with Pflugfelder conducted by a Japanese gay activist ([www.kumakusu.net/publications/nynow/0005.html](http://www.kumakusu.net/publications/nynow/0005.html), also published in *Sabu*, May 2000), the origins of the book go back 20 years to about 1980 or 1981, when the author was still an undergraduate and first came across Iwata Jun'ichi's *Nanshoku bunken shoshi* (Iwata Sadao, 1973) in Harvard's library. While in Japan on a Monbushō fellowship, Pflugfelder started checking out and photocopying the texts cited in this bibliography. His major project for the next several years, however, was a master's thesis on the women's suffrage movement, eventually published in Japanese as *Seiji to daidokoro: Akita-ken joshi sanseiken undōshi* (Domesu Shuppan, 1986). He then returned to the project of writing a history of gays and lesbians in Japan for his doctoral dissertation at Stanford University. Ten years later we have *Cartographies of Desire*, and its depth of research and analysis reflects the amount of time that went into collecting, reading, and analyzing primary texts. As a feminist reader I also find Pflugfelder's work to be consistently conscientious about gender politics, a fact that reflects his earlier immersion in Japanese feminist history.

The title signals some of the outstanding features of this book. "Cartographies" indicates that this is a book about mappings of sexuality, that it is *not* about sexual behavior, but about what people write down about it. The plural form "cartographies" is appropriate because there is more than one map to be examined, and also because the examination of these maps is itself also a kind of map. The book, then, is a "personal mapping of other people's mappings" (p. 4). As such, the book maps three different realms of discourse, each with its own logic: popular discourse, legal discourse, and medico-scientific discourse. While attention is paid to the areas of overlap—between, for example, the popular and the medical in popular sexology, and the legal and the scientific in forensic pathology—the author is careful not to conflate the different realms. This is valuable, not only because each of these realms of discourse deals with sexuality in different

ways, but because by taking up these multiple lenses through which to examine “male-male sexuality,” the author further highlights the fundamental constructedness of the object.

The term “male-male sexuality” is consistently used by Pflugfelder in his book, along with the Japanese term “nanshoku,” to signify a set of practices and attitudes inscribed in discourse. It is to be distinguished from the more familiar term “homosexuality” since, as Pflugfelder points out, “inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago before the last century did not usually draw a conceptual link between male-male and female-female forms of erotic behavior” (p. 5). Further, as Pflugfelder contends, the concept of “joshoku,” that is, male-female sexuality or “heterosexuality,” was established *after* and in opposition to “male-male sexuality.” The stylized debates between the “nanshoku” and “joshoku” advocates, each extolling the virtues of one sexual preference over the other, though never quite aiming to consolidate the two camps as separate and incompatible, is one of the important aspects of Tokugawa-era popular discourse examined by the author (pp. 59–63).

Perhaps most importantly, the title indicates that the book covers the period “1600–1950.” It is a longer chunk of history than that considered by most existing studies of the topic, and the length itself is of value. Pflugfelder highlights both the continuities and discontinuities in the various areas of discourse over this period. More importantly, however, this periodization signals part of the larger argument of the book: first the continuity across the dividing line 1868, and second the continuity across the dividing line 1945.

The first argument counters what has been the orthodox view at least since Michel Foucault’s formulation in *History of Sexuality*—that the “ars erotica” or sexual utopia of the premodern East was replaced in modern times by a Western-imposed “scientia sexualis” and Puritan morality. Such a “romantic narrative in which the naive charm of the former inevitably succumbs to the virile strength of the latter” must be resisted, argues Pflugfelder (p. 13), who perceives instead a “global network of sexual knowledge” developing in modernity, in which Japanese sexologists were actively involved. In order to complicate the “romantic narrative” that often also underlies Japanese scholarship on the topic, Pflugfelder emphasizes the legal sanctions on male-male sexuality during the Tokugawa period, while underplaying, though not dismissing, the emphasis on Western influence, legal or scientific, during the Meiji period.

A characteristic moment occurs in chapter 3 where Pflugfelder shows how what may look like Western influence has a much more complex pedigree: the only legal code that criminalized male-male sexuality, or more specifically anal intercourse (*keikan*)—Article 266 of the *Kaitei ritsuryō* in effect from 1872 to 1881—was the result of borrowings from Chinese law (specifically Qing dynasty law) rather than any Western law (pp. 158–63). Yet, as Pflugfelder points out, neither is it accurate to see the removal of the

*keikan* clause in the criminal code *Keihō* of 1882 as “decriminalization” brought about by enlightened attitudes influenced by French Napoleonic law.<sup>2</sup> While the *Keihō* of 1882 eased legal restrictions against anal intercourse, it could be used to criminalize other kinds of behavior such as masturbation and kissing, lumped under the vague rubric of “obscene acts” (p. 173). It is at this juncture that forensic pathologists are called upon the scene to catalogue the different varieties of “obscene acts” and to establish scientific means of proving their commission (p. 174). What we see here then is the complex impact of foreign influence on law, and the complex impact of law on “scientific” interpretive frameworks.

The second argument, that there existed, along with the tremendous changes brought about by the end of World War II, “equally significant continuities that link the years before and after, as well as during, the conflict” (p. 17), is not as fully developed but remains an intriguing thesis to be further explored. Recent work by scholars who emphasize the continuity of total mobilization both for the war effort and for the economic reconstruction afterward might point to fruitful directions of inquiry.<sup>3</sup> What happens to male-male sexuality after 1950, especially with the development of forums such as magazines and bars that cater specifically to gay men, remains an important topic for investigation. Perhaps more difficult, but just as important, will be the excavation of what happened to male-male sexuality in the military in the 1930s, 1940s, and beyond.

A history of female-female sexuality is also a challenging topic that Pflugfelder himself has begun to explore.<sup>4</sup> A comprehensive history of conceptions of masculinity in Japan also remains to be written, and *Cartographies of Desire* is both a starting point and a large component of such a history. What ought to be elucidated is the precise mechanism by which masculinity comes to be dissociated from male-male sexuality and associated with male-female sexuality in modernity. Furukawa Makoto points out that even around the 1900s, it was difficult to criticize *nanshoku* because the values associated with it were values of masculinity: *bushidō*, martial valor, physical cultivation. What had to happen was more than the pathologizing and marginalizing of male-male sexuality: an active inculcation of a new kind of homosocial order, one that detached the values of men being together from the values of *nanshoku*. It was this new homosocial order that detached sex from camaraderie, just as it detached sex from art, theater,

2. This is suggested by, for example, Furukawa Makoto in his “Sekushuariti no henyō: Kindai Nihon no dōseiai o meguru mittsu no kōdo,” *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, No. 17 (1994); English translation in English Supplement No. 7 (1994).

3. See, for example, Yamanouchi Yasushi et al., eds., *Total War and “Modernization”* (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1999).

4. See his “‘S’ is for Sister: Schoolgirl Intimacy and ‘Same Sex Love’ in Early Twentieth-Century Japan,” in Barbara Molony and Kathleen S. Uno, eds., *Gendering Modern Japanese History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

literature, and other realms of “high” culture being institutionalized at this time.

It was also this new homosocial order that associated male-male sexuality with “femininity,” denigrating the passive partner as a surrogate woman, or more generally marginalizing the male “homosexual” as the product of sexual “inversion” or “effemination.” It is this sexist as well as heterosexist (not to mention ahistorical) perspective that often limits earlier studies of male-male sexuality. Similarly, Gary P. Leupp’s argument, described aptly as a kind of “demographic determinism” by Pflugfelder, considers *nanshoku* culture to be a product of the shortage of women in the population of Edo. In other words, lack of women leads to the sexual use of men as substitute or surrogate women. Such a thesis of “surrogate womanhood” is critiqued also by Maki Morinaga in her perceptive analysis of the history of early *kabuki*, which refutes the traditional narrative of male *onnagata* stepping onto the *kabuki* stage in order to replace women who were driven out by government sanctions.<sup>5</sup> Such a narrative disregards the intrinsic attraction of youths (*wakashu*) whose beauty was defined more by age than by gender, and whose appeal was in any case more masculine than feminine. More generally, the “surrogate womanhood” thesis imposes modern parochial notions of sexuality—that male-female sexuality is the natural norm and male-male sexuality an aberration—onto past practices and attitudes. It is such an imposition that Pflugfelder’s cartographies seek to combat, and he succeeds admirably in this task.

*Cartographies of Desire* is the best book on the topic of *nanshoku* to date, not only in English, but in any language, and it is unlikely to be surpassed any time soon. A paperback issue as well as a Japanese translation of this important work would be most welcome.

*Writing Margins: The Textual Construction of Gender in Heian and Kamakura Japan.* By Terry Kawashima. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2001. x, 352 pages. \$39.50.

Reviewed by  
MARGARET H. CHILDS  
University of Kansas

Terry Kawashima has applied impressive scholarly skills to a deeply feminist project. Her explicit agenda is to examine the dynamics of the margin-

5. Maki Morinaga, “The Gender of *Onnagata* as the Imitating Imitated: Its Historicity, Performativity, and Involvement in the Circulation of Femininity,” *positions: east asia cultures critique*, forthcoming.