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Inventing "Lesbianism": Hiratsuka Raichō and Female Same-Sex Attraction in Early Twentieth Century Japan

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Abstract

In Japan, European sexology began to displace established frameworks for understanding sexuality, which were influenced by the long-established practice of male-male sexuality called nanshoku, in the 1910s. This paper considers how women in same-sex relationships appropriated or adapted the epistemologies available to them during this time of rapid modernization in which gender roles were contested and unstable. The case study is the pioneering feminist Hiratsuka Raichō, who from 1911 to 1912 was in a romantic relationship with another woman, Otake Kōkichi. Their relationship soured after Hiratsuka met Okumura Hiroshi, who later became her common-law husband. The pivot from Otake to Okumura coincides with Hiratsuka's exposure to sexology, which framed her relationship with Otake as pathological and potential evidence of biological inferiority. Hiratsuka's example is instructive of one possible outcome of contact with new and shifting interpretations of sexuality by women in early twentieth century Japan.
Keywords: same-sex sexuality, epistemology, Hiratsuka Raichō, history of sexuality, Japan

1. Introduction

Our present-day understanding of "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" as sexual identities rather than acts traces back to the works of late nineteenth-century sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Ellis (1927). In Japan, these terms were introduced to a lay audience in the 1910s and '20s. They rapidly spread and became the dominant framework through which people understood sexuality, as indeed they still are today. However, Japan was hardly a tabula rasa when it came to same-sex sexuality. Male-male sexuality (*nanshoku*) has a written record going back to the 10th century, and the practice was common, especially among the elite samurai class. As in many other places in the world, European "knowledge" about sexuality displaced established "knowledge." The moment of this transition from one epistemological framework to the other in early 1910s Japan is the topic of this paper. I use the term "epistemology" in reference to Eve K. Sedgewick's seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), in which she analyzes the late-nineteenth century transition from an earlier, homosocial order to the heteronormative framework that now dominates contemporary society. Subsequent scholars of gender and sexuality have adapted her thesis about the "centrality of … definitional

issues [within homo/heterosexual binarism] to the important knowledges and understandings of twentieth-century Western culture as a whole" (p. 2) to different geographic and historical contexts.

Previous investigations of this transition between epistemologies include Furukawa Makoto's influential essay, "The Changing Nature of Sexuality: The Three Codes Framing Homosexuality in Modern Japan"[1] (1994). In it, he determines that the reconceptualization of "homosexual" as something one *is* rather than something one *does,* which Michel Foucault identified as a paradigmatic shift in Europe, occurred in Japan also. The earlier *nanshoku* epistemology continued to coexist within the new sexological framework, if in diminished form. Other notable works examining the long history of nanshoku and its modern transformations include those of Schalow (1990), Leupp (1995), Pflugfelder (1999), McLelland (2000), Maekawa (2005), and Vincent (2012).

The custom of nanshoku originated in Buddhist monasteries, where older monks swore "brotherhood bonds" with chosen favorites from among the young acolytes, whom they treated as both lovers and as students. As was the norm in Japan, theirs was a vertical relationship in which the power of one over the other was emphasized. Given that samurai sons were often educated at monasteries, the practice soon spread to the samurai class. During the Warring States period (ca. 1467-1600), nanshoku between young warriors and their liege lords was prevalent, and following one's beloved into death on the battlefield grew to be considered the height of romance. By the early twentieth century, the most common form of nanshoku was schoolboy relationships between upper- and underclassmen (indeed, roving bands of students harassing beautiful boys on the street was considered a considerable social problem at the turn of the century), but historical novels based on romances between samurai were also extremely popular.

Understandably, scholarship of the early twentieth century epistemological shift in Japan has focused primarily on men rather than women, as historians of women's sexuality have no tradition equivalent to nanshoku to draw upon. Instead, female same-sex sexuality has been examined through the prewar phenomenon of intimate relationships between schoolgirls, which went by many names but is commonly referred to in the literature on the subject as "S" (short for "sister," because the younger of the pair would refer to the older as *oneesama,* a respectful term for an older sister). The custom has been investigated by a number of scholars, including Robertson (1999), Dollase (2003), Pflugfelder (2005), Suzuki (2006), Inagaki (2007), Shamoon (2011), Akaeda (2011), Zou (2018), and Imada (2022). Contemporary debates waged in the columns of newspapers and women's journals offered conflicting frameworks to interpret such schoolgirl relationships, either as harmless flirtations or as evidence of sexual degeneracy. At stake was what constituted "normal." Current scholarship has reproduced these debates by arguing whether or not it is appropriate to describe "S" relationships as homosexual. The goal of this paper is to pursue a more productive line of inquiry by asking how women might have availed themselves of the multiple extant epistemological frameworks to define or interpret their same-sex relationships.

1.1 Methods

The case study for this inquiry is the pioneering feminist Hiratsuka Raichō. Hiratsuka is acclaimed as the founder of Japan's first all-women literary magazine *Seitō* (Bluestocking) and a symbol of the *atarashii onna* ("New Woman"), politically aware advocates for women's liberation during a time when the right to political assembly was still withheld from Japan's

[1] The three codes are *nanshoku, keikan* (sodomy), and *hentai seiyoku* (sexual perversion).

female population. An earlier and lesser-known episode from her life is the year-long (1911-1912) romantic relationship she had with another woman, Otake Kōkichi. Both were known to wear men's clothes, and Hiratsuka referred to Otake as "my shōnen" (my boy). But their relationship, volatile from the start, soured soon after Otake was hospitalized for tuberculosis in the summer of 1912. During Otake's hospitalization, Hiratsuka met and fell in love with Okumura Hiroshi, who later became her common-law husband. I argue that the pivot from Otake to Okumura can be understood within the context of Hiratsuka's exposure to sexology, which cast her relationship with Otake as perverse, potentially even evidence of biological inferiority. Not long after, Hiratsuka published a translation of famed British sexologist Havelock Ellis' work on "female inverts" in *Seitō*, and she later became a staunch proponent of eugenics. Hiratsuka exemplifies one possible reaction by a woman in a same-sex relationship to the new and shifting interpretations of sexuality.

This study offers a qualitative analysis based on archival research on *Seitō* magazine, specifically Hiratsuka and Otake's own accounts of their relationship published therein. These include "One Night and One Morning" (Otake, June 1912), "From the Round Window: To Chigasaki, to Chigasaki," (Hiratsuka, July 18, 1912), "One Year," Parts 1-3, (Hiratsuka, February, March, and December 1913), and Hiratsuka's foreword to her translation of "Sexual Inversion in Women" (April 1914). A number of factors contributed to the selection of Hiratsuka as a case study. The essays in *Seitō* are a rare and valuable resource, a high volume of content written by women in a same-sex relationship rather than about them that furthermore allows scholars to trace changes in their relationship over time.

While censorship, including self-censorship, must be factored into any analysis of sources published during this time,[2] Hiratsuka's desire to push the boundaries of respectable feminine behavior means that she is frank where others might be coy. And while it is fair to assume that Hiratsuka obfuscated details about her relationship with Otake from her readers, the extended timespan covered by these texts allows the careful reader to uncover inconsistencies and lacunae in her account of herself. The availability of rich secondary source material examining the life and writings of Hiratsuka Raichō to supplement my own reading is another advantage. My original contribution is to cross-reference the primary source readings with readings not only on sexology, but also on the culture of nanshoku, allowing me to excavate themes and references in Hiratsuka's writings that have thus far gone unnoticed.

2. Findings & Discussion

2.1 Hiratsuka and Otake as Female "nanshoku"

As we shall see, Hiratsuka and Otake's relationship can be broadly divided into two phases. The first is an initial honeymoon period in which, I argue, the pair drew on nanshoku as a cultural reference point on which to model their own same-sex intimacy. As alluded to earlier, nanshoku had long been the epistemological framework under which same-sex activity had been subsumed in Japan. Although nanshoku referred exclusively to male-male sexuality ('*nan*' is written with the character for 'man'), features of the early phase of Hiratsuka and Otake's relationship suggest that they used nanshoku to make sense of their feelings for one another, despite both being women. In a heteronormative society, same-sex attraction deviates from the norm, necessitating a reclassification of same-sex pairings as Other. To presume that Hiratsuka and Otake would have been obliged to follow such a script ignores the fact that the

[2] Japan's anti-obscenity (*waisetsu*) law was the 1893 Publication Law (*Shuppan Hō),* which remained virtually unchanged until 1949.

traces of Japan's longstanding homosocial order were still prominent in 1911. Their relationship was exceptional, not because it was same-sex, but because they were women.

According to her documentation of their relationship in *Seitō,* Hiratsuka's first impression of Otake was not good. In Part 1 of "One Year" (1913), Hiratsuka describes how on November 30, 1911, she received the first of what were to be several pieces of fan mail from Otake. In her letter, Otake gushed over how inspiring she found the magazine and begged to be accepted as a member of the Bluestocking Society. From the first, Otake is described in terms of her gender ambiguity, as at the time it was not unheard of for men to pose as women in letters to the editors of women's magazines, and Hiratsuka suspected this might be such a case. But while on the one hand the artlessness of the letter struck her as mannish, on the other she thought the emotional expressiveness unlikely to have come from any other than a woman. An acquaintance of Otake's with whom Hiratsuka confirmed her gender described her as "a woman who seems like a man," and added that she was "quite an odd woman, a scary woman." (Hiratsuka, 1913, p. 96)[3]

The two met in person for the first time on February 19, 1912. Despite the poor impression her letters had made, Hiratsuka was charmed, and they grew closer over the following months. On May 13, they shared their first kiss, an event that both women described in articles later published in *Seitō,* first Otake in "Aru yoru to, aru asa" (One night and one morning, June 1912), and then Hiratsuka in "Marumado yori – Chigasaki e, Chigasaki e" (From the Round Window – To Chigasaki, to Chigasaki, July 1912), which also recounts her feelings on the eve of Otake's hospitalization. Otake's language is confused, Hiratsuka's both violent and erotic; especially her reaction as she unwraps the bandage from around a self-inflicted wound on Otake's arm is undisguisedly sexual, and she declares that when she learned of Otake's tuberculosis diagnosis she wanted to kiss her "until she bleeds" (Sasaki, 2021, p. 46).

Much has been made of the fact that during this phase of their lives, both Hiratsuka and Otake were known to dress in men's clothes. It seems reasonable to assume their gender-defying forays into male territory would have extended beyond the sartorial. After all, the practice of nanshoku may have been male-only, but it was also the dominant framework that rendered same-sex attraction culturally intelligible. Aspects of Hiratsuka and Otake's relationship, such as their cross-dressing and the emphasis on their age difference, suggest they were indeed imitating or adapting nanshoku. Hiratsuka, who was seven years older than Otake, referred to her younger lover affectionately as "my boy" (*shōnen*), and her astonishment over Otake's childlike naivete is a constant refrain in her autobiographical writings (From her diary: "There's something still so pure and adorable about [Otake Kōkichi and her friend]. They are truly young at heart and carefree. I was reminded of myself when I had just graduated and yet seen nothing of the world. K[ōkichi] in particular is innocent like a child, she seems to have a boy's [*shōnen*] curiosity and passion." (Hiratsuka, 1913, p. 13)) Theirs was not a relationship of equals: as in nanshoku, the emphasis on Otake as the junior, less experienced partner was important for their dynamic.

The episode where Hiratsuka first sees Otake's self-inflicted wound on her wrist is even more suggestive of nanshoku as their epistemological reference point, because it plays on the trope of loyalty unto death that characterized early modern nanshoku. Hiratsuka is eager to see Otake's wound, not out of concern but out of excitement.

[3] All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

> *... I grabbed Kōkichi's left arm and tore at the bandage. "Show me, show me, won't you, I want to see, I want to see!" My heart trembled. Kōkichi had, for the sake of love, for the sake of love whose only object was to protect just one person, taken my dirk (tantō), and, without my knowledge, secretly at night she had cut herself, her own soft flesh, severed the narrow blood vessels. I had to see it, no matter what.* The long bandage unwound coil by coil. (Sasaki, 2021, p. 46)

In an essay called "Peering into the Pink Flesh" (2021), Sasaki Yūko analyzes the erotic undertones of this scene. She suggests that Hiratsuka derived sadistic satisfaction from her total control over Otake's body, and that her interest waned when Otake's tuberculosis diagnosis meant she had to cede control to medical science. Building on this intriguing theory, I believe that reading the scene through the lens of nanshoku sheds further light on Hiratsuka's visceral reaction.

The background of Otake's attempt on her life was the so-called "Yoshiwara Incident," a trip made by several Bluestocking Society members to Yoshiwara, the red-light district, to interview a courtesan. Otake had orchestrated the trip, and as she had also been the instigator of a previous scandal, she felt responsible when the press caught wind and painted *Seitō*'s "New Women" as hard drinkers with loose morals.[4] As the leader of the Bluestocking Society, Hiratsuka received the brunt of the negative backlash for the Yoshiwara Incident. When Otake cut herself, Hiratsuka did not interpret it as a sign of guilt, shame, or apology; Otake had done it out of love, "love whose only object was to protect just one person," namely Hiratsuka.

The proof of this love was Otake's (possibly performative) suicide attempt, which communicated to Hiratsuka her willingness to die for her. During this period, suicide as proof of love was not uncommon; indeed, Hiratsuka herself had attempted it with a (male) teacher at the age of twenty-two. But the preferred method of death was drowning or jumping from a cliff. Otake's decision to cut herself with a blade suggests that Hiratsuka had found a partner who was willing not only to join her in defying gender conventions by dressing like a man, but also in defying the established formulae for women's sexuality (wife or prostitute) by referencing nanshoku between a samurai lord and loyal vassal. This is further suggested by the fact that the knife she used, a *tantō,* is a blade traditionally used by samurai to commit ritual suicide, although Otake used it to slash open her arm rather than her belly.[5]

2.2 Hiratsuka and Otake as Female Homosexuality

Despite the intimacy portrayed in the previous scene, Otake's hospitalization marked the start of the second, painful phase of her relationship with Hiratsuka. Though Hiratsuka had professed her intention to cease her work as editor of *Seitō* and join Otake at the hospital in Chigasaki, the truth was that she did not actually visit her lover until one month after, in August, and ironically it was during this visit that she met Okumura. Little wonder then that Otake withdrew her membership from the Bluestocking Society in November 1912. Although she cited health reasons, the dissolution of her relationship with Hiratsuka was likely the true cause.[6]

[4] The "Five-Color Sake Incident": the scandal was respectable women drinking alcohol in public.

[5] *Seppuku* or *harakiri* is a form of ritualistic suicide by disembowelment that was practiced by samurai. The ritual was performed to prevent capture by enemy forces, as capital punishment, in order to restore one's honor, or as a sign of loyalty. *Oibara* or *tsuifuku* refers to the practice of performing seppuku at the death of one's liege lord.

[6] A month earlier, Otake had published a poem in *Seitō* from the perspective of an infant abandoned by its mother, which Kurozawa (1996) interprets as evidence of her feelings of abandonment from Hiratsuka, who until recently had played a maternal role as older mentor.

In early 1913, Hiratsuka began to read Ellen Key and Havelock Ellis extensively. Shortly thereafter, she published a three-part reflection on her year-long relationship with Otake ("Ichinenkan" [One Year], February, March, December 1913), in which she revealed Otake's early letters to her. In the series, she draws attention to Otake's numerous spelling mistakes and disparages her as a childish, bumbling oaf, while she herself comes across as amusedly aloof. In April 1914, she distanced herself even further from her previous affair with Otake. In the introduction to her translation of Havelock Ellis' study on female "sexual inversion," she writes that,

> *"Although one frequently hears about something called same-sex love taking place in girls' school dormitories, since I myself never witnessed nor indeed experienced such a thing I was half inclined not to believe it. Moreover, I found myself completely unable to develop any interest in the problem (kono mondai). However, in the recent past I met a lady – this lady appears to be a congenital sexual invert (sententeki no seiteki tentōsha), and she roused my interest in the problem. I spent about a year as the object of this lady's love and was given much to think about. Consequently, I grew to want to know more about it."* (Sasaki, 2021, p. 50)

According to the new narrative provided by Hiratsuka, theirs had never been a true romance, and she no more than the indifferent recipient of Otake's one-sided emotions.

Hiratsuka's exposure to Western sexology dramatically altered her perception of her relationship with Otake. Where once Hiratsuka had been the more active partner as the older of the pair (and initiator of their first kiss), she now portrayed herself as the passive recipient of Otake's unwelcome attention. In recasting herself as a woman of "normal" inclinations and Otake as predatory and the only "real" homosexual in their same-sex relationship, Hiratsuka was using a common sexological script. The chapter on "Sexual Inversion in Women" (1927) by Havelock Ellis that she translated and published in *Seitō* is instructive. According to Ellis (1927), homosexual inclinations usually first showed in puberty, but "in the girl who is congenitally predisposed to homosexuality it will continue and develop; in the majority it will be forgotten as quickly as possible, not without shame, in the presence of the normal object of sexual love." (Chapter 4) Again, "true" homosexuality is defined as something one *is* rather than something one *does.* However, it is not a question of identity so much as of inborn characteristics. Ellis identifies a "more or less distinct trace of masculinity" as the defining trait of the invert, and his case studies of "actively inverted women" all describe having felt more boy than girl on the inside since childhood.[7]

Previous scholarship on Hiratsuka's romantic conversion offers important insights. Kurosawa (1996) draws attention to Hiratsuka's positive assessment of Otake in the early months of their acquaintance, in which she emphasized her seeming freedom from the constraints of womanhood. Accompanying descriptions of Otake in men's dress were phrases praising her carefree, unfeminine nature: "she strode quickly against the wind, said what she wanted to say, sang and laughed loudly," and "she gave the feeling of a person who was free from birth, so much so that just to watch her was pleasant." (p. 312) Kurosawa argues that to Hiratsuka, Otake represented the ideal of transcending one's woman- or manhood to become one's "true self," something she had espoused in her early poetry.[8] However, the influence of Ellen Key on Hiratsuka's thinking meant that where gender ambiguity had once been desirable, it soon grew unacceptable. In an essay reflecting on *Seitō* seven years after its initial publication, Hiratsuka

[7] Conveniently for Hiratsuka, a "mannish" woman who adopted male dress or behavior need not necessarily be classified as inverted, so long as she acted like a man out of choice rather than compulsion.

[8] Notably her most famous poem "In the beginning, woman was the sun" (a reference to Japan's origin myth and the goddess Amaterasu), which was published in *Seitō's* inaugural issue.

wrote that any approach to the "woman question" (*fujinron*) that ignored the differences between men and women was "a thing of the past." (Katō, 2014, p. 78) Otake, who did not fit neatly into a box labelled "woman," was thus painfully demoted from the ideal of Transcendental Woman to "innate invert" and pariah.

Akaeda (2011) delves deeper into the monolithic "Womanhood" of the first-wave feminism espoused by Key and later embraced by Hiratsuka. She describes how Hiratsuka's feminism was premised on the deliberate *denial* or repudiation of lesbianism. The liberated New Woman championed by Hiratsuka found the true expression of her womanhood in love for a man, which would "naturally" and "instinctively" awaken her sexual desire and inclination for motherhood. In other words, the New Woman was heterosexual. Furthermore, because the progress of society was predicated on the teamwork of paired men and women, each seeking to excel in their respective spheres, lesbianism became anathema to women's liberation. Put simply, Akaeda argues, Hiratsuka's feminism was homophobic.

By using sexological epistemology, Hiratsuka was able to assert her own heterosexuality in opposition to Otake's "true" homosexuality. Seen through the lens of sexology, her own same-sex attraction, previously so self-evident, became negligent. But why would Hiratsuka seek such an erasure? For the same reason that nanshoku was gradually disappearing from boys' schools at the time: the new conceptualization of romantic love (*ren'ai*). Previously, the blueprint for heterosexual romantic passion had been between a man and a courtesan, hardly more respectable than love between two men, especially given misogynistic views of women. Western scholarship, including by feminists such as Ellen Key, introduced a new model that sequentially tied romantic love to marriage and the idealized domestic home (*katei*).[9] In the words of Maekawa Naoya (2005), "The process by which heterosexual '*ren'ai*' backed by 'marriage' obtained legitimacy unavailable to same-sex '*ren'ai*' was a phenomenon that might better be called the institutionalization of heterosexism" according to which "homosexual love became marginalized as mere 'imitation'(*magaimono*)." (p. 15) Although Hiratsuka eschewed marriage and did not formalize her union with Okumura until 1941, the improved position of women in this Western epistemology led her to believe that emancipation could be achieved through a heterosexual partnership of equals. For her, the benefits of heterosexuality within a Western intellectual framework outweighed those of female "nanshoku."

3. Conclusion

Hiratsuka's example is relevant to other female-female relationships because it draws attention to the multiplicity of available epistemological frameworks in early twentieth century Japan that women could select from to understand their same-sex relationships, each of which provided a different narrative about their lives. This insight allows the historian to interrogate the heteronormative narrative of "S" as "just a phase" that does not destabilize girls' presumed heterosexuality. In other words, when retroactively looking back on modern Japan's same-sex practices, a heteronormalizing gaze informed by modern sexology is not necessarily the most fitting. For example, the emphasis on age dynamics and a sworn "sisterhood bond" in "S" relationships becomes difficult to dismiss as no more than platonic affection when observed as a phenomenon informed by nanshoku practices. On the other hand, a sexological framework may have appealed to some women because the sexual categorizations provided a usable label, offering an opportunity for solidarity with other women who identified as lesbian. Takeuchi (2014) theorizes that this was the draw for many Japanese men who came to identify as homosexual, despite the pathologization of homosexuality within sexology. (pp. 181-203) Still others may have forgone established frameworks and sought to define their same-sex attraction

[9] As opposed to *ie*, which denotes a multigenerational household.

on their own terms. Tamura (1913), an author applauded for her sensitive portrayal of schoolgirl romance, is such a case. She joined the fray about "S" relationships waged in the newspaper opinion columns to offer her views on the matter, which were that young women could be moved to romantic passion but remained ignorant of the pleasures of the flesh unless inducted by a man, and that consequently, innocent schoolgirl affairs were far preferable to unsuitable opposite-sex liaisons.[10] Another intervention by defenders of "S" relationships was to claim *ren'ai* to describe girls' feelings for each other, rather than as the sole domain of heterosexual marriage.[11] There was no known tradition of female-female sexuality as there was for men, and so women had to "invent" their own interpretive frameworks, whether that meant borrowing from established male same-sex traditions, looking to the West for reference, or attempting to define their sexuality on their own terms.

In her essay "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis" (2008), Jeanne Boydston argues that when historians use "gender" as a universal constant, it obscures the local, i.e. Western and bourgeois origins of the concept. She suggests instead using "gender" as a set of relatively open questions specific to a cultural and temporal context, lest we become "propagandists of a particular epistemological order." (p. 560) By tracing the origins of that epistemological order through the advent of sexology in Japan, this paper demonstrates that "truths" about gender and sexuality were subjective, artificial, and unstable, subject to interpretation through previous frameworks. Paying attention to the transition between dominant epistemological frameworks highlights the difference in how gender and sexuality operated in Japan before and after the spread of "scientific" knowledge via sexology, while also uncovering the lingering epistemological residues that continued to inform how individuals interpreted same-sex attraction.

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[10] Akaeda Kanako points out that despite her protestations of the innocence of schoolgirls romance, the language she employs to describe it veers into the sexual. (Akaeda, 2011, pp. 121-124)

[11] Maekawa Naoya describes how in the early 20th century, the concept of "love" was increasingly feminized as it became associated with "home." This had the effect of deromanticizing male-male relationships, but obviously the same cannot be said of female-female relationships. (Maekawa, 2005, p. 18)

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