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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 Okamura Hiroshi, who later became her common-law husband. The pivot from Otake to Okamura coincides with Hiratsuka's exposure to sexology, which framed her relationship with Otake as pathological and potential evidence of biological inferiority. Using the example of Hiratsuka and Otake as an entry point, I theorize the different possibility for "lesbian" experience in early twentieth century Japan.

Keywords: epistemology; feminism; history of sexuality; *nanshoku*; sexology