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Introduction: Representing Youth and Gender in Japanese Popular Culture

Jennifer Coates

This special issue evolved from a panel on “Youth, Gender, and Power in Japanese Popular Culture” at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference in 2017. While the original panel focused closely on girls’ culture in Japan, engaging particularly with media representations of the “*shōjo*” (girl), our commitment to interrogating the networks of power around female-gendered youth in Japanese popular culture led us to wider considerations of the category of “youth.” The articles in this issue present new ways of reading a variety of images of girls and young women in Japanese popular culture, from 1940s films and 1950s pulp magazines to twenty-first-century *shōjo* manga, paying particular attention to the issue of representation and its often-conflicted relationship with lived experience.

Examining the interrelation of youth and gender is a timely concern. In Japan, young people are raising their voices with increasing regularity and persuasive force on issues as varied as nuclear power, climate change, and sexual harassment. “Youthquake,” the term coined by Diana Vreeland in 1965 to describe the influence of youth on popular culture, recently returned to popular attention as the Oxford English Dictionary’s “Word of the Year” for 2017, suggesting that widening youth influence on popular discourse is a global rather than area-specific development. This issue of the *U.S. – Japan Women’s Journal* considers both how we approach the representation of girls and young women in Japanese popular culture and how we evaluate young people’s access to and participation in the creation of media forms in postwar Japan. We do so in order to grapple with questions of agency and appropriation in youth influence on popular media.

By approaching some stereotypical and stereotyped female groups from new directions, we offer a fresh view on much-discussed youth figures. We argue that many

young characters in Japanese popular culture, as well as many young people who consume their images, demonstrate varying degrees of agency within complicated regimes of power, in which they both win and lose, stepping in and out of positions of power and disempowerment. We engage critically with the question of what counts as power, taking seriously Lawrence Grossberg's (1988) proposition that "empowerment need not deny the possibility of disempowerment, or of forms of empowerment that are oppressive" (187). Yet Grossberg reminds us that "people must find something positive in the forms of popular culture that they celebrate" (187). The contributions in this issue engage with consumers' love-hate relationships to certain popular cultural productions and with similar relationships depicted within popular cultural productions themselves. The articles all feature examples of female media consumers engaging with characters and storylines that they actively dislike, or find troubling. Yet the engagement itself is also experienced as enjoyable in other ways. That we enjoy images that might harm us as individuals, and society in general, causes feelings of ambivalence.

The articles in this issue address these issues from various perspectives, media representations, and historical contexts. Through investigating how young gendered bodies and identities have been shaped by popular media discourses and representations, we argue for a more nuanced conceptualization of both the powers afforded to youth and the powers to which they are subjected. Jennifer Coates problematizes the stereotype of the young person as a mindless consumer by considering what happens when young women are shut out of or discouraged from actively consuming media texts, here, popular films of the 1940s and early 1950s. Irene González-López analyzes the representation of panpan in popular films, novels, and the kasutori culture of the 1940s and 1950s to explore how young women navigated the fraught landscape of sex and agency after the war. By examining images of sweets such as cakes, cookies, and parfaits in texts by manga artists Hagio Moto (b. 1949) and Yoshinaga

Fumi (b. 1971) Grace Ting traces an “unremarkable history of shōjo manga” to suggest that feminist scholars of Japanese girls’ culture have largely avoided emphasizing conventional femininities, focusing instead on the subversive qualities of the genre’s rejection of gender and sexual norms. By contrast, Ting’s intervention raises possibilities for feminist perspectives that allow for both pleasure and critique in the everyday consumption of shōjo manga. While Gonzáles-López analyzes the discrepancy between *panpans*’ lived experiences of suffering and their titillating popular culture portrayals, Coates and Ting show how cinema audiences and readers of shōjo manga sought to escape these contradictions, concluding that girls and young women are rarely outside the reach of formative power structures that underlie the production of popular culture. Finally, Lucy Fraser and her students’ thoughtful translation of Ogi Fusami’s 2010 chapter “Beyond Borders: *Shōjo* Manga and Gender” (<Ekkyō suru> shōjo manga to jendā) from *Manga wa ekkyō suru!* Beyond Borders: The Transnational Power of Manga (edited by Ogi Fusami, Ichiki Masashi, Motohama Hidehiko) interrogates a major power in Japanese visual culture—the imagined “West”—through a historical overview of *shōjo manga*.

Our shared concern can be understood through the famous feminist injunction encapsulated in Marian Wright Edelman’s phrase: “You can’t be what you can’t see.” Edelman was most recently quoted in *Miss Representation*, a 2011 documentary film directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom on the power structures at play in female representation; iterations of her evocative phrasing also resonate in her writing for the Children’s Defense Fund (Edelman 2015). Edelman and Newsom’s understanding of representation as formative in circumscribing our understanding of human potential runs through the scholarship presented here; at the same time, it demands an urgent response beyond the capacity of one single scholar. We hope that our articles will become part of a wider conversation on the intersections of youth, gender, and power in Japanese popular media representations.

Works cited

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