

Queer Japan: Personal Stories of Japanese Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transsexuals

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photo by RD Marte

by Ma. Georgianna Villar

Queer Japan as a personal stories book did not at first particularly strike me as interesting. As a matter of fact, I did not want to read it. But I resigned myself to doing so since I had “rejected” the first book I was offered to review for this issue of WIA, which was also a personal stories book. Personal stories can be tricky, and I am wary of books that tell more than what I would like to know without making me feel like a crime witness. Then there are those personal stories that tell me more than I would like to know—only to realise at the end that there really is not much.

The good thing is *Queer Japan* turned out to be an interesting and provocative book. All its stories had a distinct voice and message that resonated with a common theme—queer is here.

Posing a queery

“Queer” is a problematic term even for many of the sexuality initiated—sometimes known as feminists. This probably is the case because queers, when asked to define “queer,” often say that it is defined by what it is not. This is the point when the listener either bursts into a frustrated tirade or a rock.

One argument against queer is that there must be some parameters in terms of queer’s supposed fluidity and “definitionless” because it would be difficult to build a discourse around it or measure its political significance. The whole debate over it, however, had actually developed a discourse. To debate or not debate queer.

Other people feel that the idea of lumping everyone’s distinct identity as queer is a way of watering down the politics of sexuality—especially that of women. For years, feminists have studied and debated on the universality of women’s experiences and, lately, the particularities of these experiences. “Sisterhood is global” was chanted as feminists agreed that both these universality and particularities were necessary for a concerted and holistic approach to emancipating women everywhere.

Then came queer. Queer challenged the definition of woman; it comes as no surprise that feminists unconsciously conjure images of “new women” to include mutant women made of different parts. With the gains being made by science in the field of

reconstructive surgery and sex-reassignments, it is becoming easier to align bodies with claimed identities.

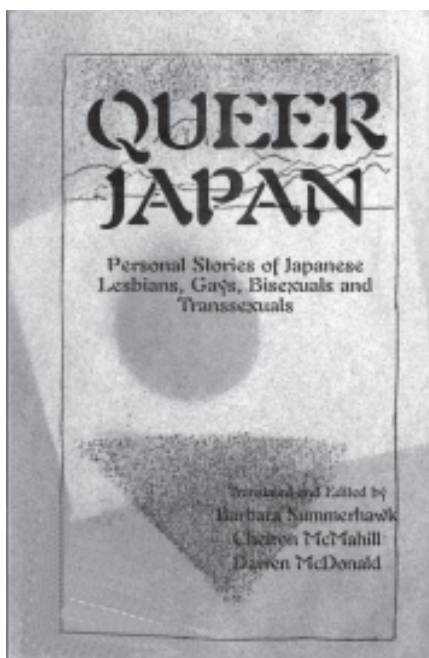
Feminists believe that what women want and say should be respected; however, it operated on an assumption—that they (feminists) knew what “woman” meant. Confronted with an expanding diversity and redefinition of terms, feminists are now trying to backtrack and remember what they said after they threw out women’s essentialism as a concept.

If queer, as sometimes argued, becomes a “valid” sexual-political identity, would the various strains of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders now all be obsolete? And, if so, how will their particularities be addressed? Will the many years of trying to dissect and contextualise the separate and distinct layers of oppression based on sex, gender, race, class, etc., now be redundant as we embrace queer?

In the attempt to create a term to make our particular experiences inclusive, non-discriminatory yet distinct, have we created a new kind of unique...so we can just be like everyone else?

Queer-ky

In the story “About a Lesbian in Hokkaido,” the author talked about an emerging sexuality that did not fit the gender roles prescribed by Japanese society. The story traced her journey toward the life she wanted to lead, and without any role models to pattern herself after or anyone to talk with, she had to learn on her own how to be a lesbian. She committed violent acts toward others and herself as her frustration mounted. Many people could relate to the difficult relationships she continued to inflict



on herself, and the lessons she learnt along the way. In the end, the author summed it up succinctly. Life is a work in progress, and the important thing is to love oneself.

The issue of bisexuality, from one woman's point of view, was also tackled in another story. Her acceptance of the diversity of her desires instead of being defined by her body or her political beliefs shows how one person was able to harmonise the sexual dissonance she was being made to feel by the people around her. This is perhaps the most revealing account of sexual liberation that anyone can read.

"Ten Years Worth of Experience" is a serious story with a wry self-deprecating humorous tone. The same story set to slapstick music could be a comedy—except that it is not. The loneliness and the search for meaning were serious, and the risky situations in which the author put himself could have resulted in very serious straits.

One of the best stories in the book is perhaps "A Married Woman." Written by a woman who chose to remain anonymous, her story showed the fluidity of feelings and sexuality, and how society tries to legislate the expressions people naturally feel. In the end, she concluded that it was not the woman she met nor her family that will decide her future. As she says concisely, "...that is a problem that precedes even my sexuality, the fundamental problem of myself as an individual, and of my own first step forward to independence."

In the end...

The stories in *Queer Japan* are an invaluable contribution to the queer

cause. By not talking about being queer but about the unique experiences of various people, it succeeded in defining itself by what it was not. This is life, and it can be queer.

The stories were written in a very clear, logical style. It was like listening to a friend tell her/his story with dignity and quiet understanding. In a sense it succeeded in making queer real. It talked about the aspirations and concerns of the individuals, and how they navigated their paths with plenty of examples of how they succeeded and failed. Readers can find themselves able to relate to the experiences of the storytellers.

Stories of people seeking meaning, actualising filial love, seeking stability, working with purpose, nurturing friendship, and finding acceptance are our own stories. Experiences and feelings are not exclusive to those who have "normal" sexual identities. The feelings of harshness and tenderness are the same. There are no norms for the human heart and spirit.

The accounts were written in a dispassionate, but not remote, way. It is truly personal and also, in fact, a political book that captures the way sexuality and queer are woven into the sociocultural fabric of Japanese life. ☺

Ma. Georgianna "Giney" Villar read the statement of the first feminist-lesbian group to march during the International Women's Day March of 1991 in the Philippines. Currently, she serves as International Advisory Board member of the Astraea Lesbian Rights Foundation, and is the Executive Director of The Theia Initiative, a knowledge management and communications NGO.
