

Drag and Female Impersonation in Japan and the United States

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Introduction

The intended purpose of this thesis is to provide a descriptive analysis of the similarities and differences that are unique to the concept of drag and female impersonation in the Japan and the United States. The reasoning for pursuing a descriptive analysis of these two particular countries is that—as a gay American with an interest in drag and female impersonation who is pursuing a major in Japanese language and culture—I have both an academic and personal interest in the subject and how it exists within these two different cultural settings. Additionally, while drag and female impersonation exists, and has existed for a considerable amount of time in Europe, the advent of the drag queen reality-competition show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, in the United States provides a modern example of female impersonation existing in, for the most part, a socially acceptable and positively received manner. In particular, while providing foundational historical context, I will be analyzing the past decade. This is in order to cover the creation and positive proliferation of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in the United States and more recent academic literature on female impersonation in Japan and the portrayal of cross-dressers on Japanese television programs.

The main similarities that I observe between Japan and the United States within the context of this thesis are the marginalization and stigmatization of drag queens and female impersonators, from both within the LGBTQ and female impersonating community and from outside communities; self-alienation that some drag queens and female impersonators experience, theatrical origins of drag and female impersonation, and the evolution of drag and

female impersonation. The main differences that I observe are the connotations between female impersonation and sexual activity, the subject of drag within female impersonation, the historical grounding of female impersonation, and the mainstream presence and recognition of drag queens and female impersonators.

I believe it to be important to focus on the similarities in order to bring attention to the fact that marginalization and stigmatization does not only occur from outside groups, but can often occur within a group, such as is the case with the LGBTQ and female impersonating communities. Similarly, the self-alienation that may be pursued as a reaction to such marginalization and stigmatization can bring attention to the ways that these individuals attempt to cope within these two different countries. Additionally, the theatrical origins of drag and female impersonation are worth taking into consideration to show how the practice developed in two different cultural settings, and the subsequent evolution of the practice into the present.

Further, I will consider the differences in connotations between female impersonation and sexual activity in order to recognize how physical sexuality and sexual activity plays an integral role in the social acceptance of drag queens and female impersonators in Japan and the United States in different ways. Similarly, exploring the subject of drag within the broader category of female impersonation shows the relevance in distinguishing between the practice of drag and the practice of female impersonation in these two different cultural settings.

Additionally, considering the historical grounding of female impersonation in Japan and the United States demonstrates the ways that cultural setting influenced the development of the practice and continues to do so today. Subsequently, focusing on the mainstream presence and recognition of drag queens and female impersonators can allow for greater consideration of how

both historical and contemporary factors present in Japan and the United States have influenced the image of the drag queen and the female impersonator.

Firstly, I provide some background knowledge of drag and female impersonation in Japan and the United States to establish the long-existing presence of the practice in both countries. Additionally, this section points out that drag and female impersonation is a practice that originated in pre-modern times, but has evolved substantially in some ways in contemporary times. Secondly, I then review contemporary perspectives of gender and female impersonation in Japan and the United States to provide a foundation for drag and female impersonation in both countries, as well as to examine both modern practices and modern academic perspectives on the part of Japanese and Western scholars. Thirdly, I examine some key similarities and differences found through my research. Fourthly, I propose potential counterarguments to my thesis, as well as implications that can be extrapolated from my findings on drag and female impersonation in Japan and the United States in order to acknowledge potential topics of future research on this topic.

Themes of sexuality and gender identity have been ubiquitous in Japanese culture for quite some time, with many featuring degrees of female impersonation and gender ambiguity (the combination of male and female elements). Various representations of female impersonation exist within Japanese culture—such as the *onnagata* (men who portray women in *Kabuki* theater), cross-dressing television personalities and musicians, as well as cross-dresser and female impersonator-exclusive bars and clubs. The most academically recognized of these forms

by Western scholars appears to be *onnagata*¹. Today, female impersonation and gender ambiguity exist within various mediums within Japan beyond the traditional performance of *onnagata* in *Kabuki* theater: from transgender television personalities and musicians to drag queens and cosplay artists (people who dress up as fictional characters, such as from television shows and video games). However, despite Japan's long history of female impersonation and gender ambiguity, female impersonation and drag culture and LGBTQ rights still face a large degree of stigmatization and discrimination.

Currently, same-sex marriage is not recognized on a national level in Japan and is left up to local governments to determine whether or not to recognize it. However, Shibuya Ward in Tokyo in 2015 and Hokkaido's capital, Sapporo, in June of 2017 have passed ordinances to recognize same-sex marriage and provide these couples identical rights of heterosexual married couples. However, Japan's largely conservative sentiment has not budged, with many citizens, as well as some politicians, speaking out in protest of these advancements in LGBTQ rights (Kageyama 2015, Jackman). Additionally, while Shibuya Ward and Sapporo are recognizing same-sex partnerships, there are no national anti-discrimination laws in Japan to protect the LGBTQ demographics. Therefore, while some may be able to get married, they may still be at risk of being fired, evicted or other forms of severe discrimination (Ripley).

¹ *Onnagata*, from my findings during my research, was the focus of the majority of academic literature on female impersonation. Due to these findings, it would appear that western scholars focus primarily on *onnagata*, in regard to Japanese female impersonation. This could be testimony to both *onnagata*'s historical bearing and its continued practice in contemporary society, in addition to being a component of one of Japan's most famous forms of performing art (*Kabuki*). This is not, however, to say that *onnagata* are not a popular topic on the part of Japanese scholars. Rather, I make this distinction about western scholars' focus on *onnagata* because the Japanese scholar, Mitsuhashi Junkō, and Mark McLelland, while giving credence to *onnagata* and their historical significance, appear to focus on alternative contemporary topics of female impersonation and sexuality, which will be examined later in the thesis.

In addition to positive shifts toward LGBTQ rights occurring on the local governmental level, some prominent Japanese companies have also adopted pro-LGBTQ policies. In April of 2016, Panasonic (a prominent Japanese electronics company) adopted company-wide pro-LGBTQ policies in Japan, as well for their branches in other countries, in an interest of moving toward diffusing any form of discrimination in the company. However, this advancement in LGBTQ support has been received with negativity not only in Japan, but also on the part of countries where Panasonic has branches that harbor prominent anti-LGBTQ sentiment, such being primarily in the Middle East and Africa, as well as other Asian countries such as China, South Korea, and the Philippines (Kageyama 2016). Another prominent Japanese company to adopt pro-LGBTQ policies is Kirin—a prominent beverage company and Japan’s second largest beer producer. In July of 2017, Kirin implemented pro-LGBTQ policies to provide equal recognition of same-sex marriages to heterosexual marriages, as well as providing medical leave for employees undergoing hormone therapy or sexual-assignment surgery (Arama! Japan). Although these cities and companies in Japan are taking strides toward positive advancements in LGBTQ rights and acceptance, they still represent a minority within a primarily conservative country.

It is because of this limited acceptance that drag and female impersonation in Japan exist in a variety of very particular public and private spheres—such as on over-the-top comedy shows and female impersonation-exclusive bars and clubs—as well as in a variety of distinctions—such as drag queens, cross-dressers, and transgenders. These various spheres and distinctions exist in an attempt on the part of these female impersonators, cross-dressers and members of the LGBTQ community to acclimate to the social, cultural and political resistance, oftentimes in a manner

that conforms to a degree of ‘heteronormativity’—the male/female relationship and the social expectations that come with it—such as the fact that two evidently physically male individuals are turned away from love hotels, however if one male is in some degree of female impersonation, they are allowed to enter (Mitsuhashi 224). However, in stark contrast to the situation for drag and female impersonation in Japan, LGBTQ rights and drag and female impersonation in the United States has experienced significant positive expansion, particularly over the past roughly 8 years, with few major setbacks, until the social and political changes instigated by the Trump presidency starting in November 2016.

Since the first episode of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* aired on February 2nd, 2009, drag has experienced a profound and exponential growth in popularity and mainstream attention within the United States. Today, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is in its ninth season as of March 2017, with casting for season 10 having closed as of May 2017. It is especially of no surprise that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has gained considerable positive reception in mainstream media after RuPaul Charles won an Emmy—the symbol of television recognition—for “Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program” in 2016 (Television Academy). In addition, the May 6th, 2017 episode of Saturday Night Live—a longtime staple of American television that showcases what are considered to be current hot topics—featured a skit on the subject of the most current season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. While *RuPaul’s Drag Race* was the catalyst for the mainstream recognition and more positive reception of drag—as the show has brought the performance of drag to audiences beyond that of inclusive LGBTQ communities—social media has played an imperative role in the growth of the drag industry and its reception—with most drag queens maintaining social media accounts on every major site and garnering thousands to millions of

followers. This proliferation of drag within social and mainstream media can be seen as being indicative of the growth of LGBTQ rights and support in the United States. One of the most evident examples to this could be that *RuPaul's Drag Race* first aired on February 2nd, 2009—13 days after President Obama's inauguration on January 20th, 2009—and became progressively more popular and well received over the following 8 years—alongside President Obama's two terms in office. Therefore, I think it is reasonable to conclude that the success and popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* can be seen as reflective of advancements of LGBTQ rights and support that were influenced by policies implemented under the Obama presidency². As LGBTQ rights and support have increased, so too has the confidence of drag queens to venture beyond the previously limited spaces of gay bars, clubs, and gay pride events. However, while drag and female impersonation has experienced such positive expansion in the United States and has done so in a more progressive and uninterrupted fashion, the situation for drag and female impersonation in Japan is quite different, and at times, opposite from that of the United States.

² These policies and acts implemented under the Obama Administration include, but are not limited to: **October 2009:** Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act signed into law, including attacks due to the victim's sexual orientation and/or gender identity under Federal hate crime laws.

March 2010: Affordable Care Act signed into law, which includes prohibiting insurance companies from discriminating against anyone based upon sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as aiding in medical access to people with HIV and AIDS.

December 2010: Don't Ask Don't Tell repealed on December 22, 2010, allowing LGBTQ Americans to openly serve in the Armed Forces without fear of recourse.

February 2011: Department of Justice no longer defended the Defense of Marriage Act, subsequently leading to the ruling of the Act as unconstitutional on the part of the Supreme Court.

December 2011: Presidential memorandum issued directing the promotion of LGBTQ individual's human rights through U.S. diplomacy and foreign assistance by Federal agencies abroad.

May 2014: Department of the Interior announced a new National Park Service theme study to ensure the inclusion of LGBTQ Americans' civil rights struggles in America's history.

July 2014: Executive Order signed including the prohibiting of discrimination against LGBTQ individuals employed or seeking employment by federal contractors.

December 2014: USAID launched the LGBTI Global Development Partnership and "Being LGBTI in Asia" programs, in addition to funding several LGBTI human rights programs.

February 2015: Appointment of Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBTI Persons in order to support U.S. diplomatic efforts in the advancement of global LGBTI rights. (Office of the Press Secretary 2016).

The terms drag and female impersonation are interchangeably used in this thesis to refer to the practice of (primarily) gay men who dress and perform as women for various reasons such as gaining situational power, income, as well as attracting attention among others (Berkowitz & Belgrave 161). Female impersonation whereby men express aspects of femininity and gender ambiguity is a common practice in both Japan and United States. For the purpose of this thesis, both the terms ‘drag’ and ‘female impersonation’ will be used in order to give the most accurate representation of these practices in Japan and the United States—as ‘drag’ is only a small sub-category of the various forms of female impersonation in Japan and is the most recognizable form of female impersonation in the United States.

In Japan, drag and female impersonation have a vast historical bearing that has been influenced to a degree by Westernization. The long-standing Japanese traditions such as *nanshoku* (eroticism between men) and *onnagata* indicate the historical existence of the practice (Reichert 355). Contemporary Japan is not exempt from feminine performance, which is primarily showcased in mainstream media through Kabuki theater and on television programs (McLelland 2000, McLelland 2004). However, female impersonation also exists in less mainstream practices, particularly in male-to-female cross-dressing communities, such as the one in Shinjuku, Tokyo (Mitsuhashi). Similarly, in the United States, drag and female impersonation is an old cultural practice, which has become increasingly popular and well received in contemporary society. However, there are significant similarities and differences in drag and female impersonation in the United States and Japan. My research in this thesis examines the practice of drag and female impersonation in these countries’ existing academic literature, as well as secondary sources primarily in the form of interviews and social media analysis. This

descriptive analysis aims at contributing to the body of knowledge on sexuality and transgender issues with regard to the perception of drag and female impersonation as it exists in two different cultural environments.

Background to the Study

Drag and female impersonation is a complex gender issue that has noticeable variations between Japan and the United States. Various facets of female impersonation exist in contemporary society, with many attributed to particular historical contexts, which are covered in the thesis sub-section “Historical Grounding in Female Impersonation.” Since female impersonation in Japan and the United States in its various forms is often exclusive to particular locales—bars, clubs, often within a particular geographical areas within a city—and often closed to the broad public, few studies have been done about the existing similarities and differences in the drag-related activities comparatively between the two countries³. In Japan, there are hundreds of bars and clubs in cities such as Tokyo and Osaka that cater exclusively to various transgendered/cross-dressing practices and the clientele that they attract (Mitsuhashi 205). Each sub-category within the transgendered/cross-dressing community has specific guidelines and rules that both the cross-dressers and the clients are expected to adhere to, both inside the clubs and outside. Specific cases such as in Elizabeth Kaikan in Tokyo restrict the cross-dressers

³ This can be as attributed to the exclusivity of many clubs and bars that cater to cross-dressing and transgendered individuals, particularly in Japan. Because of this, it can be very difficult for an academic seeking to interview or observe people within these locales. Additionally, many individuals who frequent these places do so under careful anonymity; they prefer to keep their participation separate from their everyday life and from family or co-workers. An exception to this is Mitsuhashi Junkō, who was able to engage with these cross-dressers and female impersonators and conduct interviews. This due largely to Mitsuhashi Junkō being a transgender individual. Therefore, due to their identifying as transgender, not only does Mitsuhashi fit within the demographics that frequent these locations, but their research was likely seen as being an opportunity for transgendered and cross-dressing individuals to be represented more accurately in the academic realm.

within the clubs, only allowing them to cross-dress outside of the clubs for seasonal events like *ohanami* (cherry blossom viewing picnics) and *noryosen* (cool-breeze cruises, commonly known as “booze cruises” in the US) (Mitsuhashi 207). In the United States, female impersonation is largely centered on drag queens—primarily gay men who perform in gay bars and clubs, as well as at gay pride events. There are various realities that the female impersonators experience dependent upon the forms and methods of drag they perform. Therefore, it is apparent that drag as a culture is prevalent in both Japan and the United States. However, the social peculiarity, differences, and reception of female impersonators between the two countries remain, to some extent, hidden.

The ambiguity of sexual and gender boundaries has existed throughout a substantial length of Japanese history. The forms and relationships that it has existed through include, but are not limited to, relationships between Buddhist monks and their acolytes, masters and their servants, between samurai and within brothels districts. Of these various forms, the ambiguity that is most prominent in terms of its reception and greater recognition—particularly in the West—is that of the *onnagata* in Kabuki theater (Jackson 461, McLelland 2004 21-23, McLelland 2003 205). The *onnagata* were born from the bans of both women (1628) and young men (1652) from performing in Kabuki theater, as both were seen as being too sexually attractive to the audience (Baker 67). However, female impersonation and sexual orientation were not necessarily synonymous at this time. *Onnagata*, while taking on transgendered roles, were seen as doing so in a professional manner. Many *onnagata* would marry and have children, which were then expected to continue the family lineage of the *onnagata* profession (McLelland 2003 205). This is not to say that this transgenderism was devoid of copious homoeroticism, as *onnagata* were

known to engage in sex and prostitution with both men and women (Leupp 2010 357, McLelland 2003 206) as well as to draw and indulge the homoerotic desires of their audiences (Jackson 465-68). Particular brothels within *ukiyo* (floating world [red-light districts]) even catered solely to men interested in sexual relations with transgendered (male-to-female) prostitutes (McLelland 2004 23).

Some of the earliest accounts of male-male sexuality in Japan points to the existence of *nanshoku*. In his book, *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*, Gary P. Leupp explores *nanshoku* practices in Japan in the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868) and argues that, given the ubiquitous presence of male homosexual behavior, *nanshoku* practices were normative during this time (Leupp 1995 3). However, Leupp also references pre-Tokugawa *nanshoku* practices, the earliest convincing⁴ account of *nanshoku* that Leupp could find was a diary that referenced the existence of boys that were kept for the purpose of sexually entertaining Emperor Shirakawa (1073-1123) (Leupp 1995 26). While *nanshoku* focused on the eroticism between men, there were often instances that the receiving partner embodied some degree of gender ambiguity. Leupp remarks that a large degree of focus of *nanshoku* desire was directed toward boys and female impersonating men (Leupp 1995 3). *Nanshoku* traditionally enabled men of higher class to pursue low-class male youths working as actors and prostitutes—many of whom would accentuate and be desired for their feminine features (McLelland 2003 206). This points to one instance of the existence of aspects of gender ambiguity early on in Japan. Similarly, early indications of gender ambiguity are found through representations of

⁴ Leupp remarks that there are references to *nanshoku* practices as early as 720 in *Nihongi*—the second oldest Japanese text that has been preserved in physical form—that are, in his opinion, “unconvincing.” (Leupp 22).

henshin (transformation of the body) where the deities appeared in both male and female manifestations (McLelland 2003 205). These practices and instances of gender ambiguity are testimony to the existence of such sexual and gender qualities long before the globalization of Japan and the introduction of Western influences.

Following Japan's opening its borders to the West, the introduction and imposition of Western ideologies on sexuality, which were rooted in religious doctrine, caused a shift that negatively affected the existing ideologies regarding sexuality, gender identity, and female impersonation during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) (McLelland 2003 206). It was during this time that public discourse regarding sexuality, gender identity, and female impersonation began to shift in a Western direction. During this shift, *onnagata* continued to be accepted as a professional and honorable aspect of theater. However, less professional and honorable practices and impressions of sexuality, gender identity, and female impersonation began to be viewed as outdated, deviant, and immoral. McLelland refers to the "discourse of *nanshoku* and the transgender practices associated with male prostitution" as being the practices and impressions of sexuality, gender identity and female impersonation that began to be viewed in these negative ways (McLelland 2003 206). Leupp remarks that Western discourse introduced into Japan in the Meiji period "made it clear that modernity demanded the privileging of heterosexual love and the repudiation of *nanshoku* as 'unnatural' and 'degenerate.'" (Leupp 2010 356). However, Leupp also brings attention to impressions of *onnagata* as being "poisonous" in their ability to captivate males (Leupp 2010 356-66). These newly formed, Westernized discourses grew through the Meiji Period and into the Taishō Period (1912-25), with Japan's increased militarization through

the 1930s and into the second World War solidifying the image of a Japanese man with a firm hegemonic masculinity (McLelland 2004 26, McLelland 2003 207).

Although postwar Japan experienced the occupation of American forces and a drafting of an American-influenced constitution, this did not include the various anti-homosexual policies that existed within the United States at the time. Therefore, postwar Japan marked a return to pre-Meiji cultural and social discourses on sexuality (McLelland 2004 27). This resulted in the development of new classifications of sexuality, gender identity, and female impersonation: “gay boy” (*gei bōi*) in the 1950s, “blue boy” (*burū bōi*) in the 1960s, and “new-half” (*nyūhā fu*) and “Mr. Lady” (*misuta redi*) in the 1980s (McLelland 2003 211-14). It is through these developments of new sexuality, gender identity and female impersonation identities that Japan came to experience what McLelland has coined the “gay boom” in the 1990s, as various mediums, such as television, movies, magazines, and manga, began showcasing these contemporary sexualities and gender identities (McLelland 2004 32-35). It is through these developments of new sexuality, gender identity, and female impersonation identities that Japan has come to not only host a large and diverse demographic of this kind, but the cultural, social and political issues that come with it.

Contemporary Perspectives of Drag Queen and Female Impersonation in the United States and Japan

Transgenderism and female impersonation exist within a diverse, and sometimes complicated, community in Japan. In researching the transgender and female-impersonation community in Japan, specifically Shinjuku, Tokyo, Mitsuhashi Junko establishes four categories:

“new-half”, the male-to-female cross-dresser (MTFCD) community, MTFCD women’s member’s only clubs, and the Gender Identity Disorder (GID) demographic (Mitsuhashi 204). The latter is a term that is common in Japan for defining transgenders/transsexuals, but would very much be seen as inappropriate in the United States. On the other hand, a drag queen is often seen as the intermediary between the transgender and gay communities (Mitsuhashi 208). The various types of current female impersonation methods are distinct in their way of operation, places of residence and activities, as made evident in Mitsuhashi’s research. Notably, inasmuch as the subject of transgender and transgenderism—as is defined by Mitsuhashi Junkō in their research—is highly structured in Japan, there is limited coverage of it in academic literature due to the vast majority of the modes of practice being highly discreet.

In the United States, there is a much larger proliferation of academic literature focusing specifically on drag queens. In comparison to the transgender and female impersonating communities of Japan that go to great efforts to conceal, or even surgically change, their gender identity, drag queens in the United States, while engaging in female impersonation, maintain their identity as men to a great degree. Most of the drag queens first identify themselves as men and in some cases incorporate their masculine qualities into their performances (Rupp & Taylor 115). Additionally, because many drag queens in the United States are gay, they incorporate nuances of the gay community into their performances in an often satirical way (Schacht & Underwood 7). However, some drag queens who identify as transgender undergo surgery to accentuate feminine qualities and, at times, ultimately make the transition from male to female. This is different than the common practice of many drag queens to undergo plastic surgery to accentuate feminine features, as their goal is not to ultimately become a female. Once a

transgendered drag queen receives enough sexual reassignment surgery, they begin to be looked down upon by the drag community, often being seen as having disassociated from the notion of a drag queen and toward simply being a woman. In this case, these drag queens are seen as “cheating” in a sense. It is this further stigmatization within the drag community that is seen as a problem that only further fuels the stigmatization that exists toward the community that comes from the outside (Hopkins 141).

On the subject of stigmatization, while certain degrees of stigmatization exist within the drag community, inasmuch as they are considered a part of the gay community at large, drag queens face marginalization within the gay community and experience a certain lack of acceptance (Berkowitz & Belgrave 160). There are cases where both gay men and heterosexuals marginalize drag queens due to their performances and the ways that queens distort and challenge gender norms that exist in both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. As a result, the drag queens face open marginalization in the form of both physical harassment and verbal abuse (Berkowitz and Belgrave 168-9).

There are common aspects of female impersonation between Japan and the United States that existed even before Western influence was introduced into Japan in the Meiji Period (Jackson 462). However, after the influence of Westernization, the practice of female impersonation in Japan has significantly changed and, in some respects, become more intertwined with elements of female impersonation that coincide with drag queens in the United States. Notably, there are peculiar aspects that remain more individualized, particularly in the

cross-dressing and transgendered communities in Japan, and in the practice of female impersonation, particularly that of drag queens, in the United States.

While I devote great attention toward attempting to refrain from predisposed bias, and rightfully so, looking at the stark differences in the developments of drag and female impersonation culture between the United States and Japan, there is a particular observation that stands out. It is apparent that, while drag and female impersonation has become increasingly more socially acceptable in the United States for standing out and developing its own space to exist, it has become more socially acceptable in Japan to conform to societal and cultural heteronormativity: an acceptance that is further testimony to the level of stigmatization that is present in Japan. However, the reasons behind such prominent differences being present is not readily apparent. Therefore, although stark differences exist between Japanese and American drag cultures, my comparative study of the two should not be taken to suggest that I am using one to point out the failures of the other. Rather, my intention is to conduct an analysis of the similarities and differences that are unique to the concept of drag and female impersonation in Japan and the United States, so as to be able to better understand some of the reasons for such a stark difference to exist.

Similarities

External Marginalization and Stigmatization of Drag Queens and Female Impersonators

In both Japan and the United States, drag queens and female impersonators experience degrees of marginalization and stigmatization. In Japan, while MTFCD women attract

heterosexual men, that attraction does not exist outside of the female illusion. Inasmuch as they develop a customer-base, the customers only desire them while they are engaged in female impersonation and not in the outside world. Unlike most drag queens in the United States, who make their physical gender apparent in and out of drag, MTFCD women in Japan maintain a very strictly dichotomous lifestyle and do not want their physical gender to be apparent or at all revealed when engaging in cross-dressing, and rarely ever reveal their “above-ground” life (Mitsubishi 218). In the United States, drag queens and female impersonators, while largely seen as being very much a positively received staple of the LGBTQ community, at times experience some degree of stigmatization and marginalization from the rest of the community. This derives primarily from negative sentiments held by both heterosexual and homosexual men who, while they may enjoy their performances on stage, view drag queens as being socially and sexually undesirable. While the performance of drag often challenges the conventional beliefs regarding gender roles and expectations and can sometimes exhibit sexually-responsive qualities, such ambiguity is largely undesirable in more intimate and social spheres off-stage (Berkowitz & Belgrave 169).

Internal Marginalization and Stigmatization of Drag Queens and Female Impersonators

Drag queens and female impersonators also face marginalization from within the cross-dresser community in the case of Japan and the gay community in the case of the United States. In Japan, particularly in the MTFCD women’s only clubs, such as Elizabeth Kaikan, genetic men with male gender expression are not allowed to enter: only transgendered women (Mitsubishi 207). In the United States, there have been instances of drag queens facing verbal, and

sometimes physical, assaults from fellow gay men. It is due to this physical cruelty and forms of abuse that some drag queens have resorted to the use of drugs and alcohol in an attempt manage this discrimination and marginalization (Berkowitz & Belgrave 169). Additionally, there are cases where drag queens do not receive acceptance among the gay community as they are seen as being, to some degree, unnatural (Berkowitz & Belgrave 174). As a result, they can find it hard to obtain male lovers. Female impersonators have to face the existing marginalization among themselves (Berkowitz & Belgrave 163). Since most of the drag queens and female impersonators are gay, a common expectation would be that as a community, they would be accepted and supported in the LBGTQ community. However, while they do experience a large degree of acceptance and support, there are situations where drag queens and female impersonators experience alienation and marginalization from the communities that they belong to.

Self-Alienation of Drag Queens and Female Impersonators

Female impersonators in both countries experience some degrees of self-alienation. Some drag queens in the United States have turned to the use of drugs as a way of attempting to cope. This could be seen as implying that the performance of drag exposes the performer to two social worlds that can often be contentious: the real self vs. the drag persona. In a similar vein, Japanese gay men also face degrees of self-alienation. Many gay men in Japan do not want to be identified through their sexuality (McLelland 2000 464). This is indicative that gay men desire to be able to live more compatibly with the heteronormative ideals of Japanese society, as they do not want to further exacerbate the alienation that they may already feel (McLelland 2000 467). Additionally,

economic marginalization is also prevalent in both countries. In the United States, many drag queens are not able to live solely off their drag careers and need to pursue other jobs. Most drag queens, as many have voiced for themselves while competing on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, desire to be able to live solely off of their drag careers and want to be able to reach a level of recognition and popularity in order to achieve that (RuPaul's Drag Race). RuPaul's Drag Race has become the most prevalent and effective means for drag queens in the United States to gain the level of recognition to achieve the necessary financial status. In Japan, a very complex economic hierarchy dictates the cross-dressing/female impersonating community (Mitsuhashi 215-16). The level of income of the cross-dressers is related to their client base (Mitsuhashi 207). Given the high number of bars and clubs in the Shinjuku community, a large degree of variation exists in the economic security that cross-dressers and female impersonators in this community maintain.

Theatrical Origins of Drag Queens and Female Impersonators

Historical perspectives of female impersonation between Japan and the United States are also similar in the fact that they both had origins in theatrical performance. In the case of Japan, adult men specialized in playing women's roles in Kabuki. Moreover, they would take on apprentices who would take over for them upon retirement (McLelland 2004 212). As a result, female impersonators earned a living in the performance profession. Similar trends were also present in the United States, whereby playing female roles in theater and festival performances was undertaken by professionals as a source of livelihood. Most of the festivities organized in celebration of harvest in the United States involved entertainment. It was during such instances that men were required to take up the role of women who were prohibited from participation in

public places (Newton 94). This demonstrates that aspects of female impersonation in the United States and Japan had a theatrical origin.

Playing the role of women on stage demanded that these genetic men live as women even off the stage in Japan. While these men lived in the female gender, they would get married and have sons who would continue their lineage. For instance, Yoshizawa Ayame (1673-1729), a well-known *onnagata*, got married and fathered three children who later inherited his stage name. The aspect of *onnagata* as being an active sex partner to another adult man was not socially unacceptable in pre-modern Japan, as they were understood to have assumed a kind of transgendered identity in their practices and performances (McLelland 2003 205-6). In terms of the United States, there is ample recognition of drag queens as being an integral part of the LGBTQ community. This implies that female impersonation as a profession is tied, in part, to the LGBTQ communities. Therefore, there is an evident association in the practices of female impersonation to the LGBTQ communities in Japan and United States.

Evolution of Drag and Female Impersonation

In both Japan and the United States, the practice of drag and female impersonation has changed substantially over time (Newton 19). In Japan, traditional forms of female impersonation such as *nanshoku* and *onnagata* have been joined by a proliferation of new forms. The new forms of MTFCD and notions of female impersonation that are currently prevalent in Japan have different characteristics from the original traditions. Notably, significant changes in the customs first occurred due to westernization in the Meiji era that undermined *nanshoku* tradition while promoting *onnagata* as a professional method of performance. Additionally, other

changes involved the adoption of Western cultures in traditions, especially in that of female impersonation. Instead of living and promoting the life of an individual as *onnagata* through inheritance and stage name maintenance, the existing practices as currently constituted do not embrace this traditional method. Instead, most of the actors who display such theatrical identities now do not pass their stage names to their progeny as part of the necessary inheritance (McLelland 2004 142).

Another significant change is the complex structuring of the transgender community in Japan (Mitsuhashi 205). There are various groups within the transgender/cross-dressing community in Japan that vary in terms of their investment in transgenderism. While many simply create the female illusion, there are some that undergo varying degrees of sexual-reassignment surgery. The sexual-reassignment can often be associated with the emphasis of their professions as being engaged in sexual activity with their clients or providing a more sexually-convincing illusion (Mitsuhashi 204). As a distinct group, they reflect a change from the ancient practices where *onnagata* would engage in sexual activity with other men, and were still understood to be men, gender-wise. Moreover, the professional cross-dressers in the pre-modern era sought marriage as a way of ensuring the continuity of their lineage and profession. Therefore it was not a form of employment for the sole purpose of earning income, but to maintain the family name in a professional regard (McLelland 2000 205). Similar practices are also apparent among the American drag queens whereby changes have occurred to female impersonation, which was traditionally seen as a form of professional entertainment and source of livelihood (Baker 27). In the 20th and 21st centuries, drag has become highly commercialized and acts as a source of

income to those who pursue it—with great credit owed to the proliferation of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

Differences

Connotations between Female Impersonation and Sexual Activity

The connotation of female impersonation with sexual activity varies between Japan and the United States. In the Japanese context, there is a strong association with female impersonation and sexual activity. It is because the transgendered/female impersonation community has a prominent market associated with sexual appeal to varying degrees. Some undergo degrees of sexual-reassignment surgery to ensure that their clientele experience a more authentic sexual experience (Mitsuhashi 204). Moreover, permanent alterations reveal the desire to establish independent feminine identities beyond the work environment in the community. Inasmuch as the drag queens in the United States are considered to belong to the gay community, there is a limited connotation of female impersonation with sex in several ways. In the process of their performance, drag queens embody femininity while maintaining their actual identity as men. The drag queens from Key West, Florida provide an explicit example of the determination of female impersonators to maintain their masculinity amidst their performance. Some echo similar sentiments at the beginning of their performances, making explicit references to their genitals and gender, often in satirical ways (Rupp & Taylor 114). This indicates a significant difference from the Japanese female impersonation community in certain respects. As previously pointed out, drag queens that undergo sexual-reassignment in the United States often face discrimination among the drag community, being seen as unnatural, or as “cheating.” As a result,

their power of performance is compromised and they subsequently become stigmatized (Hopkins 148). Such instances demonstrate that transgenderism does not fundamentally involve the sexual exploitation of the performer in the United States. However, these instances of sexual-reassignment point to the desire among some males to transition from male to female gender for theatrical identity, as well as assuming a gender that is more conducive to their preferred identity.

The Subject of Drag within Female Impersonation

The second significant difference between female impersonation in Japan and United States is the subject of drag. The existing transgender structures in Japan belittle the concept of drag. Drag queens are categorized as a subgroup of the gender identity disorder (GID) demographic. They lack specific category as transgender since they are assuming a female identity for the sole purpose of performance (Mitsubishi 208). On the contrary, drag in the United States is an independent feature of female impersonation where various societal aspects such as culture, politics, and sexuality are demonstrated. It appears, then, that the concept of drag is slowly being accepted in the United States as a cultural construct, an institution of performance that should be accepted in the society. As opposed to MTFCDs in Japan being the dominant female impersonating demographic, in the United States drag queens are the staple of female impersonation.

Historical Grounding in Female Impersonation

Schacht & Underwood suggest that the contemporary practice of drag can be traced back to 1700s London as well as to drag balls in both Europe and the United States in the 19th century

(Schacht & Underwood 5). Most of the activities involving female impersonation such as cross-dressing were confined to the theater, one of the few public places where female impersonation was seen as being socially acceptable. This was due to the fact that theater, to a large degree, was not taken seriously and was seen as a place where lewd or otherwise socially unacceptable practices could be expressed and viewed (Schacht & Underwood 5). Because of the fact that, at the time, women were denied participation in certain kinds of live entertainment, men took part in playing the female roles. This female impersonation, while also taking place in the theater, deviated from the Japanese female impersonation of the *onnagata*, as it did not contain the underlying sexual contact that was often present between actors and patrons of the theater (Baker 24-5). This is to say, while it is unclear whether there was absolutely no prostitution or sexual activity on the part of female impersonators in the theater, there is no written evidence of it to the extent that there is of the sexual activity of *onnagata*. Similarly, the female impersonators in the United States did not participate in the impersonation for sexual exploitation, but mainly to represent the identity and qualities of females. It was on this basis that they were acceptable in the theatrical arena as a representation of the women who were not allowed to participate in such dramas during festive seasons publicly (Rupp & Taylor 37). The prevalent view of female impersonators at that time was that of a socially acceptable profession in the performing arts industry, and not a practice that would carry over to the personal lives of the actors. However, the development of female impersonation, especially drag queens, as a cultural construct in the West beyond that of the professional sphere has been relatively stable since its inception before the 19th century (Schacht and Underwood 6).

Mainstream Presence and Recognition of Drag Queens and Female Impersonators

Particularly in contemporary society, one of the most common factors that are used to measure the presence and reception of something is mainstream involvement and popularity, both positively and negatively. From television shows to magazine articles, consumers are influenced by mainstream trends and opinions, whether it be what to buy or what to watch, or subsequently what to avoid. This has also been, and continues to be, the case for drag and female impersonation in both Japan and the United States. However, while mainstream portrayals of drag and female impersonation are present in Japan and the United States, their representations differ.

In Japan, female impersonators have maintained a regular presence in mainstream media, such as on talk shows and in media advertisements. Two currently prominent cross-dressing television personalities in Japan are Matsuko Deluxe and Mitz Mangrove. Both Matsuko Deluxe and Mitz Mangrove have developed reputations in mainstream Japan centered on their gender impersonation, and both have used their popularity to subsequently bring attention to issues of gender and sexuality in Japan.

Matsuko Deluxe is a popular plus-size, gay cross-dressing TV personality featured in several Japanese talk shows, as well as some ads for prominent Japanese companies (Fifield & Oda). One such ad was for a promotional campaign for Calpis and Misudo—two popular food and drink companies in Japan that partnered in 2013 to make donuts with Calpis drink-flavored fillings (“Misudo Calpis”). In the ad—which appears to capitalize on Matsuko’s exaggerated character and the onomatopoeias associated with eating and drinking—Matsuko looks at a Calpis

donut in his hand and questions aloud, “Calpis in a donut?” (ドーナツにカリピス?)⁵, before eating the donut in a series of bites accompanied by exaggerated gulping noises and a comedic sigh of satisfaction upon finishing it, giving a definitive “I like it!” (好き!)⁶ to the camera (CM).

In addition to being featured on many shows and advertisements, Matsuko hosts shows of his own. One of the most popular is a variety show called “The World Unknown to Matsuko” (マツコの知らない世界)⁷, in which experts on social trends or unconventional hobbies are invited onto the show to teach Matsuko and the audience about them. The show features Matsuko’s usual exaggerated and comedic reactions and gestures—in addition to his sharp, but not unnecessarily cruel, tongue—and is accompanied by a studio audience that responds in turn with laughter and other *aizuchi* (vocal interjections, such as exclamations of surprise) (TBS). While the majority of Matsuko’s shows and appearances are comedic in nature, he is also known for being serious in regard to his opinions and views on sexuality and gender in Japan.

In 2010, Matsuko voiced his criticisms toward the then Governor of Tokyo Prefecture, Shintaro Ishihara, for his “Tokyo Metropolitan Ordinance Regarding the Healthy Development of Youth” (青少年健全育成条例)⁸ that regulated the sale of sexually explicit materials, such as manga and anime, to individuals under the age of 18. Matsuko also criticized Governor Ishihara for his contemptuous remarks regarding homosexuals, in which he expressed that “[he] feel[s]

⁵ *dōnatsu ni karipisu?*

⁶ *suki!*

⁷ “*Matsuko no shiranai sekai.*”

⁸ ‘*Seishōnen kenzen ikusei jōrei.*’

that (homosexuals) have some sort of deficiency” and that “it must be due to something hereditary” (「(同性愛者は) どこか足りない感じがする。遺伝とかのせいでしょう」)。⁹ While giving credence to the fact that homosexuals and crossdressers (同性愛者や女装)¹⁰ are looked down upon, Matsuko expressed that he felt such feelings are indicative of one’s character and because Ishihara is a public official his expressing such contemptuous feelings results in “all (his) credibility [being] lost” and that “it is an insane remark (to be made)” (「全て信憑性なくなるよね。あの発言は狂ってますよ」)。¹¹ (“Matsuko Deluxe, Furious”). Interestingly enough, when several fans were interviewed outside a taping of “Crazy about 5pm” (5時に夢中。)¹², a show that Matsuko co-hosts alongside Mitz Mangrove and others, one fan said that she “want[s] (Matsuko) to be someone like a governor and represent us” (Fifield & Oda).

In 2013, Matsuko appeared on the fourth installment of NHK’s HeartNet nightly show’s series on sexuality—“Living with Diverse Sexualities”—to talk about his experiences and thoughts about sexuality and expression (シリーズ多様な“性”と生きている 第4回「マツコ・デラックス “生きる”を語る」)。¹³ When asked about Matsuko’s attire and how it represents him, Matsuko responded that “clothing (costume) is not just about masquerading as yourself, but in a way could you not say that it’s, maybe not a weapon exactly, but at the very

⁹ ‘(Dōseiai-sha wa) doko ka tarinai kanjigasuru. Iden toka no seideshou.’

¹⁰ Dōseiai-sha ya josō.

¹¹ ‘Subete shinbyōsei nakunaru yo ne. Ano hatsugen wa kuruttemasu yo.’

¹² “goji ni muchū.”

¹³ shirīzu tayōna “sei” to ikite iru dai 4-kai `matsuko derakkusu “ikiru” o kataru.’

least kind of like armor?” (やっぱり衣装って、自分を装うだけじゃなくて、ある意味ちょっと武装じゃないですけど、鎧みたいなところがあるじゃないですか。)¹⁴

(Kagami). This idea of female impersonation as being a sort of “armor” is one echoed by drag queens in the United States, and will be explored further in this subsection.

Mitz Mangrove, who is not only a prominent cross-dressing TV personality, but a popular singer as well, has developed a substantial career for himself in Japan through his cross-dressing. However, as stated on his bio page on the website for “Crazy about 5pm” (“*goji ni muchū*”), it appears that a fundamental part of Mangrove’s popularity is attributed to “his powers of expression and intellectual, respectful use of language that does not use the stereotypically effeminate language that is frequently used by gay and/or cross-dressing television personalities in Japan.” (オネエ言葉を多用せず、知的で丁寧な言葉と表現力が魅力。)¹⁵ (“Mitz Mangrove”). Nevertheless, while a prominent personality in Japanese mainstream media, Mangrove attributes his and other female impersonators’ popularity to going against the grain and being over the top—saying that female impersonators are liked so long as they “say things that are not mainstream or that are sharp or vulgar.” It is this perpetuation of stereotypes that Mangrove fears is making female impersonation and the LGBTQ community in Japan popular in mainstream media for the wrong reasons (Fifield & Oda). By using female impersonation and the LGBTQ community as an image to be consumed for the sake of entertainment, Japanese

¹⁴ “...*jibun o yosōu dake janakute, aru imi chotto busō janaidesukedo, yoroi mitaina tokoro ga aru janaidesu ka.*”

¹⁵ “*onē kotoba o tayō sezu, chiteki de teineina kotoba to hyōgen-ryoku ga miryoku.*”

mainstream media is perpetuating the demographics as a spectacle, rather than legitimizing them as a part of Japanese society beyond their exaggerated media portrayals.

This issue of the perpetuation of sexuality stereotypes and the focus on the exaggerated and bizarre is explored in Mark McLelland's article, "Is There a Japanese 'Gay Identity'?", in which McLelland addresses the issue with portrayals of gender ambiguity and the LGBTQ community in Japanese media. McLelland argues that Japanese media representations of homosexuality in Japan are seemingly inextricably intertwined with transgenderism and gender inversion because focusing on the "unusual or bizarre aspects" is what makes for "interesting programming" (McLelland, "Gay Identity" 462). Because of this conflation of transgendered/cross-dressing and homosexual identities in Japanese media, the ability for the demographics to exist within their own more explicit and accurately representative identities is limited (McLelland, "Gay Identity" 460, 63). In the interviews that McLelland conducted, many of the interviewees expressed apprehensions about coming out and being socially open with their sexualities, as they feel they are misrepresented by these portrayals. Therefore, they believe that their identities cannot be expressed within the understandings and portrayals presented by Japanese popular media. Subsequently, they believe that openly identifying themselves through their sexuality is not socially beneficial, and would rather continue to conform to the accepted societal gender notions within Japanese society. (McLelland, "Gay Identity" 464, 67-68).

McLelland's observations and Mangrove's apprehensions about representations of homosexuality, female impersonation, and the LGBTQ community at large in Japanese mainstream media appear to coincide and point to a need for a change in representation that is more considerate of the LGBTQ community and female impersonators.

In the United States, the primary platform that the art of drag has gained mainstream presence and reception, particularly in the past decade, through is *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Having started on Logo TV, a channel described as being “a leading entertainment brand inspired by the LGBT community” on their parent company, Viacom’s, website (“Logo”), in 2009, *RuPaul's Drag Race* introduced drag to audiences through a widespread televised medium. As of 2017, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has moved to VH1: a move that RuPaul himself said brought *Drag Race* to a channel in “93 million homes,” and resulted in a greater accessibility that he attributed the season 9 premiere of *Drag Race* having “nearly one million viewers” (Crowley). In the past 8 and a half years, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has brought 117 drag queens to national television and introduced the art form of drag millions of viewers outside of the clubs, bars and other venues where drag is traditionally viewed.

While RuPaul has been using *Drag Race* to provide a foundation for up-and-coming drag queens to not only bolster their careers, but grow as individuals through and the art form that they find the ability to express themselves, drag for RuPaul ““has always been a political statement”” and that statement for RuPaul is ““following your heart”” (Kornhaber). With cultural, social and political influences saturating everyday life, individuals often can feel that there is a very particular mold that they are expected to conform to. It is this feeling that RuPaul wants to encourage individuals to resist, particularly the contestants on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, who face these influences throughout their daily lives. When asked what it takes for a drag queen auditioning for *Drag Race* to catch RuPaul’s attention in an interview with *Vanity Fair*, RuPaul remarked that it is the drag queens who are authentic and not trying to be the kind of drag queen

that they think RuPaul wants them to be, but rather the ones who just be themselves, that catch RuPaul's interest (Desta).

The ability for anyone to be themselves, especially in the face of adversity that takes the form of the various expectations put upon oneself in their daily life, is not an easy feat to achieve. However, for many drag queens, the art of drag is what allows them to do this, go against the common grain and express themselves in a way that is true to who they are. In this way, drag can be seen as being a kind of armor that gives these individuals that confidence—a sentiment that is shared among the drag community.

In 2016, celebrity photographer Magnus Hastings published a photo-biographical book that features over 200 pages of photos of drag queens taken by Hastings alongside their answers to the question that entitles the book: "*Why Drag?*" One of the drag queens featured in Hastings book is Lady Bunny, a long-time friend of RuPaul's and staple name within the drag community. In her answer to Hastings' question, Lady Bunny told Hastings that drag is "[her] armor" that gives her the confidence to do what she would otherwise not have the confidence to do out of drag (Hastings 37).

Another queen to reference drag as armor is the winner of season 8 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Bob the Drag Queen. In an interview with *Teen Vogue*, Bob was asked to explain what aspect of drag is seen as making it so powerful to "step into this new character." However, Bob remarked to the interviewer "it's not always a character." He emphasized that for many individuals drag is "a suit of armor" that allows them to not only express themselves, but garner social acceptance and confidence in themselves and the drag community (Cuby).

This idea of garnering social acceptance and confidence through drag is extrapolated in Steven J. Hopkin's article, "Let the Drag Race Begin': The Rewards of Becoming a Queen." In his article, Hopkins explores the various processes of becoming a drag queen, the potential rewards in becoming one, as well as the marginalization and setbacks that a drag queen may experience. In the section, "Successfully Creating and Maintaining a Performance Persona," the idea expressed by Lady Bunny and Bob the Drag Queen is echoed as Hopkins remarks how the persona assumed by drag queens when in drag often allows for their "social deficiencies" that they experience out of drag to not only be remedied, but the newfound confidence then be subsequently bolstered (Hopkins 145). In this regard, the drag queen or female impersonator is not assuming an identity that is entirely removed from their out-of-drag identity, but rather using the performance of drag as a means to express their identity under the protection of a performance persona as Bob and Lady Bunny propose. Additionally, Hopkins touches upon the concept of "drag families"¹⁶ and "drag mothers"¹⁷ as further means within the drag and female impersonating community to garner social acceptance and confidence in a supportive environment and community.

Counterarguments & Implications

The most common argument against descriptive studies involving another country is the criticism of looking upon a foreign culture through a "Western" lens. The issue with such an

¹⁶ A group of drag queens under the care of a "drag mother" that perform together (i.e., The Haus of Edwards [a drag queen group created by the drag queen Alyssa Edwards, including the drag queens Laganja Estranja, Shangela and Gia Gunn]).

¹⁷ A (usually) older and experienced drag queen who takes in (often) young, new and less-experienced drag queens and helps develop their talents and abilities as drag queens.

approach is the belief that it will subsequently paint the picture that the United States is more advanced than the foreign culture, or similarly that the foreign culture is lacking something that the United States possesses, and should therefore seek to become more like the United States¹⁸.

While such a criticism is relevant and defines an approach that one should avoid, the purpose of this study and its particular approach is to discern the cultural similarities and differences present in regard to this topic so as to assist in preventing such assumptions from being generated.

Additionally—given my predisposition as an American writing on a country and culture foreign to me—it is arguably impossible for me to not apply some degree, no matter how small, of my experiences and impressions as an American to my research. While I do my best to use my education of Japan and Japanese culture to reduce the degree that my predispositions are applied, consciously or unconsciously, there are times when the only way that I can attempt to understand some aspect of foreign culture is to relate it to my own. It is my intention, therefore, given my predisposed biases as an American writer writing about a foreign culture, to be adamant in qualifying my predisposition and situations that my bias is or may be applied. Subsequently, it is also my intention to allow the opportunity for non-Western writers and scholars, as well as those specializing in Japanese studies, to respond and assist in closing the gaps and addressing discrepancies that may not be evident to me as an American writer.

Additionally, an anticipated counterargument is in regard to the inclusion of Japanese transgenderism in the comparative aspects of the study. While it is true that drag and transgenderism are quite different, even within the spectrum of female impersonation, the

¹⁸ An example of this could be LGBTQ rights, which are currently more developed in the United States than in Japan when it comes to political policies.

amount of academic literature regarding female impersonation in Japan that has been translated into English focuses primarily on transgenderism, with drag queens as being seen as “bridg[ing] the gay men’s community and the transgender community [in Japan]”¹⁹ (Mitsubishi 208). This observation bears relevance, as the majority of drag queens and female impersonators in the United States appear to subscribe to the gay community and the majority of female impersonators in Japan, as focused on in the academic literature covered, appear to subscribe to the transgender community. Therefore, using the foundations of drag and transgendered female impersonation in both countries in this study will serve to help in broadening the understandings of the differences and similarities that exist in Japan and the United States.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a descriptive foundation of the similarities and differences that exist between Japan and the United States in relation to drag and female impersonation; however, there are broader implications that can be extrapolated and taken into consideration for future research into this topic. In particular, these implications can speak to the relevance of this topic in terms of the current political, social and cultural climates of both countries. Therefore, I would like mention to some of the broader implications of this thesis here.

Keeping in mind the past eight years that the rights and representation of the LGBTQ community in the United States considerably improved under the Obama presidency, it is unknown to what degree the LGBTQ community will continue to experience setbacks due to the new presidency under Donald Trump. The most notable setback that has already been

¹⁹ In regard to this impression of drag queens as the bridge between the gay and transgendered communities, Mitsubishi remarks that this is due to the fact that gay men undertake female impersonation in order to satirize the gender dichotomy, and that the elements of female impersonation employed in drag have been seen to influence fashion in Japanese cross-dressing communities.

experienced is the intention on the part of President Trump and his Cabinet to reinstate the previous ban on openly transgendered individuals from serving in the United States military and the authority to discharge transgendered individuals currently in service. Additionally, this intention includes the halting of the allocation of resources toward funding sexual-reassignment procedures that are not determined to be necessary to ensure the health of an individual who has already begun to undergo the reassignment process (Office of the Press Secretary 2017)²⁰. Such regressions in the rights and representation of the LGBTQ community in the United States have caused significant concern within the community, with many speaking out against such intentions and voicing their fears for the future of LGBTQ individuals in the United States under the Trump presidency, including drag queens via their social media accounts. The regressions that have occurred in the United States and may continue to occur not only have an effect on the national level, but have the potential to cause regressive effects on an international level.

Another implication that can be made is the potential regression of rights and representation of the LGBTQ community in Japan due to the regression occurring in the United States. As the United States is one of the most influential countries in the world, actions taken on the part of the United States can influence reactions in other parts of the world, in both positive and negative ways. Shinzō Abe, the current prime minister of Japan, subscribes largely to

²⁰ A memorandum on the White House website with the subject of “Military Service by Transgendered Individuals” outlines the reasoning that President Trump deems it to be the best course of action to reimplement the pre-June 2016 prohibitions on transgendered individuals in the military. It is worth noting that Trump qualifies that these prohibitions will be reinstated “until such time as the Secretary of Defense, after consulting with the Secretary of Homeland Security, provides a recommendation to the contrary that I find convincing.” However, it is unclear whether such a recommendation will ever be proposed. On Monday, October 30th, 2017, United States District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly blocked Trump’s ban, stating that Trump’s administration has not provided substantial evidence for the ban being implemented (Crary & Gresko).

conservative ideologies regarding the LGTBQ community. Abe expressed his position on same-sex marriage during a Diet in 2015, stating that same-sex marriage is not recognized in the Japanese constitution, relating his stance “to the foundation of the shape of family in [Japan]” (Fifield & Oda, Sharp). With regressions occurring in LGBTQ rights and representation in the United States on the part of the Trump Presidency, it is unlikely that there will be any significant pressure on the part of the United States toward Japan in encouraging progressive movement in regard to LGBTQ rights and representation. Similarly, a concern could arise in the potential for Prime Minister Abe to feel more confident in pushing his anti-LGBTQ positions without receiving significant disapproval from the United States due to the regressions on the part of President Trump and his Cabinet. While the purpose of this thesis is to provide a descriptive analysis of drag and female impersonation in Japan and the United States and not a causal argument, I believe it worthwhile to consider these possibilities briefly in this section of this thesis, given the considerable movements and changes seen in the political sphere since the beginning of 2017.

Conclusion

The examination of the existing literature reveals that the study of the similarities and differences of drag and female impersonation in Japan and the United States, as well as the understanding of the contemporary development of drag and female impersonation in the countries respectively, still have room to develop in the scholarly realm. Given the ample historical and contemporary accounts of drag and female impersonation that exist, both nations have substantial historical and contemporary aspects that can be analyzed to further the study and

understanding of drag and female impersonation. However, it appears that a considerable gap is present when looking over the past ten or so years. Considering this gap alongside the exponential growth and positive reception of drag in the United States over the same period of time, and the apparent lack of substantial academic literature analyzing it, there exists the potential for the development of such academic literature, both on the United States by itself and on other countries, using the developments in the United States as a foundation for comparison. With that said, this is not to say that using the United States as a foundation for comparison is meant to imply in any sense that the comparison will be made in terms of criticism. Rather, because of my being an American and subsequently being most familiar with drag and female impersonation in the United States, the comparison is meant to allow for one to potentially gain a better understanding, and respect, for the similarities and differences and the ways that different social, cultural, and political influences shape the contemporary evolution in both countries.

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Appendix A

Cross-dresser:

An individual who dresses in clothing that is associated with the gender opposite of the individual.

Drag (US Context):

The most widely recognized form and designation of female impersonation in the United States. Because of this, there are several sub-designations that drag queens can be identified with, such as Pageant Queen, Comedy/Campy Queen, or Bearded Queen, in order to further specify the style or nature of their performance and aesthetic.

Drag (Japanese Context):

One of the many designations of female impersonation in Japan. Particularly, drag is a minority demographic of female impersonation in Japan, and is often stereotyped within the Japanese female impersonating community as being solely related to being campy or comedic in performance and aesthetic.

Female Impersonation:

Interchangeably used with drag in this thesis, but included due to the differentiation that exists in Japan between drag and other designations of female impersonation.

Gender Ambiguity:

Synonymous with androgyny, gender ambiguity is used to define instances of the combination or blurring of male and female elements in clothing, individual expression or practice.

Heteronormativity:

Used in this thesis to refer to the concept that, as extrapolated from Mitsuhashi Junkō's research on Japanese transgender communities, the social acceptance of transgendered and female impersonating individuals in Japan is dependent to a certain degree on the level that the transgendered or female impersonating individual succeeds in assuming an appearance that passes as female.

Transgender:

Generally accepted as defining an individual who believes that the gender they were assigned at birth is not synonymous with the gender that they identify with. However, there is a certain degree of relativity that comes with defining transgender/transsexual depending upon the individual using them, and the two can often be used synonymously, as well as transgender being used as a term to encompass other gender ambiguous designations, such as cross-dressers, drag queens and female impersonation.

Transsexual:

Generally accepted as defining an individual who believes that the sex/genitals they were born with are not synonymous with the sex/genitals that they would like to have. However, there is a certain degree of relativity that comes with defining transsexual/transgender depending upon the individual using them, and the two can often be used synonymously. While transsexual individuals are often the ones associated with the pursuit of physical gender alteration or re-assignment.

Appendix B

Evolution of Drag and Female Impersonation in Japan:

Tokugawa Period (1603-1868): Related to nanshoku practices, including males engaging in some form of female impersonation, as well as henshin representations, which describe deities as taking on ambiguous gender appearances. Additionally, *onnagata* in *Kabuki* theater featured a form of female impersonation that was seen as normative as well as professional.

Meiji Period (1868-1912) - World War II: The introduction and implementation of Western religious and social ideologies in the Meiji Period caused a largely negative shift in the reception of practices of female impersonation in Japan. This negative shift was also influenced by the hyper masculinity that was promoted by Japanese militarization up to the second World War.

Post War Period (Late 1940s-1980s): Due to the exclusion of the various anti-homosexual policies present in the United States from in the postwar Japanese constitution, the postwar period of Japan experienced a return of the pre-Meiji social and cultural sexual discourses and freedoms, including female impersonation and transgenderism, up into the 1980s.

1990s/2000s to Today: Japan in the 1990s experienced what was referred to as the “gay boom,” which helped ambiguous and transgendered sexualities to be featured more prominently in forms of mainstream media, growing further into the 2000s and 2010s with the evolution and expansion of the internet.

Evolution of Drag and Female Impersonation in the United States:

19th Century: The primary venue for female impersonation was in the theater, as well as during festivals in rural communities, as this was seen as a socially acceptable venue where men could engage in female impersonation.

20th Century: During this time, female impersonation deviates from but still continues to exist in the theater and is engaged in by individuals in the LGBTQ community for means of personal expression. It is during this time that the proliferation of drag culture is experienced, and continues into the 20th and 21st centuries.

Late 2000s to Today: The creation of *RuPaul's Drag Race* served as a catalyst to bring the practice of drag to mainstream audiences and promote it beyond the LGBTQ community.