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J-Pop and performances of young female identity

Music, gender and urban space in Tokyo

CSABA TOTH
Carlow University, USA

Abstract
This article examines the staging of sexuality and femininity in Japan Pop (J-Pop) and its related club-cultural scenes. While historical research on many aspects of gender in Japan has been extensive, the relationship between popular music culture, gender, and urban space has been given little recognition. Based on extensive field research in Japan, the article provides an analysis of not only how present-day female stars, Ayumi Hamasaki, Shina Ringo and Misia reproduce and enact prescribed gender and sexual roles, but also reveals how, in many instances, they transgress those. These female performers managed to carve out a representational space by highlighting girl themes that energized girl solidarity, and held up the possibility for rearticulating young femininity. They represent different angles of Tokyo's current music and style scenes, and cultural geography. These are scenes and geographies shaped by and inseparable from urban markers that female fans follow night after night in Tokyo in order to reach clubs playing the music of their favorite stars. Girls' active engagement in clubs with commercialized media texts that J-Pop performers produce assists them with the development of their identity and formation of relationships with other young females. The study argues that from trans-ethnic 'white'-style scenes, 'black' soul, and rhythm and blues (R&B)-oriented clubs in Shibuya to Shinjuku's 'seedy' disco bars, young women explore possibilities for new ethnic (trans-Asian, 'Asian black'), gender and sexual, and generational identities. The essay hopes to contribute to applied, transnational gender and cultural studies as well as music criticism.

Keywords
cultural geography, ethnicity, gender, girl studies, J-Pop, Japan, popular music

It's so nice to be a beautiful girl
(It's so nice to be... beautiful)

Party like a wild thing
(ba ba ba ba ba ba)
In parties that go on and on

Shake it at a nightclub
(la la la la la la)
Disco till the crack of dawn.

Kahimie Karie, 'Good Morning World' (1998)[1]

Pop star Kahimie Karie's words adequately express the feelings of young Tokyo women dedicated to spending their days in the chic boutiques of Shibuya and Daikanyama, and their nights dancing in one or rather more of the myriads of discothèques of the Japanese capital.[2] Present-day Tokyo's 'clubland' incorporates Shibuya's 'white' goddess Ayumi Hamasaki, 'black' music divas such as Misia, and tough-girl Shina Ringo, who is the voice of the shot bars and edgy discos of Shinjuku where prostitute and female performers are often indistinguishable. Here I would take issue with cultural geographers John Connell's and Chris Gibson's assertion that Tokyo is one of those centers that 'have not been attributed a "sound" in international mediascapes' (Connell and Gibson, 2003: 102). What Connell and Gibson set as criteria of appropriations of urban spaces for subcultural use — infrastructure of clubs, mobile populations, and 'a vibrant culture of music consumption' — are all present in Tokyo (p. 103). Indeed, what makes Tokyo different from New York, Berlin and London is the incredible density of clubs in relatively small areas, in which four- or five-storey-high buildings may accommodate four or five venues, each of which plays a different kind of music for markedly different audiences, a difference that shapes the age and gender mix on the dance floor. The author of this article has visited a dozen or more clubs within less than a mile radius in Shibuya a night (only to come by as yet-uncharted ones the following night), a good number of which cater to almost exclusively young female audiences.

In Tokyo's vast urban sprawl, female clubbers follow specific urban markers. They travel a succession of stops along specific transit lines, and navigate specific urban markers (Krims, 2007) on any given night in an effort to reach their favorite clubs — in the plural. Arguably, Shibuya is the starting point for nightly endeavors. The options are multifold. Groups of girls may want to explore some of the fashionable districts surrounding Shibuya. The clubs of Omotesando, Aoyama, Daykanyama and Roppongi are all within easy reach. However, most young women of the 'in crowd' stay in, navigate or, at some point of the night, return to Shibuya's discothèques.

While major record labels often tend to sell their female stars by highlighting their sexual desirability, some female performers managed to carve out a representational space by highlighting girl themes that energized girl solidarity and held up the possibility for a re-articulation of young femininity. Girlhood emerges

from this space not as a universal, biologically-grounded condition of female experience; instead, it implies a relation to agency, visibility and history (Wald, 2002: 207). Clubbing in contemporary Japan is a crucial site in which young women can construct their own representations of girlhood — either as a challenge to or in conformity with hegemonic gender narratives. Clubs function as important sources of emotional sanctuary for girls, and act as outlets for the expression of anger, pleasure and hope (Wald, 2002: 209).

JAPAN: FUTURE IN THE PAST?

Japan is a country that even today remains unique, not only for its distinctive culture but for the fact that, until recently, it has been the only non-Western society to have successfully industrialized its economy. It seemed that Japanese society, with its well-oiled government bureaucracy and corporate management, single-party politics (Liberal Democratic Party), and high technological innovations existed as a 'utopian alternative', as the Eastern 'Other' to 'what many perceived as the corrupt and decadent societies of the West', as film studies scholar Susan J. Napier writes (Napier, 1998: 27–8).

By the mid-1990s, the situation changed dramatically. Japan found itself in the midst of an 'imploding national economic system, a disintegrating social order, and the virtual absence of ethical and competent leadership' (Yoda, 2000a: 635). This real or perceived state of affairs led to an increasing disenchantment with the values and goals that post-war Japan was built on. The disillusionment is particularly obvious in Japanese youth culture. As girl studies scholar Catherine Driscoll stresses that young women are highly visible and central to the 'iconography of Japanese life and culture', still, they are often represented as insignificant in dominant discourses (Driscoll, 2002: 292). Therefore, it is greatly paradoxical that moral panics over youth behavior, the outbreak of which has been closely interwoven with the nation's economic troubles, suggest that it is girl cultures that reflect the brand-crazy consumerist obsession and the 'anything goes' attitude of the recent period (Yoda, 2000a: 635).

Media studies scholar Mary Celeste Kearney has demonstrated that girl-made and girl-consumed cultural texts, including commercial media texts, reveal negotiations of ideologies of race, class, generation and sexuality (Kearney, 2006). Girls' participation in public activities such as clubbing assists them with the development of their identity and formation of relationships with other young females (Kearney, 2006: 15). In the different forms of girls' culture emerging in music and club cultures in Japan, young women have performed invented ethnicities from a trans-ethnic 'white' to black American to pseudo-historical Japanese. The ensuing massive moral panic has described these girls as 'pack animals' (*guntai doubutsu*), part-time prostitutes, and creatures who exist only as images, appearances and body adornments (Kinsella, 2005: 150). In a socio-cultural context where race/racial purity (*yamato minzoku*) and, by association

of sexuality, bloodline (*kettou)* are still regarded highly important, such semiosis has generated, at the very least, contradiction and confusion (Kinsella, 2005: 147, 152).

I have selected three performers — Ayumi Hamasaki, Shina Ringo and Misia — all extremely influential as both club-scene makers and commercially successful artists, and their fans since they exemplify three different faces of Tokyo's club, music and girl cultures. It is remarkable how little these mega-selling performers are known to western audiences favoring Japanese 'underground' artists identified by avant-gardist associations. The most obvious barrier to their success is language; it is not accidental that Japanese noise music, which drives language itself to its limits, and stages its dismantling and voidance in a wall of noise, has been enormously influential in the West (Toth, 1999, 2003) while possessing only a small fan base at home. The contradiction, of course, is that performers who cross over into, say, the United States markets and gain popularity — most recently, girl bands such as Afrirampo and Tsu Shi Ma Mi Re — remain relatively obscure in Japan. It appears that female artists, who succeed in the United States, have, in cultural studies scholar Gayle Wald's assessment, a postmodern way of simultaneously acquiescencing to orientalist stereotypes *and* resisting them, evoking the more pedestrian aspects of American commodity culture in text/image *and* performing high-end rock, punk or metal (Wald, 2002: 202–3). Neither being Anglophone nor easily fitting generic markers of western music markets, J-Pop, at best, occupies a marginal position in these sites. And the fact that some J-Pop artists play out seemingly conventional images of girlhood, makes them less attractive to alternative or 'indy' audiences (and critics) thinking in uncomplicated 'categorical hierarchies of conformity and resistance' and missing out on, what postcolonial film studies scholar Rey Chow calls, the 'structural ambivalence' of these songs (Driscoll, 2002: 208–9; Chow cited on p. 209).

THE 'TRANS-ETHNIC' PRINCESS OF SHIBUYA POP: AYUMI HAMASAKI

Tokyo's Shibuya district, a pivotal youth hangout, contains a stunning array of giant, multi-storey TV screens showcasing J-Pop's latest stars, huge billboards (one of which featured singer Ayumi Hamasaki semi-nude), department stores, specialized record shops, fashion boutiques and lately even a mall (McClure, 1998: 62–71). Coming from Shibuya Japan Rail (JR) Station, to the right of the district's main thoroughfare, Dogenzaka, there is an extraordinary enclave crowded with dance clubs and performance halls. Musician Mikami Chisako from the group fra foa describes Shibuya as 'a convenient place' where '[y]ou can have pretty much everything in the area, and almost everybody is allowed to be here' (interview, in PPP @ Shibuya, Spring 2003, 14–5). She cites her pregnancy as a case in point. Girl band Love Psychedelico's Kumi claims that San Francisco, New York and Tokyo's Shibuya radiate a similar kind of positive power; to Kumi

the area is a 'power spot' (Kumi, 2002). In brief, Shibuya is perhaps the most vital center of Japanese youth culture, fashion and music trends.

Ayumi Hamasaki as J-Pop's biggest current star has enormous influence over Shibuya trends or *Shibuya kei* (Toth, 2004). *Shibuya kei* is a very self-conscious culture which changes monthly and changes dramatically, is expensive and difficult to catch up with; the exact same fashion design as what is displayed on the runways in Paris, Milan and London. It is clean and very elaborate, 'French-y' style which is casual but not too casual (*shibukaji*), sexual but not too sexual. It is heavily dominated by the color white with both clothes and make-up emphasizing a certain measure of whiteness that is perceived as trans-ethnic chic.[3] A key to Hamasaki's growing success in South-East Asian countries, historically antagonistic towards cultural products coming from Japan, is her indeterminate ethnic look (it was not accidental that she was the first recipient of the Miss Barbie Award in 2001). Ironically, this fact led to a temporary drop in her popularity in Japan, and she had to be 'repackaged' in the image of a geisha whose spectacular dress combined classic Japanese styles with strokes of cutting-edge western fashion.

Ayumi, or simply Ayu as her fans call her, has her own clothes' line brand-named 'Material Girl' in homage to Madonna. There is no concealment about the materialistic approach of promoting her. Ayu sells *images*, and is sold as a bundle of images. Fans capture Ayu as a mascot, a body on a giant poster wall, and a model for Bulgari, yet no one knows what kind of a girl she really is — the star herself acknowledges this much as she sings in 'Real me' (title in English), 'What I get?/What you get?/It may be an illusion'.[4] This inscrutability enables her close relation to merchandizing. When she wore Channel sunglasses, they sold out, while Yves Saint Laurent's lacey fashion was introduced by the diva. A couple of years ago, tight jeans and knee-high black boots became fashion because of Hamasaki. As one of her admirers has put it, 'Ayu is the me I wish I was. She just … gets it' (Takeuchi Cullen, 2002: 51). Highly ironic that in a hyper-consumption society, the practice of 'extreme shopping' by her fans, and young women in general, is widely viewed as irresponsible overindulgence. On the other hand, some popular feminists in Japan celebrate excess shopping as 'a legitimate protest against constraints forced upon women' in a paternalist society (Bardsley and Hirakawa, 2005: 113; Yoda, 2000b).

Hamasaki's early success came through electronic dance music (EDM) remixes of her songs (a hardcore/trance sound) that were allowed to be played in clubs — a crucial form of expanding a performer's appeal. While different genres within EDM have had a wide appeal across gender, sexual and class cleavages (Huq, 2006: 105), there has been very little generic crossover. In other words, audiences tend to be bound up in their favorite styles while rejecting others. Thus Ayu girls dance at their club nights to the mix spun by their favorite DJs. While they exist, super clubs are relatively rare in Tokyo, smaller-scale clubs with lower levels of volume and more intimate spatial arrangements abound; they are compatible with holding conversations or simply passing the time. Here, one needs to consider the scarcity of private (home) space in Tokyo's crammed

living quarters; thus experimenting with make-up, reading magazines and sizing up boys is carried out in the public space of the club.

Clubbing for these young women constitutes an aesthetic and political challenge to dominant representations of female sexuality produced by Japan's patriarcho-corporate sector. I would argue that clubbing is a strategy to realize young women's agency by the production of a representational space (dress, music, language) that is, in effect, off-limits to patriarchal authority. While the clubs Ayu fans frequent do not exclude male patrons, men present mostly serve as 'attendants' and 'body guards'. The girls' wild carousing inspired by their idol preempts the sexually objectifying gaze of the rest of male clubbers. Ayu and her fans' revelry in 'girliness' has an air of transgression in a profoundly masculine society (as Japan still is) while at the same time, can be interpreted as merely playful performance lacking the markers of transgression. Gayle Wald's comment on western 'girl power' practices holds true for Tokyo's young female clubbers, 'The instability of strategic reappropriation of girlhood is mirrored and reproduced… in the very instability of "meanings" that consumers construe from performers who play the "girl"' (Wald, 2002: 197).

Shibuya girls successfully challenge male ownership of the club as a public space and, while heteronormativity is not explicitly questioned, heterosexuality is subtly subverted by their obsession with themselves. This latter point is clearly exemplified by one of Ayu's major hits 'Boys and Girls', a song for which the visuals show Ayu only; the 'boy' appears in the text only, and even there he is dismissed. The song starts out with flashes of a conventional romance — 'It's on my lips/It's in my dreams/It's a story told by two' — however, happiness — 'You say you want to be happy/You've already been so many times' — which she simultaneously expects and doubts, does not materialize. She quickly equates her romantic feelings with a little confusion that dissolves in the light of the day:

> I was really expecting it.
> I really doubted it.
> What was it? Who was it?
> They say he's a good person.
> He seems like a person I don't care about.
>
> The morning glow is dazzling.
> It pierces my eyes.
> My breast hurts.
> I was a little confused.[5]

Music video is the key to Hamasaki's and other female performers' success. Beyond serving as marketing tools, they produce gender discourses that, rather than reiterate gender norms, complicate them. Visual representation of their songs as filmic narratives has been important to young women's identification with the performer (Vernallis, 2004). Encounter with these clips is unavoidable, for they penetrate public space: Shibuya and Shinjuku's giant electronic billboards constantly play them at full volume.

Some of what is going on in Hamasaki's 'Appears' (sic) helps us understand why a high school student said in a documentary that what prevented her from dropping out of school were the sad but positive lyrics of Hamasaki. In 'Appears', Ayumi sings about a girl who is obsessed with images of happiness such as couples holding hands, walking together, kissing in the car, etc. Everything is going well, everyone is happy, seemingly there are no problems *but* who knows the truth. Only two people, only the couples know the truth but even their 'truth' may not be 'true.' They cannot know what the truth is, Hamasaki suggests, because we look at our own happiness through *other* people's eyes. Happiness is constructed — 'It looks like everything is going perfectly, but no one knows the truth' — everything is open to interpretation:

> At the first phone call, the hand
> with which I held the receiver trembled.
> At the second call a message
> was left on my machine.
> At the seventh call we decided to meet.
> It all began on that ordinary day.
> …
> At the 10th call we
> went far away together.
> As we held hands and walked,
> I felt a little shy.
>
> And the nights flew by.
> On the way home, in the car, we kissed.
>
> I love the white, shining snow.
> Nevertheless, we were separated last year.
> This winter, we'll try together.
> Will we make it? Can I say?
> The Merry Christmas I couldn't say before.[6]

There is an inherent tension between Ayu in the club context and Ayu singing on Shibuya's huge television screens. As opposed to the participatory, communal relations which her music incites on the dance floor amongst girls, many of her songs such as 'Appears' seem to encourage privatized discourses of heterofemininity.

Hit songs like 'Kanariya' (Canary) and 'Fly High' (title in English) are self-referential; in them, Hamasaki addresses what it means to be a young female working in the music business. In 'Kanariya', 'surface image people' — presumably, record business people — expect canaries to sing but the birds do not necessarily follow their expectations. The studio for Hamasaki is the cage, just as canaries are kept in a cage. Now, the canaries have stopped singing:

> It's not that the canaries whose voices were crushed to death couldn't sing. Maybe they just chose not to.[7]

In 'Fly high', Hamasaki sings about pretending, and about how the real (that is, the 'girl') Ayu has become the shadow of the fake (that is, the 'superstar') Ayu. Ayu the 'girl' is watching Ayu the 'star' on the screen in a disco: everything looks so small because, as the song tells us, the sky is so big. The 'real' Ayu is unable to handle this 'big' vision of her; in stardom, everything is a fake. Out of this confrontation between the 'real' and the 'fake', Ayu springs her desire to reclaim agency,

> It's all in this hand for sure.
> I mustn't leave my dreams here.
> It's all in this hand for sure.
> I don't need a predetermined future.[8]

The singer feels so blinded and trapped in the flashlights of the media that nothing is or might be true. She feels like a 'mascot'; 'I am a product [of the industry]', she confessed in an interview (Takeuchi Cullen, 2002: 53). One must note though that Hamasaki is in total control of her production, therefore this 'confession' must be taken with a grain of salt.

Girls who worship Ayu know that they are not the same as she, and will not be, yet they are responding to statements that Ayu is just like them. Does Ayu offer some expression of these girls' desires while, in the end, encouraging conformity? One could argue that girls' embracing popular rather than avant-garde cultural production generates further emancipatory possibilities (Aapola et al., 2005: 31). Does Ayu then push young women to identify girl-positive feelings with a non-political discourse? Do her fans think about girlhood in cultural ways rather than a space for social and political action? While probably most of these considerations are in part valid, I would argue that Hamasaki's work finalized a *shift* in the dominant paradigm of club cultural production directed toward girls.

Girls' influence on Tokyo's club culture came to sight first at the legendary and now-defunct mega club, Juliana's, in the early 1990s. Women who wore body-hugging micro-skirts (*bodikon*, or body conscious), Good Up bras allowing a spectacular cleavage, and gogo shoes, created a sensational sight as they walked the distance from the nearby JR station to this club on the waterfront (Shibaura). Once inside, young women were dancing on tiered platforms, showing off their bodies clad, as the night progressed, in barely more than G-strings and bras, and holding a feather-trimmed fan *(Juli[ana]-sen[su])* in one hand while moving to the beat. Significantly, men were 'condemned' to only watch, and meandered around in confusion. Tokyo police put an end to Juliana's culture of '*bodikon* and deviance'. However, the sheer existence of the super-club led to a new understanding of the nexus between feminine spatial practice, club culture and mainstream music trends, which was quickly taken up by Avex, now Japan's biggest record company that, in 1994, bought one of Tokyo's most influential dance clubs, velfarre (sic), as a 'de facto replacement' for Juliana's (Braun, 2003). velfarre became the testing ground for Avex's increasing efforts to fuse electronic

dance music with the more orthodox J-Pop sound, which eventually translated into the success of stars such as Ayumi Hamasaki. (velfarre closed in 2007.) A proliferation of girl-centered smaller clubs ensued as the girls-only *para para* dance craze began to dominate, a style that smoothly meshed with techno (*tech para*) and trance (*tra para*). No accident that, on a club level, Hamasaki taught her fans to do *para para* to some of her hits.

SHINA, SHINJUKU AND 'OLD' JAPAN

Shinjuku occupies a particular position within the cartography of Tokyo's 'club-land'. If anyone, it is Shina Ringo who represents *Shinjuku-kei*, pure and simple. Direct sexual imagery and vocabulary bring Shina and Shinjuku together. To the singer, Shinjuku stands for *Kabuki-cho*: the rough and sleazy culture of the East Exit (*higashi deguchi*) of JR Shinjuku station. In other words, her work rests on a negation of the culture of department stores, and pricey hotels concentrated around JR's affluent West Exit. Until recently, she has had that 'amateur' (read 'uninhibited') attitude so wholly different from the delicate sophistication of the Ayu girls. A girl asserts about Ringo fans, 'They have self assertion, and they are sensual.'[9] Explaining 'sensual', she adds, 'Fans show their sexual[ity by] taking control of the man they want. … Most important thing for them is control of love.'[10]

Ringo was discovered via the radio program Japan Music Quest, which is a weekly showcase for amateur performers. Hopefuls send in demos, listeners vote, and in the end whoever has received the most votes can debut on a major label every two months. She is not a *bona fide* solo artist, has performed with the band Tokyo Jihen since 2004; nonetheless she works on her music and songs by herself. She has created the word *Shinjuku-kei* because before that, so runs the mythology, no fashion and no music of consequence existed in this entertainment district for the salaried men.

Ringo's 'Kabukicho no joou' (Queen of Kabukicho) opens with a dream sequence: everyone has this dream of going to Kabukicho. The female protagonist's mother was Queen of Kabukicho, that is, the most sought-after prostitute:

Mommy was the Queen of this place
And she's my spitting image
Everyone stretched me their hands
And even though I was just a child, they showed me around the pleasure quarters

When I turned fifteen,
The Queen left me and disappeared
Maybe she's living
With the man who came along every Friday
'All that rises must eventually fall'
I barely started to understand what this phrase meant
when I stepped inside the pleasure quarters
Even though I hate the woman who abandoned me, now it's Summer

And I revere with pride
The name of the Queen

Now I am a woman, and what I'm selling
Is only myself
I will lose everything
When I need sympathy.[11]

The mother might have vanished with the man who used to come to their house to have sex with her. Did she flee aging? The listener-viewer is reminded of an Edo era saying, 'All that rises must eventually fall', as he/she is confronted in the video with grim, black-and-white images of aging prostitutes. The daughter, who happens to be a musician, starts out on a spiritual journey in order to find her mother. This is the time the daughter needs to take over. Her living the same life as her mother is her destiny. Every utterance by Ringo references 'instinct', 'gene', and 'sex' as predicaments that cannot be avoided, 'From tonight on, in this city; I was once the daughter and now I am the Queen'.[12]

Kabukicho stands for secret life, taboo life; sex-Queen mother and daughter are predisposed to follow the exact same life path. The daughter names the East Exit of Shinjuku JR station as the site where her world lies. At the end, she too dresses up as a prostitute — the Queen of Kabukicho. In a typical Shina-esque move, she selects a word (*joou*) of murky origin that, in written Chinese, first appeared in the late third century and referred to Japan as a country ruled by a *joou* or Queen.[13]

The song, however, is larger than a 'simple' daughter–mother nexus. It posits the feminine as staging ground for national history by evoking at least one distinct stage in recent Japanese history — the Occupation years of 1945–1953 (Dower, 1999). Shina is reminiscing about her mother while wearing a G.I.'s cap, suggesting that her mother's customers were US soldiers, and so was possibly the man with whom she ran away. The potential is there in Ringo's work to create a narrative of the 'travel of sexualities that would, once again, fracture disciplinary practices' of post-war reconstruction in the Pacific (Inderpal Grewal quoted by Parks, 2002: 228). The sexual history of the 'forgotten' Occupation period is a 'taboo' topic since miscegenation would complicate not only American and Japanese gender and sexual norms but also symbolic investments in national identity. Both the song and the video depend on an unstable exchange between memories of Showa-era Japan (1926–1989) and the social costs of the economic turmoil of the present — homeless people, a boy urinating in the street, and sickly, stray animals. They are fused together by the theme of gender identity formation, the feminine disrupting the constraints the nation (state) imposes at the site of the body.

Ringo admits to *enka* influences upon her songcraft. The Shinjuku link is made more emphatic by her persistent references to social class (urban, working class with rural roots). This is a characteristic of enka but unheard of in Japanese pop. Shina has picked up these references while hanging out at markets for the poor where (amateur) enka performers equipped with cheap PA

systems sing about miseries of life as a form of release. Enka's history dates back to the Meiji era (1867–1912), when it was a political street song contesting in the name of popular representation the government's top-down introduction of western market capitalism in the country. In its role today, it functions as a cultural technology for creating 'national and cultural memory' and 'archive of the [Japanese] nation's collective past' (Yano, 2002: 17). However, while contemporary enka, facing the uncertainties of the present and unable or unwilling to account for Japan's past, is about withdrawal, Shina Ringo's songs directly address a complex web of historical issues (Yano, 2002: 179).

In Shina's 'Honnou' (Instinct), boundaries between femininity and masculinity are transgressed rather than reinforced (Butler, 2004; Jagose, 1994: 4–5). The protagonist, a nurse, does not need promises because they are never kept; she just wants to have a physical connection until morning; she wants her partner to put her 'instinct into motion'. Don't be bored, do something to turn me on, she demands of her lover, whose gender is not immediately or not obviously identified:

> Forgive my whims
> don't think it's too late, just rush me
> enter me deep
> put my instincts into motion.[14]

She responds angrily to her lover's indifference by smashing glass windows. She is breaking everything that is taboo by behaving as a sexually overcharged nurse, and having a same-sex encounter with a patient. The hospital sign says: *honnou* or instinct. Instincts in motion make her blood literally boil as shown by the intravenous tube in the video. Ringo is wearing a nurse's uniform, heavy make-up and high heels — the metal heels of which she uses to kick in the windows of the hospital door. The latter are of significance because they represent not only 'fashion with vengeance' and 'a defiant gesture… of rebellion', but are coded as ambisexual. It is a fetish that is unmistakably feminine yet carries the weapon (Kaite, 1995: 95–7).

Shina has a committed club cultural fan base that embraces her outbursts of rage on stage, ruthless domination of male musicians around her, and the violent content of many of her songs and video clips. One of her CDs' jacket design (*Gipusu* or Plaster Cast) shows Shina slicing her hand with a kitchen knife, which have led devotees to wonder about her 'sanity'. However, one female fan has touched upon a potential intersection between cultural creativity and micro-politicization (Marchart, 2003) in Shina's world, 'Violent images = destruction = get rid of regulations. Violent images used for innovation… '.[15]

Shina has fashioned an 'Old' Japanese ethnicity, one that she constructs in linguistic (rare Chinese characters, invented 'old' words), generic (enka allusions), and sartorial ways (the singer's donning a kimono fits with this process unlike Hamasaki's in whose case it has been a purely commercial move). Her sexually overt style, both textual and visual, not only intentionally evokes the pleasure

quarters of Edo, as Tokyo was once called (till 1868), but by referencing the sexually polymorphous world immortalized in *shunga* — erotic scrolls or woodblocks documenting brothel life — fosters a greater sense of awareness and acceptance of the Other (Leupp, 1995: 78–80). Significantly, this includes the queer Other understood to include a broad variety of 'non-heterosexual and gender-variant identities, practices and communities' (McLelland, 2005: 2). Using Shinjuku, this 'veritable epicenter' of sexual and gender Otherness in contemporary Tokyo (Pflugfelder, 1999: 330), as the backdrop to most of her work, is significant. Shina Ringo, on occasions at least, gives representations of *kono sekai* or 'this world' as queer cultures have been commonly referred to in Japan (McLelland, 2005: 1). She positions herself as a pop genealogist tracking down what Foucault calls 'buried and disqualified' knowledge (Foucault quoted in McLelland, 2005: 8). Significantly, the unparalleled forcefulness Shina displays in her music videos, screened in heavy rotation on television and billboards, speaks to an *audience*, and may complicate often condescending western views positing sexual minorities in Japan as 'the hapless victims of a repressive regime' (2005: 6). Nonetheless, in order to avoid triumphalist generalizations concerning Ringo's cultural work, we must remember queer theorist Yukiko Hanawa's caution that 'it [is] necessary for one to always consider the singularity of practice informing subjectivity, sexual as well as gender' (Chalmers, 2002: 1–17; Hanawa, 1996: 476; Robertson, 1998).

Ringo's performance does imply loss, grief and absence in a gendered way. Tension builds in her work as her 'old' way of saying or doing things feels cynical in light of the contemporary mood. New and retro sounds blend in her tunes as, textually, and less obviously sonically, they hark back to a long-lost, yet never idealized Japan:

> Though her old Japanese is not exact, I think it's (a good) match and beautiful. I'm Japanese so I have such a feeling' (Female high school student).[16]

Ringo's historical detours are considered new wave-y because they fit the retro rage of the moment in Japan and elsewhere.

'BLACK' DIVA CULTURE: MISIA

It is Misia who embodies diva culture in Japan. Diva would 'translate' as the aggregate of female soul and R&B music, braids, dreads, cornrows and fashion wear such as Tommy girl and Baby phat. In March 1998 Misia made her live debut at Tokyo's premier R&B and hip hop club Harlem, packing the 600-capacity venue with 1200 fans.

It was her African–American vocal coach in Fukuoka[17] who exposed Misia to soul and R&B at a music school (McClure, 2007). In 1997, Misia was signed by Arista Japan, moved from Fukuoka to Tokyo, and released her debut single, 'Tsutsumi Komuyouni' (Embracing, 1997). An analog version of the single was released before the CD and became a hit on the Tokyo club scene, thanks to

remixes by DJ Watarai and rap versions by Muro. 'Embracing' eventually sold some 700,000 copies, catapulted Misia into superstardom, and was followed by the Recording Industry Association of Japan naming her New Artist of the Year for 1998. Her success paved the way for other R&B-influenced 'divas' who, as McClure points out, changed the 'J-pop template with technically accomplished soul- and R&B-influenced music' (McClure, 2007).

One can ask basically the same questions about Japanese soul music that historian E. Taylor Atkins poses about Japanese jazz. Does a Japanese soul diva surrender her identity when she performs black R&B? Is it possible to express that identity through an African–American art of music? Is this, in the last instance, 'authentic' soul (Atkins, 2001: chapter 1)?

In partial response to these questions, one may suggest that Japanese soul and R&B is about *no* boundaries, and that Misia's performance is more about reinvention of ethnicity or creation of post-ethnicity. Her music is what is currently being referred to as m.o.b.o., or 'music of black origin'. The concept of m.o.b.o., originating from the United Kingdom,[18] lends credibility to the existence of Japanese soul, R&B and hip hop: the music is black or m.o.b.o., therefore the performer does not need to be black. R&B is captured as a neo-Japanese sign in the sense that the singer's message is that we (in Japan) are in possession of 'blackness'; it is not an import, it is part of our own culture. Rejecting racial essentialism, one of Misia's admirers has expressed this idea as, ' … what makes us Japanese is getting more and more complex and diverse, and African American music is part of it. I guess Tokyo becomes much more internationalized and culturally chaotic.'[19]

This search by Misia for a parallel 'emotive vocabulary' (Atkins, 2001: 249) as historically indigenous and rich in depth of feeling, does not come at the price of expunging soul's roots in African–American music. The 'discursive loophole' that Atkins takes note of regarding the history of Japanese jazz, is quite possibly valid for Misia's R&B performance as well. This 'emotive vocabulary' rests on the assumption that there exists a 'natural affinity' between black soul music and Japanese soul music, both expressive of the shared and painful history of peoples of color (Atkins, 2001: 251–2). Misia familiarizes her audience with this — to her listener's as yet unfamiliar — sign; in her videos, for instance, we see a dreadlocked Misia leading her African–American dancers across the narrow alleys of Hong Kong. In her Japanese fans' imaginary, black culture equals 'hip' culture, that is, Misia gives her followers the ultimate 'cool' — and one that is experienced as homegrown. 'Cool' is realized through cultural consumption; youth consume (and produce) commodities such as music that show *both* their desire for these cultural products and their investments — affective and material (Maira, 2002: 197). Obviously, boundaries do exist in Tokyo's R&B scene; yet, challenging some of the assumptions of subcultural theory, 'cool' is in this instance constructed by virtue of its (racial) *inclusivity* rather than exclusivity (Jensen, 2006; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003: 9–10; Thornton, 1995). This inclusiveness goes beyond the appreciation of music 'only', Misia's fans do include African–American, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Asian clubbers as

any night in any Tokyo R&B club will reveal. As cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller notes, 'consumption is a "moral" project, built on the possibilities that commodities offer to reimagine cultural ideologies, such as those of "self" and "other"…' (Miller quoted in Maira, 2002: 197).

Paul Gilroy suggests that Afro-diasporic cultures in western modernity cross 'different national paradigms for thinking about history' and that black identity is 'unstable' that challenges notions of authenticity and cultural uniqueness (Gilroy cited in Huq, 2006: 121; Condry, 2006). Misia's work might retain 'residual contradictions' of colonialism and exoticism, yet it also speaks to new cultural and political currents that have emerged from 'fundamentally new geopolitical and economic realities' (Lipsitz, 1997: 5). Considering 'reflexive uses' of the black Other in the context of Japanese popular culture, anthropologist John Russell raises the possibility for the rejection of a racial status-quo mirroring a Eurocentric world view, and assertion of solidarity by Japanese youth with other non-whites (Russell quoted in Maira, 2002: 66).[20] Misia and her fans' embrace of black music does the cultural work of 'discursive transcoding' (Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan): indirectly expresses youth disenchantment with not only a Eurocentric universe but the new rage of topdown ethno-centrism in contemporary Japan (Kellner and Ryan cited in Lipsitz, 1997: 55).

Misia's fans who flock to dance clubs with such telling names as Harlem, Asia (both in Shibuya) and Yellow (in Nishi-Azabu) view blackness as a means of iden-tity negotiation. They incorporate black skin in their stylistic vocabulary as a key signifier of R&B and hip hop styles. As historian of Japanese literature Nina Cornyetz has noted, in J-Pop fandom, like in white suburban appropriations of African–American youth culture, the origins of these genres are erased but with a crucial *difference*: in Japan, they are not 'whitened' (Cornyetz, 1994: 114). Black culture therefore might be understood as a space to comprehend the self, and experience Otherness. Fans talk about the *incorporation* into their selves of the black Other, 'Through the music of African American origin, I acquire a totally positive image of otherness — cool, soulful, and powerful.'[21]

Unlike Hamasaki, who rarely sings in English, Misia cannot avoid singing in English. In order to reflect the 'proper' atmosphere, she feels compelled to mix Japanese with English to engender the feeling of soul music. Misia's performance represents the fundamental pleasure of music: the listener does not take her as commodity; it is a music-centered performance. Her respect for African–American music is reflected in her adoration for Chicago soul diva Minnie Riperton, whose 1975 hit single 'Lovin' You' Misia has covered (the Japanese diva like Riperton possesses a rare five-octave vocal range). In New York, she sought out Erykah Badu whose Afro-centric soul, hip hop and jazz has been an influence on her music, in order to record with her the duet 'Akai Inochi' (Red Destiny). Admiration is manifested in the other direction as well; legendary house music DJs — Junior Vasquez and Frankie Knuckles — who work with Misia, consider her a top talent in the R&B field.

Misia always talks about the boyfriend she wants to have. Her yearning exemplifies girls' sentimental dreams and appeals to young women with her

evocation of passionate longing. In 'Key of Love', Misia asks her boyfriend to teach her a 'little bit of love', and asks him to open the 'wounded door' of her heart and hold her:

> Abandoning hesitation,
> The time is now
> I will start to run. The time is now [*repeat*]
>
> Alone I was looking up at that sky, now I extend my arm
> My love for you that was once unable to grow has gone beyond my dreams
> …
> Key of my love
> My heart, like a thin spring ice,
> Melts little by little, I realize
> You're the key of my love.[22]

In 'Hi no ataru basho' (The Place that Gets Sunshine) she asks existential questions: What is the meaning of her life? Why does she sing?

> I can sing a song for you and me forever (English in the original)
> Finding a place where the sun shines
> I can sing a song for you and me forever
> Let's change sadness to a smile
>
> Although I sing DADDA RATTATTARARA
> Although I fool with PAPPA RATTATTARARA
> Incompatible with my feelings that flow and flow
> If I was not here, oh
> If I had the time to think
> It would be good when I look up at the clear sky
> Because I am so small, I am not alone, unable to live alone
> If I lose the words, I can still sing, oh.[23]

I would argue that embrace of 'blackness' by Misia's fans and their R&B culture recast America as constructed white as well as defies the equally constructed Japanese national, racial identity. As Cornyetz points out, Tokyo's 'black cultural' fans search for an alternative, yet communal identity, and by incorporating Black and other non-white cultures, Japanese R&B and hip hop 'generates interactive dialogue rather than unilateral plundering of image' (1994: 132).

CONCLUSION: FEMALE *JISAKU-JIEN-YA* AND THEIR FANS

Club scene is one of metropolitan Japan's most fertile sources of new musical trends. What all Tokyo clubs have in common is a degree of subtle sophistication. It has been an elitist and very masculine scene. This is the culture which Ayumi Hamasaki, Shina Ringo and Misia have broken into, begun to interrogate and, on occasion, managed to reformulate its masculinist codes. 'She is *jisaku-jien-ya*',

a fan characterizes Ringo; that is, a maker and enactor of her own style, a characterization that holds equally true for Hamasaki and Misia.[24]

However, what made the creation of these openings in Tokyo's club culture possible were the activities of young female fans. Their collective sense of identity — acknowledged even by their most vociferous critics (see 'pack animals') — has been built around a particular type of music and particular performer. I would concur with Mary Kearney that young women's *collective* participation in commercialized public activities, such as clubbing, helps 'female youth to express themselves assertively and to form relationships with other girls' (2006: 4). And while these girls might be seemingly politically disengaged and involved in semiotic 'warfare' only — although as I have hinted earlier, contours of an emerging micro-politics can be sighted — their nightly endeavors speak directly and unambiguously to mounting social and economic insecurity under neoliberal regimes (as the Koizumi and Abe governments have been), and reflect a desire to counter encroachment by a patriarcho-corporate culture.

Notes

1 Text was accessed on 17 March 2007 at http://www.stlyrics.com/songs/k/kahimikarie4821/goodmorningworld212097.html. No translator was named. All lyrics are provided for educational purposes only. Intermittently, I have made slight changes for the sake of greater clarity.

2 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the School of Culture and Communication, Södertörn University, on 13 March 2007, and the Center for Gender Studies at Stockholm University on 14 March 2007. I want to thank my audience for their valuable comments. I also wish to express my gratitude to Atsuko Miyawaki (Tokyo) who was instrumental in honing my approach to J-Pop. The romanization system in this article follows the Hepburn system.

3 See, for instance, the Ayumi Hamasaki cover story in *Girlpop* (Japan), January, Vol. 77, 2006, pp. 10–21. The article and photo-shoot evoke a white, dreamlike vision of Ayu dressed in a wedding dress, however, significantly, with no male in sight.

4 Text was accessed on 22 May 2007 at http://www.ayumi-hamasaki.org/music/lyrics/. The text has been translated by Masa, Wataru and Ustuff (sic).

5 Text was accessed on 17 March 2007 at http://www.primanova.com/lyrics.php and was translated by Wataru.

6 Text was accessed on 17 March 2007 at http://www.primanova.com/lyrics/appears.htm and was translated by Wataru.

7 Text was accessed on 17 March 2007 at http://www.primanova.com/lyrics/kanariya.htm and was translated by Wataru.

8 Text was accessed on 17 March 2007 at http://www.ayumi-hamasaki.org/music/lyrics/ and was translated by Masa, Wataru and Ustuff (sic).

9 T.R. email on 21 May 2007.

10 T.R. email on 23 May 2007.

11 Text was accessed on 17 March 2007 at http://www.centigrade-j.com and was translated by Brian Stuart and Takako Sakuma.

12 Ibid.

13 The word is a relative latecomer in Japanese, making its appearance most likely in the mid-eighteenth century. I want to thank Professor Junzo Oshimo at East Asian Languages and Literatures, University of Pittsburgh, for this information. For historical detail on *Wei chih* (the Chinese chronicle, c. AD 297) about the Japanese 'queen', see Hall (1991: 25–6).
14 http://www.centigrade-j.com
15 T.R. email on 21 May 2007.
16 High school student's (anonymous) email on 24 May 2007.
17 Coincidentally, Misia, Ayumi Hamasaki and Shina Ringo are all from Fukuoka, the largest city on the southern island of Japan, Kyushu.
18 The acronym has been popularized by the Mobo awards — one of a number of music awards in the United Kingdom that can influence record sales and boost an artist's profile. 'Music of black origin' awardees account for more than half of all singles sold in Britain. Nominations are not restricted only to Black artists. Nominees can be of any race or nationality, so long as their performance draws on music that traces its roots back to Africa.
19 S.I. email on 14 March 2007.
20 John Russell observes 'the tendency to employ the Black Other as a reflexive symbol through which the Japanese attempt to deal with their own ambiguous racial status in a Eurocentric world, where such hierarchies have been largely (and literally) conceived in terms of polarization between black and white, and in which Japanese as Asians have traditionally occupied a liminal space.' (Russell quoted in Maira, 2002: 299.)
21 S.I. email on 14 March 2007.
22 Translation by Yoko Motoyama. Commissioned by the author.
23 Translation by Yoko Motoyama. Commissioned by the author.
24 High school student's (anonymous) email on 24 May 2007.

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CSABA TOTH received his PhD from the University of Minnesota, and is Professor and Chair of the History Department at Carlow University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Toth's scholarly interests include social movements, production of gender, girl cultures, politics of sound, urban history, and pedagogy. His writings have been published by The M.I.T. Press, St. Martin's Press, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He was a guest professor of American Studies in Japan (1998–2000), lectured in Australia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia, and Sweden, and has been the recipient of several major grants and awards (Fulbright Senior Lecturer, NEH, Newberry, George Soros Foundation, DAAD, Wise-Susman Prize). Toth co-teaches with Katie Hogan the seminar 'Girl Cultures'. *Address:* History Department, Carlow University, 3333 Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA. [email: tealeaf_toth@yahoo.com]