



Welcome to another exciting issue of *The Japan Society Review* bringing you five reviews of books, stage productions and films about Japan. This October issue is more eclectic than ever and we are thankful to our reviewers for their time and expertise.

The issue opens with a review of *British Extraterritoriality in Korea, 1884-1910: A comparison with Japan*, an academic publication discussing the British experience in Japan through the lens of extraterritorial rights and how this influenced the history of Anglo-Korean relations. The book's author, Christopher Roberts, gave an online lecture about this topic a few months ago, so if the review piques your interest, be sure to visit our YouTube channel to watch the video recording and learn more about this fascinating period of history.

Turning our focus to the arts, this issue's second review focuses on the catalogue of an exhibition held at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in 2019. *Plum Blossom & Green Willow*, edited by curators Hanaoka Kiyoko and

Clare Pollard, introduces over forty *surimono* prints in the collection of the museum, framing the development of *surimono* within the context of both 19th century Japanese literati communities and Edo period material culture.

The thought-provoking work *Heaven*, written by Kawakami Mieko, is at the centre of our next two reviews. The first covers Kawakami's novel in its English translation, shedding light on the story, characters and topics discussed in the book, including the problem of teenage bullying and discrimination. The second review concentrates on the stage adaptation of the novel, recently performed as an immersive reading at the Southbank Centre in London.

We close the October issue with a review of the documentary film *Queer Japan*, which explores the LGBTQ+ community in Japan, offering an insightful and illustrative view of queer culture in the country.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

Fiona Collins, Laurence Green, Kimura Genki, Susan Meehan and Jenni Schofield.

Image: Tokyo Rainbow Pride, from the film *Queer Japan*.

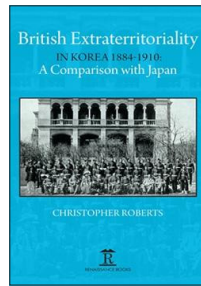
British Extraterritoriality in Korea, 1884-1910: A comparison with Japan

by Christopher Roberts

Renaissance Books (2021)

ISBN-13: 978-1912961276

Review by Kimura Genki



When most of Japanese people hear the word “extraterritoriality”, or “consul jurisdiction”, it may remind them of history classes at high school. The narrative there is one related to an oppressive regime compelled by the Western powers and the eventual recovery of the Japanese nation’s sovereignty through two glorious victories over Qing China and Russia. On the other hand, Korean readers may recall the bitter history in which their nation was yoked under the pressure and subsequent colonisation by Japan which by itself turned to the vanguard of Western imperialism. What is common among those narratives is the view that extraterritoriality is an unequal and imperialistic legal regime which was imposed upon them, ignoring their sovereignty.

Christopher Roberts, the author of *British Extraterritoriality in Korea, 1884–1910: A comparison with Japan*, does admit that British extraterritoriality had some discriminatory and unequal aspects. For instance, in the notorious Normanton incident, the British captain of a sunk ship who, though rescued most of the British sailors failed to rescue most of the Japanese passengers, was punished unconventionally lightly in a consular court. However, the excellence of this book is that it enables us to take a glimpse of the complexity of the reality beyond the simple state-made narratives through extensive research on various first and second materials, mainly from the British side.

The book roughly consists of five parts. In the first chapter, the author introduces the context of British extraterritoriality in Korea in comparison to the situation in Japan. Chapters 2 to 4 explain its institutional and administrative backgrounds, and chapters 5 to 9 offer a detailed description of the procedures for criminal, civil, and naval cases with the examples of the Bethell case and Joly case. Chapter 10 and 11 are about the issues around extraterritoriality—British claims against Koreans and British protection of other foreigners and Koreans, both of which are not matters of extraterritoriality in a strict sense. Chapters 12 to 14 illustrate how British extraterritoriality came to an end and conclude.

Written by a British lawyer who resided in Tokyo and Hong Kong, this book offers valuable descriptions both for historians and legal scholars. For historians, a rich description of the correspondence among British consuls and diplomats from the national archive offers a great perspective on the reality of British colonial bureaucracy. Especially, as personnel management is always the keystone to comprehend the work of bureaucracy, deep analysis on the careers of the people involved in British diplomacy in Korea is very attractive. For example, readers may find it interesting that as the Minister to Korea actually never resided in Korea and concurrently served as either the Minister to Japan or China, it was a natural consequence that British Korean policy was influenced by which Minister was serving as Korean Minister. Consuls also had their colours either of Japan or of China — and Britain never tried to bring up their own “Korean experts”. Rather surprisingly, the British Foreign Ministry even rejected the proposal from one official fluent in Korean language, vice-consul Scott, to create an English-Korean dictionary. Scott was promoted to vice-consul of Shanghai soon and never came back to Korea. As the author iterates, it is certainly true that Korea had not been important for the trade strategy of the British Empire. All the same, the number of British ships which called at Korean ports were strikingly so small that one may assume that this extreme indifference to Korea by the central government may have accelerated British merchants’ avoidance of Korean ports, and thereby might have resulted in further growth of Japanese economic influence there.

From a legal perspective, extraterritoriality is by itself a very unique invention of international law. As globalisation encompasses the imbalance of power and wealth among states in reality, it is sometimes inevitable that an “advanced” legal system and “indigenous” one virtually coexist within one territory — and we still do not know the right answer to deal with the situation. Extraterritoriality was the answer of the British Empire, which is apparently different from the currently widespread “Washington-consensus” type answer to force other countries to change their legal systems themselves. Before supposing that the system of extraterritoriality contradicts the sovereignty of states and was destined to fail, it might be worthwhile observing British efforts to keep it working and the different responses to it by Asian countries.

Indeed, trials and errors of British diplomacy depicted in this book tell us how it is difficult to draw a boundary between two coexisting jurisdictions.

The principle of extraterritoriality — the defendant’s nationality determines the jurisdiction — seems simple, but examples in this book show that there were lots of grey-zone cases. However, as Britain noticed that the success of their “informal empire” was dependent upon the success of the extraterritorial system, they treated especially careful the issues around extraterritoriality, such as protection of other foreign nationals or of British-related Koreans, to neither expand nor concede their rights too much. It is rather symbolic that the age when the last extraterritoriality disappeared in China, 1943, was almost simultaneous to the cessation of the British Empire.

One of the fundamental issues of extraterritoriality is whether consular jurisdiction applies to the cases of administrative regulations — especially when Westerners allegedly violated local administrative regulations such as quarantine rules. As the Treaty of Yedo (Ansei Treaty) with Japan did not clarify this point, Meiji Japan asserted that consular jurisdiction only applied to civil and criminal cases, insisting that it would become impossible to execute administrative regulations properly if the Japanese government needed to explain all such regulations to foreign consuls. As the author points out, learning from this dispute, Britain clarified with the Korean government that local administrative rules were not applicable to British subjects and premises unless agreed otherwise when concluding their treaty. However, this seemed to have revealed another problem: as British jurisdiction enlarged, native Koreans rushed to seek its protection from local authorities by leveraging their connection to British subjects and entities, such as British employers or missionaries. The present author attributes this

difference between Korea and Japan — that is, Japanese were eager to erase extraterritoriality while Koreans rather leveraged it — to cultural factors and administrative capacities, but does not give satisfactory explanations. It is certainly a matter of further research what factors drove Japanese, Korean, (and Chinese) responses to the inherent matter of extraterritoriality to draw a boundary between coexisting jurisdictions. [1]

The only thing regrettable about this meticulous research is that there is still room for further investigation of Japanese or Korean-side materials. Although the author seemed to think it did not create any problems, this research sometimes falls short in explaining motives and backgrounds of Japanese or Korean governments’ policies in comparison to the great explanation on British policies, perhaps because of the author’s overdependence on the newspapers written in English. In addition, if I may point out a trivial mistake for the benefit of readers and for the honour of the best-known Japanese admiral, the name of Admiral Togo was misspelled in p. 105 — although the readers familiar with Japanese history will immediately notice.

Notes

[1] See for example, Par Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (Oxford University Press, 2012) §

Watch the recording of our online lecture with author Chris Roberts about this publication on our YouTube channel.

Plum Blossom & Green Willow: Japanese surimono prints from the Ashmolean Museum

by Hanaoka Kiyoko and Clare Pollard

Ashmolean Museum (2018)

ISBN-13: 978-1910807262

Review by Fiona Collins



The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford is home to a number of beautifully printed, well preserved *surimono* prints from the Edo period (1603-1868). While they often depicted images of popular culture, scenes from well-known literature, or figures from traditional Japanese legends, they were not produced

for mass consumption; rather, they were privately commissioned by wealthy patrons or a part of a limited edition (of about 50 to 500). Given their purpose and audience, *surimono* were often made with the finest materials, and artists’ portrayed every aspect of the design in painstaking detail.

The vibrant imagery and lush colors have long made these prints desirable among collectors in the West, their visual appeal often superseding their informational value within the world of commercial art. However, by taking this approach *surimono*, like *ukiyo-e*, have often been framed as art historical objects as opposed to a visual framing device for rich literary resources (for those who are unfamiliar with Japanese print culture, it may be helpful to think of it

like a western picture book). *Plum Blossom & Green Willow: Japanese surimono prints from the Ashmolean Museum*, the catalogue of an exhibition held at the museum in 2019, discusses the relationship of text and image at length, and frames the development of *surimono* within the context of 19th century Japanese literati communities and Edo period material culture.

The collection of *surimono* in the Ashmolean museum was developed in the 20th century, a majority of the objects donated by the founders of the Spalding Trust, an organization dedicated to promoting the study of transregional comparative religion. After providing an overview of the general purpose of the prints, and how the imagery relates to the poetry, the main body of this catalogue is split into seven categories: 'Picture Calendars', 'Zodiac Animals', 'New Year's Symbols and Activities', 'History, Legend and Literature', 'Kabuki', 'Still Lifes', and 'The Shijoo Style' and "Haikai Surimono'. Each of these sections focus on the type of imagery featured and the reason they were commissioned, but always cognizant of how the artists/designers were deferential to the poems' contents.

Within these categories, each featured *surimono* has two pages dedicated to it, most often one containing a photograph with object information, the other an in-depth catalogue entry. At first glance, it may seem like some of the prints could fall into several categories. For instance, even though one section of them is dedicated entirely to still lifes, others include still life *surimono*. It only becomes clear after reading several that the authors chose to organize the prints by the context clues (found in text and image) that suggest the general impetus for their being commissioned.

So, to continue with the example of still lifes, one print entitled Still life with hair ornaments falls under 'Picture Calendars' because the cosmetics depicted and the accompanying poems all allude to how a woman would be done up for New Years festivities. It is not in 'Still Lifes' or 'New Year's Symbols and Activities' because the references to major holidays or annual events are very subtle, and the coyness was characteristic of calendar pictures as they were strictly regulated (and in some cases, prohibited) by the ruling government.

A feature that makes *Plum Blossom & Green Willow* an excellent introduction into the subject of *surimono*, as well as a reference resource for one more well versed in Japanese literature or art history, are the detailed diagrams and lists of terms developed by

the authors. Some effectively delineate how to "read" a print, delineating ways to identify seals, poems, signatures, and print titles.

There are also in-depth descriptions of the different formats available with superimposed graphics to make clear how they could be folded or for scale reference to other images. They, in addition to key vocabulary and definitions, are largely placed in the introduction of the text (unlike many other catalogues of this nature, where they are in the back), so the reader is exposed to them early on, and can always refer back if they are unclear on this information when considering the entries about featured objects later on.

Unlike many art historical publications, the images and catalogue information (i.e. author, artist, date, etc.) featured in *Plum Blossom & Green Willow* are accompanied by the textual contents of the print, a transliteration from phonetic Japanese to English characters, as well as the English translation. By doing this, it forces the reader to engage with both the print's design, and text, and reconsider their dynamic.

For example, in the catalogue entry for the print featured on the cover, called *Ono no Tofu*, the author points out how the poems included make reference to the subjects claim to fame as the founder of Japanese style calligraphy (and later the subject of famous *kabuki* play *Ono no Tofu aoyagi suzuri* or The green willow ink stone of Ono no Tofu) through a variety of subtle poetic epithets and play on words. The authors walk the reader through the original text and its English counterpart, which would have likely been overlooked by non-Japanese speakers otherwise. Understanding this relationship also clarifies some of the designer's choices in his or her portrayal of the subject, such as the script having the same brushstroke quality as the willow tree limbs that it is situated against, creating an intentional balance between text and image.

In short, *Plum Blossom & Green Willow* is a joy to read. The wealth of information is communicated clearly and effectively, and can be read easily by those with an academic background in the history of Japanese culture, art, and literature, as well as those who know very little about the subject. Interestingly, the ways the editors Hanaoka Kiyoko and Clare Pollard conveyed the key themes of the publication through innovative, strategic arrangement of text and image suggest they took a number from the *surimono* they studied. §

Heaven

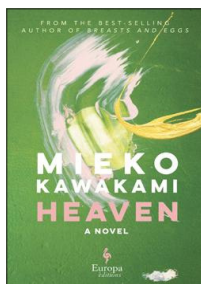
by Kawakami Mieko

translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd

Europa Editions (2021)

ISBN-13: 978-1609456214

Review by Susan Meehan



Heaven was originally published in Japan in 2009, winning the 2010 Murasaki Prize for Literature. It was translated into English by Sam Bett and David Boyd in 2021. It predates *Breasts and Eggs* as well as *Ms Ice Sandwich*. In *Heaven* graphic and extreme teenage bullying takes centre stage which makes for uncomfortable reading at times. The book is set in the early 1990s, before the advent of the internet and online bullying or trolling.. The novel is also an exploration of friendship and its limits, victimisation, morals, religion and ethics. It is undoubtedly a thought-provoking book, which I continue to digest months after having read it.

A shared experience of torment and harassment brings together two 14-year-old classmates. Kojima is bullied by the girls while the unnamed narrator, nicknamed Eyes for his lazy eye, is mercilessly bullied by the boys. He is, amongst other things, made to swallow pond water, toilet water, a goldfish, and scraps of vegetable from the rabbit cage. The bullying gets far worse. The girls pick on Kojima “for being poor and dirty”. They don’t realise that Kojima is intentionally unclean. It is her way of connecting with or evoking her impoverished beloved father who was divorced by Kojima’s mother. The bullied teenagers bond when Kojima begins leaving anonymous notes for Eyes. Initially he thinks one of the bullies is tricking him, but plucks up the courage to meet the correspondent. Eyes and Kojima secretly meet from time to time while hiding their friendship at school. They derive enormous strength from meeting and talking, while ignoring each other at school.

It makes utter sense that Kojima would want to take Eyes to visit “Heaven” to find respite from the relentless bullying which they are subjected to at school. They don’t *quite* make it there, but we get a vivid impression of what Heaven is and what it means to Kojima. (I will leave it up to the readers to find out more about this *Heaven*.) In the same way that Kojima tries to rationalise why and how her father ended up living by himself after all the hard work he did for his family, she wants to attribute some kind of meaning to the bullying which she stoically withstands. “I have to believe there’s some kind of god, who sees everything

that happens and understands the meaning of everything we’ve been through when everything is over.” Eyes listens to Kojima and tries to make sense of what she says while also trying to work out his own stance. Though their views begin to diverge, Eyes will always treasure Kojima: “I never had another friend like her. She was the only one.”

In an interview with Izzy Smith, Kawakami Mieko reveals that she took inspiration for the book from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in exploring the callousness of youth and how the meek survive in a society that favours the strong. Kawakami says that ‘we have a tendency to categorise people as strong or weak’ whereas “weakness is really what’s at the core of, or a fundamental part of humanity’. ‘Everyone is born as a powerless infant, and then they pass away in a similar position of vulnerability’.[1]

Though bullying and discrimination remain intractable societal issues, which need to be discussed, Kawakami does so in an unremitting manner which can be exhausting. Nothing is left to the imagination. Perhaps that was Kawakami’s intent so that readers can really begin to understand the true horror and banality of bullying. There are times when Kojima’s stoicism, veering on the masochistic feels rather extreme, yet Kawakami’s characters are, at the same time, believable, young, complex, still developing and, at times, rather toxic.

Despite finding the novel a little adolescent in places, particularly in its attempts at philosophical discourse, it provides many positive moments of reflection and I admire Kawakami for making us think with empathy about the vulnerability of our infant and elderly selves. As with *Breasts and Eggs*, and in a similarly redeeming way, this novel ends with hope and human agency. Eyes continues to ponder the meaning of existence while actively embracing light and knowledge.

He decides to talk with his stepmother about the bullying and makes a potentially life-changing decision the immediate results of which lead him to say, ‘Everything that I could see was beautiful. I cried and cried, standing there, surrounded by that beauty, even though I wasn’t standing anywhere. Everything was beautiful. Not that there was anyone to share it with, anyone to tell. Just the beauty’.

Notes

[1] Smith, Izzy (2021), ‘10 Questions for novelist Mieko Kawakami: Assaying ‘Heaven’ – the Japanese writer on childhood, vulnerability, and violence as a complement to beauty’, *The Arts Desk*, Tuesday, 27 July 2021. §

Heaven by Mieko Kawakami: Live

Staged by Jack McNamara

Southbank Centre (23 October 2021)

Review by Laurence Green



Distilled to its purest essence, Mieko Kawakami's *Heaven* is a work about bullying. What it means to bully, and to be bullied. But it is also a character study - a sometimes charming, sometimes uneasy unfurling of friendship between two middle-schoolers. There is the unnamed male narrator (played here by Nino Furuhata) - cruelly dubbed 'Eyes' by his bullying tormentors due to his lazy eye. And then there is Kojima (Grace Akatsu) - the mysteriously quirky girl who offers him a glimmer of hope amidst his seemingly unending torments. Responding to her proposition that 'we should be friends', the two misfits strike up a correspondence with one-another, letters passed back and forth between school classes, and our narrator quickly discovers that Kojima faces troubles all of her own.

Presented at the Southbank Centre as part of this year's London Literature Festival, this staging by Jack McNamara, Artistic Director of Live Theatre Newcastle, is billed as a kind of live reading, but in truth is every bit a kind of fully realised theatrical two-hander, and it is testament to the skill of the actors playing the two protagonists that the central relationship at the heart of the narrative is drawn into even tighter focus. Reading *Heaven* in book form, we - of course - flesh out the characters in our minds' eye with a specific look, sound and feel. What is most striking about this performance is how utterly and completely the two actors resembled that mental image in both look and voice - springing almost fully formed from the page to the stage.

As the narrator, Furuhata has the lion's share of the work to do, building a character that is both vulnerable, but also with the requisite drive to point the narrative where it needs to go. He also has the tricky task of flipping into the roles of the tormentors themselves - switching back and forth between the bullied and the bullies in a lightning quick act of role reversal. Here, the narrator is placed in stark contrast to the explosive delivery of the bullies, who both verbally and in physical gesture, dominate his on-stage presence. If anything, this makes their actions all the more reprehensible - conveyed by one actor, we realise the interchangeability of the uniformed middle-school students, and the harsher implications of the

power dynamics at work here. The narrator *could* be anyone, lazy eye or not - but through ill chance or a simple whim, it is he who ends up on the receiving end of the kicks and beatings of the other boys, instead of the other way around.

Kojima, as played by Akatsu, initially comes across as cheery and energetic - the natural counterpoint to the more vulnerable, subdued narrator. It is only as things progress that we begin to see the complexities and nuances of her individual quirks open up into a gaping void of barely concealed agonies. In rare moments, these bubble to the surface - Akatsu bringing near-tears to Kojima's face, or looking questioningly out into the darkness of the auditorium for answers that never come. We are never told quite what haunts Kojima, though we know the class bullies taunt her for her 'dirtiness'. Her idiosyncrasies, what she calls her 'signs', mark her out as different from the others, and for all that she finds in common with the narrator, she remains, to a degree, at a remove from us in a way he never is. In a particularly powerful moment toward the end of the performance, Kojima herself becomes the narrator, delivering a few lines about herself in the third person as she is forced to confront the bullies and their most awful conceit yet. This makes for a compelling moment of dissonance, while also introducing a thought-provoking element about the ownership of Kojima's body, her physical presence, that is perhaps more understated in the original novel.

With the actors seated behind lecterns and mics, the set-up is minimal in the extreme, the lighting similarly stark. Behind them, on a raised pedestal, the third element in this intriguing staging - gluing everything together. This comes in the form of Japanese musician and vocal performer Hatis Noit. Tipped by *The Guardian* as a one-to-watch and with a debut album in the works, her style is a perfect fit for the uneasiness of *Heaven* itself, sliding gracefully between skeletal ambient soundscapes conjured into being through loop pedals and samplers to mournful vocal plaintiffs that draw inspiration from both classical Japanese *gagaku* music as well as operatic styles, Bulgarian and Gregorian chanting. The effect - piecing together snippets of vocal elements - creates a kind of collage-like art-music that at times rises to the fore as interludes, momentary breathers between the intensity of the actorial dialogue, before falling away again; the sound of the breeze through leaves underscoring the poignancy of the work's final lines.

Just as in Kawakami's previous work in English translation - the monumentally successful *Breasts*

& *Eggs – Heaven* raises difficult questions about the role of parenthood and the positionality of the female body and is similarly unflinching in the manner in which it confronts its central thesis. At times coming on more like a philosophy primer than a work of fiction, the performance reaches its fever pitch in a stirring showdown between the narrator and one of the boys bullying him. The narrator remains convinced that he is picked on because of his lazy eye, while the bully offers up the devastating riposte that they do so simply because they want to, because they feel like it, because - perhaps - the narrator simply lets it happen to him. To reveal what happens next would be to spoil the climactic resolution between the narrator, Kojima and the bullies - but suffice to say, in a typically Kawakami-esque way, it invariably raises as many questions as it offers answers.

This constant questioning, this picking away at what we come to perceive as normal or abnormal,

is Kawakami at her most thought provoking. The unique charm of this staging of *Heaven* is the intensity of characterisation it places on its central duo - the narrator and Kojima. Their relationship, fumbling between friendship and exasperation in the face of incomprehensible hardships, is the beating heart of humanity and depth of feeling in a world that in all other ways seems cold and cruel. Breathing life into the characters, Furuhashi and Akatsu offer up a stirring take on Kawakami's novel, perfectly underscored by Noit's embracing soundscapes. The sharp intensity of *Heaven's* central theme of bullying remains as icy as ever, but in this brief moment, in the spotlights of a Southbank stage, the prospect of hope offered up in the novel shines stronger than ever too. [S](#)

Join us on Monday 13 December 2021 for a informal online discussion of *Heaven* in our monthly book club. Visit our website for more information and to book.

Queer Japan

Co-written, directed and edited by Graham Kolbeins

Screened at the Queer East Film Festival in London (2021)

Review by Jenni Schofield

Queer Japan, directed by Graham Kolbeins in 2019, is a documentary which explores the LGBTQ+ community in Japan, from Shinjuku Ni-chome to Osaka and beyond. There is a core cast of individuals that the film focuses on interviews as an illustrative view of queer culture in Japan, notably featuring a well-known drag queen called Sato Vivienne, co-founder of G-Men and manga artist Tagame Gengoro, and butoh performer Matsuda Atsushi, among many other well-known and lesser-known artists, activists, performers, and individuals.

As a part of the showing at Queer East Film Festival 2021, there was a Q&A session with director Graham Kolbeins via video call after the screening of the film in London. This proved an exciting opportunity to explore *Queer Japan*, and the background which inspired the project in the first place. Kolbeins was extremely kind and passionate about the project and understanding of the limitations of the film - namely, that certain communities within the LGBTQ+ culture were limited, or omitted entirely, due to time restrictions. After all, there are an infinite number of denominations and identities, and it would be truly

impossible to showcase and explore them all within a two-hour film.



Kolbeins features a multitude of scenes and demographics within the queer umbrella, in terms of representing the present-day businesses and physical spaces for queer folks to exist, while also examining a brief history of queerness in Japan. In Tokyo, the majority of these queer spaces and businesses are in Shinjuku's Ni-chome in the Shinjuku ward, comprising of a few streets packed to bursting with hundreds of queer-owned snack bars and nightclubs, as well as a multitude of shops, boutiques, and love hotels. Most of the bars and nightclubs are insular, with very few windows or street level floors, providing a level of security for those who are unable or unwilling to publicly come out. These bars often are highly specialised for a subsection or subculture of queer folks, for example, okama bars mostly for gay men, BDSM and

kink-friendly nightclubs, and bars for lesbian women only. *Queer Japan* stars some of these establishments, such as Goldfinger, a bar which is technically open to all gender identities and sexualities, but reserves Saturdays for lesbian (and importantly, cisgender) women only. As the description implies, Goldfinger does not allow transgender women on its “women only” nights, highlighting the issue of transphobia even within the queer community.

As a disabled member of the queer community, as well as a researcher of disability in Japan, it was refreshing for me personally to see deaf and disabled queer folks featured in *Queer Japan*. In one segment, the audience are introduced to a couple who work as Japanese Sign Language (JSL) interpreters for queer people, a distinction made necessary by the fact that the signs for LGBTQ+, queer, trans, and other vocabulary associated with non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities are not well known by many JSL interpreters. As a result, deaf and disabled queer folk who use JSL to communicate are left without access to events, spaces, and perhaps most crucially, adequate medical care, as they are unable to access queer-specific healthcare, such as medical transitions for non-cisgender deaf folks. *Queer Japan* raises awareness for this organisation as one part of the fight for proper access to medical care for deaf and disabled queer people in Japan, and does so beautifully, integrating the struggles of one part of the LGBTQ+ community, rather than segregating these concerns and treating them as irrelevant for hearing and abled queer audiences.

Queer Japan takes a different approach than would be expected in a documentary about queerness and the LGBTQ+ community, opting to omit historical representations and strict retellings of socio-political history and events by a narrator in favour of passing the microphone, so to speak, to the community themselves. In other words, Kolbeins removes himself from the film as much as possible, allowing the members of the queer community in Japan to tell their stories and share that which is important to them. The documentary serves as a miniature ethnography of the queer identities in Japan, and as a collaboration between filmmaker and participants, forming a sort of autoethnography of a community through a variety of voices from that group of people, as opposed to an outside researcher making “the strange familiar, and the familiar strange”, as the saying in anthropology goes.[1]

Kolbeins’ work is not limited to this one film; he has collaborated with queer voices from across the world, as well as in a documentary web series titled *Rad Queers*, which sought to explore the world of queer activists, artists, and “those working to make the world a better place”. [2] He also co-edited both the first anthology of gay manga in English titled *Massive: Gay Erotic Manga and the Men Who Make It*, and *The Passion of Gengoroh Tagame: The Master of Gay Erotic Manga*, alongside Anne Ishii and Chip Kidd. Kolbeins and Ishii also co-founded a fashion brand called Massive Goods in 2013, which in their own words “creates and agents queer and feminist art, comics and fashion, by artists from Japan”, featuring artists such as Gengoroh Tagame, Rokudenashiko, and Jiraya in their clothing. [3]

Watching *Queer Japan* feels like attending a pride event; a celebration of everything LGBTQ+ within Japanese culture and beyond, while acknowledging the socio-political hurdles and injustices that still affect the community today. Voices from throughout the queer spectrum shared their lives and stories with us, the audience, to both raise awareness and rejoice in their queerness and self-love. Kolbeins does a remarkable job of moving himself as a director from the piece, allowing the participants to speak for themselves and tell the stories they wish to tell. Although the documentary arguably avoids topics of transphobia within the LGBTQ+ community itself, the inclusion of non-abled and non-hearing voices within the film creates a true representation of how diverse the queer community is, focusing instead on the positives that make the community great, rather than the negatives, sub-divisions, and in-fighting. In summary, *Queer Japan* is a depiction of queer joy, and one I highly recommend you watch.

Queer Japan is available as a DVD, Blu-Ray and as a VOD from various streaming services in certain regions.

Notes

[1] To read more about the “familiar strange” in anthropology, check out Robert Myers (2011) “The Familiar Strange and the Strange Familiar in Anthropology and Beyond”, *Bulletin of the General Anthropology Division*, 18:2.

[2] Graham Kolbeins’ work portfolio: <https://grahamkolbeins.com/work> (accessed 22/10/2021).

[3] Massive Goods’ About page: <https://massive-goods.com/pages/about> (accessed 22/10/2021). §