EMERGING LESBIAN VOICES FROM JAPAN

Sharon Chalmers

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Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan

Lesbian sexuality has remained largely ignored in Japan despite increasing exposure of disadvantaged minority groups, including gay men. This book is the first comprehensive academic exploration of contemporary lesbian sexuality in Japanese society.

Misinformation and erroneous portrayals of lesbians and lesbian sexuality have resulted in those who self-identify as lesbian living overwhelmingly invisible lives. Based on a series of long-term thematic discussions with Japanese lesbians living in the Tokyo area, this work opens up a more inclusive representation of cultural and sexual diversity across gender studies and Japanese studies. Chalmers addresses a wide variety of themes, including the issue of compulsory heterosexuality and the invisibility of Japanese lesbians as socio-economic and political subjects. Along with Chalmers the narrators explore the apparent monolithic notions associated with representations of the 'Japanese family', and the sex/gender distinction in relation to how lesbian bodies fit into ideas of 'Japanese womanhood'.

Sharon Chalmers provides a new lens onto Japanese society from which it is possible to critique several fundamental concepts that are so often taken as unproblematic in Japan, in particular notions of 'inside–outside', 'family' and 'community'. The author employs an interdisciplinary approach and this book will be of great value to those working or interested in the areas of Japanese, lesbian, queer and gender studies as well as Japanese history, anthropology and cultural studies.

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All Japanese personal names are placed in Japanese order, surname first.

1 A moment in time

Introduction

> Traditionally, the way of thinking in Japanese society concerning minorities, and unusual people, strange people, was not to exclude them. They were allowed into society, but society would act as if they weren't there, by ignoring them, and if that didn't work, telling them to keep quiet. So to that extent, Japanese society is not very aggressive toward minorities. Most lesbians at the moment haven't come out so they can't be seen. And because they can't be seen, society doesn't attack them, and is prepared to let them be. So for the lesbian too, that's okay. There are some unpleasant aspects, but if some one is prepared to put up with them a bit, there's not really a problem.
>
> (Kakefuda)

Kakefuda Hiroko made the decision to come out publicly, through the publication of her book, *Rezubian de aru to iu koto* (Being a Lesbian) in 1992. Over the following five years both television and the print media generally called on her for comments and appearances whenever a 'lesbian point of view' was required. Kakefuda consistently asserted that one of the most difficult areas for lesbians in Japan to deal with is the overall social approval of knowing when to keep silent as an instrument of both containment and oppression. She argues that containment of marginal groups has been historically constructed in terms of 'tolerance', which has also been long described in the language of consensus and harmony. However this appearance of tolerance can only be maintained as long as minority or marginal groups are prepared to accept that the dominant form(s) or hierarchical relationships will allow only for their partial inclusion.

Over the last twenty years, however, there has been an increasing number of visible interest groups – a multiplicity of publics – who, with varied success in reforming social policies, have worked to voice their concerns from alternative subject positions. These groups, including pacifist, anti-war, environmental, feminist, Burakumin, Ainu and Korean groups, have attempted to challenge in various ways the representation of Japan as a homogeneous and mono-racial society.

These shifts notwithstanding, within this new inclusiveness there is one overarching assumption that still remains firmly in place and overwhelmingly unchallenged in academic and popular discourse.[1] That is, that all Japanese are heterosexual, or, at the very least require a heterosexual guise in which to operate

as full members (*ichininmae*) of Japanese society. Hence, few cracks have hitherto appeared in the hegemony of these heterocentric discourses in Japan. Thus, despite the increasing political exposure and academic documentation of the issues of disadvantaged minority groups in Japan, lesbian sexuality has remained inconsequential. The result has been portrayals of lesbian sexuality which perpetuate and sustain the myth of lesbian invisibility in Japan.

This invisibility, Kakefuda contends, is not generally manifested in the form of direct discrimination but rather as systematic cultural dis-ease which results in either objectification or omission of their daily experiences as embodied social subjects. This is the issue that to a large extent precipitated her decision to come out. Kakefuda maintains that in Japan the fear of one's parents' and family's reactions to finding out that one is lesbian is what prevents many women from taking this step.

> [But] the idea of telling their parents is enough to make most people panic … . It comes down to who is going to suffer! And of course within Japanese society, it is not the individual who is the most important. Putting yourself above others is simply not the acceptable way to think in Japanese society
>
> (Kakefuda; also see Hara, M. 1995: 72)

Kakefuda's view is premised on the assumption that Japanese social relations encompass a worldview in which the form or type of association of any given relationship becomes the privileged site (Rosenberger 1994: 102). In other words, 'I' only becomes meaningful by contextualising one's position relative to others and so 'I' is interwoven into and implicated in a multiplicity of constantly shifting hierarchical relationships. Arguably, this notion of a fragmented 'self' has the potential to open up spaces in which 'whole' identities do not need to exist in order to be inside various social contexts. However, to know which part to reveal in what situation, usually learned from early childhood in Japan, is a little more complicated for lesbians. This was expressed clearly by one of the women whose perspectives are presented in this book. As Fumie explains, when initially 'coming out' to her mother, her mother's (lack of) reaction clearly fits in with Kakefuda's analysis of the general response to minority groups in Japan.

> [S]he didn't say anything outright because we just have this custom of not saying things … and not saying positive things when you feel it. It's better not to express things. And that's what really oppresses me here [in Japan].

The issue, therefore, is that these different selves are contained in strictly bounded hierarchical groupings. In Japan these are primarily founded on sex, age, status and ethnicity. The moment at which one attempts to recognise and/or separate one's self from one's accepted position within a relationship, the relationship based on 'form' and 'tolerance' is disrupted and affirmed as anti-social.

One of the major aims of this book is to challenge this myth of 'tolerance' by critiquing the apparent overwhelming desire to create the impression of harmony and consensus through 'sameness' within Japanese society. This 'harmony' and

'sameness' are represented in terms of cultural (Japaneseness) and (hetero)sexual homogeneity in which notions of outsider and outsiderness are set in opposition to norms grounded in the maintenance of appropriate hierarchical forms of being. These hierarchies subsequently become internalised and eventually normalised. In contrast, those who do not *appear* to fit in are either explained away within narrow and limited explanations as some form of deviancy, at best anomalies, or, more commonly, they are simply ignored. Part of the problem however is that these two pseudo-explanations themselves are constructed within a contained binary opposition of inside/out, or sameness/difference (Fuss 1991).

A further aim of the book is to reinforce what has now become apparent within recent scholarship on identity formation. That is, that socio-cultural factors such as sexuality, class, age, ethnicity and gender are not separate entities but work simultaneously. In Grosz's words all these factors are 'mutually constituted' to produce multiple meanings (1994a: 19–20),[2] the effects of which in this instance enable or disable Japanese lesbians to appear and disappear as social, economic and political subjects in Japanese society. In order to make sense of these dis/appearances I attempt to work in a somewhat unconventional form, in the telling of 'this story' (Kondo 1990: 8). For the women I worked with and for myself, this final text is the result of various discussions, negotiations, friendships as well as misunderstandings and altercations which we grappled with over a six year period (1993–94 and for a short period in 1998).

And this brings me to a critical issue: that being the way I have decided to produce this text and represent the voices of the women with whom I talked. This account examines narrative themes rather than individual life stories. Indeed, there is very limited information offered about the appearance, residences, work lives or routine daily comings and goings of the women involved. Furthermore, this book explores a range of social and geographical sites rather than locating 'lesbian activity' in a particular geographic space or in any one specific community (Robertson 1998a; Wolf 1979; Krieger 1980). In addition, I have adopted an interdisciplinary approach in that the work draws on history, social and cultural anthropology as well as Japanese, lesbian, gay, queer, women's and cultural studies.

Similarly, all the participants, myself included, were located in multiple shifting subject positions some of which included those of researcher, friend, academic, paid and unpaid worker, confessor, confidante, political activist, parent, lover and of course same-sex attracted women. Within these various guises I want overtly to acknowledge what has hitherto, particularly among Western academic researchers – whether working in the area of anthropology, sociology, history or behavioural psychology – been generally met with some amazement, that is, that narrators have knowledge and expertise about both their own lives, and the socio-cultural contexts in which they and their 'others' live.[3]

At the same time, the recent and often well-founded empowerment strategies of acknowledging women's expertise in interpreting their own lives and their own socio-cultural positionings, previously the domain of the outsider or 'objective researcher', continue to call for constant critique. That is, there is now a tendency to construct the subjectivity of 'the insider' merely as a mechanism in 'the projection

of an all-knowing subject'. Trinh Minh-ha refers to this twist as 'a paradoxical shift of the colonial mind' (1988: 75). In doing so, she asks whether this move is simply a post-colonial reinvention of the self/other relationship through the privileging of female voices without serious reflection of the hierarchical process inherent in the gesture of calling on other women's voices. This can result in the construction of false representations of homogeneous and romanticised subjects where 'the other would always remain the shadow of the self. Hence not really, not quite all knowing' (Trinh Minh-ha 1988: 75).

The above issues are integral to the form the text has taken in that the women involved determined the context in which their voices could safely speak and be heard. In contrast, other women who were initially involved felt that the research process, sometimes due to our personal relationships and at other times because of the sensitivity of the research itself, placed them in an untenable position and subsequently withdrew. Due to the ethical, emotional and intellectual complexities (and potential minefields) of these issues, it is no accident that this is the first published English language analysis of both institutionalised heterosexuality and female same-sex attracted Japanese women and it is one that almost did not happen.

The process of the production of this text has been changing since its inception. There are no surprises in that! Indeed, I did begin with the idea of collecting life stories but over time I was made aware that the narratives could not be presented in this form because of the homophobic and sexist climate in Japanese society. For example, as alluded to above the fear of being 'outed' through this research, despite the use of pseudonyms or only first names, caused so much distress that a number of women withdrew. This fear – whether real or perceived – was not just about being 'outed' as a *rezubian* (lesbian) but rather rested on being 'outed' as a lesbian and an unmarried woman, the latter a precarious position to be in in Japanese society in terms of housing, family, work, gender or sexual relations.

On a personal level, the withdrawal of these women caused me great distress, anger and sadness as I had already been working and collecting stories for one year. More significant however was that it also resulted in the end of a number of close friendships. Acknowledgement of this situation in the introduction by way of their virtual disappearance in the rest of the text is in itself evidence of the sensitivity and vulnerability of their socio-political positions, emotional vulnerability as well as the inherent ethical dilemmas faced in the process of doing research and intervening in other people's lives (Edwards 1993: 185).

What has eventually materialised is broadly speaking a three-way conversation which gives a partial picture of how the women I talked with see, contextualise, explain, analyse, and make sense of certain issues in their lives as self-identified Japanese lesbians. The result is an exchange in which the women's views are juxtaposed alongside academic and popular discourses and encapsulated within my theoretical/methodological approach. The fact that they would only appear/participate under particular conditions attests to the coercive and dominant position heterosexual discourse plays in all areas of Japanese women's lives. Thus, while some may be critical of what may appear to be simply 'talking heads', at least they are talking.

I believe that what makes this work different is the fact that, as I have mentioned above, there is almost no contemporary academic discourse in English[4] about lesbian sexuality in Japan. And furthermore neither are there any works in English or Japanese that challenge or open up a space that allows a paradigm shift in who and what is being analysed.[5] In other words what has emerged is a space in which these women are able to express their critique of Japanese heterosexuality from a position both within and outside of heteronormative behaviours.

> I don't really know anything about the academic world in Australia, but in Japan there are women who are supposedly intellectual who still react negatively to women's studies. There was one woman at the last place I worked who was really outstanding … . But even she rejected women's studies as a discipline. She said that putting together a lot of opinions and impressions as a discipline would only give people yet another opportunity to poke fun at women … . She considered herself a feminist … . [but] so far as she was concerned, an academic discipline wasn't a discipline unless it had the right sort of data and objectivity. Of course I don't know whether it's that important to be acknowledged by academic circles – that's your decision. But on the other hand, acknowledgement of your methods would be an indirect but important influence toward change in the academic world.
>
> (Mitsu)

The Japanese education system thrives on the notion of collective learning, and 'difference' is seen as a negative attribute in student and teacher interactions (Hendry 1986; Lewis 1989; Peak 1989; Rohlen 1989: 19–26). This concern was reflected in the above observations by Mitsu, one of the women I talked with over fifteen months. Central to Mitsu's analysis was a concern with how I would legitimate the direct words and lived experiences that constitute the substantive knowledges of different lesbians' lives. 'Will academics criticise you or ignore you?' This worry is not unique to my work but is a fairly common reaction by women to participating as active voices in feminist research. That is: is what I am telling you and how I am telling it worth anything (Contratto in Buss 1985: 1; Kennedy and Davis 1993: 16)? This vulnerability, as Buss argues, often translates into invisibility (Buss 1985: 14; Vance 1984: 13). Thus, the silences and practices of marginalisation which surround lesbians' lives in Japan are also indicative of the personal experiences within academic institutions and mainstream popular discourses both in and outside Japan. Consequently the changing developmental process of the research – at times volatile – was at risk not only from outside criticism, but we also had to overcome the negative attitudes attached to speaking about women, the language women use to express themselves (Gluck and Patai (eds) 1991; Personal Narratives Group (eds) 1989), speaking and writing about (homo)sexuality (Walsh-Bowers and Parlour 1992: 109; Williams 1993: 118; Bolton 1995: 158; Duberman *et al*. 1991: 1; Humphreys 1975: 228; Lewin and Leap 1996: 19), and speaking about lesbians by lesbians. The latter to some degree can be explained by internalised homophobia in regard to our collective

fears of 'coming out' in the text as well as the anxieties and pressures in relation to the acceptance and legitimacy of feminist research. In addition, as alluded to by Mitsu, there is an on-going academic struggle between Women's Studies and the position of oral narratives as a legitimate research method in Japan (Tomida 1996: 22). The low status of feminist methodologies, in combination with the trivialisation of sexuality studies as a serious and relevant area of research (McLelland 2000: 61; Allison 1996: 9–15), work towards the marginalisation and de-legitimisation of both projects as academically worthwhile.

Despite these fears, lesbian invisibility and the active production of these silences in Japan can only begin to be understood with the cooperation, involvement and analyses of Japanese women themselves. Thus, what I have attempted to achieve is to present a partial picture of how this group of women see, contextualise, explain, analyse and make sense of their lives, lives which are implicated and complicit in mainstream heteronormative Japanese discourses, while at the same time appearing to exist in a separate space.

> Even feminists and lesbians have been brought up inside Japanese culture, so there are some aspects of their households which resemble those of heterosexual households, but there are also rebellious aspects. I think the image received by people reading your work will depend very much on the way you describe the situation. I think people would find it very easy to understand if you said that heterosexual societies to date have been like this, while lesbian households are different, like a counter-culture. However, I don't think the situation is that simple. I've thought about that while we've been talking. Even as I've been talking to you about being a lesbian, I've realised how much of my behaviour and attitudes are shaped by heterosexual society's conventions. For example, not talking to the children about sex. It's been interesting in the sense of thinking about the interplay between being a lesbian and being in Japanese society.
>
> (Kumiko)

Another critical issue in deciding how I would reveal their thoughts was that of the age range of women with whom I worked. The women ranged from their mid-twenties to those in their early fifties. However, the majority were in their late thirties and forties. This is significant and is reflected in the information and critiques they presented. That is, they were part of the first generation of women who accepted lesbian sexuality as part of their conscious subjectivity and one from which they could articulate their understandings and personal experiences. Thus I was able to collect a living history of the changes that have occurred over the past thirty to forty years. These personal experiences were augmented by a history of the modernisation and industrialisation of Japan which they gained from listening to their parents' stories, a generation who went through massive social, economic and political changes. At the same time, their ability to question, challenge and respond to mainstream representations of female same-sex desire throughout their earlier lives was extremely limited. The images these women were presented with

were either those of the pathological female deviant represented in the guise of the heterosexualised butch/femme roles (*tachi/neko*) or women who were portrayed in androcentric pornography. Thus, this story stands in contrast to a younger generation of people who appear in, write to and read a variety of what emerged as a primarily male 'gay boom' consumer culture in the early to mid-1990s. This new generation identify within a range of minority sexualities as lesbians, gay men, transgender, transsexual and 'queer' people, while many choose or feel no need to identify with any particular sexual identity at all. I am not suggesting that there are not overlaps between the generations but rather they have grown up and experienced their sexualities under different historical conditions.

For those women who agreed to speak with me, except for one, none were 'out' in the Anglo-European sense and for this reason there was too much at stake to present their daily lives in a conventional ethnographic form. While they were prepared to share their experiences and ideas with me, albeit under very specific conditions, they were also very sensitive to and aware of the socio-economic limitations placed on them in their ability to survive in Japan independently – as 'older' women, some as mothers – let alone what it would mean to be 'out' as a lesbian. In short, 'coming out' in the text in terms of personal details such as their jobs, workplaces, children, appearance, residences was simply not an option for the overwhelming majority of these women. Indeed, in most cases 'coming out' was not even considered an inevitable goal to be attained – the latter an assumption more readily conceived of through a Western modernist paradigm of individual rights and liberation.

Rather, the primary approach I have adopted is an exploration of dominant, and still pervasive representations of what it is seen to be a healthy 'Japanese woman' and how these images have been historically constructed in juxtaposition to those of women who do not necessarily 'fit in'. I argue that these earlier representations are not part of a past gone by but rather can still be found in and reflect the degree to which mainstream portrayals of Japanese lesbians remain firmly in the category of anti-family, anti-reproduction, anti-social, transgressing normal (*futsū*) female bodily behaviour. On the one hand, contemporary female same-sex eroticism has been represented as 'deviant' either in terms of androcentric pornography or pathologised as abhorrent in the media and literature. On the other hand, and more commonly, it has simply been ignored. I have interspersed the primary narratives throughout the book as the narrators speak to both the past and present dominant representations of the notion of 'female deviance' not in terms of distinctive and separate historical periods but as a continuous process which has had a direct relationship on their lived experiences.

In so doing, the women explore, tease out and deconstruct critical issues that work towards the maintenance of a system of compulsory heterosexuality and marriage in Japan. Part of this process involved their insistent resistance to fitting into my initially neatly predetermined set of issues. They rather often redirected, indeed demanded, that I constantly rethink my position both as a researcher and as a lesbian doing research about other same-sex attracted women living in Japanese society.

Whether they think the same way now, whether they are single, or live with the same partner, whether they have changed jobs, or if they live in the same place or not is irrelevant to this work. What is significant is what each of these women articulated when these various conversations took place. It is no more or less significant than that.

Inside–outside circles of silence

My introduction to Japan was in 1985. I was twenty-eight years old and travelled on a one-year working-holiday visa. At that time I lived in Sojiji, a small town in between Kyoto and Osaka. I taught English in Osaka six days a week and studied Japanese language in Kyoto one morning per week. There wasn't much time for socialising outside of joining my students – overwhelmingly businessmen – who regularly took me to their usual hostess bars. These drinking excursions were mutually beneficial. They allowed my students to show me off as a blonde, blue-eyed Anglo-European foreigner whom they knew, as well as someone with whom they could practise their English. For me, it was a wonderful introduction to the male-centred nightlife of the business world and an opportunity to chat with both the men who took me and the hostesses who served us. After about six months, however, I was becoming increasingly aware that as a lesbian-feminist who was unable to speak these words out loud I was beginning to question my decision to spend so much time in Japan where connections with other lesbians seemed extremely remote, particularly outside Tokyo. I therefore made the decision to go looking. After numerous attempts at standing at the local phone box and dialling half the phone number of the Osaka Women's International Network (WIN), I finally swallowed hard and began speaking. The conversation went something like this:

WIN CONTACT: Hello?

SHARON: Yes, hello, umm … I got your phone number out of Kaleidoscope Kyoto[6] and was interested to find out where and when your group meets.

WIN CONTACT: Yes, of course. We meet on the third Saturday of every month and newcomers are always welcome. We usually meet outside the Big Video screen at Osaka Hankyu Umeda complex at 5 p.m. [Umeda Station is the largest train and bus station in Osaka.]

SHARON: Thanks very much for the information. Umm, by the way, I was also wondering whether you know if there are any lesbians involved in your group?

WIN CONTACT: (Slight pause) Umm … well, no, I don't think so but maybe that is something we could talk about one day.

I did go to the next meeting and was taken around and introduced to various women with the repeated tail-line of 'And Sharon is interested to find out if there are any lesbians in our group' with the common response of 'Oh, really, how interesting (*omoshiroi ne!*) which invariably brought the conversation to a speedy conclusion.

Throughout this first trip one of the constant questions I was asked was why I was still unmarried in my late twenties. In response I spent a significant amount of time either lying about my sexuality or at best not using 'he' or 'she' when discussing past partners – somewhat easier in Japanese than English given the possibility of avoiding the use of gender-personal pronouns. My second trip was in 1989–90 and again I lived in Osaka. This time I was with my Australian partner. Although less isolated, with the odd exception we both kept up a heterosexual pretence in our local community and workplaces. At this stage lesbian events had begun but because of our working hours (often in the evenings, Saturdays and sometimes Sunday mornings), we were invariably unable to attend.

Despite, or perhaps partially because of these experiences, I decided to proceed with what Du Bois refers to as 'passionate scholarship' (1983) and find out more about the silences that surround lesbian subjectivity in Japanese society. Seven years and two trips to Japan later – when I entered the PhD programme at my Australian university – I was faced with a similar response when I showed an interest in pursuing this subject. I was discouraged and advised by my then supervisor that there was no literature and that my chances of gaining access to speak with or even find Japanese lesbians would be extremely limited. Despite these cautions and a contingency research plan[7] I left for Tokyo.

Given my previous stays in Japan I also had a pretty good idea of why it might be difficult first to make connections with Japanese lesbians and second to gain the trust necessary to carry out a research project with their direct involvement. Initially I made contact with what was known as the 'foreign' lesbian community in Tokyo among whom were some women who had already spent several years in Japan. Among them a few had built up relationships with Japanese lesbians to whom they introduced me. Through participating, socialising and continually bombarding women with talk about the possibilities of carrying out interviews, I was eventually able to link up and begin to discuss my project with a number of Japanese women who identified as lesbian.[8]

Thus my opening or entry into, and potential acceptance by the Japanese women I met, was initially based on our collective identification as lesbians. However, in my excitement at being able to carry out what I had originally wanted to do, I did not at first realise the provisional nature of my seemingly successful 'arrival'. Although sexuality was a significant common starting point, it did not, in itself, automatically give me permission to carry out research, for, as Reinharz was aptly reminded, 'identification is useful, not "sacred"'(1992: 232). In the same vein, Narayan perceptively argues that in our contemporary global political economy, where anthropology has diversified in terms of who are the 'natives' and where they are located, it is rather naïve and overly simplistic to assume any unified notion of an 'authentic insider'. She contends that:

> at this historical moment we might more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux.
>
> (1993: 671)

The introductions that I first received through 'foreign' or non-Japanese lesbians were a beginning, but certainly did not equate to either total or unquestioned acceptance. I was going to spend at least another year in Japan and I also wanted to become involved in different lesbian-related projects. This involvement included helping to organise community events, running workshops at 'lesbian weekends' for Japanese and 'foreign' lesbians, working with other Japanese lesbians to build a drop-in space for women and sometimes holding lesbian-only events, which all assisted in building up relationships. Some of the women I worked with agreed to participate and when appropriate introduced me to other women who they thought would be interested in taking part.

Consequently, neither the lesbians I interviewed, nor myself, can be categorised in a simplistic dichotomy of researcher/researched. Rather, our words and actions must be viewed from our different locations including those of mothers, lovers,[9] sisters, daughters, aunts, paid and unpaid workers, artists and friends. Sometimes the narrators chose to make their lesbianism publicly visible, as writer and political activist Kakefuda Hiroko did, but overwhelmingly they did not. This containment of their sexuality into 'appropriate' cultural contexts does not equate with a suspension of their sexuality but it does secure them a legitimate disguise under which they enter different social, political and economic sectors of society. In other words, despite the compartmentalisation or how in general we express our outward appearance – in the Japanese context this is known as *tatemae* – we are still always gendered and sexual beings and as such these factors contribute to any social interaction, 'affect[ing] how we respond and how others respond to us, even in non-sexual contexts' (Gearing 1995: 188).

Living the research

Critical to a feminist approach is the ability constantly to reflect on the research process in an effort to transform the inequalities embedded in traditional forms of interviewing. However, perhaps this is impossible given the asymmetrical power relations inherent both in 'doing research' as well as in broader societal relations (Lal 1996: 197; Stacey 1991: 114). Further, I concur with Lunsing when he asserts that researchers are not, nor should they position themselves as pseudo-benefactors or 'experts' from which it is assumed research participants are hoping to gain social benefits, assistance or advice (1999a: 189). Rather my willingness to participate in various aspects of lesbian communities while in Japan was based on my needs both as a researcher and as a self-identified lesbian. As Kath Weston maintained in her research, as a lesbian carrying out a study about lesbians I was 'living a social reality as well as documenting it' (1991: 14). This means I became personally involved with the people with whom I spent time with and I formed some close friendships.

I also hope that this research might contribute to transforming the knowledge that has generally misrepresented and made invisible many of their lives. However, there was nothing altruistic about my aims. While I tried to sustain friendly relations with most women I met, this does not mean that I agreed with or became friends with all the women I met and interviewed, and the nature and

intensity of our relationships constantly changed. Thus, inherent in living any social reality are the contradictory, inconsistent, conflictual as well as positive emotional affinity shifts that occur over time and place.

Over the first twelve months I worked with ten women with whom I carried out between three and four open-ended semi-structured interviews. I also undertook several one-off interviews throughout this initial period. All these women lived either with their partners, children, by themselves or in one case, Narusa, lived in a 'women's house' – an unusual situation among Japanese living arrangements. I did not interview women who were still living with their parents, nor those who were living with their husbands. There was no conscious decision not to engage with the latter two groups. Rather I had become involved with the former groups and decided to focus on their 'independent' living arrangements. I also carried out an afternoon workshop with about twenty-five women while attending a 'lesbian weekend'. All the interviews were taped and the participants received copies.[10] Obviously the issue of representation surfaces here. I did not enter this research with any intention of trying to represent 'Japanese lesbians' as an homogeneous group, nor did I plan to look at 'real practices' in order to deduce grand theories. Both these methods, as Deleuze points out, simply privilege particular universalising truths and expose 'a process of totalization' (1977: 205–6).

As mentioned previously, over the last three months of my stay in 1994 a number of women decided to withdraw from the research. In consultation with these women I signed an agreement that forbids me from using any material from the formal interviews we had done. One of the major concerns centred on shifts of information and identities (both my own and the narrators') between *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside) positions. First, there was great concern about their exposure both within their own lesbian communities and their margins, the Japanese mainstream heterosexist as well as the academic world. Second was the possibility that the information that had been imparted may be translated into Japanese. In other words, who would read about their lives and would they be identified?[11] Despite initial agreements, I was now seen to be – and this was certainly the case – the voice of author/ity, moving from inside the community back to a 'foreign' academic and cultural environment with extremely sensitive information. The result for those continuing was the change in focus from the presentation of detailed life histories to the present textual form, one that mirrored the politics of the day. I also negotiated that nothing from the research would be published until those who were involved in the long-term interviews had the opportunity to see the complete text and only then was final permission to publish granted. This took place at the end of 1998. Interestingly, at these meetings one of the most common remarks after our discussions was that they hoped the text would one day be translated into Japanese.[12]

Consequently, this account, far from being objective, is in fact a political product that draws on a variety of discursive practices that are constituted through 'a set of ideological moves' (McRobbie 1982: 51). That is, what is seen as well as that which remains silent sets the political agenda (Reinharz 1992: 46).[13] As such, the act of how we question and listen, and the preparedness to deconstruct and change the research process itself when necessary, is both a political strategy and,

I would argue, central to any feminist methodology (Blackwood 1995: 55; Buss 1985: 14; Mohanty 1988: 62; Oakley 1981: 37; Personal Narratives Group 1989: 216; Reinharz 1992: 44).

The interview/conversations were held in a variety of locations chosen by the narrators and these sometimes shifted depending on their particular schedules and living arrangements. They took place in their homes, coffee shops, workplaces, parks, and on trains. Again, depending on individual requests, we often waited until children were either absent from home or asleep before commencing our more structured discussions. In the case of one couple, I met them separately outside their home because of their decision not to discuss the research when together.[14] Although I began by interviewing couples individually, at times through either their or my own suggestion we held some sessions together.

Interesting, but perhaps not surprising, is the fact that the only constant among the narrators was the differences I encountered both in terms of the stories I heard and the responses to any set format. In terms of the structure of the interviews, I often interrupted and asked follow-up questions, queried details or just threw in my opinion. While at times this was accepted, even appreciated, just as often it was seen as an interruption that, for the sake of politeness, needed to be dealt with as quickly as possible in order to continue the story.

Second, given the complexity of the issues that were being raised, my interruptions sometimes resulted in a narrator losing the thread of her explanation. This became more obvious to me when I reviewed the tapes. At these times, the feminist dictum of breaking down asymmetrical power relations through constructing an active dialogue was not particularly useful. In fact quite the opposite was true. As Kennedy and Davis observed, there are no rules, as sometimes listening can be 'an adequate and respectful response' (1989: 21). However, in other situations, as stated, my input was not only appropriate but actively sought. Of course, reactions also depended on individual temperaments and what someone felt like on the day. Furthermore, my own input was to some extent tied to the degree of difficulty of the Japanese language that was being used by the narrators. I carried out all interviews–conversations in Japanese, except with one participant. In this case, Fumie was completely bilingual (in fact she was multi-lingual) and she offered to do the interviews in English.

Throughout the year of interviewing I progressively developed a more open-ended approach. Initially I framed questions through my own knowledge of Japanese culture and history. For instance, at one point I wanted to explore the construction of female friendship in Japan. Consequently I put together a series of questions including, 'What importance is placed on friendship in Japanese society? Do you think different values are placed on male and female friendship? And if so, could you explain some of these differences?' The responses were generally, 'I don't know' or 'I've never really thought about it.' This did not mean that these issues were irrelevant, far from it. Rather, over time they permeated the conversations in more subtle and complex ways.