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*Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star: A Woman, Sex, and Morality
in Modern Japan* (review)

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assortment of texts prove problematic and rooted in misogyny. He ends the book, however, on what he aims to be a positive note and reports on the numerous ways people have paid tribute to female anatomy and physiology. In a discussion that covers the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, young women in love baking bread after the dough has been pressed into their vulva, and modern-day piercings of the labia and clitoris, Drenth assures readers that there are places where "the origin of the world" is still valued.

Readers looking for a tour across time and cultures will appreciate this text for its breadth. Those who are interested in deeper discussions of the subjects Drenth covers will likely find the text lacking. Drenth's treatment of his material is often shallow, making the text read much more like an assortment of trivia than a sustained analysis. Taking on such a project is admirable, and it seems that Drenth is sympathetic to feminist politics of embodiment and knowledgeable about female anatomy and physiology; however, I found the book to lack structure and the sort of nuanced discussions I would expect from someone taking on such a project.

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Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star: A Woman, Sex, and Morality in Modern Japan. By WILLIAM JOHNSTON. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. Pp. 272. \$36.00 (cloth).

When Abe Sada murdered and castrated her lover in May 1936, she unwittingly became a site of fear, anxiety, and curiosity. Various people—psychoanalysts, a well-known feminist activist, a literary critic, neighbors, and one of Abe's lawyers among them—tried to explain why the young maid killed and mutilated Ishida Kichizō, the owner of the restaurant where she was employed. Fame haunts her still, well after her mysterious disappearance in 1970, as speculation and romanticization continue to be thrust upon her by fiction writers, movie makers, and their fascinated audiences.

In *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star* William Johnston separates Abe's lived experience from the myth that has come to surround it. He carefully peels away characterizations of Abe as a crazed and dangerous woman in a meaningful attempt to reveal the deeply human person beneath. Profoundly sympathetic to Abe, Johnston recasts her as an ordinary woman who had to navigate the gender inequalities and restrictive sexual moralities of her time.

More than half of the book is thus dedicated to telling the story of Abe Sada's life before she met Ishida Kichizō. It starts with her birth in 1905 to a relatively wealthy family in the Kanda neighborhood of Tokyo. There was nothing particularly remarkable about her childhood; Johnston points out

that her doting mother, poor performance in school, and fascination with the romanticized geisha image were not unusual and certainly not indicative of future criminal behavior. What Johnston frames as a turning point in Abe's early life was the traumatic loss of her virginity at the age of fifteen through acquaintance rape by a college student. It was this experience that allegedly encouraged in Abe a distrust of men and the desire to be a "misfit" (48). She began hanging out in the streets of the Asakusa district of Tokyo, did not take well to a job that her mother forced her to assume as a live-in maid, and was sold by her father to a geisha house. Johnston stresses the normalcy of this phase of Abe's youth, describing her as "not especially remarkable compared to that of other unruly teenage girls both in Japan and in other times and places" (54) and implying that becoming a geisha was not so unusual during this time when the profession was "booming" (59).

By the time Abe became an apprentice maid at Yoshidaya, the reputable restaurant in Tokyo owned by Ishida Kichizō and managed by his wife, Otoku, she had held numerous jobs. After working as a geisha at several establishments, she became a licensed prostitute at various brothels until she ran away and, as a woman on the lam, supported herself as a café hostess, mistress, and unlicensed prostitute at establishments across the country. She eventually applied for a job at Yoshidaya apparently out of her desire to "work in a serious business" (84).

The relationship that developed between Abe and Ishida at Yoshidaya is presented by Johnston as a romantic story: "This is, above all, an enduring story about love and one woman's quest to find and hold on to it" (viii). Although Abe had known other lovers, Johnston claims that with Ishida "for the first time in her life Abe experienced the combined erotic and emotional power of romantic love" (89). The murder that ended their relationship roughly a month after it had begun was also an act of affection, in Johnston's rendering.

Through a serious retelling of her life before the crime for which she became famous, Johnston successfully rescues the history of Abe the person from the myths. It is Abe Sada's formative years, not the gory details of the "Abe Sada Incident," that take center stage in his book. He is also careful to treat the immediate legal and popular reactions to the murder not as insights into Abe's thoughts and motivations but as the earliest constructions of the myths around Abe. In the last chapters of the book he illustrates the growing gap between the dramatic public perception of Abe and her sober life under trial, in prison, and as a released convict. Perhaps most important, Johnston captures Abe's humanity by letting her speak (to the extent that she can) through a lengthy translation of the "Notes from the Police Interrogation of Abe Sada," which comprises the last fifth of the book. Here, more than anywhere else, the reader can try to hear the voice of Abe; this source alone would make rich reading material for the undergraduate classroom.

With *Geisha*, *Harlot*, *Strangler*, *Star* Johnston has authored a book that, through the life of one woman, is intended to serve as a window into a certain time and place for a broad readership that is as much popular as scholarly. It is clearly written and highly accessible and would be especially engaging for undergraduates and nonspecialists. It is not aimed primarily at historians of Japan or scholars of gender and sexuality, so these audiences might be left wanting more engagement with historiography and theory. This expectation is probably unfair, as Johnston is quite explicit about his main concern: "This book places the events of her [Abe Sada's] life, rather than an interpretive or analytical apparatus, at the forefront" (5).

Nonetheless, historians might hope for more of an extended discussion of what it means to depend so heavily on a police interrogation as a source. Johnston acknowledges that the record is not "free of deletions or distortion" and that the police had a hand in shaping this document (15). Another issue that might have been mentioned is what is lost when a conversation is put on paper, where tone and inflections and facial expressions are hard to duplicate. This difficulty is especially evident when reading Abe's description of her crime: "Next, I carved the character for my name in him and then washed my hands in the basin at the window. I then tore off the cover of the magazine *Fuji* that was next to his pillow and wrapped his penis and testicles in it" (200). It is impossible to tell from these lines, particularly in translation, whether she was shaken or remorseful or cold.

Specialists and nonspecialists alike might appreciate greater elaboration of how Abe's cultural context shaped her decisions and behavior. In chapters 3 and 4 Johnston does describe the gender expectations and sexual mores of early-twentieth-century Japan, but this discussion is, as Johnston himself notes, "brief" (5). It is a shame that Miriam Silverberg's *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense* was not published early enough to be taken up in this book. In addition, more of an explicit connection could be made between these values and Abe's life, as she is mentioned only sporadically in this section of the book. The reader is left to wonder how Abe fit into, reflected, and was influenced by what serves now as mere backdrop. Also, Johnston's contention that Abe struggled with a maiden/harlot dichotomy would be more convincing if there had not been such variation in gender and sexual values across class and region.

Also fascinating might have been greater elaboration on conceptions of love in this era. Johnston's attempt to shed Abe of her characterization as "sex crazed" is appreciated, but in forwarding the alternative argument that she was "in love," Johnston either takes Abe at her word or substitutes his own ideas of what constitutes love. He argues, as she herself suggested, that "Abe loved Ōmiya [another lover], but was in love with Ishida" (91). He goes on to define the former as entailing respect and reverence, the latter, "total absorption and identification" (91). In other places Johnston is more forward with his own understanding of different kinds of love. He

not only makes a clear distinction between sex and “erotic love” (91) but also criticizes those at the time who were preoccupied with Abe’s sexuality as not understanding that “romantic love and desire to control the object of love are impossible to separate” (103). Although Johnston is generally sensitive to constructed meanings, especially of gender and sexuality, he seems confident that he knows love when he sees it. For example, he provides a quotation from Abe about why she murdered her lover: “I knew all too well that he would refuse my suggestions and didn’t even think of double suicide or of running off as serious options. So in the end, I decided that there was nothing I could do but kill him and make him mine forever” (101). To Johnston “these were words of love—more accurately, of desire—not of anger and hatred. Abe’s desire to make Ishida hers forever had the ring of a marriage proposal or pledge of commitment” (101). The dilemma here is how a historian can know when someone has experienced love, especially when love itself is a constructed and slippery concept.

In focusing so much on love, Johnston leaves no room for the possibility of some kind of mental instability—if even just a playful exploration of the relationship between love and madness. He trusts the police that there were no signs of “mental disease, nervous disease, leprosy, hysteria, and alcoholism” (22). And he cites Abe’s medical record, which “did show that she had suffered from gonorrhea and syphilis, the latter having progressed to its tertiary stages but without physical or psychological abnormalities” (128). It is possible that medical examination of tertiary stages of syphilis at this time might not have uncovered “psychological abnormalities,” but, much more importantly, what would have been considered and defined as “psychological abnormalities” at this time, particularly for a woman?

Finally, Johnston’s emphasis on how human and usual Abe Sada was leaves open the crucial question: if she was indeed ordinary in so many ways, how did she come to do something so extraordinary? To be sure, there were at least nineteen other incidents after 1936 in which men were castrated by women, so Abe was not alone. Still, many of these men lived to tell about their experiences, and, by any standard, murder combined with physical emasculation was a highly unusual act. Johnston’s argument about the humanity and ordinariness of Abe, though convincing in many parts of the book, is least so in his characterization of her actions after she committed the crime. After Abe left Ishida’s body at the teahouse where she had killed him, she instructed the maid not to disturb that room; had a final rendezvous with her lover Ōmiya; spent time in a public park; took refuge at an inn in Asakusa, where, she says, “I put his [Ishida’s severed] penis in my mouth and even tried to insert it inside me” (111); and checked into another inn, where she contemplated suicide until she was caught by the police. All of this Johnston describes as reflecting Abe’s “naïveté and ordinariness” in ways that “both defy imagination and attest to her humanity” (106).

In *Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star* Johnston may not have offered the final word on the life of Abe Sada, but he contributes an important alternative to the understanding of the infamous Abe as a dangerous and sex-crazed woman. Using mainly police and trial records, medical reports, and newspaper articles, he does an admirable job with the difficult task of peeling away the myths that shroud her life and memory and attempts to get at her lived experience and her own voice. This first book-length study of Abe Sada in English is a fascinating foray into a history of gender, sexuality, and crime in early-twentieth-century Japan and deserves wide readership.

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Sexuality Down Under: Social and Historical Perspectives. Edited by ALLISON KIRKMAN AND PAT MOLONEY. Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press, 2005. Pp. 304. \$39.95 (paper).

Ever since Michel Foucault's influential call for a reexamination of sexuality as a genealogical and epistemological enterprise in the 1970s, a wealth of scholarly material has been published that has both engaged with and enlarged the histories of sexuality, establishing sexuality in the context of burgeoning literatures from the health and social sciences as well as in relation to feminist, queer, anthropological, and cultural studies. The majority of these investigations have focused on the North Atlantic, that is, the United States and western Europe, but now *Sexuality Down Under* widens this scholarship by turning its attention to the South Pacific. Allison Kirkman and Pat Moloney admit in their introduction that this new scholarship faces a considerable challenge to establish itself. The problem is one of being a "suspect area of study," which has meant that contributing scholars have risked "personal and professional costs to pursue their research interests" (27). The editors identify four major discourses that run as a central thread through twelve diverse contributions, covering the fields of sociology, gender studies, history, media and art studies, and the political sciences, which influence the biomedical, liberal, conservative, and feminist discourses.

Following a brief introduction, the volume opens with Pat Moloney's fascinating chapter on the Maori and the racial issues that have a bearing on our understanding of their sexuality. The chapter draws an interesting historical comparison between the construction of sexual knowledge and the intertwining issues of race and ethnicity in Tahiti and New Zealand. This is a strong chapter, but one minor quibble is that there could have been a wider engagement with recent literature on the revisionist historiography on colonial sexual encounters and the construction of sexuality