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# Re-Presenting the Gender-Queer Figure: Western Appropriations of Inappropriate/d Others in *A Third Gender*

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## Abstract

*A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Prints* was an exhibition curated by Asato Ikeda for the Royal Ontario Museum which included many prints and artifacts depicting the *wakashu* in Edo Japan. The *wakashu*, male youth who were distinguished from both adult men and women to be represented as “a third gender”, were depicted by the exhibition in conformity with contemporary queer aesthetics and trans identities. This paper explores the curatorial practices involved in the representation of the *wakashu* as a third gender or gender-queer figure, elucidating the many (re)appropriations involved in the production of a postcolonial queer visual imaginary. I begin by walking through Ikeda’s *A Third Gender* exhibition, and recounting the representational practices therein, to examine the construction of the *wakashu* as an essentially gendered figure and exhume the historical and cultural characteristics that are elided by this re-presentation. I then explore the incommensurability of the *wakashu* with contemporary queer and trans representational practices as a fundamentally queer failure, which may precipitate other affective relations with this figure that transcend our spatial and temporal differences. Finally, I question how these inappropriate/d re-presentations might produce an affective rupture within the queer visual imaginary that invites us to interrogate the postcolonial and transnational structuring of sexuality and gender.

## Keywords

transgender, postcolonial, affect, ethics, curation

## Introduction

The image of “Abed, a tailor”, which opens Gayatri Gopinath’s (2018) *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, presents an almost uncannily familiar gender-queer<sup>1</sup> figure. Gopinath (2018) writes:

The image stopped me in my tracks. “I know you,” I thought as I gazed at the black-and-white photograph from the early 1950s. Identified in the caption simply as “Abed, a tailor,” the subject in the photograph looks directly into the camera as he leans on his elbows with his hands folded gracefully under his chin. There was something in Abed’s gaze—forthright, uncompromising, fierce—and the precise and delicate gesture of his hands framing his face, that evoked the femme aesthetic of the young queers of colour I remember seeing on the Hudson River piers during my young adulthood in New York City in the early 1990s. With his finely chiseled face, perfectly arched eyebrows and elaborately coiffed hair, Abed was to my contemporary gaze immediately recognizable as a gender-queer figure (p. 1).

Even for those of us who didn’t grow up in the New York City of the 1990s, the image described by Gopinath harkens back to the queer and trans people of colour represented in Jennie Livingston’s (1990) *Paris is Burning*. Or perhaps the picture is reminiscent of writer and performance artist, Alok Vaid-Menon (2017), whose photo series, *Femme in Public*, is a contemporary symbol of gender-queer representation. The image of Abed awakens an entire constellation of gender-queer aesthetic practices that transcend colonial, geopolitical, and biopolitical specificities. The intimate

feelings of familiarity that Abed affects span these spatial and temporal differences to enliven a critical cosmopolitanism grounded in his distinctively queer aesthetic practices.

In contrast, the image “*Wakashu* with a Shoulder Drum” (Figure 1) is far less recognizable to our contemporary queer visual imaginary. The *wakashu* brandishes a drum upon their shoulder, their expression hardened with lips and brows turned down in a discerning gaze, the tight close-up on their head and shoulders affording them an imposing presence. There is little about this image that registers as a decidedly gender-queer figure to our western gaze; the transcendent recognition evoked by “Abed, a tailor” is not similarly mobilized by the *wakashu*. Nevertheless, “*Wakashu* with a Shoulder Drum” was presented as the titular image of an exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum in Tkaronto,<sup>2</sup> curated by Asato Ikeda (2016), and entitled *A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Prints*. The exhibition featured over 2500 prints and artifacts from the Japanese Edo period (1603-1868), all concentrated on the figure of the *wakashu* who was re-presented as a “third gender” in Edo society. Separated by both the temporal distance of more than 400 years and the artistic medium of the woodblock print, perhaps it should not be surprising that our contemporary recognition of this image is delayed. And yet, the transhistorical representational practices involved in our reception of the image, “*Wakashu* with a shoulder drum”, insist we apprehend this figure as a “third gender” and, in so doing, re-constitute the *wakashu* as a gender-queer figure. The multiple representations and recognitions involved in our reception of the image invite us to understand the *wakashu* through the lens of western, queer aesthetic practices.

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use the term “gender-queer” to refer to performative or aesthetic practices that transcend the norms of heterosexual discourse (Butler, 1993, p. 228). Although there are many people who do identify as genderqueer, my use of the term should be distinguished

from western humanist identity paradigms.

<sup>2</sup> I use the Mohawk word “Tkaronto”, meaning “the place in the water where the trees are standing”, to refer to the land that is colonially known as Toronto, Ontario (Mills & Roque, 2019).



**Figure 1. *Wakashu with a Shoulder Drum***

*Note.* Woodblock print titled “*Wakashu with a Shoulder Drum*” by Hosoda Eisui (1790). From *A third gender: Beautiful youth in Japanese Edo-period prints (1600-1868)* (p. 77), by J. S. Mostow & A. Ikeda, 2016, Royal Ontario Museum.

The *wakashu* is not the only figure who has been subjected to this kind of queer reclamation. Increasingly, figures such as the Indian *hijra*, the *two-spirit* of Turtle Island, the Igbo *female husbands* of Western Africa, and many others, are being arrogated and deployed to provide legitimacy to the gender expressions of western trans and non-binary people. I remember feeling surprised, for instance, when the facilitator of a trans-101 workshop that I had coordinated at my university, showed a “Map of Gender-Diverse Cultures” (PBS, 2015) that listed 38 transnational and historically specific “third gender” figures, seemingly to confer legitimacy upon non-normative gender expressions in the west. The common refrain “non-binary people have always existed”, which can be found on buttons and patches in local queer marketplaces, relies upon a

similar appropriative logic: wherein, western queer and trans people seek justification for our own articulations of gender and sexuality in the racialized Other, who is subsequently frozen in time and stripped of specificity. Although it is certainly possible that these queer representational strategies might allow us to reach across spatial and temporal differences to unearth subjugated queer lineages, I worry that the appropriative gesture performed in these representations remains wedded to our western cultural imaginary.

In what follows, I examine the representational practices involved in these appropriations of postcolonial “third gender” or gender-queer figures. Taking Ikeda’s *A Third Gender* exhibition as an exemplary case of queer curatorial practices, I explore the array of imbricated inclusions and exclusions, sameness and difference, (re)appropriations and (mis)recognitions, that are at work in the construction of our western, queer visual imaginary. I begin by walking through the exhibition and recounting the representational practices therein to analyze the curatorial decisions involved in presenting the *wakashu* as an essentially gendered figure and, in so doing, exhume the social and historical characteristics that are elided by this re-presentation. How is it, I ask, that the *wakashu* has come to be constituted as “a third gender” figure appropriate to western, queer and trans regimes of intelligibility?

I then go on to suggest that the incommensurability of *wakashu* with western conceptions of queerness and transness need not impede our recognition of this gender-queer figure. On the contrary, I propose that the irreducible differences that cannot be incorporated into the western imaginary, the fundamentally queer failure of the *wakashu* to be appropriated in this way, might precipitate a cosmopolitan vision of our common humanity. How, I ask, might these Inappropriate/d representations elicit an affective relationality and ethical responsibility for the Other, which both upholds and transcends our spatial and temporal differences? Placing the multiple representations

of the *wakashu* in conversation with postcolonial feminist theory, I advance a reading of Ikeda's *A Third Gender* exhibition in which our historically contingent recognition of the *wakashu* can be extrapolated into a postmodern ethics of representation, within and across difference. Attempting to intervene in the gradual conflation of "third gender" figures from the Third World with western queer and trans identities, I propose that the partial or even misplaced recognition we feel for this racialized, gender-queer figure may indeed compel our responsibility to ethically represent the Other.

### Appropriation of the *Wakashu*

The transgender native is portrayed not as a normal, fallible human being living within the gender constraints of his or her own society but as an appealing, exalted, transcendent being (often a hero or healer). He or she can be imagined (e.g., as a transgender ancestor), discovered (e.g., on a trip to a foreign land), enacted (e.g., as one's own persona), or simply cited to justify one's argument (Towle & Morgan, 2002, p. 477).

The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) is an oppressive structure. Overlooking a prominent intersection in downtown Toronto, a crystalline formation engulfs the entire face of the museum, spilling out onto the sidewalk. Its reflective aluminum and glass panelling jut-out at unpredictable angles, interconnecting with one another to form the appearance of a large crystal one might find in the mineralogy collections of the museum. Existing somewhere between an architectural marvel and a mineral miracle, this natural-cultural structure draws our attention inwards and upwards, diffracting our glance throughout the depths of history. In turn, this

incredible prism becomes an optic or way of seeing, much the same as the museum itself.

The prism opens onto an expansive atrium where a *futalognkosaurus* fossil, one of the largest dinosaurs to have ever lived, looms large over the more than one million visitors who travel through the ROM each year. Intertwined staircases branch off the atrium, leading visitors to biodiversity galleries that resurrect the creatures of natural history, or to cultural galleries that animate the artifacts of societies passed. There is a definitive sense, as one leaves the bustling streets of downtown Toronto and explores the galleries of the museum, that you are traveling through time, traversing multiple temporalities of natural and cultural life to transcend the tedious present and experience the "authentic" past.<sup>3</sup>

For a brief period in the summer and fall of 2016, tucked away on the third floor of the museum, there appeared a special exhibition about sexual desires and gender positions in Edo Japan, entitled *A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Prints*. Nestled among the many other artifacts of natural-cultural history in the museum, the exhibit affected an ineluctable feeling that this collection represented the "truth" of gendered life in the historical Edo society. The lights were lowered in the exhibition, casted into shadow relative to the bright lights shone upon the other historical figures revitalized in the museum. The words "a third gender" adorned the entrance to the exhibit in large, plain script supplemented by the following explanation in fine print: "throughout history, various cultures have had diverse gender and sexual practices. This exhibition explores one example—the Edo period in Japan".<sup>4</sup>

It was made immediately clear that we, the audience, were meant to apprehend the *wakashu* as an explicitly gendered position—an alternative arrangement of gender and sexuality to the

<sup>3</sup> This paper is influenced by postcolonial critiques of the museum as a western epistemological institution. See Achille Mbembe's (2019) critique of the coloniality of the museum: "since the modern age the museum has been a powerful device of separation. The exhibiting of subjugated or humiliated humanities has always adhered to

certain elementary rules of injury and violation" (p. 171).

<sup>4</sup> Ikeda, 2016. In my discussion of the exhibition, I reference the written exposition installed throughout the gallery because this paper is primarily interested in the curatorial strategies used to represent the *wakashu*.

pernicious binaries of heteronormativity and homonormativity so familiar to us in the west. And it appears this framing was effective, as a review of the exhibition in the *Toronto Star* indicates: “with LGBT issues front and centre on the mainstream agenda in recent years, it’s past time for our straitlaced western society to consider what amounts to a very simple truth: that, historically, ours is one of the only societies to have such ingrained hang-ups over notions of androgyny, gender identity and sex” (Whyte, 2016, para 3). When I attended the exhibit, I dragged my begrudging father along with me and can confirm that, for someone who represents a typical audience member, he experienced the exhibit as a reflection on contemporary queer and trans issues. My father understood the narrative that was impressed upon visitors to the exhibit to mean that the *wakashu* was “a third gender” whose existence validates contemporary queer and trans people’s expressions of gender and sexuality in the west.

Exploring the artwork and exposition in the exhibit, we learned that the “third gender” of the *wakashu* emerged in the social structure of Edo society, wherein gender incorporated the categories of anatomical sex, sexual practice, age, and appearance. Within this matrix, the term *wakashu* referred to anatomically male youth who had reached puberty but had yet to formally come of age—a transitory stage in the life-course inhabited by all members of the male sex. Sexually mature but not yet adults, the *wakashu* were a highly sexualized figure, constructed as “objects of desire for both adult men and women”, and depicted as engaging in sexual interactions with “both” adult genders.<sup>5</sup> These sexual practices were structured according to the hierarchical organization of Edo society as opposed to individual desire or sexual preference, with *wakashu* generally occupying a passive role with male partners and an active role with female ones.

The social position of *wakashu* in Edo society was therefore characterized by the intersections of anatomical sex, relative age, and sexual practice, which were bound together in this inherently temporary and desirable figure. To the extent that the *wakashu* was distinguished from both adult men and adult women on the basis of this assemblage of characteristics, the exhibition invited us to understand the figure as “a separate, third, gender of their own”.<sup>6</sup> The multiplicity of dimensions along which the gender of the *wakashu* was differentiated in the exhibition, invited our critical reflection on the ingrained definitions and social constructions of gender within the western cultural imaginary.

The gendered dimensions of the *wakashu* were constituted by their visual representations in the woodblock prints. The *wakashu* could be visually discerned according to their characteristic hairstyle, in which the top of their head was shaved, save for their forelocks, which “became both the signature of *wakashu* and an object of sexual fetishism”.<sup>7</sup> These forelocks were shaved off upon their coming-of-age, with the fully shaved pate becoming a symbol of adulthood for men. Among the woodblock prints displayed in the exhibition, their hairstyle was often the only discernable way to identify *wakashu*, who were otherwise represented similarly to either adult women or sex workers. In some cases, the forelocks were bent behind their heads to join the remaining locks in elaborately fashioned hairstyles, rendering the *wakashu* even more difficult to discern from other feminine figures. In one particularly illustrative curatorial exercise in the exhibit, Ikeda juxtaposed two images—“Young Woman Reading a Letter” (Figure 2) and “*Wakashu* Going Fishing” (Figure 3)—in which a striking resemblance can be drawn between the expressly feminine bodily comportment of both figures. Between their bowed posture with chins tucked in tightly to their chests, their soft expressions with eyes closed and eyebrows raised attentively, their hair ornately

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<sup>5</sup> Ikeda, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ikeda, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ikeda, 2016.

styled with the bald patch barely visible atop the *wakashu*'s head, it seems clear that the *wakashu* represented a characteristically effeminate figure in the Edo cultural imaginary. Although not immediately reconcilable with our contemporary queer aesthetic practices, when glancing across the visual re-presentations of the exhibit, we could begin to recognize the *wakashu* as a decidedly feminine, supposedly queer, figure.

**Figure 2.** Young Woman Reading a Letter



**Figure 3.** *Wakashu* Going Fishing.



Note. Woodblock prints titled “Young Woman Reading a Letter” (Figure 2) and “Wakashu Going Fishing” (Figure 3) by Suzuki Harunobu (1770). From *A third gender: Beautiful youth in Japanese Edo-period prints (1600-1868)* (p. 83-84), by J. S. Mostow & A. Ikeda, 2016, Royal Ontario Museum.

However, just as I began to sense an affective relationality with the *wakashu* as a genderqueer, or “third gender” figure, I was reminded of the problematics of imposing western conceptions of gender on transhistorical Others. Nigerian feminist, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997), has elaborated a comprehensive critique of such western feminist engagements with the Third World, in which she argues that feminisms have presupposed gender as a salient analytic category and, subsequently, imposed gendered meanings upon cultures and contexts where they may otherwise be inappropriate. Writing about

postcolonial “third gender” positions specifically, she maintains that “the fact that the African ‘woman marriage,’ the Native American ‘berdache,’ and the South Asian ‘hijra’ are presented as gender categories incorporates them into the western bio-logic and gendered framework without explication of their own sociocultural histories and constructions” (p. 11).

Certainly, once we apprehend the *wakashu* as a gendered figure, it becomes impossible to disentangle them from the constellation of symbolic meanings and affective investments that are mobilized by western conceptions of gender. Immediately, our recognition of the *wakashu* becomes inextricable from our contemporary queer visual imaginary, historically situated in western colonialism. The excesses of signification that are affectively imputed to these “third gender” figures—as somehow commensurate with contemporary queer and trans identities—threaten to overflow and spill out beyond the originary representations of the *wakashu*. For as Oyèwùmí reminds us, the flooding sense of recognition affected in these representations may drown out the significant historical and cultural contingencies of this figure in Japanese, Edo society.

Oyèwùmí’s critique becomes particularly poignant when we arrive at a large world map splayed across a wall of the exhibition. Marked on the map were postcolonial and transhistorical “third gender” figures including the *two-spirit* peoples of Turtle Island, the *hijra* of South Asia, the *mino* of Benin, and the *wakashu* of Japan, even extending to include the homosexual relations of Ancient Greece. Britain was also represented on the map as the originator of dichotomous and heteronormative conceptions of gender, which were then “disseminated as the norm by western imperialism”.<sup>8</sup> The narrative being plotted on the map suggests that Victorian England first constructed the contemporary arrangements of sex, gender, and sexuality now familiar to us in the western world, which then suppressed other cultural conceptions of gender

<sup>8</sup> Ikeda, 2016.

as this model was exported transnationally through European conquest. And yet, couched within the global historical vision of this cartographic narrative is a presumption of continuity between the many pre-colonial societies represented on the map, which subsequently overlooks their cultural, spiritual, and historical specificities.

Spanning from Ancient Greek homosexual conduct in the seventh century BCE to the contemporary reclamation of two-spirit identities in the early 1990s<sup>9</sup> and traversing precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial cultures, the spatial and temporal differences lying latent in this map illustrate the problematics of cosmopolitan generalization. The specific colonial history of Japan, for example, which is inherently inappropriate to the traditional organization of the binary opposition between the west and the Third World, is occluded by this visual imagery.<sup>10</sup> Despite the discontinuous spatializations and power relations of colonization that these figures inhabit, the map invites us to comprehend them within a global universalism—a hallmark of the very western thought that the exhibition purports to reject.

The cartography of the map runs into another problem pertaining to the “third gender” concept. The language, “a third gender”, which launches our expedition through this collection of Japanese prints and artifacts originates in the anthropological research of the 1970s and 80s, which was becoming increasingly preoccupied with questions about the normative construction of gender in the west (Valentine 2007, p. 156). During this time, ethnographic research turned to “third gender” figures, often finding them in the cultures of the Third World, to supply evidence to refute the presuppositions of gender dimorphism. For instance, gay activist and anthropologist, Gilbert Herdt (1994), in his introduction to the

seminal volume, *Third Sex, Third Gender*, positions the “third gender” figures revitalized in his text as “emblematic of other possible combinations that transcend dimorphism” (p. 20).

These “third gender” figures are made to stand in as methodological tools or heuristics for complicating what are, essentially, western articulations of gender. These kinds of analyses rely on a colonial optic that positions the Third World as somehow naturalized or closer to nature—what Towle and Morgan (2002, p. 477) refer to as “the primordial location” of the transgender native—relative to modern western civilization. From this vantage point, the “third gender” figure constitutes a sanctuary of nature, a precolonial refuge that remains static, somewhere prior to the legacy of western colonialism, to which we might return to escape the ubiquity of the heteronormative gender binary. Framing the racialized Other in this way, the western imperialist fiction is reiterated, with these Third World, “third gender” figures being represented as historically backwards or anachronistic, artifacts of precolonial social relations always already surpassed by western progress.

The figure of the *wakashu* is resurrected in the optical apparatuses of the museum, coming to life as “a third gender” through their many visual representations. This re-animation of the *wakashu* rests on their interpellation and incorporation into western cultural frames, hailing them within the anthropological vocabulary as a “third gender”. Interpellated as a “third gender” figure who troubles the binary oppositions of male and female, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, the *wakashu* becomes “a third gender” commensurate with western queer and trans identities.<sup>11</sup> Such incorporation depends on a series of exclusions, however, in which gender is epistemologically privileged over other social and historical dimensions along which the

<sup>9</sup> The term “two-spirit” has been reclaimed by many Indigenous peoples to name the unique sexual, gendered, and spiritual positions that were stripped away by western colonialism (Wilson, 1996, p. 305).

<sup>10</sup> Japan occupies a complicated position in narratives of colonization and the Third World (Trinh, 1989, p. 98). See

Alexis Dudden (2005, p. 5) for an examination of the complexities of imperial power relations in Japan.

<sup>11</sup> The concept of interpellation introduced by Louis Althusser (2008, p. 47) and subsequently developed by Judith Butler (1997, p. 106) speaks to the constitutive effects of naming in gendered discourse.

*wakashu* could otherwise be delineated.

Take the specificities of age, for instance, which are evacuated in the gendered configuration of the exhibit, even when the direct, English translation of *wakashu*—“young companions”—clearly denotes an age-specific figure. Similar inattention must be paid to class, despite admissions throughout the exhibit that *wakashu* could be “sold into prostitution [*sic*]”, enlisted as crossdressers in kabuki theatre, or permitted to engage in sexual relationships with higher-class samurai or merchants.<sup>12</sup> We find that, once the *wakashu* is interpellated into the western queer visual imaginary, these other, “non-gendered” differences begin to recede, fading from our perception of this “third gender” figure.

A final wall at the end of the exhibition posed the question, “who are we?”, and featured an interactive panel in which we, the audience, were encouraged to add our sexual orientations and gender identities to a collective mosaic (Figure 4). As my own “trans\*” tile dropped into the mosaic, intermingling with an overwhelming number of “straight” tiles, my simultaneous difference from and commensurability with the *wakashu* hung heavily in the air. At once irreducible to this figure of Japanese Edo society on account of the intervening geopolitical and transhistorical contingencies, my small offering signified a tacit acknowledgement of the potential reconcilability of *wakashu* with contemporary queer and trans identities. I was left wondering: How would a *wakashu* have participated in this exercise and what word or collection of words would they deploy to represent themselves in the queer lexicon?

Figure 4. “Who are we?” Interactive Activity



Note. Installation in *A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Prints* exhibition. From *A third gender: Beautiful youths in Japanese prints—a review*, by K. Canales, 2017, (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/a-third-gender-beautiful-youths-in-japanese-prints-a-review>).

In an article about her experience curating *A Third Gender*, published in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Ikeda (2018) maintains that the *wakashu* are irreconcilable with current trans identities, characterizing this parallel as an uncontrollable feature of the exhibit’s “reception or its audiences’ interpretations” (p. 646). And yet, this very exercise, in which we are asked to reflect upon our own identities, re-centres the permutations of sexuality and gender in the west and places them in conversation with the rest of the exhibition, thereby compelling our contemplation of this parallel with the *wakashu*. The exhibition’s queer curatorial practices that privilege gender as a representational category and invite our speculative identification with the *wakashu* are what first establish our affective recognition of this figure.

Bound-up in this feeling of recognition is an appropriative vision. When I use the word appropriation to describe these representational practices, I draw upon three distinct meanings intertwined throughout the colonial project. In the first sense, appropriation refers to a relation of ownership—the transformation of some natural phenomenon, whether this is land or the living body, into a property of one’s own. To

<sup>12</sup> Ikeda, 2016.



appropriate, in this sense, requires the enclosure of the common,<sup>13</sup> the dispossession of its previous owners, and the re-instatement of the colonizer as its proprietor; a productive relation that has undergirded the colonization of land and the logics of racial slavery throughout western modernity. The objects of appropriation are then subjected to the will of the proprietor, denoting a relation of profound unfreedom.

The second sense of appropriation refers to a relation of representation, the criteria with which to judge whether a given performance is proper or “appropriate.” In this second valence, to be appropriate implies both an “authentic” or “truthful” representation of a given condition and its morally correct or virtuous expression. This injunction to be proper has subtended the processes of western colonialism, with the civilizing narratives deployed to rationalize colonization attempting to render Indigenous populations appropriate to western modernity (Stoler & Cooper, 1997, p. 16). In this sense, to be appropriated is to be proper or commensurate with the normative expectations of the western cultural imaginary.

The third meaning of appropriation combines elements of the previous two definitions and is more proximate to the everyday language of “cultural appropriation”. Cultural appropriation typically connotes an aesthetic or performative valence, in which cultural artifacts or practices are violently dispossessed from their original owners and are subsequently re-presented as being appropriate to discordant cultural contexts (Hart, 1997, p. 138). The re-presentation of the *wakashu* in the exhibition as a “third gender” figure approximates this appropriative gesture, transforming the *wakashu*’s (am)bivalent position in Edo society into a cultural artifact that is then excavated and interpreted from the standpoint of contemporary, western queer discourses.

Often, a dualism is constructed between appropriation and “authenticity”, in which

appropriative representation strips situated, cultural practices of symbolic meanings and historical specificities. And yet, for figures like the *wakashu*, who were gradually eradicated “with the arrival of American ships in 1853”, when “Japan opened itself to western imperial powers”, our ability to determine their “authenticity” is noticeably inhibited.<sup>14</sup> The *wakashu* now exists only in their re-presentations, which, while varying in terms of their empirical validity, are nevertheless reconstructions embedded in the peculiar historical contingencies of their curators. Whether it was the original production of the woodblock prints, Ikeda’s *A Third Gender* exhibition, or my own narrative representation of this gender-queer figure, the *wakashu* are continually constituted and reconstituted throughout their many representations. The original “truth”, which we have since appropriated, has been lost in the many re-figurations of this gender-queer figure across space and time.

## **Wakashu, The Inappropriate/d Other**

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is a queer of me in all races) (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 80).

Those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the

<sup>13</sup> This narrative of the appropriation of the common in the establishment of private property has persisted in political philosophy since John Locke (1980, p. 20) and has been developed in the writing of Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 57)

and Sylvia Federici (2004, p. 24), among others. One might also think of the logics of elimination that undergird settler-colonialism (Wolfe, 2006, p. 402).

<sup>14</sup> Ikeda, 2016.

structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish (Lorde, 2007, p. 112).

When it comes to the figure of the *wakashu*, I experience something of a double vision. On the one hand, I recognize the appropriative gesture in their re-presentation as “a third gender”, which constructs them as a cultural artifact of some precolonial elsewhere, a gender-queer ancestor exhumed from the spatial and temporal contingencies of western colonization. Through the exhibition, the *wakashu* was resurrected, brought to life in a darkened museum gallery in the middle of downtown Toronto. Being hailed in the longing gazes of the assembling queer and trans audience, along with the furtive glances of other voyeuristic spectators, the *wakashu* gradually became appropriate to the contemporary, queer visual imaginary. From this vantage point, perhaps we could deplore the exhibition and our speculative identification with the *wakashu*, altogether.

On the other hand, however, I recognize the ethical necessity of our affective relationality with the *wakashu* in orienting our engagements with the postcolonial Other, the importance of exploring the postcolonial elsewheres this figure animates. Much like the lesbian feminists I quote in the above epigraphs, I wonder if the *wakashu* can bridge the spatial and temporal dualisms erected by colonization, whether we can forge commonalities with this figure through difference rather than succumbing to the relativist inclination to avert our eyes. To sacrifice the possibility of our affective relationality with the *wakashu* for fear of misappropriating this figure, seems to me, too great a cost to bear in our contemporary postcolonial landscape.

Accordingly, I want to explore the possibility of an alternative way of seeing, an ethics of re-presentation, so to speak, that is at once orienting and disorienting of our queer visual imaginary. To this end, I pursue a reading of the *wakashu* in accordance with postcolonial feminist and

filmmaker, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s (1986), figure of the “Inappropriate/d Other” (p. 9). Writing about the fundamental inability to represent Third World women within androcentric language, Trinh’s *Inappropriate/d Other* suspends gendered meanings and articulates other syntactic possibilities—interplays of silence and signification—that overflow the boundaries of the masculine signifying economy. This feminine aesthetics of language is cultivated in the interstices between real and representation, a liminal Third Space that cannot be appropriated into masculine schemes of re-presentation.<sup>15</sup> Existing in this Third Space, Trinh’s *Inappropriate/d Other* “moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while pointing insistently to the difference; and that of reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at” (p. 9).

The *wakashu* similarly performs each of these gestures, with their depiction in the *A Third Gender* exhibition at once signifying “I am like you” in the eyes of the queer or trans onlooker, while diffracting their gaze to the characteristics of age and class that must be overlooked in this recognition. The simultaneous gesture, “I am different”, signifies the incommensurability of the *wakashu* with the western cultural imaginary, once again compelling our affective connection with this figure who is always already improper to the western humanist language of identity, an experience familiar to many queer and trans people today. Occupying the liminal position of the *Inappropriate/d Other*, the *wakashu* leaves us “disoriented” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 106) and with “crossed-eyes” (Gopinath, 2018, p. 174), gesturing to the necessary fallibility of our visual perception at every turn.

Feminist theorist, Teresa de Lauretis (1990), describes Trinh’s figure of the *Inappropriate/d Other* as eccentric, “attained through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between sociosexual identities and

<sup>15</sup> Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 55) originally formulates the “Third Space” as the inbetween space of enunciation in

discourse that allows the production of difference within systems of signification.

communities, between bodies and discourses” (p. 145). The many displacements and dislocations at work in the reconstruction of the *wakashu* as a “third gender” similarly reveal the essential eccentricity of this figure. Never quite appropriate to the anthropological taxonomies and transnational cartographies with which they are interpellated in the exhibition, the *wakashu* is only ever imperfectly apprehended by the notion of representational authenticity. Never fitting properly as the precolonial sanctuary or postcolonial artifact within the historical narrative, always revealing the shortcomings of the visual imageries to which they are fixed, the *wakashu* is always exceeding the representations through which they are constituted.

This inability to be nailed down or circumscribed by representational practices (or rather, the singular capacity to be represented when crossing or transcending these boundaries), is profoundly *queer*.<sup>16</sup> Moving from a conception of queerness rooted in humanist identity paradigms towards Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1993, p. xii) understanding of queerness comprised of movements across normative boundaries, we can begin to apprehend the *wakashu* as a gender-queer figure. In so doing, we may draw a distinction between the hierarchical taxonomy presupposed by “a third gender” and the movements across difference connoted by “gender-queer”, to foreground the deconstructivist possibilities that are afforded by the latter refiguration of the *wakashu* as an Inappropriate/d Other.

Rather than a straightforward re-presentation, which simply conforms to a historically accurate or authentic image, the visual depiction of the *wakashu* in Ikeda’s *A Third Gender* exhibit diffracts into patterns of misrecognition and interference. This diffracted vision, affected by the optical illusion of the gender-queer figure, bends the waves of meaning that pass by the *wakashu* to reveal the significant differences that precipitate our recognition of the image (Barad,

2007, p. 80). Such diffraction is also literalized in the low lighting of the exhibition itself. When the light shines upon the *wakashu*, our gaze is diffracted by the significant absences—those of age, class, and historical contingency—casting our glance about the darkened room, constantly disoriented by the patterns of interference that constitute our perception of the image.

In this way, the gender-queer figure represents what Gopinath (2018) describes as a “queer optic”, a way of seeing that “deviates from a forward-looking directionality and instead veers toward multiple objects, spaces, and temporalities simultaneously” (p. 174). The incongruous directionalities of the queer optic erupt in a visual cacophony, “a palimpsestic landscape marked by the promiscuous intimacies of entangled histories”, incapable of being separated into their component parts, the intra-acting layers of meaning inextricable (p. 174). Our perception of the *wakashu* is defined by the interference pattern of this queer optic, where interference does not connote an impediment to clear vision, but rather, is the constitutive messiness of vision itself. This diffracted vision, irreducible to the optical lenses supplied by western humanism or Enlightenment rationality, is the queer visual imaginary of the Inappropriate/d Other.

When apprehended through Gopinath’s queer optic, the *wakashu*’s representation as an Inappropriate/d Other unsettles our feelings of familiarity with this figure, leaving only partial and uncomfortable commonalities. Always inappropriate to the modern, universalist imperative to reproduce “the same”, while simultaneously upending every interpellation of “difference” with which they are hailed, the Inappropriate/d Other is both unrecognizable, yet recognizable; disorienting, yet orienting. As the Inappropriate/d Other, the *wakashu* disorients the feeling of recognition affected by the imposition of western humanist identity paradigms, while, at the same time, orienting an affective recognition through the queer optics of diffracted

<sup>16</sup> Jack Halberstam (2011, p. 97) has analyzed the intimate attachments to feelings of failure, unintelligibility, and loss

that ground queer art and cultural production.

interference. Rather than a sense of common humanity motivated by universal sameness, the *wakashu* as the Inappropriate/d Other, re-appropriates the comingled and contingent differences of history as the condition of our entry to the common.

The feminist aesthetics of Trinh's (1989) Inappropriate/d Other thus introduce powerful new figurations of our feminist humanity that cannot be reduced to the categories of western humanism. For Trinh, the possibility of a critical cosmopolitanism is not revealed in the binary opposition of sameness and difference, a humanist reduction of differences to identities, but rather, in the feminist re-appropriation of critical differences, always multiple, incommensurable, and overlapping, "grasped both *between* and *within* entities" (p. 94). Our speculative identification with the *wakashu* as a "third gender", the original interpellation of this figure as a long-lost trans ancestor residing within a pure origin that exists somewhere prior to western domination, depends on an articulation of difference as identity. This illusion of continuity, extending along a linear telos from a historicized origin to the monotonous present, ensuring the continuous authenticity of this figure across discrete temporalities, relies on an essentialized difference that upholds the promise of liberal humanism.

Instead, a Trinhian re-articulation would locate our common humanity in pre-ontological differences, the originary and constitutive differences that ensure the boundaries of identity are "not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like them to be" (Trinh, 1989, p. 94). Rather than a *difference between* that ensures the internal continuity or self-sameness of a given figure, Trinh describes a prerequisite *difference within* that undercuts the unity of identity, diffracting in every direction to produce a multiplicity of differences. Here, the possibility of an ethical relationality emerges from *between* and *within* differences: "you and I are close, we intertwine; you may stand on the other side of the hill once in a while, but you may also be me, while remaining what you are and what I am not" (p. 90). A

postmodern ethics would have to account for each of these relationalities, recognizing our commonalities, acknowledging our differences, honouring these relations either in presence or in absence. According to Trinh, the critical cosmopolitanism that is so often necessary in postcolonial feminist thought and politics is immanent to the pre-ontological differences we share with the Inappropriate/d Other.

This is to say that the representational qualities of the *wakashu* as an Inappropriate/d Other allow us to envision our common humanity differently. In relation to the Inappropriate/d Other, our common cause with one another is not achieved through either the tolerance of difference or the normative reproduction of the same, neither of which are particularly useful in a postcolonial landscape. Rather, our commonality would come before our individuality, with our relational and historical co-implication in the Other preceding and conditioning our subjective identification. Put differently, the figure of the Inappropriate/d Other does not resolve or reconcile our pre-ontological differences but constitutes a queer optic through which the diffracted patterns of interference, the visual effects of our *differences within*, are brought into focus. In their inability to be appropriated into the liberal-humanist taxonomies of sameness and difference, the Inappropriate/d Other exposes the pre-ontological differences suppressed by our representational practices and allows us to tease out our entangled histories of signification. The ethics of re-presentation would then involve attending to our co-constitutive relations with the Other as they are revealed in the interference pattern of our queer optic.

If I return to the interactive mosaic at the end of Ikeda's *A Third Gender* exhibition, I am once again faced with the question, "Who are we?". Maybe this time, I opt not to place a tile in the growing mosaic made-up of the sexual orientations and gender identities of the spectators of the exhibit. Maybe this time, the contemplation of my affective relationality with the *wakashu* is not premised on the reduction of this gender-queer figure to the contemporary

queer lexicon reproduced on the tiles. Maybe this time, I step back from the mosaic, glancing tentatively around the darkened gallery, my gaze bending to reveal the silences and significant absences, diffracting into patterns of interference. It is within the eccentricity of this visual landscape that I can begin to recognize the *wakashu*, not as my ahistorical or atemporal queer twin, but as a figure who cannot be appropriated into the cosmopolitan universalism of the mosaic behind me; as a figure constituted in movements across boundaries; as a figure composed of an array of pre-ontological differences.

Perhaps I find that this disoriented and disorienting vision feels familiar, perhaps I feel a sense of affective recognition for the unrecognizability of this gender-queer figure; perhaps this disorientation is the basis of my deconstructive relationality with the *wakashu*. Disconnected by the spatial and temporal incongruities of our historically contingent locations, in this singular moment of convergence, I find connection in the incongruous, incommensurate, and inappropriate. Perhaps in response to Ikeda's question "Who are we?", the *wakashu*, the Inappropriate/d Other, would answer: "We are not we, are within and without we".<sup>17</sup>

## An Ethics of Curation

*A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Prints* was not simply a collection of prints and artifacts presented in a special exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum. Existing somewhere between an appropriative reproduction of trans history and a potent nexus of deconstructive relationalities, this visual, postcolonial queer archive re-presents the *wakashu* as a "third gender" or gender-queer figure. In the first half of this paper, I traced the representational practices involved in the resurrection of the *wakashu* as a "third gender" figure, situated in the western gaze, supposedly commensurate with contemporary queer and trans identities. My critique of the exhibit attempted to trace the

appropriative visions that are involved in this colonial optic; constituting the *wakashu* as property, rendering this figure appropriate to our queer visual imaginary, re-presenting them as a cultural artifact of our imagined trans ancestry. Underscoring the interrelations of appropriation with western colonialism and its attendant liberal humanist ideologies, I was quick to discard this appropriated figure and the corollary promise of a cosmopolitan universalism.

And yet, in the fundamental failure of the *wakashu* to be appropriated, in their constant escape of the appropriative visions of the west, I explored the possibility of other ways of seeing potentiated by the Inappropriate/d Other. In this queer optic, the pre-ontological differences that resist appropriation into humanist identity paradigms are revealed in diffracted patterns of interference, deconstructing the "continuity" or "authenticity" of our imagined humanity. Thinking alongside the disoriented and disorienting tropes of our postcolonial feminist humanity, I attempted to illustrate how the critical reappropriation of the improper might capacitate our return to the common.

In so doing, I have indicated the possibility of a postmodern ethics of re-presentation innate to queer curatorial practices. Following Gopinath's (2018) etymology of "curation" from the Latin *cura*, meaning "to care" or "to heal", I have tried to advance an understanding of curation as an affective relationality and ethical responsibility for curious re-presentations (p. 174). To care or to heal, in this sense, should not be confused with an imperative for authentic re-presentations, however, but should abound with curiosity for the layers of contingent and constitutive differences involved in our re-presentations. Whether it is the layered curatorial re-presentations of "Abed, a tailor," traveling from El Madani through Zaatari and Gopinath, or the care for the *wakashu* displayed first in the woodblock prints and then reproduced in Ikeda's exhibition and again here; queer curatorial practices erupt in

<sup>17</sup> I am reappropriating Trinh's (1989) articulation of a critical difference from the self in the phrase: "I am not i,

am within and without i" (p. 90).

potent visual imaginaries.

Throughout each of these imbricated curations, our affective familiarities and fantasies are re-collected and re-constituted in the archives of history, the feelings of recognition that these figures intimate intermingling in our curatorial practices of “caring for”. The many significations of these figures inextricable from this affected and affecting imagery, the contemporary affects and historical artifacts interwoven through these re-presentations, begin to suggest what I might call an “archive of feelings” to misappropriate Ann Cvetkovich’s (2003, p. 242) generative term. Situated among this assemblage of public feelings—emotions provoked and preserved in this postcolonial queer archive—perhaps an ethics of queer curation means learning to be responsible to these affective relationalities, holding them in curious regard, holding them in common. “Caring for” these ephemeral and eccentric figures of human history, means learning to be accountable to the affective relations with the Other that undergird our common humanity.

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