

REVIEW ARTICLE

## Lesbian Identities

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Horie Yuri 堀江有里. “*Rezubian*” to iu ikikata: *Kirisutokyō no iseiaishugi o tou* 「レズビアン」という生き方—キリスト教の異性愛主義を問う. Tokyo: Shinkyō Shuppansha, 2006. 265 pages. Hardcover, ¥2,200. ISBN 978-4400427049.

*Rezubian aidentitizu* レズビアン・アイデンティティーズ. Kyoto: Rakuhoku Shuppan, 2015. 363 pages. Hardcover, ¥2,582. ISBN 978-4903127224.

Experiences of lesbians are various. That is why it is impossible to depict them as a singular experience. However, through an attempt to connect these experiences as best we can, we can find the means to resist messages delivered by social norms, namely heterosexism (2015, 343).

**T**HE AUTHOR of these books, Horie Yuri, is a scholar of lesbian studies and a leading scholar of queer theology, which is still a minor area in Japan. She is also an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ in Japan 日本基督教団 (UCCJ), the largest Protestant denomination in Japan. In her first book, “*Rezubian*” to iu ikikata: *Kirisutokyō no iseiaishugi o tou* (Living as a “lesbian”: Questioning Christian heterosexism), Horie pointed out that homophobia, misogyny, and heterosexism do still exist in Japanese churches. Although many academic works about sexuality and gender in Christianity have been published in the West (especially in the U.S.), there are still very few works dealing with this topic in the Japanese context. Therefore, her first book was epoch-making at

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the time and is still worth reading even today, since many issues she raised in it remain unsolved.

Almost ten years later, Horie has published *Rezubian aidentitizu* (Lesbian identities). While *Rezubian to iu ikikata* was a deep reflection on heterosexism, especially in the context of Japanese churches (mainly UCCJ), *Rezubian aidentitizu* widens the scope of consideration and examines issues of “identity” relating to sexuality and gender through a sharp analysis of the current social situation of “sexual minorities” in Japan.

### *Is “Identity” out of Date?*

This book consists of three parts. In the first part, titled “Identity: Between Others and Self” (アイデンティティー—他者と自己のあいだで), Horie explains why she is trying to “consciously stop at the concept of ‘identity/ies.’” Recently, many scholars have pointed out that the concept of human “identity” is a concept that should no longer be used. Many academic areas such as feminism, queer theory, post-colonial studies, and ethnic studies, regard the critical reconsideration of human “identity” as one of the most important tasks. These studies sharply pointed out that human “identities” (such as identities relating to sexuality, gender, nationality, or race) are not fixed or persistent attributes of human beings, but socially constructed “fictions,” which vary according to place, time, and context. Therefore, many scholars assert that the concept of “identity” should be deconstructed. Given these recent arguments about identity, Horie explains, it might be seen as an “out of date” or “invalid” attempt to develop an argument based upon an “identity” as a “lesbian.” However, while admitting that “identity/ies” is/are a fiction, Horie still seeks to “discuss the concept of ‘identity’” in order to “look out for the possibility that ‘identity’ could still be a valid concept” (25). There are many reasons to do so.

First, while it has been revealed that “identity” is a socially constructed fiction, the concept of “identity” is still reinforced and reproduced again and again in our daily lives, and it is used to impress the rigid norms of heterosexism and patriarchy on our society (44–45).

Second, the term “identity” used in everyday language also “refers to the process in which we look for the meaning of ‘life’ 生 and look for the collective ‘we’ by discovering the common ground in relationships between ‘I’ and ‘you’” (24). While she acknowledges that “identity” will never be a synonym for homogeneity or sameness, and while she constantly reminds us that there are always “differences” (*sai* 差異) between “you” and “me,” Horie still tries to find a possibility to connect to others in the concept of “identity.”

For Horie, there is another important reason for sticking to “lesbian identity/ies.” It is because of her deep anger about the “invisibility” (*fukashisei* 不可視性) of “lesbian existence” (*rezubian sonzai* レズビアン存在) and the fact that “lesbian

existence” is still “erased” (*masshō sareteiru* 抹消されている) in Japanese society. In heterosexist societies, lesbians have been ignored as if they hardly ever existed. Even if they were recognized, it has always been in a negative way (such as through hyper-sexualized representation in pornography). Such “unilateral naming” (一方的な名づけ) is clearly an abusive exercise of power. It is in this context that Horie asserts the possibility to “raise a protest against the matrix of power (and violence) forced on a society” by “consciously adopting the name of ‘lesbian’ and revealing oneself as ‘lesbian’” (28). The “lesbian” identity Horie uses here is not a “stigma” (*yakiin* 焼き印) forced by others, but a “living” 生きた (and therefore, fluid, tentative, and diverse) identity. Horie sees “lesbian existence” (defined by Adriene Rich) as an existence of humans who “are living their daily lives *in the midst of* society interacting with others and with the past” (35; see also 74–75).

Since the 1990s, the term “queer” クィア has been increasingly used in gender/sexuality studies and activism in Japan. Although “queer” was originally a derogatory word against gay people, in the late 1980s it was adopted by LGBT people as a positive label that proudly embraces all transgressive acts against heterosexist norms. Since then, “queer” has been used as an expression of solidarity among sexual minorities as well as of differences among them. “Queer” is also frequently used as a verb: to “queer” something is to challenge, disrupt, or subvert something, especially social norms relating to sexuality and gender identity. However, while affirming the possibility of the concept or act of “queer,” Horie explains that at this point her prime aim is “not to *displace* (*zurasu* ずらす) social norms.” Instead, she intends to “stop at one step before them” because “stopping at this point [the point of ‘lesbian’ identity] and examining the social norms/structures that erase lesbian existence thoroughly” will be “a preparation for developing a strategy of how to displace them” (44).

Horie’s approach to “identity” reveals many significant issues of identity politics and queer theory. As Horie points out, especially in sociology, the concept of “queer” has been sometimes used as an “anti-identity” concept aiming to deconstruct “identity.” However, in order to displace or disrupt social norms, one must first carefully examine what the “norm” really is and how it functions in society. Without that reflection, one will not be able to disrupt anything. And, as Horie made clear, “identity” is still the most significant and probably the only path to find a way to unravel the power matrix of heterosexism in society. Horie convincingly demonstrates it through an analysis of “lesbian” identity in this part.

In addition, Horie’s argument here reminds us to use the term “queer” with care and not just as a convenient term to refer to sexual minorities. Although the first use of “queer” in the academic sphere intended to recognize the differences among individuals, recently it is frequently used as an “umbrella term” that obscures

differences (see Horie's discussion, 42–45). In this regard, Horie's approach of "consciously stopping at 'lesbian' identity" constitutes an important alert.

*"Anti-Marriage" (hankon 反婚)*

The second part of her book is titled, "Sociality: Between the Nation/Institutions and Self" (ソーシャルティー—国家・制度と自己のあいだで). In this part, Horie examines relationships between the nation and individuals by analyzing in detail some of the acts relating to the human rights of sexual minorities that have been implemented by federal and local governments in Japan, including the "Act on Special Cases in Handling Gender Status for Persons with Gender Identity Disorder" (Seidō'itsusei shōgaisha no seibetsu no toriatsukai no tokurei ni kansuru hōritsu 性同一性障害者の性別の取扱いの特例に関する法律), Act No. 111 of 16 July 2003. She argues that profound homophobia is manifested in these seemingly "anti-discriminatory" laws. This is one of the main theses of this part, but Horie also devotes considerable space to her idea of "anti-marriage" (*hankon*). Recently, movements for the legal protection of same-sex partnerships (including marriage) have become active in Japan. Although same-sex marriage is not legal in Japan as of 2017, some local governments (such as Shibuya Ward and Setagaya Ward in Tokyo) have started to offer official recognition to same-sex couples, and some other cities and prefectures are on the way to join them. Advocates of legal protection of same-sex partnerships bring up three main reasons: 1) There are the actual needs of lesbian and gay people (many rights guaranteed in opposite-sex marriage, such as rights of inheritance, hospital visitation, tax advantages, health insurance, custody, adaptation, and artificial insemination are not guaranteed in a same-sex partnership); 2) it is clear that an unfair legal system should be corrected; and 3) the endorsement of same-sex marriage might have a good effect on other human rights issues (217–22).

Some people who advocate LGBT rights, however, express wariness over rushing into the legalization of same-sex marriage. They point out that 1) the system remains exclusive, if legal recognition (including marriage, civil union, and special partnership) grants special privilege only to monogamous relationships; 2) hierarchies in sexuality ("good" relationships over "bad" relationships) would be reproduced by celebrating monogamous relationships; and 3) marriage itself is a product of heterosexism. Activism aiming to make marriage applicable to same-sex partnerships would not be an act of "resistance" (*teikō* 抵抗), but an act of "assimilation" (*dōka* 同化) to heterosexistic society (223–27).

In addition to these issues, Horie focuses specifically on the issue of the *koseki seido* 戸籍制度, the Japanese family register system. As has often been pointed out, there are many problems with the *koseki* system. Some scholars see the *koseki* system functioning to perpetuate patriarchy; others see it as a breeding

ground of discrimination against women, foreigners, children born out of wedlock, and *hisabetsu buraku* 被差別部落 (discriminated communities); some also point out that the *koseki* system is inseparably linked to the imperial system (*tennōsei* 天皇制). Therefore, Horie warns, joining the marriage system, which is based on the *koseki* system, would result in sustaining or even reinforcing these problematic issues.

Furthermore, Horie questions the adequacy of seeking the “approval from the nation” (*kokka no shōnin* 国家の承認). Horie’s question is simple but powerful: Do we really need approval from the nation for our personal relationships? Seeking legal protection from the nation means accommodating oneself to an “ideal form of family” set forth by the nation. In addition, as long as there is a boundary between “approved relationships” and “non-approved relationships,” there are always people who are excluded from legal protection. We really need to pay attention to “who” is holding the power to evaluate our relationships, and to “how” a judgment of approval or non-approval is made. This is clearly an issue of power (*kenryoku* 権力), and we need to carefully reconsider the underlying structure of power, argues Horie.

For these reasons, Horie takes the stance of “anti-marriage” which aims for dismantlement of the marriage system itself. This stance does not seek any approval from others (including the nation) for a personal relationship, but seeks to dismantle existing systems that have created various boundaries.

Horie does not intend to negate the efforts of people to acquire legal protection for same-sex partnerships completely. She clearly understands that there are actual needs of LGBT people and that there certainly is inequality under the present political system. However, she insists that there are many issues we need to carefully think about before rushing into the legalization of same-sex marriage. As Horie warns, especially in the Japanese context, it is necessary to examine the various problems embedded in the *koseki* system (and the interrelated imperial system). Although Horie does not provide a thorough theological discussion of the *koseki* system in this volume, there have been many theological arguments relating to the *koseki* system and the imperial system which could be helpful in the further reconsideration of the marriage system in Japan.

### *Community as a Process*

In the third part of this volume, titled “Community: Among People” (コミュニティー—人々のあいだで), Horie examines the positive and negative potential of a “community” in which people share their identities. Here, Horie draws on ECQA (Ecumenical Community for Queer Activism, founded in 1994) and the protest movement against “discriminatory incidents” (*sabetsu jiken* 差別事件) within the UCCJ (see 286–96 for details) as “sample communities,” of which she has been

a part herself. Horie analyzes various challenges she has faced in her activism in these communities. One challenge is that people's expectations towards a community and the degree of their commitment to it vary from person to person. Therefore, even in a community in which people share "identities," it is not always easy to head in the same direction.

Horie clearly recognizes that as much as "identity" is fluid and tentative, "a community also exists as a process, inevitably fluid and tentative" (319). Based on this acknowledgement, however, Horie finds a deep meaning in this ever-changing community as a process:

"Community" itself is not a stable substance, but "a space that has a continuity" (*renzokusei o motsu kūkan* 連続性をもつ空間). It could include "many moments of disconnection" (*kazuōku no danzetsu no shunkan* 数多くの断絶の瞬間)... While we sometimes have conflicts and sometimes different purposes in the community, we will still be able to share the common theme we need to wrestle with, and recognize "community" as a process of continuous trial and error in the continuity. I think this might be the only way to recognize the actual life of people (*hitobito ga ikiru genba* 人々が生きる現場) (323).

Horie also argues that recognizing the many differences between others and oneself provides an important opportunity to "confirm the 'contours of one's self'" (*jiko no rinkaku* o kakunin suru 「自己の輪郭」を確認する). For Horie, "community" is a place where we recognize "disconnections" (*danzetsu* 断絶) as well as build "connections" (*tsunagari* つながり) with others. "Community" is the place which provides these apparently contradictory experiences for her: "I would like to keep searching for the potential of 'community' through conflicts and hesitations" (*kattō to shunjun* 葛藤と逡巡) (324).

In this last part, Horie expresses her strong hope that runs through this entire volume most clearly. As she demonstrated in the first part, even among self-identified "lesbians," experiences, perspectives, and understandings of their "identity" vary largely from person to person because "identity" itself is a tentative and fluid concept. This means that there are deep "disconnections" between the other/s and oneself. However, while recognizing these disconnections, Horie does not give up on the possibility to connect to each other. Rather she finds a possibility to connect to each other in the feeling of deep "anger" (*ikari* 怒り): "Sometimes we are able to start a dialogue with others when we happen to connect the dots of our 'anger.' In the encounters with others, multiple 'identities' clash and cause a chemical reaction. I would like to take a chance on that possibility" (344).

### *Conclusion*

In her books Horie covers a broad range of topics and raises many theoretical as well as practical issues. Each of them is very important. Against calls for

deconstruction of “identity,” Horie tries to stick to “lesbian identities” in order to expose structures of power and violence, especially against “lesbians.” Against calls for the legalization of same-sex marriage, Horie insists on the need to clarify the various problems embedded in the *koseki* system and to question the existing Japanese marriage system itself. Horie’s very convincing argument is based on a detailed analysis of history and the current situation in Japan relating to LGBT rights.

As was clear in her first book, *Rezubian to iu ikikata*, we could also see her ceaseless effort in this second volume not to give up hope of “living together.” As Horie shows, we inevitably experience “differences” and “disconnections” among us even in the “community” in which we share identities (such as “lesbian” communities and LGBT Christian communities). However, Horie still asserts the possibility to work and live together. The fact that the subtitles of all three parts of this book include the word “between/among” reflects not only her sharp argument that our “identities” are constructed only through relationships between “you” and “me” (not necessarily in a good way), but also her strong hope on building relationships. Readers are invited to join her journey and face many difficult tasks while repeatedly experiencing “disconnection” and “connection” between others and oneself, and between nation/institutions and oneself.