

9/29/2023: WRITING THE NOT SELF

In one way or another, writers can't avoid creating some characters different from themselves. When such a character is depicted as "belonging" to a distinct, recognizable group—perhaps a minority—what if any is the writer's responsibility toward representing the "other" accurately? Are there comparable challenges for an author writing from a marginalized position?

1. LI Kotomi (Taiwan/Japan)

As a queer creator, I am constantly forced to ask myself, "What does it mean to write about the other?"

Writing about the queer experience in Japan is not easy, because Japan is still a country defined by the values of patriarchy, male superiority, heteronormativity, and cisgender norms. The average annual income of women in Japan is 60% to 70% to that of men, and the percentage of women in the Diet is only 10%. The LGBTQ+ community also experiences severe discrimination.

In the literary world, cisgender heterosexual men are still often in power. In such an environment, it is very difficult for women and queer writers to be legitimately recognized. I myself am a woman, a foreigner in Japan, and a lesbian, which is a very marginal position from which to write fiction. Since I have been writing stories about queer people since my debut novel, I have had my fair share of ignorant reviews by cis het male critics.

I would be lying if I said that LGBTQ+ stories aren't being told in Japan. Especially in recent years, we are seeing more and more LGBTQ+ characters not only in novels, but also in popular culture such as anime, manga, movies, and TV shows. From my perspective, however, there are few realistic portrayals of the queer experience written in Japan. The reason is that when LGBTQ+ characters or narratives are included, they are often produced or written by cisgender and heterosexual creators, and rather than depicting the raw reality of queer people, like their difficulties in life and the political realities that affect them, these creators merely view queerness as things to be consumed to make their creation "stand out" or "interesting". In other words, they are depicting our stories from the outside, not from the inside.

As a queer person, I have made a great effort to portray the queer community from the inside. In my novel, *The Night of the Shining North Star*, I depict interactions between queer women from various backgrounds in Shinjuku Ni-Chome, the largest gay district in Asia. Though this should be obvious, it is often forgotten that the queer community is made up of individuals possessing different ways of thinking, different values, of different generations, and differing experiences. There is joy, sadness, despair, and struggle. There are individuals without power but there is a community that supports these individuals. There is discrimination and conflict even within the queer community, and this exists alongside a history of solidarity and struggle against the majority society.

International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm) Iowa City Public Library
9/29/23: Writing the Not Self.

Azhar Noonari (Pakistan), Li Kotomi (Taiwan/Japan), Marina
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I am not saying that if you are not a queer person, you should not write queer stories. If we could only write characters that overlap with our identities or communities, it would not only be narrow-minded gatekeeping, but it would also be contrary to the true nature of literature. After all, writing a novel or a story is ultimately about portraying others. Without portraying others, one cannot write a story.

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