PANEL TITLE: SEXUALITY AND THE BODY
Discussant: Lynne Huffer, Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Emory University

PANEL PARTICIPANTS:
Jan Bardsley, Associate Professor, Japanese Humanities, Dept. of Asian Studies, UNC-Chapel Hill

Paper title:
“Cautionary Tales from Post-Feminist Japan: Beauties, Monsters, and the Loss of Feminist Politics”

Abstract:
Messages encouraging beauty work as the key to success are ubiquitous in the developed world and certainly abundant in Japan. Corporate demand for employees to perform aesthetic labor, to “look good and sound right,” has come to play an important role in the global and local marketplace. This valuation of beauty reinforces the rhetoric of post-feminist culture that naturalizes feminist calls for choice and empowerment, but re-packages these as guilt-free consumerism and hyper-gendered display. Popular guides published by authors as disparate as geisha, Miss Japan winners, and the transsexual make-up artist IKKO promote liberation through head-to-toe makeovers.

My presentation explores this landscape from a different perspective by examining two novels of beauty gone wrong: one, a tale of beauty contest success leading a woman astray [Misu-kon=mis-control by Gōtō Etsuko (Shōgakukan, 2004)] and the other, a gothic tale of an ugly girl becoming a surgically altered beauty with an appetite for revenge [Monsutā by Hyakuta Naoki (Gentōsha, 2010)]. Both novels show how beauty achievement enables the protagonists to command power initially but ultimately self-destruct.

Most interesting is the way that authors Gōtō and Hyakuta critique the pressures on women to perfect their appearance. Although these authors take some issue with post-feminist culture, they do not contend with its erasure of feminist politics, and as a result, cannot offer an alternate path to empowerment. These texts lead us to ask why the post-feminist turn has occurred, how it has muted feminist activism, and what kinds of citizenship are possible today in Japan.
Kathryn Hemmann, University of Pennsylvania

Paper title:
“Sexuality, Politics, and Misogyny in the Work of Kirino Natsuo”

Abstract:
Kirino Natsuo (b. 1951) is a contemporary author whose novels are often characterized as murder mysteries. In two of Kirino’s recent novels, Grotesque and Real World, these murders revolve around adolescent sexuality. In both novels, Kirino contrasts the commodified sexuality of young women with the wasted sexuality of women in their thirties and forties, which invokes disgust and ridicule.

Through Grotesque and Real World, which were originally published in 2003, Kirino responds to several strands of discourse on women and social responsibility that shaped public policy in Japan during the late nineties. Women were blamed for the low birthrate that was commonly held to be a factor in the country’s continuing economic depression, while legislation that made provisions for equal employment policies was accompanied by derision concerning career women who grew older without marrying. Meanwhile, an increased public awareness of feminist issues was followed by a conservative cultural backlash. At the center of these debates was women’s sexuality, which politicians and the media alternately worshipped and villainized depending on the age of the woman.

As a writer of mystery fiction, Kirino enjoys the freedom granted to authors of taishū bungaku to challenge dominant modes of discourses from within the comfortable conventions of genre. Through a reading of Kirino’s novels, this paper examines how the author critiques the contradictions inherent in these discourses by demonstrating their effect on women, who find themselves trapped in a cycle of outwardly imposed misogyny and internalized self-hatred that they in turn direct toward other women.

James Welker, University of Toronto

Paper title:
“From Women’s Liberation to Lesbian Feminism: Thinking About Same-Sex Desire Within and Beyond the Ūman Ribu Movement”

Abstract:
One notable aspect of Ūman ribu (women’s liberation), which emerged in Japan around 1970, was the attention within the movement not just to women’s social independence but also their sexual autonomy. In discourse circulating within the movement as well as commercially produced publications written or translated by individuals linked to ribu, women’s sexual and reproductive health, along with avenues for women’s sexual pleasure—including sex outside the institution of marriage and masturbation—were treated as a vital component this new wave of activism.
Within *ribu* during its peak in the first half of the 1970s and within the feminism and women’s studies that followed on its heels, one possible avenue for sexual and romantic fulfillment was conspicuously overlooked or downplayed, however, that of getting sexual pleasure from another woman. A number of individuals recount being unable to express their attraction to other women, while others were ostracized from *ribu* and other feminist circles for so doing. In translations of feminist texts from abroad, sections on lesbians were often abridged or omitted for their ostensible lack of immediate relevance. Yet it was in this context that Japanese *rezubian feminizumu* (lesbian feminism) appeared.

Drawing on analyses of commercially published books, translations, and magazine articles, as well as newsletters, booklets and other ephemera from the 1970s and 1980s as well as recent interviews, this paper situates the emergence and development of *rezubian feminizumu* in Japan within the context of *ribu* and other feminist activism, as well as transnational flows of (lesbian) feminist discourse.

Leslie Winston, Adjunct Professor, University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Paper title: “Seeing Double: the Feminism of Ambiguity in the Art of Takabatake Kashô”

Abstract: Painter and magazine illustrator Takabatake Kashô (1888-1966) wielded great influence on those who followed him, but today he is largely unknown. Yet, he was enormously popular in the Taishô and early Shôwa periods and was pivotal in creating the vision of “Taishô chic.”

Beyond letters, Kashô left behind no writings regarding his influences or motivations. However, it is clear from his cosmopolitan lifestyle that his interests lay in freer sexualities than state or sexological discourses would allow. According to Kashô’s great-grand niece, “Kashô did not overtly protest the government, but he created art in which males weren’t male and females weren’t female.”

Meiji and Taishô feminists, whether engaged in suffrage or not, confronted women’s exclusion from the public sphere and consignment to domestic space. Conversely, Kashô’s female subjects are generally not depicted in familial or maternal roles. Stylish and sophisticated, they are of a class that has the leisure to play tennis. They are *moga*, modern girls, yet are not sexualized for being so. Rather, they own their sexuality; Kashô’s young women are simultaneously demure, sexy, and self-assured.

This paper will focus on two reasons why Kashô’s work is feminist. Firstly, women themselves are depicted as active, vibrant, and autonomous. And secondly, in the intersexual portrayal of his subjects, Kashô sunders the chain between sex and the body. Kashô’s art is not in the service of a heterosexual male gaze. His subjects suggest a world of fluid possibilities.