

Sexuality and Ambiguity at *Girlfriend*, a Contemporary Tokyo Women-Only Dance Party

by

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BA, Portland State University, 2007

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

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In the Tokyo neighborhood of Shinjuku Ni-Chome, the number of women's gay bars has more than tripled over the past five years. Focusing on a neighborhood dance party called *Girlfriend*, this thesis explores the manner in which patrons and organizers of Girlfriend approach and negotiate with contemporary dance events. Taking place once a month, Girlfriend draws hundreds of young Japanese women who identify as queer, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual, offering a variety of activities based on themes that challenge conventional norms about sexuality and gender. I conducted original qualitative research over the summer of 2011, including a series of open-ended interviews with patrons and organizers of Girlfriend. The information gathered from the interviews is analyzed along five key themes: observation of the *tachi/neko* binary (a dyadic system of masculine and feminine gender performativity), fantasy, safety and escape, the Other and contingency. This study demonstrates that the values and perceptions of women involved in these events are complex, and deeply ambiguous. This thesis argues that the event, and others like it, can serve as both a refuge for attendees, and a vehicle to reinforce homogenizing images of the mainstream, within a context of global capitalism. This research will contribute to a more advanced understanding of marginalized individuals in contemporary Japanese society.

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Dedication

To my interview participants, who unhesitatingly gave their time, shared their thoughts, and opened their hearts.

Introduction: “Shinjuku Ni-Chome is kind of like a tiny foreign country. Everyone is a little different here.”

This thesis presents a qualitative study of individuals who attend women-only establishments in the Tokyo neighborhood of Shinjuku Ni-Chome in 2011. The goal of this thesis is to explore the values and perceptions of these individuals, and the manner in which they interact at events like *Girlfriend*, a popular dance party held in Shinjuku Ni-Chome. This thesis is an exploration of the individual, and the ways in which she recognizes herself, transforming the discourse that simultaneously allows for, and is created by, this recognition (Gee, 2011a). The focus of this research is one historically-specific group of individuals whose experiences with identity are shaped by their encounters at Girlfriend in new and important ways.

Previously dominated by men’s gay bars and events, the Ni-Chome district has undergone a radical change from 2007 to 2012 to include a growing number of establishments that cater to women. In 2007, there were only four small pubs, whose clientele consisted primarily of women, while the rest of Ni-Chome’s roughly 300 bars served mostly men. Girlfriend, a women-only monthly dance party begun in 1991, was an anomaly in this scene, as it was the only longstanding women-only event in Ni-Chome. Girlfriend typically drew between 400 and 700 women each month, a rarely seen crowd in Ni-Chome’s male-oriented bar scene. Taking place in one of the larger dance clubs in Ni-Chome, Girlfriend patrons pay a 2,500 yen cover (approximately twenty-five dollars) for an evening of dancing, electronic dance music by several featured female DJs, and drinks. The event is run by well-known

lesbian impresario HG.¹ Similar events have sprung up in recent years; however Girlfriend remains the largest and most well-known of these.

As of 2011, the number of women-only bars in Ni-Chome had risen to more than thirty, and colorful walking maps containing the names and locations of each of these were readily available for free to visitors to the neighborhood. In addition, there were three women-only dance parties regularly drawing crowds in the hundreds, with Girlfriend still the leader of this group. As the number of women's bars and events has grown since 2007, the attendance at events like Girlfriend has also risen, indicating that Japanese queer women are increasingly finding one another, and more willing to make themselves visible. Girlfriend is also frequented by non-queer women who enjoy being in the presence of other women, and there is a disproportionately large number of non-Japanese who also attend the party regularly. This attendance can be attributed to media attention, both in Japanese and international outlets, as well as word-of-mouth given Girlfriend's importance as the original women-only event in the district.

Problematizing Girlfriend's Place in Contemporary Japan

On the surface, this proliferation of women-only dance events appears to signal a social change which indicates an increasing openness to female homosexualities in Japan. It has been seen as a part of a larger movement which has been viewed both as an extension of Japan's feudal homosexual traditions (Buruma, 1984; Leupp, 1995), as well as a signal of Japan's participation in an era of what Altman (1996) has called "global queering" in which

¹ Much like the self-identification of individuals and their sexualities, the nomenclature for non-normative sexualities is itself fluid and constantly changing (Sedgwick, 1990). My use of the term *queer* in this thesis is an attempt to describe individuals whose non-conforming sexualities may fit into the categories of bisexual or lesbian, but who did not express a preference for either identifying term. When individuals explicitly described themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual, I use their preferred terminology. When talking about specific political movements (the movement for "gay rights", for example) I use the word that is most often used in identification with that movement.

globalization has been the harbinger of an Americanized global queer culture. However, both of these analyses are limited in their ability to understand the contemporary increase of women-only events. Locating Tokyo's women-only scene in the realm of traditional Japanese homosexual practices fails to address the issues of male privilege as well as women's specific location in Japanese society. Furthermore, it does not take into account the conditions put in place during the period of rapid post-war reconstruction, which created the current conditions for economic prosperity along gendered lines. In particular, neither of these analyses adequately addresses the individual's lived realities, values, and perceptions which mediate the ways in which these events are created and experienced. My interviewees were very much invested in these women-only establishments as indispensable sites of personal connection, as places for the negotiation of identity, and as outlets for the destabilization of, and frustration with, compulsory heterosexuality. At the same time, however, these events were revealed to be ambiguous, potentiating the re-stabilization of established categories of gendered identity and desire.

This thesis looks beyond simplified assessments of changing homosexualities in contemporary Japan to ask what are the key social contexts shaping the values and perceptions of individuals experiencing Ni-Chome's rapidly growing women-only scene. Furthermore, it seeks to investigate the new and fascinating ways in which these individuals are interacting with these events, and what the implications might be for these individuals' lives. I will address these questions by examining rapidly changing notions of sexualities and genders in the context of Japan's post-war expansion and its location in contemporary global society. This thesis will argue that a complex and deeply ambiguous set of key issues shapes the manner in which individuals experience and negotiate with these events. These key issues are: observation of the

tachi/neko binary (a binary system of performing masculine and feminine genders); fantasy; a feeling of safety and escape; the Other; and contingency. Describing how these key themes affect individuals' values and perceptions, when they are at Girlfriend or through their association with Girlfriend, I argue that, rather than being a permanent location of resistance against hegemonic genders and sexual norms, Girlfriend is best understood as an ambiguous experience, an event that is enmeshed in global forms of capitalism, and is capable both of challenging, and of enforcing homogenizing images of the mainstream.

Shinjuku Ni-Chome: an Ambiguous Experience

Viewing Girlfriend as a site of ambiguity goes against first impressions of the Shinjuku Ni-Chome district as a place which reinforces a globalized homosexuality. Shinjuku Ni-Chome is a neighborhood filled with hundreds of closet-sized gay bars, pubs and restaurants, packed into roughly six city blocks of meandering alleyways. Most of these businesses are extremely small, some seating only five people at a time, and catering to a highly specific, mostly male clientele. There are pubs for *bears* (gay men who have a particularly surly appearance), for example, as well as pubs for feminine men, and pubs for older men. Aside from these tiny watering holes, there is a small number of dance clubs, which regularly fill up with hundreds of patrons who spill into the streets in boisterous crowds as the last trains leave Shinjuku Station for the night. Depending on the theme of the evening, a club could be restricted to men only or women only, while other nights anyone could be welcome. In Ni-Chome, men-only events tend to dominate these types of venues overwhelmingly. This dominance has its roots in the widespread misconception that Japanese lesbians are an anomaly (Chalmers, 2002), an assumption reinforced at many societal levels in Japan. To acknowledge the population of Japanese queer women would ultimately mean the wide recognition of the sexual autonomy of

women in Japanese society, something which has yet to fully take place (Wieringa, Blackwood & Bhaiya, 2007). In instances when the existence of queer Japanese people is acknowledged in the media, representations tend to be exclusively male, and reinforce stereotypical images of ultra-feminized figures, while avoiding the multitude of identities comprising Japan's queer men, women and transgendered persons. Ni-Chome's maleness is also a tradition which has been partly attributed to the US military's post-war footprint, beginning when gay servicemen found Ni-Chome an ideal location in which to seek the company of other men (McLelland, 2006). One exception to the ubiquity of male-centric gay events is the women-only dance party, *Girlfriend*.

Girlfriend began in 1991 as an underground women-only dance party in Roppongi, another Tokyo neighborhood known for having many bars and a generally rowdy nighttime atmosphere. The organizer who created *Girlfriend*, described being so moved by London's lesbian dance parties in 1988 while living there, she decided to start a similar event in Tokyo (see chapter 3 for interview). Prior to 1985, when the first documented lesbian bar *Ribonnu* (Ribbon) opened in Ni-Chome, there were no lesbian bars operating as such (Welker, 2010). Rather, there were a handful of bars operating in various neighborhoods in Tokyo where female staff dressed in male drag catered to mostly heterosexual male clientele. While these locations also functioned as spaces where queer women could meet one another, they were conceived more as a space for entertaining the heterosexual majority (Welker, 2010, p. 125). The so-called queer space constituted by Ni-Chome, therefore, evolved with queer women as an afterthought much in the same way that current research on Japanese homosexualities tends to brush over female perspectives.

“Are There Actually Lesbians in Japan?”

Existing research on homosexualities in Asia-Pacific contexts has not tended to focus on perspectives of queer Japanese (Chalmers, 2002). Researchers who have investigated the emergence of queer identities in Japan (Summerhawk, McMahill, & McDonald, D., 1998; Ito & Yanase, 2001), have tended to locate Japanese homosexualities within a discourse of western advancement over Japanese categories of identity formation. In *Queer Japan*, Summerhawk et al. (1998) argued that closeted gay men living in Japan are in denial, devoid of a gay identity, and living in a state of deep conflict. Built into her argument is the assumption that western politically-constituted homosexual identities are the ideal model to follow, and that if one is not completely “out” then it necessarily follows that the individual will lead a tortured life, forever hiding his “authentic self”. Similarly, Ito and Yanase’s *Coming Out in Japan* (2001), while pioneering in its honest account of the struggles of two Japanese gay men and their journey of self-discovery, assumed that Japanese homosexualities (such as the flamboyant characters one sees in Japanese TV shows) are somehow inferior to western constructs of homosexuality, which the authors see as being taken more seriously, and more politically-oriented, and therefore more authentic. These perspectives have not sufficiently taken into account the continuously transforming, dynamic processes that shape and reshape Japanese queer identities, as well as the global queer context (Jackson, 2011). Rather than Japanese queer culture being colonized by western models, or slowly progressing toward western ideals, Japan’s queer sexual culture is occurring in a process of hybridization (McLelland, 2005, p. 95), in which definitions and concepts have been evolving in conjunction with and alongside non-Japanese counterparts.

Much of the existing scholarship on Asian homosexualities is focused on the more visible, and more politically active queer and transgender communities of Thailand, the

Philippines, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations (Jackson, 2011). Researchers that have addressed these topics in the context of Japanese homosexualities (Curran & Welker, 2005; Lunsing, 2001; Izumo & Maree, 2000) have also acknowledged the difficulties of pursuing female perspectives in the context of what remains a male-centric field of study. This has been deeply problematic for research and popular discourse which seeks to dispel the persistent myth of Japanese society, especially Japanese women, as invariably heterosexual (Chalmers, 2002). This lack of discourse devoted to the perspectives of Japanese female homosexualities has perpetuated the misconception that queer women do not exist in Japan. During informal conversations with individuals not familiar with Ni-Chome or issues of non-normative sexualities, it was not uncommon, during the fieldwork phase of this project, to be met with the bewildered question “Are there actually lesbians in Japan?” The question is a manifestation of the cyclical quandary by which Japanese queer women are persistently overlooked, ignored, and unacknowledged at many levels.

The lack of attention in academic research has further enabled the continued marginalization of female homosexualities in the public consciousness, and allowed the issue to escape from much of the public debate challenging Japan’s image as a homogeneous society. Ironically, this very lack of public acknowledgment of Japanese female homosexualities has also enabled the recent increase in visibility of Japanese queer women to take place without much public attention, and therefore with little direct political and social backlash. The small number of scholars who have begun to explore this topic in recent years tend to cite women-only events as locations which invariably pose a challenge to sexual norms.

Scholars such as Welker (2010) have taken up the study of Japan’s lesbian community, including women-only events, using the self-told narratives of individuals directly involved.

Borrowing from McLelland's (2005) concept of hybridization, Welker (2010) has argued that, while there are elements of western queer culture being imported and built upon, the lesbian community in Japan is a complex and innovative local construct, which is constructed outside of the heterosexual mainstream. Furthermore, Curran and Welker (2005) have noted the potential for community formation as a feature of the very processes of translating, borrowing, and negotiating identities in Japanese queer circles. This construction of the community as a naturally-occurring process outside of the mainstream, Welker has argued, is the source of "refuge" (p. 129), a highly sought-after feeling of shelter which was echoed by participants in this research who used words like "safety" and "escape" to describe their experiences in Ni-Chome. Welker has identified women-only dance parties of Ni-Chome as locations where participants can reliably find this refuge, invariably challenging mainstream heteronormative discourses:

Whether queer-only, women-only, or lesbian-only, these kinds of events are acts of collective resistance against the heteronormative boy-meets-girl paradigm, and regardless of who is let in the door, these discos allow for a feeling of connectedness with other lesbian-inclined women—even if they are so inclined just for that evening. Lesbian dance parties thus provide women with another space where they can feel their sexual and gender identities accepted, helping them find affirmation regardless of how they define, or refuse to define, themselves. (p.126)

This thesis, while supporting Welker's argument that Japan's lesbian community is a distinctly hybridized construct, directly refutes the claim that lesbian dance parties are always locations of resistance against heteronormative discourses. As participants in this research explained, an individual's way of identifying herself has a major impact on whether she will be accepted,

both into the constructed, social space constituted by individuals in this community, and in the physical spaces in which events like Girlfriend take place.

Furthermore, while constituting important sites of identification for participants, the events themselves have the potential to enforce, rather than challenge homogenizing messages of the mainstream. This thesis aims at countering lack of depth and awareness regarding the scope of lesbian identities in Japan, by looking at Girlfriend as a site where complex identities are formed in contest with images of hegemonic femininity.

Deconstructing the Dance Party Discourse

To investigate what social contexts, conditions and experiences shape identity in the condition of Ni-Chome's rapidly growing women-only scene, I conducted participant observation research at Girlfriend and in Ni-Chome, and carried out thirteen semi-structured interviews with patrons, organizers and activists involved in Girlfriend and other events in the summer of 2011. The interviews were recorded and the audio recordings were listened to repeatedly. They were then translated from Japanese to English where applicable, and transcribed. The transcripts were then analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is an interdisciplinary, qualitative methodology that applies critical social theories to deconstruct discourses which contribute to the creation and maintenance of social inequalities (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Discourse can refer to spoken and written words, as well as one's actions, lived experiences, values and ways of thinking. The manner in which these are combined, emphasized and de-emphasized determines the ways in which different identities are created, enacted, transformed and recognized (Gee, 2011a). Using CDA as an analytical method for a critical approach to these discourses enables an understanding of language as not simply a tool for communicating, but rather as a form of social practice in which structures of

power are embedded and reproduced in discourse. Furthermore, using CDA as a primary methodology allows for a more agile negotiation of the complexities involved in studying individuals of variant sexualities living in a heteronormative context. Investigating these power structures and the manners in which these discourses shape and are shaped by other aspects of social life (Fairclough, 1995), a rich understanding of the individual emerges.

Thesis Summary

This thesis, through its exploration of the growing presence of women-only bars and events in Shinjuku Ni-Chome, seeks to highlight the values and perceptions of the women involved in these events, and how these women are negotiating their identities. The voices of Japan's queer women, heretofore excluded from much of the public discourse (Dasgupta & Mclelland, 2005), offer a valuable contribution to the discussion of marginalized people in Japan and elsewhere. Using the transcripts of thirteen semi-structured interviews with patrons and organizers of women-only events, this thesis highlights the key themes which emerged in the comments of participants. These themes were: observation of *tachi/neko* binary, fantasy, a feeling of safety and escape, the Other, and contingency.

Often regarding the lesbian population as an afterthought, existing research on Japanese sexualities fails to adequately address the underlying reasons for the male-oriented exclusivity of these discourses, or the challenges inherent in studying genders and sexualities on the whole. Furthermore, much of the existing research on the topic of non-conforming sexualities fails to explore the degree to which these events are ambiguous, providing both a shelter from heteronormativity, and reinforcing binary gender constructions. While the individuals who are participating in this growth are rebelling against norms of gender and sexuality, the women-only events of Ni-Chome also have the potential to become a channel for hegemonic

representations of genders and sexualities. While some people visit Ni-Chome in search of curiosity, or a desire for avant-garde entertainment (McLelland, 2006), many who first approach these establishments do so out of a desperate desire to connect with others whom they perceive to be like them (Welker, 2010). This is precisely because of a long-held reluctance, both in academia and pop culture, to question the notion that as queer women in Japan, they are utterly alone. This misconception is challenged by the findings of this research, which indicate that Japan's queer women are increasingly finding one another, and, at least in the case of Ni-Chome, rapidly growing more visible. In the context of this growing visibility, however, the line between conformity and rebellion is blurred, and the women-only events of Ni-Chome become a conduit for ambiguous representations of genders and sexualities, where on the one hand normative expectations are reinforced, but on the other hand they are challenged.

In Chapter 1, I summarize some of the challenges involved in studying non-normative sexualities, exploring these in the contexts of Japan's post-war reconstruction, and the contemporary context of global capitalism. I show that the post-war constructions of family and nation in Japan have created the historical conditions for gender inequality and the popular myth that Japanese homosexuality does not exist.

Chapter 2 details the methods by which I collected data for this research. I describe my methodology for conducting semi-structured interviews, the primary sources of data for this study, as well as participant observation and promotional materials which served to augment this data.

In Chapter 3, I describe the complexities of the perceptions and values of the individuals who participated in Girlfriend, and the five key themes of the *tachi/neko* binary, fantasy, safety and escape, the Other, and contingency as a means for understanding these

complex feelings. I emphasize the theme of ambiguity as a key aspect of these individuals' experiences with Girlfriend.

Chapter 4 is a discussion of my interpretation of these themes as they relate to one another, showing how these interact in individuals' experiences with Girlfriend. I then attempt to connect these themes to the post-war construct of the heterosexual family unit, and locate them in the context of global capitalist discourses which I discuss in Chapter 1.

Chapter 1: Sexuality, Japan and The Family, and the Global Context

This chapter begins by explaining some of the difficulties of studying genders and sexualities, including the ambiguities inherent in these aspects of identity. It then goes on to explore post-war constructions of family and nation in Japan, which have created the historical conditions leading to the contemporary rise of women-only events. Finally, stepping back to take a broader view, the final section explores what the implications of the global context could mean for the future. Each of these sections contextualizes the experiences and perceptions of individuals interviewed for this thesis, and the manner in which they are experiencing Ni-Chome's women-only events.

The Unresolved Problems of Gender and Sexuality

Before delving into the identities of women involved in Shinjuku Ni-Chome events, it is necessary to first review current debates about genders and sexualities because these areas of knowledge are contested. While recent decades have yielded a growing interest in research on these topics, there still exists a great deal of controversy, and a litany of obstacles to a full and clear understanding of these issues. One such hurdle is the mere fact that sexualities are as diverse, complicated and difficult to categorize as humans themselves. Indeed, Eve Sedgwick (1990) revealed that much of our understanding of sexualities has been structured in the context of a crisis of how exactly to define homosexuality and heterosexuality, terms which themselves came into being within a historical period of rapid changes in our understandings of gender, power and nationalism (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 2). In one respect, homosexuality has been conceptualized as a means of defining and minoritizing a small, clearly defined group of people ('homosexuals'). On the other hand, the concept has been seen as occurring in an infinite spectrum of gray which encompasses each individual, rather than a static minority which is

inherently separate from the “heterosexual majority” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 1). Sedgwick described this as a contradiction in the ways in which individuals understand and talk about themselves, which is both embedded in, and influenced by, all aspects (even the non-sexual) of existence. This contradiction, therefore, can be a means of revealing the imbrication of sexuality within multiple sectors of everyday life, a reality which is concealed in the day to day, but becomes clearer upon closer examination.

In “Salarymen Doing Queer”, for example, Mark McLelland revealed this imbrication of (hetero)sexuality in everyday life in Japan, showing in particular how heteronormativity² shapes and gives meaning to the actions of the workplace. While the office and other public spaces are widely considered to be fundamentally non-sexual, in reality the workplace and the public sphere are routinely tolerant of heterosexuality and intolerant of homosexuality. Given that stable employment has long been intimately tied to achieving adulthood in Japanese society (Yoda, 2000; World Bank, 2011; Allison, 2009), the implications for becoming a so-called “sexual citizen” in Japan become problematic (McLelland, 2005, p. 3, 15, 18). Furthermore, when an individual is unable to perform within a regime of compulsory heterosexuality by meeting the societal expectations of conventional marriage and procreation, even one’s status as a person comes into question. This assumed heterosexuality of everyday life and public spaces, is one critical aspect in understanding why and how queer women seek refuge in Ni-Chome’s women-only events.

Given these dynamics of sexuality and societal structures of power in Japan, it becomes clear that various forms and systems of oppression can interact with others in ways which can

² Heteronormativity is the social condition or worldview by which heterosexuality is assumed to be the default or preferred sexual orientation (Warner, 1991). A hallmark of modern societies and social theory, heteronormativity implies the expectation that all people are heterosexual, and that the heterosexual family unit is the most ideal, natural, and functional social institution (4).

both privilege and disadvantage the same individual. In the case of marriage, Sedgwick (1990) argued: “A woman’s use of a married name makes graphic at the same time her subordination as a woman, and her privilege as a presumptive heterosexual” (p. 32). The act of using a married name, in this case, is indicative of the patriarchal social norm that a woman must surrender her name as a result of marriage to a man, an act which itself has its roots in a tradition of male-centric empowerment. At the same time, the very same woman who is subjected to the oppression of the duality of gender and its corresponding social norm of marriage, is also the beneficiary of the narrative which privileges heterosexuality as the default condition of human love, and therefore allows for marriage as an institution only available to heterosexual couples in most of the world. Individuals participating in *Girlfriend* also have to grapple with the duality of oppression and privilege as highly mobile global citizens, who are also members of a marginalized community as queer women, and a patriarchal society as women.

Where Sedgwick offered an illustration of the co-mingling of privilege and subordination built into social institutions such as marriage, Yuriko Iino’s (2007) analysis of the experiences of ethnic Korean lesbians in Japan also illustrated the capacity of different identity categories to both privilege and disadvantage the same individual depending on changing contexts. Korean residents, who have long encountered a litany of obstacles to attaining full Japanese citizenship, are the largest population of foreign residents in Japan (Iino, 2007; Kawashima, 2009). Iino’s example described an incident which took place at an annual conference held by the Asian Lesbian Network, a group of lesbian women from various Asian nations who felt the need to organize as a group in response to the overwhelming lack of Asian representation of lesbians in the world. At the opening of the conference, participants from

different Asian nations were called upon to stand as representatives from their respective countries in the format, “Asians from (country), please stand.” When Japan’s turn came, however, the emcee (who was Japanese) phrased the role call differently. She said: “Japanese lesbians who come from Japan, please stand,” a phrasing which alienated the group of *Zainichi* ethnic Koreans who were unable to stand because of the emcee’s choice of words. *Zainichi*, meaning “resident in Japan,” refers both to new Korean immigrants, and also descendants of people who were colonized during Japan’s military transgressions in Korea until the 1940s (LaFeber, 1997). The *Zainichi* Koreans who remained in Japan, as well as their descendants, have since faced discrimination in many areas of life, including the workplace, schools, and access to public housing (Iino, 2007; Kawashima, 2009). The incident at the Asian Lesbian Network Conference touched the tender nerves of the descendants of Japan’s colonial legacy, but also was magnified by the reaction of other Japanese participants present at the conference who did not notice the statement, and characterized it as a harmless slip of the tongue. The *Zainichi* Korean lesbians were outraged at both the statement itself, and the reactions of Japanese lesbians, which they felt made little of what was in their eyes, a very significant insult. In this case, the differences in position of *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese lesbians were thrust to the forefront, in the context of a meeting in which the positionality of Asian lesbians (who are disadvantaged by a racialized structure of power in the global context) was meant to be interrogated. This incident illustrates Sedgwick’s argument that the visages of oppression, and the ways in which these interact with others, can both privilege and disadvantage the same individual. The *Zainichi* Koreans were hurt by the systems of power which privileged the Japanese lesbians, and created a situation in which a room full of people listening to the same announcement could hear the words completely differently. At the same time, the divide of the

global lesbian community along racial lines disadvantaged lesbians from Asian countries (Iino, 2007, p. 72), making it necessary to found the Asian Lesbian Network as a counterweight for the global balance of power. Finally, the global heteronormative social order privileges heterosexual people, both creating the very identity categories of “gay” and “straight” (Butler, 1990), and presupposing the standardization of one over the other. This social context where sexualities can be privileged and demeaned simultaneously, as illustrated by the case of *Zainichi* Korean lesbians in Japan, is important for understanding how and why individuals approach Ni-Chome events in the current day, and what the nature of their experiences may be when they arrive.

While systems of power that constitute the identity category of “women” as opposed to that of “men,” and “heterosexual” as opposed to “homosexual” seem to describe these categories within contemporary Japan, they also construct and reproduce them (Butler, 1990, p. 14). Because socially-constructed binary categories can never adequately communicate the diversity of lived realities of individuals who identify with labels such as “lesbian” or “bisexual,” these terms necessarily function as reductive, rather than inclusive culturally-recognized symbols (McLelland, 2005). Therefore, these identity categories and their corresponding nomenclature should not be thought of as simply descriptives which signify some externally existing reality, but instead as actually producing those identity categories and their corresponding subjectivities. It follows, therefore, that choosing to identify one’s self as ‘homosexual, ‘heterosexual’, or ‘lesbian’, terms that signify what Jennifer Robertson (2002) has called “ready-to-wear identities” (p. 788), can have the dual effect of silencing certain equally critical aspects of one’s identity, and communicating tacit understanding that some specific set of characteristics that all ‘women’ or ‘lesbians’ share can be expected to be found

in an individual. Robertson (2002) has described identity as something personal, inherently unique to each of us, and derived from every molecule, experience, thought, belief and feeling a person ever had. Terms like those mentioned above tend to offer a set of prepackaged identity categories which invite their users to indulge in the attractive, but illusory idea that they will serve to clarify, rather than complicate one's position. This kind of pigeonholing can itself be ambiguous, however, as simple labels represent a set of fixed, unambiguous modes of being which tend to have both a unifying effect, increasing the visibility of a politically constituted "gay identity", and allowing Japanese people who experience same-sex desire to feel as though they belong to a community (McLelland, 2000). Finding a "home" among others in Japan, especially among members of minoritized groups, can be incredibly liberating, as participants in this research illustrated repeatedly in their interviews.

Identification, however, can also be constraining, producing rigid, over-simplified categories from which little understanding of the diverse reality is possible (McLelland, 2000, p. 463). As several participants in this study describe in the coming chapters, it can be frustrating to be essentialized as a lesbian or as a bisexual. This is akin to Sedgwick's (1990) position that the politically-constituted identity category of "homosexual" suggests clearly distinguishable groups with well-defined borders, rather than an infinite spectrum of fluid, ambiguous, and diverse individuals. Indeed, the individuals interviewed in this thesis were deeply complex, multifaceted, and experienced a wide range of reasons for attending Girlfriend. The problem of identification is further complicated by the ways in which language both shapes and is shaped by these categories. My respondents described themselves using a nuanced vocabulary which may not be easily recognizable to individuals not familiar with Japanese homosexualities.

Curran and Welker (2005) describe how processes of word choice, translation and adaptation can reveal much about how queer identities in Japan are constructed. *Rezubian*, the Japanese adaptation of the English term “lesbian”, fetishizes the sex act, sidestepping the implications and complicated realities of romantic partnerships between individuals (Chalmers, 2002; Welker, 2010). The abbreviated *rezu*, which, until the early 2000s was the pejorative term often used to refer to lesbians in Japan derives its meaning from this word, and remains vaguely pornographic. As of the past decade, the term *bian* has become more prevalent, signaling a reclamation of *rezubian*, and a new proactive approach to the language with which young queer women describe themselves (Izumo & Maree, 2000). Still, the shifting and continuously negotiated terminologies and translations hint at the larger challenges of categorization of sexualities, modes of human existence which do not lend themselves to simple binary descriptives (Butler, 1990).

Messerschmidt and Connell (2005), in their study of hegemonic masculinity, revealed that ideas and identities of gender and sexuality are consumed and expressed differently at various times, locations, and contexts, and that these differences occur within a single society, and, as Sedgwick (1990) would posit, even within the same individual body (p. 3). This contrasts with “commonsense” ideas about genders, sexualities and gendered bodies which are limited by heteronormativity and confined to binaries such as gay/straight and masculine/feminine (Izumo & Maree, 2000; Lunsing, 2001; Maree, 2007). This research assumes, therefore, that genders and sexualities are not tied to and dependent upon one another as intrinsic aspects of human existence, but rather are activities, repeated and performed through the actions of our lives, in ways that can both influence, and be shaped by systems of power in society. Because the scope of this project does not allow for an extended

deconstruction on this complicated issue, but acknowledging the challenges therein, I have chosen to use the term *queer women* loosely to describe women who identify themselves as *bians*, because the people with whom they fall in love, and to whom they are attracted at the time of this research, are primarily women. Clearly, due to the disputed nature of sexualities and structures of societal power, even the language with which we are able to discuss these topics is contested.

Having placed the concepts of gender and sexuality in the context of structures of power, it becomes necessary to evaluate these mechanisms, and their ties to the varying representations of genders and sexualities in the current climate of Japan. The individuals experiencing Ni-Chome's rapidly growing women-only scene are doing so in the contexts of these rapidly evolving ideas about genders and sexualities. It is necessary to place this changing understanding of sexualities and genders in the context of Japan's post-war expansion and its location in contemporary global society. In order to understand the values and perceptions of women involved in Ni-Chome's events, we must first discuss the unique development of Japan as an economic power, and the corresponding social policies which affected the lives of my participants.

Constructing the Japanese Family as the Nation

One aspect of my participants' lives which influenced the ways in which they experienced Ni-Chome was their work life. Not many had full time jobs. Some worked only nights and enjoyed going to Ni-Chome on their nights off. Others went out after school. Many of my participants were students, and part-time workers, two common lifestyles for contemporary Japanese women. Only one of my interviewees was a full time company employee, a position that is typically reserved for men. This demographic has its roots in

Japan's post war reconstruction when Japanese companies, working hand in hand with the state, implemented a series of policies favoring married couples, and specifically designed to nurture the heterosexual family unit (Yoda, 2000). As Japan rebuilt itself as a producer of consumer electronics, the gendered division of labor centered around the production of industrious Japanese male workers through the construction of a national self-image built around the trope of the mother-centered household (p. 877). Data from recent decades suggests that these policies have led to the disproportionate precarity³ of the female workforce (World Bank, 2011), with a significantly greater number of women employed in temporary positions, and a comparatively large percentage of goods and services generated from for-profit enterprises (p. 4). Japanese society is increasingly privatized, therefore, through enterprises employing a growing, disposable workforce in which women are overrepresented. The rise of the "enterprise society" (Yoda, 2000, p. 867) has ushered in escalating numbers of working poor across the board, but has been especially devastating for working women (World Bank, 2011). This is due in part to the architecture of the reconstruction, and its resulting creation of winners and losers.

The emphasis on equality by the Japanese government in the restructuring of the post-war labor force neglected to include issues of gender equality, instead focusing specifically on rectifying national patterns of income inequality and more egalitarian land ownership (World Bank, 2011). Japan's economic rise thus relied upon the construct of the nation as a homogenous, racialized, heterosexualized body, united by the desire to obtain education,

³ *Precarity* describes an existence lacking security, predictability or material or psychological wellbeing. Particularly the term is linked to the postmodern growth of the flexible, casual, highly contingent labor force that characterizes global capitalist exploitation of workers (Hardt & Negri, 2002; Negri & Hardt, 2004). For a more in-depth discussion of the corresponding *precariat* (from "precarious proletariat") in the Japanese context, see Allison, A. (2009). The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(2-3), 89-111.

employment, and prosperity (Yoda, 2000). This paradigm leaves little room for the diverse, heterogeneous reality which comprises Japanese society; single-parent families, same-sex couples, rural Japanese and descendants of immigrants are among the many people who are excluded from this hegemonic template of what it means to be “Japanese” (Chalmers, 2002). This disbaring of heterogeneity, which Naoki Sakai (1992) calls “discursive space”, is insidious, and manifests in moments like the Asian Lesbian Network’s meeting, when “lesbians in Japan” were differentiated from “Japanese lesbians”.

The connection between gender identity and sexual citizenship in Japan’s post war production regime was further discussed in Yoda's *The Rise and Fall of Maternal Society* (2000), which examines the notion of Japanese “maternal society” (*bosei shakai*) (p. 865). Yoda identified maternal society as a paradigm which applies the principles of motherhood expressed in the societal attributes of selfish consumerism, and individuals’ disregard for order and harmony, a condition which many right-wing Japanese politicians and cultural critics argue is to blame for Japan's current social and economic problems. She highlighted the right's opposition to this development as that of a position of “paternalism” in which the progressive destabilization of masculinity, paternal authority and collective obedience must be reversed in order to restore Japan's supremacy as a powerful nation-state. Describing how the institution of the mother-centered household, coupled with the maternal society doctrine was woven into industrializing post-war Japan, Yoda teased out the links between family and corporation as pillars of Japan's industrial capitalist regime. This state is formed by the images of the company as a “family” and familial bonding that developed in Japan's period of postwar economic expansion. This merger of company and family was implemented by the state through the concept of the enterprise society centered around the *sarariman* (“full time company

employee”), endlessly toiling in the name of family and corporation. When the success of this system had run its course, evidenced by the recession of the 1990s, Yoda identified a stalemate in Japanese capitalist production and social management. Neither the maternal nor paternal orders remain adequate frameworks to address the changes taking place in the context of global capitalism. The thoroughly hegemonic power of corporations and corporate values had been obscured in previous decades by the maternalist social order, but is apparent in the modern breakdown of the institutions of family, school and company. For Yoda, therefore, the debate about how to return the nation to its glorious past is just another way of sidestepping the issues of gender inequality, economic injustice, and unchecked power of corporations inherent in contemporary capitalist societies.

Where Yoda offered a bittersweet hope that the vacuum created by this disintegration could expose the tools for criticism of the systems of power heretofore concealed by maternalism, scholars such as Anne Allison (2009) seemed to lament the decline of the company-centered heterosexual family order. Allison saw the breakdown of the institutions of family and company as a weakening of the mechanisms which recreate the community connections needed for individuals to thrive (p. 2). Her assessment has also highlighted the reasons why the context of economic decline and recession could open new possibilities for Japan’s minority groups, such as immigrants and sexual minorities. Allison has suggested that the destabilization of Japan’s socioeconomic structure, deeply imbricated with the gender norms that made the nation both productive and reproductive, could open new possibilities for critique of this system in ways that were never possible when the robust economy made criticism difficult (personal communication, February 3, 2011). No longer bound by the persistent expectation that people go to university, work at a company, marry and have

children, Japanese youth in particular have a unique opportunity to create a society in which the diversity of all individuals is valued. However, in order for such a scenario to unfold, it is first necessary for scholars like Allison to shed more light on, and be more critical of the homogenizing values which were built into the system before it began its decline. For, as Yoda (2000) has cautioned, it is these homogenizing notions which laid the foundation for their own inevitable collapse, by imagining Japanese society as a univocal, heterosexualized, ethnically homogeneous body.

Further complicating the contemporary predicament is the expectation of repeated recession that is built into the global economic system. From the perspective of critical historians like Paolo Virno (2004), Michael Hardt (2002; 2004) and Antonio Negri (2002; 2004), the crisis is not merely a matter of reversing this particular episode of economic decline, but in fact is a precursor to a host of even bigger problems we face as human beings in a system of increasing global interconnectivity.

The Global Context

The era of global capitalism has brought with it the most rapid and profound changes in human production and consumption patterns the world has ever seen (Hardt & Negri, 2002). Among the many changes in contemporary capitalist production, one of the most radical is the increasing presence of immaterial labor as a global commodity. In *Empire* (2002), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explained that the immaterial labor, “involved in communication, cooperation, and the production and reproduction of affects” (p. 53) is increasingly central to both capitalist production and the production of subjectivity itself. “Affect” refers to ideas, images, knowledge, information, and especially emotion (Hardt & Negri, 2002). Affective labor comprises the underpinnings of the service-based industries upon which much of the

global economy is dependent, and manifests in the form of the care one expects from staff at a restaurant or bank, for example. It has also been deeply implicated in the production of subjectivity and the social (Aizura, 2011), due to the nature of the human interactions and exchanges through which affective labor is transacted, which create and recreate relationships, and ultimately society as a whole (Hardt & Negri, 2002). Affective labor involves a softening of the separation between exchanges of feeling and transactions which are strictly economic, filtering into our everyday lives to constitute the very means for the production of social reality (Aizura, 2011, p. 159). Hardt and Negri (2002) have written that, whereas in the past, institutions such as religious organizations, schools, and prisons enforced the codes of social conduct through overt disciplinarity exacted upon the individual (Foucault, 1977), in the contemporary global capitalist economy, the rules for behavior and social organization have increasingly been internalized, intensified, and generalized to occupy our daily practices: “Power is thus expressed as a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population—and at the same time across the entirety of social relations” (p. 24). As the cycles of production and reproduction have become increasingly woven into the societal fabric, the interconnectedness of the global economy means that the ripple effects of a single incident are ever wider, and carry the potential to impact individuals’ lives more directly. This has had profound effects on the ways in which individuals experience life, and the larger mechanisms to which our lived realities are exposed and subjected.

The pervasiveness of boom and bust global capitalism puts inhabitants of the world at the mercy of the whims of the global market, a precarious existence demanding more flexible work patterns, even as employment has become increasingly irregular (Allison, 2009). The effects of both the increasing mobility of capital, and the ever-volatile pitch and yaw of the

global economy has created a sense of desperation and dread for what the future holds (Virno, 2004). Global events have a faster, and more powerful impact on lives than ever before, making the individual vulnerable to outbreaks of disease, social unrest, and turmoil in faraway places, in unprecedented ways. In this environment, individuals will seek out connections, community, and comfort as an escape from the relentless anxieties of modern living (p. 31). “The absence of a substantial community, and of any connected ‘special places’ makes it such that the life of a stranger, the not-feeling-at-home . . . are unavoidable and lasting experiences” (p. 39). The “not-feeling-at-home” which Virno described as a universal symptom of contemporary existence is also the force which drives people to seek out the “special places” and communities to which they can belong. The desire for connections, an extension of contemporary life in Japan and elsewhere, can therefore be understood as a driving force for how and why marginalized individuals seek shelter and camaraderie in one another.

This drive to find comfort in the common highlights the significance of Girlfriend participants’ stated desires for community, connections, and friendships, placing them in the contexts of the global as well as the individual. It should be noted here that my intention is not to assert that individuals who seek companionship in Ni-Chome are doing so only out of a desire which is entirely the result of global capitalism’s backdrop to our lives. Like any action or attribute which is common across a spectrum of people, we should recognize both the significance of the lived circumstances of the individuals, as well as the larger histories, and systems of power in which the individuals’ lives occur (Gee, 2011a; 2011b). In this case, while global capitalism has colonized and alienated the individual on the one hand, affective labor, with its emphasis on warm exchanges and human interactions, has emerged to shape the logic and future of capitalist production, and the lives of Girlfriend participants, on the other (Hardt

& Negri, 2002; Allison, 2009). A key component of global flows of affective labor and capital can be found in global capitalism's connection to and dependency upon commoditized femininity.

An example of commodification of images of essentialized femininity in the context of global capitalism is Aren Aizura's (2011) description of the experiences of patients and care workers at a gender reassignment surgery clinic in Thailand. Surveying the images of white-skinned feminine beauty reflected in photos on the clinic's website, and observing the relations between staff and convalescing patients, Aizura made the connection between commoditized, racialized beauty, and affective labor in the global context. Thai clinic workers assigned the job of caring for patients undergoing gender reassignment surgery, many of whom are foreign-born medical tourists, were instructed to make the patients feel at-home, comfortable, and cozy during the recovery period, through such tasks as engaging in chit chat and doing each others' nails and hair. The care workers were expected, therefore, to behave toward the patients as one might expect women friends to behave toward one another, blurring the line between work and play. While Aizura's account of a Bangkok gender reassignment surgery clinic may seem a remote example, it is nevertheless the same blurring of the line between labor and capital, social activity and work, which characterizes global corporate culture today (Yoda, 2000, p. 896). Girlfriend lies at a similar nexus of gendered affective labor and commoditized femininity, with staff expected to engage with patrons on an intimate level, and an overwhelming presence of homogenizing images of feminine beauty. While recent years have yielded visibility to a more diverse spectrum of genders and sexualities (Chalmers, 2002, p. 7), even diversity itself has proven to be ambiguous because of its potential to reconfigure differences into target markets.

Management practices of global corporations exhibit the desire to identify and harness such diversity in the workplace, maximizing its creative potential through a process coined “diversity management” (Hardt & Negri, 2002, p. 153). Policies of multiculturalism, increasingly the mantra of corporate culture today, teach us to embrace difference, including ethnicity, varying degrees of physical ability, and sexual orientation. These differences are to be welcomed, upheld, and reorganized in order to generate profit through diversification of both the workplace and the company profile. Marketing practices mirroring these workplace strategies have emerged as means of identifying and opening new markets. Hardt and Negri (2002) have noted the following on corporations’ marketing policies:

Ever more hybrid and differentiated populations present a proliferating number of ‘target markets’ that can each be addressed by specific marketing strategies—one for Latino males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, another for Chinese-American teenage girls, and so forth (p. 152).

By this logic, Ni-Chrome women-only events offer corporate sponsors an attractive point of entry into the market of young, queer Japanese women, a very specific target population on one hand, and an opportunity to present a public image of the company as embracing multiculturalism and diversity on the other. Through this process, sponsors like Revlon and Moët & Chandon, who make cosmetics and champagne, also produce the intangible affective outcomes of brand recognition and a corporate image of embracing diversity. While this can explain the motivation for company sponsorship of these events, marketing practices and corporate image are elements specific to the production of capital. To understand the backdrop of the global in contextualizing individual identities, we must take a closer look at the ways in which patrons of Girlfriend approach and negotiate with such events.

Summary

This chapter has identified some specific realms of literature pertaining to this research, highlighting the themes of ambiguity of genders and sexualities, historical constructions of family and nation through the gendered division of labor, and the implications for individuals involved in these events in the global context. These areas of literature and research are particularly essential tools for understanding the rise of Ni-Chome's women-only events, which are rooted in specific historical conditions and contexts at the levels described in this chapter. One cannot divorce the construction of genders and sexualities from discourses of post-war nationalism. Furthermore, the individuals who openly shared the details of their lives during this research must be understood as agents of their own volition, whose lives are also occurring in a historically specific context, with its own set of implications that pertain to global discourses.

Placing the constructs of gender and sexuality in the context of societal structures of power, this chapter highlighted the pioneering works of queer theorists to identify the ways in which these are constructed and represented. Assuming that genders are not intrinsically tied to sexuality, but rather are sets of activities, repeated and performed, this chapter asserted that gender is thus consumed and expressed differently at various times, locations, and contexts. This process was evaluated in the context of Japan's post-war reconstruction, which established the gendered division of labor in order to galvanize the nation as an economic world leader.

Having interrogated the broad intersections of gender and sexuality in the context of global flows of labor and capital, in the following chapter I describe my research methods, where I applied qualitative research methods to explore the intersections of gender, sexuality,

and wider flows in the lives of Girlfriend participants. The methods emphasize how individuals are approaching and negotiating with these broader flows in their everyday lives.

Chapter 2: Researching Girlfriend: Methods and Strategies

Having described some broad concepts for understanding genders and sexualities in the global context in the previous chapter, this chapter details the methods by which I went about collecting data for this research. In order to investigate the dynamics behind the increasing number of women-only bars and events in Shinjuku Ni-Chome, my study specifically seeks to explore: 1) What are the social contexts shaping the values and perceptions of the women involved in these events? 2) How are these women negotiating and interacting with these events in their everyday lives? The primary sources of data for this study are thirteen semi-structured interviews with individuals who have or continue to participate in these events, or whose actions have otherwise influenced the manner in which these events take place. The data from interviews is augmented using promotional materials and participant observation. I gathered these materials over the course of three weeks in 2011 in Tokyo.

For the purpose of addressing my driving questions, I determined that the target population for interviews would be individuals from two groups: The first group is individuals who identify as female, Japanese, have frequented Ni-Chome women-only events, and are roughly between the ages of 20 and 35. This group is of interest because these individuals are likely to have been participating in Ni-Chome events during the period of rapid growth of women-only events in recent years. The second group is comprised of individuals directly involved with planning, organizing and running women-only events and managing of women-only bars. This group was chosen because of their intimate involvement in the operations of such bars and events, and resulting insider knowledge of these bars. I obtained ethical approval from the University of Victoria prior to conducting these interviews.

HC: The Key Informant at Bar Motel

In the majority of cases, participants were contacted first through a “key informant,” an individual whose active participation in the event can yield rich firsthand information and understanding (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). My key informant was typically a person with whom I had a personal relationship prior to starting this research. I had lived in Japan from 2004 to 2006, and again from 2007 to 2009 and had attended Girlfriend on several occasions and met individuals whom I was able to contact again for this study. An example is HC⁴, manager of Bar Motel, the small women-only pub located approximately three blocks from Girlfriend’s venue, *Bar Hijoguchi*. Bar Motel is managed by the same team that operates Girlfriend, and many of the clientele who attend Girlfriend also frequent Bar Motel. I had first met HC in 2009. When I returned to Tokyo for field research in 2011, HC introduced me to several of her customers, many of whom were regular patrons of both. She served as both a gatekeeper and an icebreaker to help broach the topic of this research. In this way, I was able to approach several participants and easily schedule interviews. I carried out all of my interviews in Japanese except for the cases of AH, YK, and MT, whose interviews were conducted in English, and HG whose interview began in English, but switched to Japanese in the middle.

After making contact through a key informant such as HC, I gave potential participants my contact information so that they could contact me if interested in participating in the project. Once possible respondents contacted me, we had a short conversation in order to determine whether the respondent was part of the target population, and whether they would feel comfortable discussing the issues included in the interview. This conversation usually took place over mobile phone text messaging or email messaging. If the respondent was part of the

⁴ In order to protect the privacy of the individuals who were interviewed, pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis in the form of initials, such as HM and HG.

target population, and was willing to participate in the interview, then we would schedule the interview accordingly.

Cocolo Café: An Ideal Location for Interviews

I conducted the majority of interviews in *Cocolo Cafe*, a quiet coffee house in Shinjuku Ni-Chome (see figure 1) over the course of three weeks. Cocolo's location two blocks from Bar Hijoguchi was in a familiar neighborhood for most participants. This made the interview process more relaxed than it might have been in other areas of Tokyo. Interviews took place during the cafe's afternoon off-peak hours between two o'clock and five o'clock. This time slot and location offered considerable privacy for interviewees because there were virtually no other customers present during that time.



Figure 1: Photo of participant AT⁵ outside of Cocolo Cafe

⁵ This participant wished to have her photograph included in the thesis.

Interviews were semi-structured, and were conducted using a set of guiding questions (See Appendix A). The interviews were relaxed in nature, and questions were open-ended in order to encourage frank and honest discussion, while reducing normative answers to questions asked (Bailey, 1987, p. 122). The questions differed slightly depending on the target group to which the participant belonged. Audio recordings of the interviews were taken with participants' permission using a palm-sized electronic recording device. The interviews lasted between one hour and ninety minutes. They were conducted one-on-one, except in the case of AK and IK, a couple who preferred to be interviewed together. The interviews were very friendly and relaxed, often beginning with participants asking me questions such as how I learned Japanese, how I met my Japanese partner, and how we ended up living in Canada. Thus, good rapport was established in the first few minutes of the interviews by first allowing participants to assuage some of their uncertainty about me.

Questions asked to all interview participants were designed to investigate the values and perceptions of the participants in Shinjuku Ni-Chome events. The questions also explored the participants' perceptions of themselves as individuals in this context. Questions for planners and managers were also crafted to investigate the values and perceptions of this group, and also to explore the role of bars and events in Ni-Chome.

Planners, Managers, Participants and Me

Planners and managers is the category of individuals who are directly responsible for the planning and execution of Ni-Chome events, including other dance parties, collective political actions (such as protests), or members of the media. During the design phase of this thesis, it was unclear whether I would be able to get access to planners or managers, including Girlfriend founder, HG. In the end, in addition to HG, and web journalist YK, I was able to

make contact with MT (a political activist), and HM (an activist whose actions have become very high-profile since the time of this fieldwork) both of whom I interviewed. Questions for HG, Girlfriend's founder, aimed to gain a specific understanding of Girlfriend and its participants. Questions for YK were designed to explore the perspectives of a member of the media.

The data from the analysis was also augmented by participant observation at Girlfriend. Participant observation is an activity in qualitative fieldwork that involves establishing and immersing oneself in a particular setting in order to investigate and experience the social processes that occur in that setting (Atkinson, 2001). After attending Girlfriend as a participatory non-researcher approximately twenty times between 2007 and 2009, I attended Girlfriend on August 27, 2011 at their monthly party, to conduct participant observation. My position was that of both an insider who has experienced Girlfriend many times over the years, and as an outsider who is attempting to understand the complex values, perceptions and experiences of others involved in the event and others like it through the lens of a white American researcher. These dual viewpoints were helpful in that they allowed me to maintain the delicate intellectual location between familiarity and strangeness, and indeed between stranger and friend (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Some of my personal attributes also helped to establish rapport with the interviewees, building the trust which enabled them to share their stories with little hesitation. The first of these attributes, my ability to speak and understand Japanese, was perhaps the most important given that many Japanese people hesitate to talk openly with strangers, particularly those who they do not expect to speak their language. The second attribute that put my participants at ease was the fact that I identify as queer myself, and have personal experience with loving other

women, some of whom have been Japanese. This shared experience established a common ground that many of my participants appeared to find comforting. The third attribute is my natural curiosity about the lives and experiences of others. I genuinely enjoy meeting different people, listening to their stories, and imagining what life is like for them. These three attributes were helpful in garnering the rich, detailed interviews which my participants so openly, readily, and generously allowed me.

While conducting participant observation at Girlfriend, I noted the staff's actions and behaviors, as well as the positioning of sponsoring companies' materials inside of the club. The space given for sponsors to display their products, as well as frequency of appearance of sponsors' names at the event were taken into account for this portion of the analysis. While participating, I observed the behaviors of participants and staff, as well as atmosphere, decor, and use of space at Girlfriend's hosting venue, Bar Hijoguchi (see figure 2). I also took note of the behaviors and numbers of other attendees at different points in the evening, beginning from when the club opened at 9:00 pm and ending at approximately 5:00 am. Using this combination of diverse tactics and sources, this research was conducted with the assumption that a diversity of resources can increase both depth and breadth of our understanding of the data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As a part of this methodology, therefore, both information from interviews, and data collected at the event were used to inform my analysis.

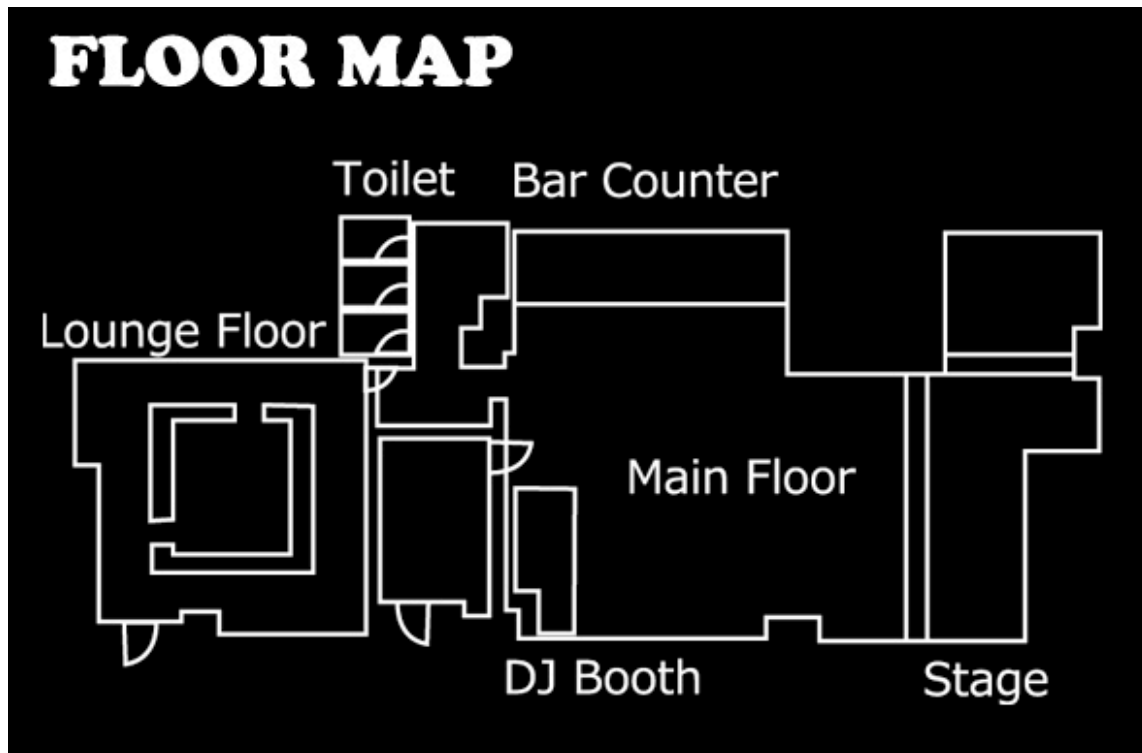


Figure 2: Floor map of Girlfriend's venue, Bar Hijoguchi

At my request, Girlfriend organizer HG gathered a small collection of original posters and promotional materials for the purpose of augmenting her interview with me by providing documentation about the history of Girlfriend. In addition, she granted access to her personal collection of posters dating from the first women-only event 1991, which she had arranged chronologically during the course of Girlfriend's twenty-year lifespan up to the present day. Posters can be a valuable tool for interpreting the manner in which an event targets a specific clientele (Dacanay, 2011), and determining whether there has been a change in marketing strategy over time.

Listening Between the Lines

According to Moerman (1988), the purpose of qualitative research is to yield a richer understanding of the mechanisms by which people conceive of the world and their lives in it (p. 10). An individual's words can reveal the relationships between social practices and

assumptions, as well as language and perceptions (p. x) Investigating the ways in which individuals active in Ni-Chome's women-only events experience the world, this research explores what the values and perceptions of these individuals are. The transcripts of interviews designed to explore this question were analyzed using critical discourse analysis.

For the scope of this study, the term *discourse* refers both to spoken and written words, and to one's actions, lived experiences, values, and ways of thinking (Gee, 2011a). The manner in which these are combined, emphasized and de-emphasized determines the ways in which different identities are created, enacted, transformed, and recognized (p. 178). Performing different identities involves distinctive ways of behaving, speaking, thinking, and feeling, which I have sought to identify through the interviews conducted with participants in this research. Discourse analysis has been defined broadly by Gee (2011a) and Fairclough (1995) as the analysis of the ways in which discourse is used in the functioning of society. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with the manners in which these discourses shape and are shaped by other aspects of social life (Fairclough, 1995). A framework for the analysis of discourse in relation to power and the ideological mechanisms which oppress certain people while privileging others (Fairclough, 1995), critical discourse analysis can help reveal the diverse ways in which discourse is implicated in the construction of societies and identities.

After conducting the interviews, I listened to the recordings repeatedly and transcribed them. During this process, I also translated them from Japanese to English, with the exceptions of MT, YK and AH whose interviews were originally conducted in English. I then compared the transcripts to one another in order to find instances of overlap and recurring themes which were consistent in all of my interviews. Such instances of recurrent patterns in speech can signify broad systems of meaning, in the worlds in which participants live (Moerman, 1988).

Interview Participants: Eager and Mobile

The primary source of data is a collection of thirteen semi-structured interviews conducted over the summer of 2011. Basic information on the individuals interviewed is presented in Table 1 below with detailed descriptions of each individual in the form of case studies in Appendix B. In short, these individuals are mostly under age thirty-five, well-educated and highly mobile. Most were born in various locations throughout Japan and have relocated to Tokyo. Nine out of thirteen interviewees described having had to leave family behind and relocate, either to a different area of Japan or another part of the world, as a direct result of incompatibility between their sexuality and home or family life. Participants described having to work more to support themselves in their independent lives, while simultaneously having to cope with the disappointment of their family members. Some have lived abroad, and three have lived in more than one country abroad, and therefore have second or third language skills.

Table 1 Summary of Respondents

name	from	time living in Tokyo	occupation	age	Number of visits to Ni-Chome each month	languages spoken
AK	Hyogo	4 mo	student, waitress	23	2	Japanese
AH	Shizuoka	6 yrs	office worker	29	4	Japanese, English
AT	Sendai	10 yrs	hairdresser	32	1	Japanese
HI	Nishikasai City, Tokyo	whole life	office worker	32	1	Japanese
IK	Hyogo	4 mo	student	24	2	Japanese
NI	Koto Ward, Tokyo	whole life	office worker	25	12	Japanese

name	from	time living in Tokyo	occupation	age	Number of visits to Ni-Chome each month	languages spoken
NT	Kodaira City, Tokyo	whole life	office worker	35	2	Japanese
WY	Ibaraki	2 yrs	student, part time at karaoke box	21	4	Japanese
HG	Tokyo	most of her life	event owner, organizer	41	currently lives there	Japanese, English
RI	Shizuoka	past 9 years	event owner, organizer	36	currently lives there	Japanese
YK	Switzerland	9 years	writer, activist	36	1	Japanese, English, French, Italian
HM	Tokyo	past 6 years	translator, activist	34	2	Japanese, English, French
MT	Fukushima	past 5 years and most of her childhood	activist	35	less than once	Japanese, English, Spanish

Summary

This chapter has described the collection methods, analysis methods and materials used in this research. The study relies primarily on the viewpoints, experiences, and statements of the attendees of Shinjuku Ni-Chome's women-only events and businesses. The original qualitative research conducted aims to investigate the values and perceptions of the women

who frequent this neighborhood, and how these individuals are negotiating their identities in the context of the increasing presence of women-only events. Using critical discourse analysis of the transcribed interviews, the data was augmented with promotional materials and participant observation. The next chapter will discuss the process by which the materials in this section were interpreted, and detail the themes which were identified by this analysis. For example, the analytic theme of safety and shelter was operationalized by participants describing various ways in which they felt safe, relaxed, comfortable, and at ease while participating in Ni-Chome women-only events. The importance of this theme was emphasized by the frequency with which it arose in each and every interview, often more than once.

Chapter 3: Introduction to Girlfriend Attendees: Refuge and the Other

This thesis explores the increasing number of women-only bars and events in Shinjuku Ni-Chome, specifically seeking to answer the questions: 1) What are the values and perceptions of the women involved in these events? 2) How are these values and perceptions influencing the ways in which women are experiencing these events? Given the evolving perceptions of genders and sexualities in the world, as well as Japan's location in the global economy, I expected the interviewees to describe their experiences in terms of a politically constituted gay identity, with some references to gay rights in the world, and hope for change that would trickle down into their individual lives. My expectations only proved to be partly true. In fact, discussions with my respondents did not naturally veer toward these political, rights-oriented topics, but rather the discussions were deeply personal. Interviewees chose to talk about their own intimate experiences with family, friends, and in most cases, their apprehension when first approaching Ni-Chome events. These feelings and descriptions tended to revolve around five themes which I have identified: observation of *tachi/neko* binary; fantasy; a feeling of safety and escape; the Other; and contingency. Each of these themes is related to and overlaps with the others, and none is completely independent from the rest. The connection between these themes is deeply relevant to this study because it illustrates the complexity of the individuals who shared their deepest feelings for these interviews. Clearly, the respondents are grappling with a number of conflicting emotions, contradictory messages about sexualities and genders, and competing expectations about how women ought to look, feel, and behave. In the next sections, summarize each key theme, and describe how my respondents talked about them.

Degree of Observation of *Tachi/Neko* Binary

One of the key themes which emerged in the course of this research was that of the *tachi/neko* binary. Fundamental to the historical understanding of the LGBT community in Japan are pairs of descriptives like *tachi* and *neko* which can be translated as “dominant” and “submissive.” “butch” and “femme”, or “top” and “bottom”. These terms are used to describe two opposing gendered categories which echo the dominant heterosexual paradigm of masculine and feminine. While the exact origin and meaning of the words is contested (Bergman, 2006), *tachi* has been traced to the word *tachiyaku* (Robertson, 1999), which describes the leading male role in a kabuki play, while its counterpart, *neko*, literally means “cat,” and connotes images of femininity (p. 9). Until recently, these terms were ubiquitous in Ni-Chome bars and clubs, and served as code words to identify whether two people could be sexually compatible. The terms also were significant in that individuals felt compelled to achieve one or the other of these roles, especially when in public spaces where there was a high likelihood that they would be seen by others (Chalmers, 2002). In the course of this research, it became clear that this binary construct has undergone a shift in recent years, and no longer carries the importance that it once did in determining compatibility between individuals (Welker, 2010). Furthermore, while *tachi/neko* remains a persistent theme in many Ni-Chome bars and functions (consider the Beach Party, Rockstar Steady, and BoyishFriend party themes mentioned later in this chapter for example), it seems that especially among young women there has been a decline in the willingness of individuals to describe themselves in terms of *tachi/neko* gendered binaries.

Comments from interviewees, especially those under age thirty, tended to characterize the *tachi/neko* binary as a thing of the past. Many respondents felt that it was an inadequate framework with which to characterize the subtleties of their identity. Others felt that it

amounted to an irrelevant and outdated system which served to confine, rather than liberate them from compulsory gender norms. While respondents tended to articulate their antipathy toward *tachi/neko*, however, there still remained evidence of complicity and observation of this very system.

The degree of observation of *tachi/neko* was related to the respondent's age. Older respondents, particularly those over age thirty, tended to be less hostile toward *tachi/neko*, while younger respondents were more resistant and tended to reject the idea based on the reasons given above. Even among those who voiced their opposition to *tachi/neko* however, there were contradictory responses which showed a degree of ambiguity in individuals' views on the matter. This ambiguity was best evidenced in the statements of NI and WY.

NI described hating the way *tachi/neko* was used in the past. When asked why people used the words *tachi* and *neko*, she answered:

People use it as a way of introducing themselves to see if they are compatible. But it's going away these days. I never get asked that anymore. More people feel like they can go either way. In the past, though, they used to ask right away 'which one are you?' I hated that.

NI's statement about *tachi/neko* is an example of rejecting this binary framework while at the same time revealing an underlying complicity with it. NI suggests that the system is going away, and that she never gets asked about which category she belongs to. However, by saying that more people feel they can go either way, she is assuming the existence of the underlying binary gender regime upon which the *tachi/neko* system relies. That an individual could "go either way" presupposes both the naturalness of a mutually-exclusive two-tiered gender

framework, and the ability of individuals to switch from one role to the other. This was further verified when following up on her statement with another question:

NF: Why do you suppose that system has become less common?

NI: It's become irrelevant I guess. I am originally a *tachi*, but my current girlfriend is also a *tachi* so we both are able to change. If you like the person, it doesn't really matter.

Again, while *NI* is disavowing the *tachi/neko* system as irrelevant, she is simultaneously reinforcing it by suggesting that the category of *tachi* was the one to which she originally belonged, but made a conscious decision to change. By suggesting that "if you like the person, it doesn't matter," *NI* is acknowledging that while the *tachi/neko* binary is based on facts, a person's desire can transcend the category to which she belongs. In this way, *NI*'s comments illustrate the ambiguity of interviewees' views on *tachi/neko*.

WY's comments also revealed a degree of both rejection of the *tachi/neko* regime, and acknowledgement of some underlying truth behind it. When asked what she thought of the words *tachi* and *neko* *WY* said:

I am not really conscious of that, but most student-aged people you meet don't ask you if you are *tachi* or *neko* right away. They want to have a deeper interaction with the person in their first conversation, rather than jumping into that kind of talk. But when I went to some events and talked to some women who were a bit older, I was surprised that they asked me that. I had heard about it but they really do ask you right away! I wonder why they go to the trouble to choose between them anyway.

WY's comments characterize *tachi/neko* as a thing of the past, which only the older generation of women still recognize. Her surprise at being asked which category she belonged to showed

that she had little experience with this binary system, and probably hadn't encountered such a question before. She suggests that choosing between the two categories is troublesome and unnecessary. During the same interview, however, WY seemed to embrace the *tachi/neko* binary when talking about her own style:

I usually dress more boyish. Sometimes I even wear men's clothes. But I also went through a period when I was very feminine and wore dresses every day. It's unusual because femme people and boyish people are usually clearly divided and don't cross categories very much. But I can go either way. I get sick of being on one side for too long. And it's handy because if I start to like someone who likes femmes, I can be a femme and if she likes more boyish style, then I can be boyish.

WY's comments, like those of NI, show an assumption that feminine and masculine are two separate categories which are not ordinarily performed in the same body. By stating that femme ("feminine queer women") and boyish people don't cross categories, and are clearly divided, her statement presupposes the existence of the *tachi/neko* framework which she had previously admonished. Also, by describing herself as being able to go "either way", she, like NI is suggesting the validity of the underlying binary gender regime upon which *tachi/neko* is predicated. By suggesting that an individual could "go either way" WY is signaling both that she is limited to two choices, and that she can switch from one role to the other depending upon her circumstances. To both NI and WY, the individual's ability to choose between the two gender categories is proof that the *tachi/neko* system is invalidated. At the same time, respondents' statements that they are comfortable moving between binary gendered identities has the effect of reinforcing a central tenet of *tachi/neko*: the existence of two categories of

gender which are naturally compatible as mirror images of one another. The next theme of fantasy played a key role in facilitating *tachi/neko* at Girlfriend.

Fantasy

The theme of fantasy emerged from both the comments of the interviewees, and in participant observation of Girlfriend and Ni-Chome bars and events. The term fantasy is used here to describe the contemporaneity of both lived realities of participants in Ni-Chome bars and events, and the invitation by such establishments to participate in a collective activity based on something impossible or improbable. This is especially true of the capacity of fantasy to encode reality, providing an alternate mechanism through which realities are experienced (Žižek, 2008). Fantasy can also be understood as a means of instrumentalizing another individual's desire by performing the fantasy together (Lent & Fitzsimmons, 2013).

The fantasy theme was identified in the comments of participants with the use of words like “pretend,” “manipulating reality,” and contrasting Ni-Chome with the “real world.” These observations were augmented by the results of direct observation while attending Girlfriend. Fantasy was also an overarching theme of several facets of Girlfriend, which included the event's presentation, party themes, and decor.

Fantasy has been an important element of the overarching theme of Girlfriend since its inception. Girlfriend is just one of several of HG's businesses, which have included three women only events and two women-only bars. Each of these has been branded under HG's trademark production company called Goldfinger. The theme of Goldfinger, an allusion to the James Bond movie of the same title, can be found throughout Girlfriend, from the aptly-named Bond Girls dance troupe, to the gilded living room furniture set that decorates Girlfriend's main

stage. Accessing the website for the event automatically plays the theme song to the James Bond movies. HG shared her inspiration for choosing the theme of Goldfinger for her parties:

I call my party brand Goldfinger because I love James Bond movies. I wanted to be James Bond. The party has that kind of theme. Just once a month, people can pretend they are different. Just once a month, they can do anything they want. Even the Bond Girls [Girlfriend's in-house dance troupe], all twenty of them, they know that I am gay, but most of them are not gay. Some of my staff are married. Some customers have boyfriends, but just once a month they can be whatever they want. So it's kind of an escape party.

Here, HG's comments show the significance of fantasy at Girlfriend. Describing her personal fantasy of becoming a fictional spy character as the inspiration for Girlfriend, HG chose the words "pretend" and "escape" to describe the experience of Girlfriend staff and customers. This choice of words reiterates Girlfriend's overarching theme of fantasy because it suggests HG's perception that participants and staff desire to pretend and escape from reality. She also reiterates that this opportunity only happens once a month, which is common of other Ni-Chome events as well. Indeed, the fact that these events happen only during certain times, and within the specific physical space that Ni-Chome occupies reinforces the themes of both fantasy and contingency. Also significant in this context is HG's statement that many of her dancers, staff, and patrons who identify as heterosexual, "can be whatever they want" only once a month. This shows her perception that on other days of the month, they are presumably not being "whatever they want," a freedom which they can only experience at Girlfriend. Furthermore, it illustrates what Lent and Fitzsimmons (2013) call the "pedagogical" mechanism of fantasy, in teaching the superiority of one version of reality over another. HG's

version of reality (that even non-queer people wish for the chance to be queer for a night) is enforced by the Bond Girls dance troupe and others acting out HG's fantasy. This is by no means meant to suggest that non-queer women are forced to pretend to be queer at Ni-Chome. Rather, HG should be understood as a kind of proprietor of the parameters of the fantasy which participants are free to enact. Indeed, non-gay participants in Ni-Chome often frequent the neighborhood as a kind of day-tripper adventure akin to visiting a strip club or hostess pub, but with the added novelty of becoming an outsider themselves for a night. Thus, the physical existence of the district itself presents a kind of permeable layer between fantasy and reality through which anyone with curiosity may pass.

MT's comments about Girlfriend also reinforce the theme of fantasy. She said: "part of it is the sponsors I think kind of manipulating reality. I mean people who come there come in all shapes and sizes. Maybe [HG] just does it naturally without thinking about it." Here, MT is critical of the hegemonic template of femininity reinforced through the theme of fantasy at Girlfriend. She sees the corporate sponsors as selling one type of beauty as the only beauty, which she sees as a way of "manipulating reality," words that are closely connected with the theme of fantasy.

The themes of Girlfriend's monthly editions are also closely connected to fantasy on several levels. Each month, Girlfriend parties have a different theme which is chosen by the organizer HG. Past themes include Beach Party, Rockstar Steady, and BoyishFriend. Each of these themes gives examples of the use of fantasy and its importance in the experience of individuals at Girlfriend. The flyers in figures 3, 4 and 5 provide visual examples of the theme of fantasy, and also show the standard name placement of sponsor, Moet & Chandon.

Beach Party was the name of a party theme in which participants were encouraged to don either bikinis or aloha shirts when attending Girlfriend (see figure 3). On Beach Party night, the club was decorated with leis and inflatable palm trees, and even had a sandbox in which participants could pretend to be frolicking at the beach. In the small, cramped corner of Tokyo that Ni-Chome occupies, few scenes could be more laden with fantasy than a nightclub packed with sandy beachgoers.



Figure 3: Girlfriend flyer for Beach Party. Note the words “Bikini or Aloha.” Also, note the words “Sponsored by Moët & Chandon Champagne” identifying sponsorship, barely visible in the bottom right corner.

Rockstar Steady was a pop music album-themed party referencing the release of *Gossip*, an album by pop star Aikawa Nanase (see figure 4). Rockstar Steady was also the name of Nanase's new all-girl band in which she was the lead singer. The album famously features a video of Nanase, dressed androgynously, and engaging in a passionate kiss with another woman. Nanase herself, who is married to the father of her children, made a personal appearance at Girlfriend on Rockstar Steady night. She held a live concert at Girlfriend in which she danced seductively and blew kisses to the crowd of screaming female fans. She also held a press conference and a photo shoot in which she wore a studded black leather jacket with a white tank top, her hair styled in a shiny pompadour. During the photo shoot, one of the Rockstar Steady singers, dressed in a flowy white one-piece dress and high heels, held affectionately to her arm, as if to suggest that the two were a couple.



Figure 4: Girlfriend flyer for Rockstar Steady. Note the androgynous look of pop star icon Aikawa Nanase on left, poised to kiss the other woman. Again, note the words “Sponsored by Moët & Chandon Champagne” more clearly visible in the bottom right corner.

BoyishFriend is the one Girlfriend party in which non-feminine women, as well as feminine women, are encouraged to attend. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, HG ordinarily discourages masculine-looking patrons from participating in Girlfriend. BoyishFriend features a runway fashion show with androgynous models dressed in male drag. All of the clothing for the show is supplied by the sponsor H & M, according to HC, a member of Girlfriend’s

management and manager of Bar Motel. BoyishFriend also includes a concert in which the models perform onstage, as well as an arm-wrestling competition. Following the concert, the performers drift into the crowd of spectators to drink, mingle and take photos together. The evening also features what is referred to on the event flyer (see figure 5) as the BoyishFriend Supper Club. The flyer describes the supper club as “a champagne bar in which the very best, most handsome garcon are carefully selected to be your companion.” The supper club is in fact a miniature host bar, where hosts are selected for their looks, personality, and ability to show their patrons hospitality. Patrons pay extra to drink champagne in the company of the host of their choice. Onlookers can observe the goings on inside of the supper club from beyond the velvet ropes that separate the supper club from the rest of the club.

Figure 5: Girlfriend flyer for BoyishFriend. Note the use of the question mark after “women,” as well as the exclamatory announcement of the arm wrestling competition in the upper right and again in the bottom right. An announcement of BoyishFriend Supper Club “Champagne Bar” is also included in the bottom center.

These are a few examples of the use of fantasy in Girlfriend’s party themes. The next theme, the feeling of safety and escape, was especially common in the interviews.

Feeling of Safety and Escape

This theme emerged very early in the interviews, primarily as a response to the opening question of: “what motivates women to come to Ni-Chome?” This theme was identified when respondents described their experiences in Ni-Chome using the words “escape,” “safety,” “relaxation,” “not having to worry,” and “not having to think about what others think.” Respondents specifically cited a feeling of “safety” (*anshin*) that they felt when meeting new people in Ni-Chome as opposed to meeting new people in other areas of Tokyo. This feeling was often described in contrast to other areas of the respondent’s life such as at the workplace or in school, contexts in which respondents felt that they were assumed to be heterosexual. This expectation was described by respondents as causing “stress” and “anxiety” (*fuan*) because of the delicate issue of when, how, and whether to reveal that they were not heterosexual, and what reactions such a revelation might elicit.

Other forms of safety and escape emerged when respondents discussed how they were seen by other people. For most respondents, being able to hold hands with a same-sex partner in public is something they only do in the Ni-Chome area. Otherwise, they risk feeling the shame of being stared at by strangers, and feel uncomfortable knowing that they might be perceived as a lesbian couple by others. Because Ni-Chome is widely known as the gay district, there is no feeling of being an outsider as a non-heterosexual woman, a source of anxiety for respondents when outside of Ni-Chome (Welker, 2010). With no underlying expectation of heterosexuality, Ni-Chome provides precious escape from the constant worry of being identified as an outsider.

Respondents also described a feeling of safety and comfort that was achieved simply by being among other queer women. Participants felt safe when surrounded by people who

were presumably supportive and accepting of their lifestyle, especially other non-heterosexuals. This feeling was cited when respondents described a feeling of “community,” being among those with “similar circumstances,” and experiences that mirrored their own.

One respondent, MT, brought out the issue of safety in her responses. MT, who is a political activist for several nonprofit organizations, cited her desire to be among queer women as a result of having lived in the US for several years. She described how adjusting to life in Japan was difficult because heteronormative gender roles and norms felt more rigid in her life in Japan than they had been in the US. MT said: “I was used to going to clubs and things like that in the US, and I moved to Japan and just felt my life is so straight. I couldn’t stand it and I had to go to a women’s party.” This statement also shows MT’s perception that many aspects of everyday life, including those that are not necessarily associated with sexuality (i.e. shopping at a department store) are imbued with the assumption of heterosexuality (McLelland, 2005). She situates her life in Japan within this system of compulsory heterosexuality, a condition which she finds oppressive. She is suggesting that visiting the Girlfriend women-only party seemed to offer an escape from the feeling of being confined by heteronormative social roles.

Similarly, NT, a full time company employee, indicated safety as a motivation for visiting Ni-Chome. NT did not seem to have any queer friends, and I felt that she desired more friends with whom she could identify as someone who is attracted to women. At the same time, however, she also seemed uncomfortable identifying herself this way or even talking about homosexuality, which surely made her pursuit of finding others like her much more difficult. She described the feelings of patrons in the following way:

They [women who frequent Ni-Chome] can't talk about it [same-sex attraction] to their other friends. If they talk openly about it to people, they feel it's a bad thing somehow.

But if they come here, there isn't any of that, so it's much more comfortable.

NT's statement indicates that only in the comfortable surroundings of Ni-Chome can she feel free from fear of being discovered as non-heterosexual, presumably because she knows that she is among others like her. Later, NT described the feelings she had when visiting Ni-Chome for the first time. She stated, "I was surprised how easy it was. The first time, I was like 'oh my god this is so cool!' And it was definitely more comfortable, like I said before." Here, her feeling of surprise at the ease with which she visited Ni-Chome for the first time shows that she had also felt fear of entering the neighborhood. Ultimately, NT was able to overcome her fear of the unknown, and she expressed relief at having summoned the courage to visit Ni-Chome for the first time.

Similar to the previous two respondents, HG, the organizer of Girlfriend, also made several statements which highlight the importance of the themes of safety and escape. HG is an intense, powerful, and respected entrepreneur in Ni-Chome, and a member of the "old guard" of organizers who originally opened the door to women-only events in Tokyo. She began the interview by describing the condition of women in Japanese society as follows:

Even if the box is removed and the housefly set free, she will not fly because she has no idea that possibility of flying exists. If there is a very interesting and beautiful girl, but there is no [concept] that it is ok for women to fall in love, they are not going to think about that because they don't have the ability. Girlfriend is a way of opening that box. People can do anything they like.

HG's characterization of women in Japanese society as being confined shows her perception that they are held captive by their own socially-prescribed limitations of thinking about (or not thinking about) sexuality. This metaphor also positions HG as holding the key to their emancipation. Ni-Chome (and by extension, Girlfriend) is the escape hatch through which women can break free of their internalized homophobia. Later, HG referred to Girlfriend specifically using the words "escape party," further highlighting this theme.

The motif of safety was also observed in the form of participants' desire for connections. This tended to manifest as a longing for more opportunities to make "friends" (*nakama*) among gay-friendly patrons of Ni-Chome bars and events, to encourage cooperation between community leaders, especially bar and club owners, and to protect one another from homophobic discourse by banding together as a unified group.

NT, the company employee who seemed uneasy with overtly identifying her sexuality, cited the search for connections as a motivation for other women who frequent Ni-Chome: "I like dancing, so I really want to dance and be in high spirits, but I feel like people are there to talk." She then revealed her own desire for a broader sense of community with her statement about another nearby dance club: "Arty Farty [a popular Ni-Chome club which allows both men and women] for example is more like a straight club because anyone can go in and everybody is friendly." Here, NT shows her desire for a space where she can be among people who are accepting of her sexuality.

Similarly, another respondent, AK, described this search for others like her. This was especially important since she and her partner IK had left their rural Hyogo prefecture hometown four months prior to our interview in order to be in an environment more tolerant of their relationship. She said, when describing the reasons why she goes to Ni-Chome, "We [AK

and her partner, IK] haven't made many friends since moving here so it could be a good chance for that." AK's statement shows her experience of difficulty establishing a supportive network in Tokyo. She desires a community which is accepting of her relationship. She feels that Ni-Chome events are the ideal place to meet people who have experienced prejudice, and are therefore less likely to harbor those feelings themselves: "I want to go there [Ni-Chome] to meet people who I have things in common with," she explained. For AK, feeling same-sex attraction is something she wants her friends to have experienced. When discussing personal matters with heterosexual friends, she finds it difficult to discuss her relationship with her female partner: "it's just that it's a hard thing to talk about with normal [futsuu no] friends who just date guys. I want friends who I can talk to about us. So I think it would be nice if I met a friend like that at a [Ni-Chome] event." Here, it is clear that making friends with others in Ni-Chome is desirable and locatable within the theme of safety.

IK, AK's partner, also felt that it was problematic to discuss her partner in the context of work and other areas of her life: "we can't tell the people we meet at work or in our everyday lives. So we thought it would be easier to meet people who have an understanding about that." She also felt that the atmosphere of Ni-Chome offered a sense of community in which participants have similar values and experiences. IK said: "everyone has the same way of thinking and common circumstances [*kyouguu*]." The "common circumstances" which IK is describing are the challenges of living as a gay person in Japanese daily life. The presumption that one has dealt with, or is dealing with, such familiar hardships creates an instant bond between strangers who meet in Ni-Chome. No such safety exists when meeting strangers outside of Ni-Chome however. IK described this greater risk in her daily encounters: "you have to worry about other people looking at you, and their prejudices." Using varying degrees of

caution when meeting others, IK lives most of her life in a constant state of awareness of her sexuality, which is escapable only in Ni-Chome.

My youngest respondent, WY, a university student and karaoke employee, also cited a desire for casual connections as a reason for people to visit Ni-Chome. She said: “most people go to hang out with their friends from school, drink, that kind of thing.” WY feels that her deepest friendships are forged among those who share her feelings of same-sex attraction. She described this feeling of commonality: “if I compare the number of really close friends in Ni-Chome to the number in my university, there are more in Ni-Chome. I feel like I can really talk openly to people here, and we have more in common.” Open communication and sharing a connection with others are important themes of safety which she feels are common when visiting Ni-Chome.

Similarly, AT, a hairdresser from rural Sendai prefecture also cited the desire for more connections as a reason young women come to Ni-Chome. She discussed the impact of the death of the owner of Kynswomyn, another long-running women-only bar that was a familiar hangout for many patrons. She said that her death brought many people together who shared the common experience of visiting Kynswomyn over the years. AT also called Ni-Chome a “tiny foreign country” with its own culture. This characterization of Ni-Chome as being a separate, but close-knit community with a shared history indicates a feeling of safety and solidarity.

HM, a highly active political organizer, used the word “community” several times to refer to queer women in Ni-Chome. A self-proclaimed lesbian activist, she situated members of this community as being a unified group, galvanized by attacks from Japan’s right-wing conservatives, such as Tokyo’s Governor Ishihara Shintaro. For HM, safety from these attacks

is best ensured by banding together. She explained: “as targets of hostility, we need to respond together cooperatively.” In HM’s view, the two-part cycle of being targeted by criticism, and subsequently responding as a group through social activism is a process that fosters unity. In this way, community is constantly forming through the tension between opposing political discourses, a process that tightens the bonds between individuals, and provides a sense of safety and escape from attack.

Another participant, NI also cited the desire for safety and comfort as a reason for why women visit Ni-Chome. NI visits Ni-Chome nearly every weekend, and is not open about her sexuality with either her friends or family. She has been in a relationship with a woman for several months, however, and said: “they [women visiting Ni-Chome] are looking for someone they can depend on for support. Someone to count on.” She felt that events like Girlfriend offer a shelter for queer women to feel connected to one another. She described this feeling:

I think they [events like Girlfriend] offer a place for people who can’t come out, and a chance for interaction and exchange [kouryuu]. I haven’t come out because my friends say it’s gross. So I really feel accepted and comfortable there among my friends who are like me.

Here, it is clear that for NI the threat of rejection by friends is too great to enable the act of coming out. In order to find the safety of acceptance, and escape the threat of condemnation, therefore, she seeks shelter in Ni-Chome events.

YK, the highly ambitious editor of Tokyo Wrestling online magazine and author of the book Tokyo Bois, began going to Ni-Chome eight years prior to our interview. Having made the transition to being open to her friends and family about being a lesbian, she was eager to find a supportive community of individuals who could relate to her experience. YK later went

on to publish Tokyo Wrestling, for queer women interested in fashion. She writes frequently in the magazine about women-only events. Her recently published book, Tokyo Bois, contains photographs and dozens of interviews with androgynous queer women in Tokyo. Through these entrepreneurial endeavors, YK explained that she wants to reinforce the idea that it is safe for women who identify as queer to be highly visible in Japanese society. She described how the coming out process initially sparked her curiosity and interest in finding others like herself: “eight years ago, I came out, which was quite late. So I went to Ni-Chome because I didn’t have any lesbian friends.” Implicit in YK’s comment is the assumption that making lesbian friends is an integral part of being an openly queer woman in Japan, a process which she began late.

To summarize, the importance of safety and refuge was a common thread running through all of my interviews. This highlighted the importance of Ni-Chome women-only events as a means of making connections in a world where respondents felt that they were outsiders because of their sexualities. The search for these connections, however, did not always produce the kind of safety which participants desired.

The Other

While all interviewees revealed a feeling of safety and comfort associated with Ni-Chome, most also described various ways in which they felt an existential condition of isolation, weakness, separation, or being out of place in some way. Whereas the feeling of safety and comfort manifested in connectedness, and feelings of community and sameness, the seemingly opposing feelings of being separate, out of place and not belonging showed the individuals’ perception of difference. These two contradictory feelings of both separateness and

sameness demonstrate that Ni-Chome and events like Girlfriend are ambiguous, rather than clear-cut places for safety and shelter.

Participants expressed feelings of Otherness on several different levels. As non-heterosexuals in a heteronormative society, respondents share the identity of being the Other with gay men. However, many respondents expressed frustration at the enviable presence of male homosexual public figures in popular media, and what they felt was the disproportionately small number of openly lesbian public figures. This male-centric representation of homosexuality in mainstream media, such as TV dramas and talk shows, is also mirrored in the comparatively small number of women-only bars and events in Ni-Chome. In this way, respondents felt that they were in fact a minority within a minority. This comparative invisibility was a common theme of the Other which was felt by many participants. The young couple AK and IK, for example, lamented the lack of openly queer female public figures. IK said: “if only there was a big star that was openly lesbian, I think society would definitely be captivated by that.” AK’s response: “yes, it could change the way people look at us.” This longing for representation in order to counter prejudice and lack of awareness was common among many respondents.

Many participants also felt acutely different in some ways from other women who frequent Ni-Chome. Several people described anxiety and difficulty approaching Ni-Chome bars and events as an outsider. Many also felt that the standards of beauty expected for certain Ni-Chome patrons were set unrealistically high, and that events such as Girlfriend were too exclusive. Indeed, organizers of such events tended to be strict in their evaluation of patrons’ appearances, a point illustrated in the responses below from Girlfriend organizer HG and patrons. In many cases, only certain women who met the organizer’s standards of beauty and

femininity were allowed entrance into the club or event. Club owners and organizers were in effect Other-izing patrons, and reinforcing a feeling of not fitting in or being somehow outside of the accepted standards of gendered beauty.

Several respondents also indicated feelings of detachment from their own internal identity as gay women, describing feelings of homophobia and self-hatred because of their same-sex attraction. These participants made statements indicating the feeling that their own sexuality was a kind of internalized Other which they had distinguished from other elements of their identity. This theme was identified when respondents used words such as “normal,” “natural” and “separate” to talk about heterosexual friends and experiences in which participants were involved outside of Ni-Chome.

Girlfriend organizer HG’s comments were deeply connected to the feeling of isolation and the Other. Several times during the interview, HG characterized Ni-Chome as separate from the outside world, and therefore shielded from the eyes of society because of this isolation. While visiting Ni-Chome, she said her patrons no longer have to feel anxiety about how they are seen by others in light of their homosexuality. She explained that they can feel safe to hold hands with a same sex partner, or rest assured that an androgynous appearance will not elicit the stares and whispers of strangers that one can expect in other areas of Tokyo. She felt that this sheltered separateness was counterproductive, however, and had the effect of pampering people to the point that they were unprepared to deal with the real world:

Just because you’re a lesbian, people say ‘we believe in each other, we’re helping each other!’ I think that’s very indulgent. There’s a time and place for that, but I want to be a member of society at large. I just happen to be Japanese, and a woman, and a lesbian, but before that I am a human.

Here, HG is critical of women she feels are too dependent on one another for shelter. For HG, the shelter provided by other lesbians is indulgent, and has resulted in a population of queer women who are coddled. She contrasts this with society at large, where other aspects of her identity are given precedence over her being a gay woman. HG is expressing both her feeling that a community of women exists with Ni-Chome as its hub, and that this community is so close-knit that it is suffocating its members. This view shows that HG feels like the Other herself, inherently separate from the rest of self-identified lesbians in Ni-Chome.

HG also struggled with the feeling of being the Other in her past. She said that she had spent much of her youth feeling disgusted with herself because of her same-sex attraction. She called this disgust “homophobia” and confessed that she didn’t like the thought of being gay or having to refer to herself as a lesbian. HG described these feelings of shame and homophobia using the past tense, insinuating that she had overcome these internal conflicts. However, she also expressed a feeling of being smothered in her current life by the expectation that she be a part of the aforementioned community, simply by virtue of her same-sex attraction. She did not feel a part of this community, but was expected to behave as a part of it because she identifies as a gay woman. In this regard, HG struggles with feeling like the Other in her everyday life.

At one point in our interview, the conversation moved toward the topic of gender and transgendered people coming to Girlfriend. This was the only moment in which HG seemed to become agitated. Her volume and tone of voice rose, and she began speaking very quickly:

Lately there are a lot of FTM [female to male transgender] people coming [to Girlfriend] . . . they have their breasts removed and grow a beard, and want to come to the party. So at the door, we have had some standoffs, some fights. They say, ‘you let me in just two months ago!’ Well two months ago you didn’t have a beard did you? If

they want to become a man, they should do it all the way. The people are coming here to have fun as women . . . women are there to see women. These people call themselves boku [Japanese masculine pronoun for “me”] and have a beard . . . I guess these people don’t belong anywhere so it’s sad. They can’t be categorized.

Here, it is clear that HG struggles with Otherizing in terms of her patrons as well. On the one hand, she wants to deliver people from the restrictive norms of Japanese gendered social order, and create a space in which every woman is welcome, regardless of sexual preference. On the other hand, the rules for who fits the definition of a ‘woman’ become problematic in her efforts to categorize her patrons. This categorizing process is especially troubling because of the Girlfriend’s status as a queer women’s event, and the neighborhood in which Girlfriend takes place. Ni-Chome is the one area where people who do not fit the hegemonic standard of femininity or masculinity, especially those undergoing the transition from female to male or vice-versa, are the norm, and therefore not subject to the standardized gender norms of greater Japan. Naturally, such individuals assume that Ni-Chome establishments will be a welcoming, safe place for them. However, HG’s measuring stick for who fits the definition of a woman seems to mirror that of the standard, gendered binary which Girlfriend is supposedly avoiding. In this way, organizers like HG take on the role of choosing exactly who the Other is, and enforcing a strict policy of exclusion based on this standard. Hence, Ni-Chome events, ostensibly catering to marginalized people such as queer women, can be seen as reinforcing rather than challenging the dominant gendered paradigm of the mainstream.

In another case, the young college student and karaoke worker WY also characterized the separateness of Ni-Chome, as opposed to the rest of society, as being invalid or non-real, in a way that was similar to HG’s description:

When I was in college, I didn't want to meet [a partner] in Ni-Chome. I wanted to meet naturally. I had fallen for a straight person [non-ke] before, so I wanted to meet in the real world, out in society. I thought people were just coming to Ni-Chome to hook up with each other, and I didn't want that. But when I came here and met real people, I realized that wasn't the case. People just meet, and some start dating and some not. If they do, it's because they like each other, and not just because they both happen to be lesbians. Yes, the world is smaller here [in Ni-Chome], but it's not a bad place. It doesn't matter if we meet in a normal way or not, or if the person is a lesbian or straight. If I like her, I like her regardless.

This account of WY's evolving struggle with being the Other is similar to HG's in that interactions between women in Ni-Chome are characterized as somehow unnatural, abnormal, or not occurring in the real world. WY worried that if she were to meet a woman in Ni-Chome, the relationship would not be as valid as it would if she had met her somewhere else. Taking this line of thought even further, she expressed concern that if she had begun dating an openly lesbian woman, as opposed to a heterosexual woman, the relationship would be the result of both partners being lesbians, rather than true love. Never mind the fact that a heterosexual girl would presumably be uninterested in dating someone of the same sex. In this way, WY's statement could be a sign of both the internalization of heteronormative discourse, and its manifestation as the Other inside of herself.

In yet another instance, AT, the hairdresser from Sendai prefecture, showed her perception of HG's pivotal role in establishing a presence for women in Shinjuku Ni-Chome, while at the same time reinforcing a standard of femininity for patrons. AT said:

[HG] doesn't like boyish girls and won't go near them. Only girly girls. My friend is a femme [feminine-looking lesbian] so she's friends with [HG]. [HG] really started this whole scene with two other women: Tara from Kinswomyn [another well-known women only bar in Ni-Chome] who passed away, and the Jo who runs Diamond Cutter [another women-only event in Ni-Chome], that group is responsible for making Shinjuku Ni-Chome big.

Here, AT clearly feels that HG's disdain for masculine or androgynous women (AT refers to her own appearance as "androgynous") determines that she and HG cannot be friends. AT's feminine friend, however, meets HG's standard, and is therefore able to be friends with her. In AT's mind, HG's central role in creating the Ni-Chome women's scene has had the effect of institutionalizing masculine and androgynous women as the Other, reinforcing a binary system of masculine and feminine.

Similarly, NT's previous statement that Arty Farty is more like a straight club because anyone is welcome, also illustrates the feeling of the Other. By situating inclusiveness in the realm of heterosexuality and straight clubs, this statement indicates NT's experience of the Other as a Ni-Chome patron. This positions herself as somewhat of an outsider in both Ni-Chome women-only clubs (because of their exclusion), and non-Ni-Chome Tokyo clubs (because she is not heterosexual). In this way, she has also highlighted the ambiguity of Ni-Chome establishments.

NT later described her first visit to Ni-Chome as an outsider, again showing the feeling of being the Other. According to her account, she had desired to go there, but was unable to do so because, as an outsider she had to be taken there by someone who was experienced with the area:

I always knew Ni-Chome was here, but I never had a chance to come. Then a friend and I went to La Nina [another women-only dance party] and went dancing and I met a girl who invited me to go to Ni-Chome. So I thought ‘finally I have a chance to go!’ and she brought me there. That was the first time.

This account of her first visit to the neighborhood is an example of her feeling like the Other. NT had a desire to explore the neighborhood, but needed someone to guide her in order to set foot there. Not only did she require an escort, but she also had to be invited. Only after a chance meeting with a person who offered to introduce her to Ni-Chome would she finally have her chance to go there. This account highlights that Ni-Chome is not necessarily the natural territory of anyone who feels as though they don’t fit the heteronormative gendered paradigm. Rather, Ni-Chome establishments can present an ambiguous and daunting new dominion which can even require the escort of someone with special expertise in order to enter.

MT, the activist who identifies as bisexual, also expressed feelings of the Other which were similar to that of NT, especially when approaching Girlfriend. After recently attending the event, she felt disillusioned with the atmosphere, and the scale of Girlfriend’s size and impact in Ni-Chome. This disillusionment prompted a moment of self-reflection that included seeing herself as not fitting in with the people around her. She described her feelings as the following:

[Girlfriend] has this huge space in Ni-Chome. And it has a huge screen with commercials and things like that running. Some of the images were even portraying some stereotypes about women, so I was like ‘why am I watching this?’ . . . Girlfriend has always been glamorous, but to have that be such a major scene in Ni-Chome was kind of weird. I generally got a feeling that instead of being yourself and just dancing,

there's a certain kind of hype that you have to keep up with. And there are a lot of girls in groups.

In this statement, it is clear that MT feels as though her perception of Girlfriend is different from that of the other attendees. She is speaking from an observational, rather than a participatory position, and feels as though she cannot be her true self in the atmosphere of that event. This is a sharp contrast from her previous statement that she attended to Girlfriend in order to be among others like her, and escape the oppressiveness of heteronormativity. Her feelings of being the Other in Ni-Chome led her to suggest a different solution from NT's, however. Where NT seems to gravitate back toward heterosexual clubs as an alternative to Ni-Chome's women-only clubs, MT suggested a third option: "we [MT and her feminist activist friends] were actually thinking of having our own women-only party . . . all of our friends and friends of friends could come, and we could just party. Because a lot of activist events are kind of boring." Here, MT is expressing the desire for a reevaluation of the concept of women-only parties to make them more inclusive.

WY's comments also reflected a perception of Ni-Chome's impermeability and the theme of Otherness. She described her first visit to Ni-Chome as a challenging test of her bravery: "after trying and trying to get someone to go with me, I finally had to really build up my courage and go there on my own." Her experience shows that as an outsider, it is most desirable to bring along another person on one's first visit to the neighborhood. Failing that, often the only recourse is to go alone, risking the rejection and ostracization of insiders by being the new and inexperienced Other.

Similarly, AH who is an office worker and grew up in rural Shizuoka prefecture, found Girlfriend to be exclusive. AH moved to Pittsburgh for five years in 2000 and now lives with

her parents, and struggles with balancing her home life with her sexuality. She commented several times about the exclusivity of events like Girlfriend, and the ways in which they can reinforce the feeling of the Other. About club organizers and bar owners, she described a Darwinian environment in which people compete to make their event seem more “exclusive” (haitateki), rather than inclusive. AH herself is somewhat caught in margins of this competition because of her personal relationship with the owner of another women-only event, *Panache*, a competitor of Girlfriend. Because of her friendship with Panache’s owner, she is an outsider at Girlfriend, and does not attend it. Similar to Girlfriend, Panache also enforces a strict code of gender-specific entrance requirements. Only those whose passport says they are female are allowed into the club. AH also said: “they are going to treat you as a girl. It’s a women’s party, so you are going to be treated as a woman.” This statement reflects an assumption that it is possible to treat someone as a man or as a woman, and that these two ways of treating a person will be different somehow. When pressed to explain how one treats a person as a woman, however, AH could not explain, and paused before saying: “actually I don’t really know what that means.” AH then used Girlfriend’s policy as an example to illustrate the difference by saying:

At Girlfriend, you probably can’t go in if you have a beard because [the owner] says so. She wants to have a women’s party, so she wants fashionable, feminine women. Because it’s cooler I guess . . . It looks prettier to have beautiful women around.

This statement shows that the rules of the event can overtly enforce the definition of who the Other is. In this case, the Other appears to be individuals who have undergone, or are undergoing the transgender process, and therefore do not fit neatly into the category of male or female.

Furthermore, because the idealized patron is “feminine,” and “beautiful,” it is apparent that the Other could include “non-fashionable” and “average-looking” women as well.

Another respondent, NI, who visits N-Chome nearly every weekend complained that the increased presence of gay and *onee* (“transgendered men”) on television has highlighted the problem of a lack of understanding of gay women in the mainstream. She said: “lately there are a lot more gay men and transgendered men on TV . . . they have a lot more recognition. But women couples are still not understood. It just doesn’t make sense to [non-gay viewers] to see women together. But gay men are much more accepted.” Here, NI is expressing the belief that gay women are a minority within the larger minority of all gay people. In NI’s view, the public’s idea of homosexuality is still very male-oriented. It doesn’t make sense to TV viewers to see two women together, since a gay couple conjures up the image of two men, a stereotype which is reinforced in the media. In this way, the Other are lesbian women whose existences are still comparatively unacknowledged even while gay men have begun to appear in popular media such as TV dramas and talk shows.

AK and IK also commented that the prevalence of gay men in popular media was reflective of a male-centric idea of homosexuality that often leaves women as an afterthought. IK said: “we can’t tell the people we meet at work or in our everyday lives [that we are a couple].” AK agreed, adding: “yes, we really can’t talk about it. But maybe guys are able to talk about it. Gay men. There are gay characters and stuff like that on TV.” AK and IK then said that there are rumored lesbian Japanese celebrity women, but that these women do not publicly acknowledge their homosexuality. In this way, male-centric ideas of homosexuality reinforce the status of lesbian women as the Other within the minority of gay people in Japan.

HM the self-declared lesbian activist also expressed frustration at the lack of recognition of all gay people in popular media, but especially gay women. She said that while gay people in Japan do not face the threat of violence like they do in some places in the world, there is still discrimination, which is magnified in the case of gay women. She said: “we [gay people] are ignored as if we are not here. Especially lesbians. Everyone knows that gay men are here, but people still say ‘are there really lesbians in Japan?’” HM is clearly frustrated at the lack of understanding that pervades the public’s perception of gay people in Japan. In HM’s view, the dearth of openly queer women in the public sphere has caused people to question the very existence of lesbians in Japan at all. HM’s statements show her perception that queer women are the Other within the minority of all gay people.

In sum, participants described the various ways in which they felt an existential condition of isolation, weakness, separation, or being out of place in some way. For some, this was experienced as a function of being queer in a heterosexual society, a feeling which sometimes engendered feelings of commonality with queer men. Other participants experienced the feeling of Otherness to a greater degree when measuring the visibility of queer women to that of queer men, particularly in Japanese media. Finally, as queer women who identified that part of themselves as the Other, some individuals experienced excruciating feelings of self-loathing and anti-gay sentiment. The next significant theme, that of contingency, is connected with the feeling of the Other as it is a way of understanding the careful negotiations which individuals participating in Ni-Chome events are making in their everyday lives.

Contingency

In addition to the themes of *tachi/neko*, fantasy, safety and escape, and the Other, the theme of contingency emerged on several levels in the course of this research. The term

contingency here refers to the distinct and highly specific set of conditions, times and locations (Kawashima, 2009), of Ni-Chome women-only events which require heightened levels of flexibility on the part of patrons and organizers. This theme also refers to the tension between women patrons' need for events such as Girlfriend, and the uncertain circumstances which determine when, where and whether such events can take place. While respondents reported that Ni-Chome bars and events were places of safety and escape, the often unforeseeable set of obstacles that respondents routinely encountered in order to attend these events showed that they were not simply lifeboats of refuge. Rather, the events require an often elusive combination of circumstances in order to take place, making events like Girlfriend precarious and dependent on chance. The theme of contingency was identified when respondents described both having a strong desire to visit Ni-Chome to feel comfortable, but also being unable to do so due to restrictions resulting from being too busy, financially constrained, or afraid to enter the neighborhood as an outsider. This theme was also identified when patrons and organizers described the characteristics of Ni-Chome spaces, which can constrain individual events in certain circumstances. Economic uncertainty, club owners changing hands, or two separate events competing for one space all can affect the ability of organizers like HG to successfully orchestrate an event.

The circumstances of the lives of participants who organize and attend the events are also highly contingent. Nine out of the thirteen interviewees described having had to leave family behind and relocate, either to a different area of Japan or another part of the world, as a direct result of their sexuality and incompatibility with their home or family life. One of these, WY gave this answer when describing why she moved from her home in rural Ibaraki, to Tokyo at the age of nineteen:

I guess because I was living in the countryside, and I knew I was a sexual minority so I just wanted to get out into the bigger world. And my family doesn't really know, but they kind of do. Like my mom says 'You're more likely to bring a girlfriend home than a boyfriend. But don't you dare bring one here!'

Similarly, HM described the pain of hiding her sexuality from her parents: "the hardest was in college, during that four years, because even though I found someone I liked, I couldn't tell my friends, or my parents and that was very hard. Extremely hard." HM then went to study in Paris for a year, partly in order to explore her sexuality with space and privacy from her family. While living there, she fell in love with a woman. When her mother came to visit she described the pain at being unable to hide her feelings any longer: "my mom came to visit once and found out about what was going on. And she was very shocked and hurt, and told me that I should never have been born and things like that because she was very shocked. I was shocked too. It was still a big taboo at that time." In HM's case, even after relocating to another continent, she could not avoid the shame of being told she belonged nowhere and should never have been born. Her case is especially illustrative of the Other as well, because of her shock at her own sexuality, which she describes as taboo.

After leaving home, participants described having to work more to support themselves in their independent lives, and simultaneously having to cope with the disappointment of their family members. Without family support, or with only partial family support as was the case with WY for example, visiting Ni-Chome's comparatively expensive bars and events can seem like an overpriced luxury.

The theme of contingency was also identified in the physical spaces which were used as venues for Ni-Chome's women-only events. Events like Girlfriend, occurring in spaces which

are shared by several events and businesses, are inherently contingent in that they lack a fixed location which is guaranteed to be available for use when needed, and can be highly dependent upon the schedules of other events. For example, Girlfriend takes place in Hijoguchi, a dance club whose name means “emergency exit.” HG explained that Hijoguchi rents the space for up to eight other weekend events each month. According to AH, who has personal connections with several club owners in the area, the new owner and manager of Hijoguchi prefers to rent the space for men-only events. This is because male-only events tend to draw larger crowds, most likely due to the fact that Ni-Chome remains a comparatively male-oriented neighborhood. However, there is a large, very popular men-only party called Ageha which takes place on the fourth Saturday of every month in Shin-Kiba, a coastal area of Tokyo which is far from Shinjuku Ni-Chome. Due to the high volume of male patrons attending Ageha, the number of patrons in Ni-Chome on that particular night each month is impacted, and therefore the manager of Hijoguchi allows Girlfriend to fill the space on the fourth Saturday of each month. Situations like this are common in such cases of shared event spaces in Ni-Chome. In this way, regularly-occurring women-only events can be highly contingent, and even dependent upon the schedules of men-only events.

HG’s comments also reveal other characteristics of contingency in Girlfriend. The fact that the event only happens once a month poses a number of risks for HG, who depends in large part upon the profitability of Girlfriend for her livelihood. She said: “organizing parties, you lose money and it costs a lot. If it rains, you lose money. It’s kind of a gamble.” Here, HG’s comment shows the uncertainty of such events, which depend entirely on patrons’ willingness and availability to attend. In Tokyo’s typhoon-prone summers, even the weather can be a wild card which can eliminate an entire month’s profits. The contingency of such

events is further magnified, therefore, by a number of unpredictable factors such as weather, and other contemporaneous events. In order to offset this risk, HG explained that she began asking companies for sponsorship in the mid-1990s. This process, however, had the effect of HG relinquishing an amount of creative control, which would eventually influence the atmosphere of Girlfriend.

HG explained the process by which the corporate sponsors of Girlfriend came to help support the event. In 1993, HG approached a representative of Moët & Chandon, a champagne-producing subsidiary of the large French multinational corporation LVMH, and asked the company to sponsor her party. The company agreed, and supplied HG with an undisclosed amount of money, as well as goods which included Moët & Chandon-themed decorations and cases of champagne to serve her patrons. At that time, HG did not use the words lesbian or gay in her advertising, and she avoided use of these words when approaching the company for sponsorship. HG said: “I never said the word gay women. I would say it was a women-only party for women who are open, but I wouldn’t say anything about sexuality when I approached big companies.” HG’s careful use of language shows her perception that a company’s image could be damaged by association with homosexuality. Her use of the word “open” seems to signify her acknowledgement of the fact that her party largely appeals to gay women, while the euphemistic “open” lets her avoid discussing this issue.

While ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ were not included in promotional materials, certain key points, including word-of-mouth, enabled patrons to understand that it was an event by and for women, many of whom were gay. This was reflective of the contemporary norm that so-called “queer spaces” were, practically speaking, places where lesbians could meet, but did not overtly advertise themselves as such (Welker, 2010). Indeed, the photocopy of the entrance

tickets from the first parties shows two Venus symbols side by side (♀♀), with the words “women only!” but does not list the word lesbian, or any other queer-identifying terminology (see figure 6).



Figure 6: First flyer for Girlfriend (originally called “Girl’s Night”) in 1991. Note the lack of identifying words *lesbian* or *gay*.

This kind of ambiguity had many functions. As a form of security for patrons not wanting to be associated with an overtly lesbian-oriented event, leaving the controversial word

off of event flyers and posters meant that attendees could rest assured that they would not be identified as belonging to that category. As a means of broadening the event's customer base, leaving the event open to interpretation as to whom it was targeting meant that people who did not identify as lesbian, but still wanted to attend (heterosexual women who wished to avoid being approached by men for example) could also feel welcome. This is also reflective of the overall fluidity of Ni-Chome's image as a gay neighborhood, which is frequented by both gay and non-gay patrons alike. It could also be interpreted as a reflection of general tolerance for sexual exploration, because homosexuality has been viewed as a fetish, not unlike a hobby (McLelland, 2005). HG's ability to strike a balance between luring sponsors wary of overtly homosexual images and language, and at the same time trying to appeal to the desired patrons of her party, shows the difficulties of conducting such an event in this context, as well as her own business acumen. It also may also provide some reasons for displaying stereotyped images of women, which patrons such as MT, profiled in Appendix B, find troubling at Girlfriend. MT described the commoditized images of women at Girlfriend critically:

It is odd for me because going to an event like that is different from being in Parco [a famous Tokyo department store] or something like that . . . I mean there's no one lesbian world, but there is a scene that is different from the commercialized one made by Marui [another famous Tokyo department store] or whatever. That one is just another way for the consumer culture to come in. For me there's no point in promoting this image which came from men's expectations of women.

This comment from MT illustrates the conflict of trying to challenge images of essentialized femininity through Girlfriends's all-women-are-welcome theme, while at the same time accepting support from the global purveyors of such imagery, and reproducing this

imagery at the event. Navigating this complex relationship illustrates the contingency of HG's position.

Starting in 2009, the words “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “gay” begin to appear on Girlfriend's promotional materials (see figure 7). Magazine editor YK said explained that this was a significant change: “What's different is that now [HG] says it's a ‘lesbian event.’ Eight years ago she would not use the word ‘lesbian’. She would just say it's a ‘woman-only event.’ She actually prints the word ‘dike’ or ‘lesbian’ on her flyer and that's something very new.” YK saw the change in thematic language around 2009 as occurring within the context of larger changes taking place in Japan around the image of queer women, which was tied to the fashion and entertainment industry: “I think the L-Word created a kind of visibility, made it more fashionable. It was very big in Japan. All of a sudden, for the first time I was seeing the word ‘lesbian’ everywhere, in fashion magazines, getting a lot of publicity.” Reiterating the theme of contingency, YK stressed, however, that approaching Japanese companies for sponsorship as a gay enterprise remains a dubious prospect: “there is no LGBT market in Japan. Most companies are not LGBT friendly. If you go to Subaru to ask them to sponsor you, I don't think they'd say yes. They are a very Japanese company.”

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21:00~5:00 2800YEN/ID

世界中のメディアから取材を受け続けた、日本初にして最大のWOMEN ONLYイベントとして名高いGOLD FINGERがお贈りする姉妹ラウンジPARTY。ガールズDJ & VJの魅力をどこよりも早くお届けしてきた【GF】、各界で大人気のGFチームがフロアをHOTに盛り上げます! シャンパンBAR [スナックMOTEL@GF支店]もオトナの女性に大好評!! TOKYOのLガールズシーンをみんなで盛り上げるわよん♥ オーライ!

DJ: CHII
DJ: PELI
DJ: KUBO
DJ: ENBUNHARI & Yoshiko
VJ: ビビ

*ご入場は20歳以上の女性ONLY。IDチェックあり。毎月最終土曜日レギュラー開催。

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with this FLYER 2,000Yen/1D before 24:00

Figure 7: Girlfriend flyer from January, 2009. Note the emergence of the word “lesbian” in the upper right corner: “Welcome all girls & women, lesbian, gay women, dyke [sic], bisexual and also straight girls!”

Securing sponsors’ support by no means guarantees it for the long term. Sponsors were keen to offer financial support to Girlfriend in the 1990s, but the money has slowly tapered off since 2008. HG explained that the economic downturn has impacted her sponsors’ willingness to give her cash, though she never disclosed the amount she received. Currently, the sponsors of Girlfriend limit their support to products. A representative from Moët & Chandon for example comes to Girlfriend a few hours prior to the doors opening in order to set up a

champagne corner where customers can purchase Moët by the glass. The profits go to HG, but the company no longer provides cash directly. Another company, Hennes and Mauritz (more commonly known as H & M), provides all of the wardrobe for BoyishFriend, a variant of Girlfriend which includes a runway fashion show of androgynous and masculine-looking models. The company provides the products on the condition that the models will wear only H & M clothing on the runway, and that promotional materials for the event use the words “sponsored by H & M”. These examples show the ways in which economic uncertainty has had the effect of slowly leaching creative control of Girlfriend from HG and redistributing that power to corporate sponsors. Thus, Girlfriend’s contingency is closely tied to unforeseeability and precarity in the global economy as well.

WY’s story also illustrated the theme of contingency. She described having moved out of her parents’ home in rural Ibaraki prefecture at the age of nineteen because she felt different from other people in her small town. When asked why she moved to Tokyo, she explained that she had left her family home in rural Ibaraki in order to experience an environment in which she no longer felt the acute Otherness of being a sexual minority. Living on her own in Tokyo, WY has to support herself while attending school full time. Currently, she works the graveyard shift at a karaoke company as her main source of income. She wants to spend more time in Ni-Chome, since she finds that it is easiest to talk to people there, but is only able to come to the neighborhood three to four times a month. This is mainly due to her work hours coinciding with the normal busy hours of Ni-Chome bars and events. Because Girlfriend only takes place once a month, often on a day when WY has to work all night, she has yet to attend the event. Furthermore, Girlfriend’s 2,500 yen entrance fee is restrictive for WY, who makes the Tokyo minimum wage of 837 yen per hour. WY’s circumstances are an example of the theme of

contingency because she has a persistent need to be among others like her, but also faces a set of obstacles which can make it very difficult to do.

The couple AK and IK also provided examples of contingency in their interview. The two moved to Tokyo from Hyogo prefecture after hearing rumors about Ni-Chome being at the center of gay women's culture in Japan. This excited them and, similar to WY, they were motivated to uproot themselves in order to live in an environment which is more accepting of their sexuality. Upon arriving in Tokyo, however, they were disappointed. Both respondents described having to hide the fact that they are a couple, except on nights when they are in Ni-Chome, which is approximately two times per month. Both said that they would feel uncomfortable visiting Ni-Chome alone, and only want to go together as a couple. Both are full time students and AK also works as a waitress in the evening. Because of their schedules, it is rare that they are able to visit Ni-Chome together. AK and IK's case is an example of contingency because the circumstances of their lives and the spatial and temporal characteristics of Ni-Chome events create a highly specific set of conditions which are required in order for them go there.

In sum, the theme of contingency was identified in the distinct and highly specific set of conditions, times and locations in which individuals were able to experience freedom from fear and anguish about their sexualities. This required heightened levels of flexibility where the individual was willing to live, and work, and the lengths to which they were willing to go in order to hide their sexualities from their families. This theme also refers to the tension between women patrons' acute need for events such as Girlfriend, and the various circumstances which determine when, where and whether such events could take place.

Summary

This chapter has introduced the five themes which emerged from the thirteen semi-structured interviews conducted with participants in Ni-Chome events. These themes were: observation of *tachi/neko* binary, fantasy, a feeling of safety and escape, the Other and contingency. Each of these themes was observed in both the comments of the participants, and in elements of Girlfriend's production, presentation and advertising.

Observation of *tachi/neko*, a framework of opposing dominant and submissive gender roles, was the final theme which was identified in this research. While more than half of respondents, especially those under age thirty, tended to describe this system as outdated, irrelevant and unrealistic, critical discourse analysis of the respondents' comments revealed an assumption that feminine and masculine are two separate roles not ordinarily performed in the same body. The *tachi/neko* binary was also echoed in the themes of Girlfriend, which tended to reinforce a dynamic of dual gender through dress code and staged performance.

Enabling and facilitating *tachi/neko*, the theme of fantasy emerged both from comments of interviewees, and observation of the nature of Ni-Chome events. The term fantasy is used to describe the juxtaposition of lived realities of participants in Ni-Chome bars and events, and the invitation by such establishments to participate in a collective activity based on something impossible or improbable. The fantasy theme was articulated with the use of words like "pretend," "manipulating reality", and contrasting Ni-Chome with the "real world." Fantasy was also a feature of Girlfriend's alternating themes, incorporating elements of pop music and Hollywood movies, imaginary landscapes, and a fashion show featuring models hired to provide emotional experiences for patrons. HG specifically encouraged patrons to "pretend" and "escape" by participating in a predetermined set of conditions corresponding not only to Girlfriend's theme du jour, but also to a specific, homogenizing notion of femininity. The

fantasy of uniform, feminine beauty was given priority over a deeply diverse and heterogenous reality. In this way, fantasy served to conceal and encode the contradictions of power even while paradoxically “acting as a form of collective resistance against the heteronormative boy-meets-girl paradigm” (Welker, 2010, p. 126). Further underlining this ambiguity was the theme of safety and escape and the related feeling of the Other.

Interviewees cited the feeling of safety and escape as the reason why they and other women visit Ni-Chome. Because Ni-Chome is widely known as a gay district, interviewees felt that it provides an escape from the constant worry of being identified as a non-heterosexual outsider. Individuals felt that the atmosphere of Ni-Chome as a queer space made it possible for others to see them as an insider, giving them a significant feeling of comfort and safety. This feeling of safety and comfort, however, was tempered by seemingly contradictory feelings of being isolated, different in some way, and not fitting in, a theme categorized in this thesis as the Other.

The Other was constituted by respondents’ perception that they were separate and different from others in Ni-Chome. This feeling was felt not only towards other women who frequent Ni-Chome clubs and events, but also regarding gay men who have traditionally been afforded more visibility both inside and outside of Ni-Chome (Welker, 2010, p. 129). Respondents also revealed their own internal feeling of Otherness, which was articulated as homophobia, self-loathing, and not wanting to be identified as a lesbian, or part of a queer community. Participants used the words “normal”, “natural” and “separate” to describe their heterosexual friends and family, highlighting the perception that their experiences in Ni-Chome occurred in a realm of the abnormal, unnatural and different. This feeling of Otherness was

further augmented by the event organizers' inconsistent interactions with patrons along gendered lines.

Patrons whose appearance more closely conformed to mainstream standards of feminine beauty were given preferential treatment, while patrons whose bodies were more gender-variant (exhibiting both a beard and breasts, for example) were discouraged from entering the club. That respondents were able to harbor feelings of being both "at home" as an insider, and isolated as the Other simultaneously was evidence that Ni-Chome constituted an ambiguous experience, rather than a clear-cut place of refuge and safety. This ambiguity was further highlighted by the emergence of the theme of contingency.

Contingency, the distinct and highly specific set of conditions, times and locations of Ni-Chome women-only events (Kawashima, 2009), was identified on several levels. Contingency was identified in the crucial need that individuals have a permanent safe place where they can feel accepted, even as the probability of their easy access to such a space is unlikely. Access to these places of refuge was threatened by a number of factors including demanding work schedules, financial constraints, and fear of approaching Ni-Chome as an outsider. There was also a high likelihood that individuals would encounter other obstacles that would make it difficult for them to access these events. These included situations where two separate events were competing for the same space, clubs were frequently changing hands, or economic downturn made it difficult to continue the event.

In the next chapter, I discuss my interpretation of these themes and their relationship to one another. I attempt to connect these themes to the socio-historical contexts of post-war constructions of family and nation, and global flows of capital and ideas discussed in Chapter 1, describing how these themes interact in individuals' lives and experiences with Girlfriend.

Chapter 4: Discussion of the Five Key Themes

In this chapter, I explain my interpretation of the key themes of: *tachi/neko* binary, fantasy, a feeling of safety and escape, the Other, and contingency. I attempt to justify my assumption that they are a representation of sociopolitical practices (Fairclough, 1995) by placing them in the context of Japanese constructions of the heterosexual family unit, and global flow of ideas and capital. I discuss the relationship of the themes to one another, and explore their significance in the experiences of Girlfriend participants.

Acting Straight: The *Tachi/Neko* Binary

This research is informed by the theory that genders and sexualities are ambiguous, fluid, and not necessarily dependent upon one another. Rather, these are consumed and expressed differently at various times, locations, and contexts, and are repeated, performed activities (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990). These aspects of identity occur within an infinite field of human uniqueness, rather than as static, constant and clearly defined categories, an assumption which is in clear contrast to the *tachi/neko* paradigm which emerged during the interviews.

Tachi/neko, a dual role system based on the presentation of either a masculine or feminine gender role, was until the 1990s, a common way of identifying oneself and determining relationship compatibility with others (Welker, 2010; Chalmers, 2002). Until that time, the system served as both a code to identify what one's role would be in a sexual encounter, and as an indicator of a person's corresponding identity as either one of masculinity or femininity (McLelland, 2005). Used both in the male and female queer circles, *tachi/neko* determined which individuals were compatible with one another much in the same way that the butch/femme dynamic characterized some lesbian relationships in the US until the 1990s. After

that time, it became more common to identify oneself with one or more of a range of sexualities which included lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer people, or choosing not to identify with any of the above (Chalmers, 2002).

Missing from much of the literature describing *tachi/neko* is a thorough interrogation of the concept as a “heterosexualized” binary (Wieringa, Blackwood, & Bhaiya, 2007; Chalmers, 2002). Many researchers explain it in these terms, with the assumption that a relationship which features a masculine and a feminine person can be explained by understanding this as a kind of reflection of heterosexual relationships. This assumption, therefore, delegitimizes the individuals in the relationship, and their gendered identities, as being somehow imitations of their more authentic heterosexual counterparts. This is especially true with regard to the woman who performs a more masculine role, because this person problematizes socially constructed notions of femininity in a way which is more visible to scrutiny. More troubling, however, is the degree to which this explanation of *tachi/neko*, butch/femme as reenacting heterosexuality also falls short of questioning the degree to which gendered duality is a necessary and natural part of a heterosexual relationship. If sex and gender are to be understood as performed, repeated, independent activities (Butler, 1990), then all relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual, with one masculine and one feminine member should be thought of (on a sociological level at least), as an extension of the societal constructs of dual genders. In other words, instead of asserting that lesbian relationships imitate heterosexual relationships, we should investigate the mechanisms, identities, and gendered performativity which enable *any* relationships to enact dual gender roles.

While *tachi/neko* has largely disappeared from popular use, those who experienced Ni-Chome in the 1980s and 1990s can recall routinely being approached by strangers in bars with

the brash opening question: “which one are you?” It is generally regarded as a formality of the past, therefore, with very little applicability to the diverse realities of individuals’ sexualities today.

A majority of interviewees disavowed *tachi/neko* as being outdated and irrelevant, but later described their sexualities as occurring within a binary gendered paradigm reflecting its basic tenets. Many respondents expressed this idea in some form of being able to “go either way,” meaning that depending on their desire and that of their partner, they could choose to perform either a masculine or feminine role. This indicated the degree to which the understanding of sexualities has been structured around dual identity categories, which are productive, rather than simply descriptive (Butler, 1990). Even given that respondents found the parameters of *tachi/neko* to be unrealistic and out of date, the fact that these categories exist as an idea still potentiated that the individuals’ identify with either a masculine or feminine role at a given time.

Further illustrating the productive aspect of this binary regime, in an example of enforcing an overtly masculine/feminine paradigm directly upon the bodies of patrons, Girlfriend’s Beach Party theme also echoed the *tachi/neko* paradigm, with the dress code encouraging patrons to wear either a bikini or an aloha shirt. HG, who was forty-one years old at the time of this research, experienced Ni-Chome during the height of *tachi/neko*, and perhaps chose a beach theme which explicitly reflects it as a result. An informal survey of the patrons’ clothing at Girlfriend Beach Party revealed that approximately two out of three patrons did choose to enact the dress code, with the majority of them choosing the aloha shirt option rather than wearing a bikini. Some participants even climbed into the sandbox which was set up on the stage of the dance floor presumably as a kind of prop to enhance the Beach Party theme.

This type of fantasy role play is common in many Japanese socio-subcultural activities, and, as the next section shows, is an important element of the Ni-Chome experience as well.

Fantasy: Modeling Desire and Facilitating Feelings of Safety and Care

The theme of fantasy was identified in the comments of participants who used words like “pretend” and “manipulating reality”, and contrasted Ni-Chome with the “real world.” It describes the coexistence of both the lived realities of participants in Girlfriend, and the participation in an activity based on something that cannot exist in reality. This is especially true of the capacity of fantasy to encode reality, providing an alternate mechanism through which realities are experienced (Žižek, 2008). Expanding upon Žižek’s ideas, Lent & Fitzsimmons (2013) noted the pedagogical function of fantasy as means of teaching the superiority of one version of reality over another: “In many cases, fantasy can also have a didactic function, allowing the desires of others to operate pedagogically, particularly [in the case] of what, by consensus, [is] considered the advanced, modern society, whatever its other shortcomings” (p. 85). Many themes of Girlfriend echoed this mechanism of fantasy as a means of teaching the desires of others, often those of HG.

In an example of fantasy, Girlfriend’s recurring Goldfinger theme, derived from HG’s desire to see herself as the character James Bond, occurred at several levels, including the name *Girlfriend* itself, which is vaguely alliterative of the word “Goldfinger.” In another reference to the James Bond character, HG chose the name Bond Girls for the group of dancers who regularly perform at Girlfriend. The group typically performs a strip show which includes audience participation in the form of tipping the dancers with fake paper dollar bills, which patrons acquire when paying the entrance fee for the party. This is an example of fantasy encoding one aspect of affective labor, a common theme in Aizura’s (2011) account of care

workers at a Thai gender reassignment surgery clinic. The job of the clinic workers, which entailed both exhibiting caring behavior and the formation of friendships with patients, constituted both an emotional exchange, and a commercial transaction, a combination identified as affective labor (Hardt & Negri, 2002). At the clinic, care workers were tasked with nurturing and comforting patients, both in order to facilitate their body's recovery after surgery, and to aid in the transformation of patients into more feminine-feeling subjects (p. 147). At Girlfriend, the task of the Bond Girls dancers is to flirt and mingle with patrons, exhibiting a libidinous attitude toward them in order to "make them feel sexy" according to HG. Just as the labor of Thai workers was naturalized within an orientalist discourse of Thai culture, the affective labor of the Bond Girls, situated in a highly sexualized atmosphere of escaping from reality, conceals the function of affective labor as a commodity.

Commodified affective labor, identified as a hallmark of the contemporary global economic infrastructure, places the very innermost qualities of subjectivity itself -- language, desires, affects -- at each intersection in the production of capital (Virno, 2004; Hardt & Negri, 2002). Even the intimate characteristics of our humanity are thus shaped and reshaped by the logic of capital, and the distinctions between production and consumption, and subjectivity and commodity become more and more difficult to discern. The above example of representations of fantasy and desire at Girlfriend constitutes a microcosm of this aspect of global capitalism, wherein affect serves to encode and eroticize the exchanges between customers and workers.

This condition, however, should not be misunderstood as invalidating the experiences of individuals who are involved in these exchanges, or undermining the agency of these individuals in the process. Interviewees were passionate in their descriptions of the Bond Girls' performance, and the feeling of awe which they experienced while participating in that aspect

of Girlfriend. They described their interactions with the dancers as making them feel like they had “gotten their money’s worth” out of Girlfriend’s comparatively expensive cover charge of 2,500 yen (approximately twenty-five dollars). Brief discussions with some members of the Bond Girls also revealed that they enjoyed their jobs overall, and considered Girlfriend an ideal venue in which to perform. Many of the dancers were married to men or had boyfriends, and felt that the atmosphere of Girlfriend as a women-only event gave them a sense of security and safety which they could not experience dancing for men. Fantasy, thus, can function as a mechanism for allowing feelings of safety and security, enabling individuals to care and be cared for in ways that would seem strange without fantasy’s encoding of reality. Interviewees also described with great enthusiasm the overall importance of events like Girlfriend in giving them a sense of safety, comfort and escape.

Safety and Escape: Finding Calm

For young queer women, the stress caused by a feeling of fundamental difference from others is a uniquely isolating experience. Welker (2010) emphasized that it is difficult to overstate the importance of having a safe, familiar and welcoming place for an individual questioning her sexuality. As such, Ni-Chome bars and events offer an escape from the burden of hiding one’s sexuality, but also a location in which an individual can belong as an insider, a member of a larger group, rather than as an outsider (Welker, 2010, p. 125). Interviewees overwhelmingly echoed this feeling in their responses to the question of why women visit Ni-Chome. Describing the anxieties of everyday life, and the constant threat of rejection by others, participants characterized Ni-Chome events as offering a precious escape from such pressures. The expectation of one’s heterosexuality was temporarily lifted, providing a sense of normalcy and belonging which was difficult to experience in other contexts. Patrons described the

importance of identifying with others in Ni-Chome whom they assumed to be “like me,” having shared similar experiences as queer women. Without the threat of being identified as an outsider, or the pressure to clarify their sexuality for others, women in Ni-Chome described feeling relaxed, safe, and comfortable.

Participants also named a desire for connections (*nakama*) as a motivation for visiting Ni-Chome. This desire tended to appear as a longing for more opportunities to make gay-friendly friends during visits to Ni-Chome bars and events, to encourage support between community leaders (especially bar and club owners), and to protect one another from homophobic discourse by banding together as a politically active group. These comments tended to represent Ni-Chome as a kind of shelter which was uniquely accessible to queer women, and which these individuals had a special ability to claim as their own. One participant described this feeling as Ni-Chome representing a “queer space” (*ikuukan*) wherein everyone has faced similar circumstances. To reiterate young WY’s description of this feeling of identification with the lived experiences of others: “if I compare the number of really close friends in Ni-Chome to the number in my university, there are more in Ni-Chome. I feel like I can really talk openly to people here, and we have more in common,” and later when describing her first interactions in Ni-Chome events and bars: “I felt like I can relax and talk about love without hiding it. I feel calm there.” This feeling of commonality and safety in letting one’s guard down was different from other areas of individuals’ lives, where they described feeling vulnerable, left out, and alone.

Feelings of loneliness and vulnerability which necessitate the drive for shelter and safety have been identified as common features of contemporary existence (Hardt & Negri, 2002; Virno, 2004). The relentless fear and dread of not feeling “at home” (Virno, 2004, p. 32),

and the “absence of substantial community” and “connected special places” (p. 39) are symptoms of Japanese postmodern life, rather than traits belonging exclusively to any minority group. Virno wrote that these anxieties can make our existence unbearable unless we locate the places that offer a refuge in the form of connections. Ni-Chome women-only events offer venues in which patrons are highly connected, and often intimately so. One participant used a gesture of linking chain links to illustrate how individuals get to know one another through their connections in this neighborhood. Another described having to “greet” (*goaisatsu*) HG as a formality when visiting Ni-Chome, even though she didn’t enjoy the atmosphere in Girlfriend. Maintaining her relationship with HG as a friend was paramount in order to ensure that she did not lose an important connection in the community. Five participants described having to hide their romantic relationships from others in the neighborhood because of the inevitable gossip which ensues once word spreads about a member being no longer single. While some of these descriptions carried a decidedly negative and even irritated tone, participants nevertheless described Ni-Chome as a crucial point of contact with others, which offered an important source of shelter and safety. However, as comments from the interviewees showed, shelters like those which Ni-Chome represents are not clear-cut places of refuge. Rather, they are complex, conflicted and deeply ambiguous.

Neutralizing The Other Within

Interviewees who described a feeling of safety and comfort associated with Ni-Chome also described a number of ways in which they felt like outsiders there. This took the form of feeling like a foreigner, visitor, or somehow inferior to other women at events like Girlfriend. The feeling of inferiority could be attributed to the policies of event owners like HG, whose hierarchical organization of patrons exacerbated their feelings of insecurity.

Enforcing a set of unwritten rules about which patrons' bodies constituted acceptable standards of femininity, organizers like HG took it upon themselves to decide who would be allowed into the event, and who would be the outsiders not permitted entrance. Ni-Chome patrons whose gendered bodies tended to be especially fluid, transitioning and ambiguous were constrained by a set of regulations enforcing a homogeneous, feminized standard of beauty which did not reflect their realities, but was nevertheless upheld as fact. HG's comments that patrons come to Girlfriend "to see women" (a specific kind of feminine women, as opposed to transgendered women, for example) highlighted the contested definition of what constitutes "a woman." Her statement revealed the assumption that "women" can be categorized according to a set of fixed, uniform attributes which are unambiguous and easily spotted. This hegemonic notion of femininity underlines the ambiguity of Girlfriend in its capacity to reinforce a dual regime of gendered performativity (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990).

It seems counter-intuitive that the desire for shelter, community, and connections could yield such hegemonic representations of genders and sexualities. Members of oppressed communities can easily become willing participants in the systems which perpetuate their own oppression, however. Indeed, the desire for one's own demise can be brought about in certain circumstances, where the rules for who wins and who loses create an environment of self-destruction. Ni-Chome participants, for example, who perceive that aspects of their own queerness make them less attractive may repress these very attributes as a means to ensure their own value as individuals. This has the dual effect of creating an ever-narrowing image of an idealized and univocal queer identity which necessarily delegitimizes diversity, silencing non-conforming representations of an individual's unique sexuality. Tomiyama Ichiro (2000) wrote about this propensity of marginalized individuals to desire their own oppression, due to their

precarious location within the economic system. Documenting the self-policing that pervaded Okinawan villages in the 1930s, Tomiyama described the threat of annihilation that drove indigenous Okinawans to persecute one another, repressing their own culture in favor of a universal, homogenizing notion of Japanese subjectivity as a means of survival. The assimilation was not enforced by some heavy-handed military or police officers, but by peers as a form of self-policing, which gave way to the internalization of the colonizers' values. "Okinawan was constructed . . . as the other in the self that had to be eradicated" (p. 127). Similarly, through neutralizing the Otherness of the self, organizers like HG have found survival and prosperity in the global economy. HG's policy of closing the doors to gender-variant patrons echoes the principle of "assimilate or die" (p. 122). Her approach to her sponsors also reveals her tacit understanding of the risk in using words that are associated with homosexuality. Censoring words like *gay* and *lesbian* when dealing with sponsors, HG walked a fine line to avoid alienating her financiers. This delicate balance is both a symptom of HG's Otherness of the self, and an example of the ambiguity of meaning and identity in the context of global capitalism.

Contingency, Instability, and the Weight of a Nation

Even if organizers like HG are able to adequately woo potential sponsors, there is still a great deal of risk for many individuals involved. Given the importance of these events for the people who organize and attend them, there is little guarantee that they will actually take place on a given day. A number of factors can derail a monthly event, causing it to lose money and patrons. Issues that affect the event include: spatial and time constraints, frequent changes in the ownership and management of the venue Hijoguchi, and challenges resulting from economic conditions. Furthermore, the individual circumstances of patrons who attend events

like Girlfriend show that precarity and contingency are common characteristics of their lives, making it difficult to find stability and commit to specific times and locations for their activities.

The spaces relegated to events like Girlfriend are limited, contested, and unstable. Occasionally other events are scheduled for the same time and location as Girlfriend, which, according to AE, close friend of the manager of Girlfriend's competitor Panache, has created conflicts resulting in last minute rescheduling. This kind of situation can cause confusion, resulting in a loss of attendance. Perhaps more damaging, however, is the lasting impression of undependability that a last-minute cancellation can leave with potential patrons, many of whom travel for an hour or more on the train to attend Girlfriend. The changing of ownership of the event's venue, Hijoguchi, also has the effect of creating instability. During the course of this research, Hijoguchi changed hands three times. The most recent change resulted in a renaming of the venue (currently it is called *Geisha*), and a renovation that lasted several weeks, during which time the club was closed. Several other regularly occurring events compete for space in Ni-Chome, where large dance clubs suitable to house such events are extremely rare. Ni-Chome is characterized by very small bars, some seating as few as five customers at a time, and has one of the highest concentrations of gay bars per square block in the world (McClelland, Suganuma & Welker, 2007). All of these factors contribute to an atmosphere that is rapidly changing, unstable and subject to a wide range of influences, making Girlfriend and events like it particularly contingent.

Girlfriend's patrons also generally tend to be a precarious group, further highlighting the theme of contingency. Many of the individuals who attend these events, such as WY, AK and IK are in their early twenties and living on their own, often working long hours in more

than one job. Many are students who are balancing demanding work and school schedules. Some, such as NI and NT, are hiding their interest in attending Ni-Chome events from their families and friends. As young people in contemporary Japan, they face a tremendous amount of pressure to perform certain roles in the economy as well. Several interviewees reported feeling pressure to secure stable jobs, marry and have children. In a particularly tense exchange between the young couple AK and IK, it was revealed that AK's family would never accept her relationship with IK, and were holding out hope that she too would marry a man and have children soon. Especially in the context of economic decline, and Japan's now well-known declining birthrate, Japanese youth bear a particularly heavy burden of criticism from those looking to point the finger in blame (Yoda, 2000; Allison, 2009).

Allison has placed the precarity of contemporary Japanese youth in a global context, where youth are expected to assume the superhero's role in rescuing the nation from economic collapse, but are unable to do so in reality: "When real youth fail to get steady jobs or reproduce, as did their parents, they are castigated for not assuring Japan's future – what gets rendered as a crisis in reproduction" (p. 91). In this broader political economic context, the strain placed upon Girlfriend participants like AK to conform to a heteronormative lifestyle is further compounded by their location within the global economy, where their nonconformity can be seen as making Japan less competitive.

Within the context of this unstable, unpredictable global capitalist economy, Allison (2009) characterized the decline of middle class jobs, and the deterioration of the institution of the family as grave problems facing Japan's economic future. However, the lived realities of the participants in this research tell a different story. These individuals have never had the option of participating in the middle class dream through the usual channels of education,

employment, and consumption. Sexual minorities, immigrants, and rural Japanese lie outside of the narrative of what it means to be middle class in Japan. With so much discourse focused on this system's failure to deliver the goods of middle class life as promised, some have overlooked the fundamental injustice of upholding a racialized, heterosexualized middle class as the pinnacle of contemporary life. In this way, events like Girlfriend, and the individuals who patronize them, are highly contingent, subject to chance, conflicting needs, and competing, often contradictory messages.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the themes which emerged from the analysis of the interviews. The values and perceptions of women involved in Ni-Chome events were linked to one another by the key aspects of *tachi/neko*, fantasy, safety and escape, the Other, and contingency. These themes were tied together by the overarching theme of ambiguity which also characterizes Ni-Chome events such as Girlfriend. While the individuals interviewed for this research expressed the desire for a space in which their lived experiences of non-conforming, diverse sexualities would be accepted and embraced, this research has found that the critique offered by Ni-Chome's women-only events can empower these desires, yet also can undermine the possibility for such a space. While events such as Girlfriend can offer an escape from the implicit heteronormativity of daily life, and a location in which marginalized individuals can connect with one another, they can also reinforce homogenizing messages of binary genders, and discourage performativity of diverse sexual identities.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Directions

Events like Girlfriend can offer a critical alternative space in a society that excludes individuals who fall outside of heteronormative narratives of the mainstream. Interview participants said that they felt “comfortable,” “relaxed,” and generally at ease when participating in Girlfriend and other establishments in the neighborhood. They characterized Ni-Chome as offering an “escape” and a kind of shelter. This research showed, however, that this critical space can exhibit attributes which have troubling consequences. While these events did offer a feeling of comfort, escape and shelter from heteronormativity, they also had the potential to reinforce these discourses. Individuals reported feeling like the Other, an outsider, or (in the case of event organizers), compelled to make the event more exclusive, rather than inclusive. These seemingly contradictory responses served to highlight that the events were actually ambiguous, rather than clear-cut places for refuge.

Girlfriend’s organizer HG encouraged patrons to “pretend” and “escape,” by participating in a specific, idealized template of femininity, and a set of conditions corresponding to themes that she alone would determine. The fantasy of uniform, feminine beauty, and often dual gender performativity was presented as superior to a more diverse representation of the multitude of sexual identities seen in the individual participants at Girlfriend.

The lived experiences of individuals participating in Ni-Chome events also showed that their lives were highly contingent and precarious, dependent upon circumstances which were outside of their control. Japan’s economic rise helped to create the conditions for this precarity, having constructed the nation as a homogenous, racialized, heterosexualized body, united by the desire to obtain education, employment, and prosperity (Yoda, 2000; World Bank, 2011). This paradigm leaves little room for the diverse, heterogeneous reality which comprises Japanese

society. Single-parent families, same-sex couples, rural Japanese and descendants of immigrants are among the many people who are excluded from this hegemonic template of what it means to be “Japanese.” In the case of Shinjuku Ni-Chome participants, this realm of interiority extended to individual notions of beauty and femininity, arresting the representations of diverse genders and identities in favor of a stream of homogenizing images delivered through the logic of capital.

The recent increase in the number of women-only events in Ni-Chome has taken place in a global context of rapidly changing ideas about sexuality which are both political and cultural. The list of countries which are expanding their legal frameworks to incorporate same-sex marriage is growing every day. Global opinion polls indicate that views on homosexuality are increasingly positive and accepting (Pew Research, 2012). The women-only events of Ni-Chome should not be interpreted simply as an extension of growing global tolerance for non-normative sexualities, however. Like many other contemporary Asian queer cultures, Ni-Chome continues to be a process of hybridization (Jackson, 2011) which is continuously evolving, and influenced both by global flows of culture and capital as well as distinctively local practices. This evolution, incorporating both global, westernized queer cultures and local and regional processes, is becoming a common phenomenon throughout many cities in Asia (Jackson, 2011; McLelland, 2006; McLelland & Suganuma, 2009). At the heart of this evolution of hybridized queer cultures is the individual, whose daily life is a continuous negotiation of identities, contexts, and changing ideas of what it means to be queer, a woman, and Japanese.

The five key themes of *tachi/neko*, safety and shelter, the Other, fantasy and contingency, which emerged during interviews, are best understood as some of the common avenues through which the queer cultural identities of my participants are being negotiated today. As Japanese queer culture continues to evolve through the hybridizing processes of global and local cultural

flows, the individuals who are at the forefront of this evolution are uniquely positioned to criticize and recontextualize the role of a diverse and robust Japanese civil society.

In recent years, a loosely connected group of politically active queer women has emerged in Japan and is pushing for legal and social recognition. One of these individuals, Higashi Koyuki, recently made international news when she and her female partner confirmed with Tokyo Disneyland that they would be able to hold their wedding ceremony at the theme park (McCurry, 2012). Another prominent voice on the political front is that of Kanako Otsuji. Otsuji became famous in Japan for being the youngest person ever elected to the prefectural Osaka assembly in 2003 at age 28, and more recently for being Japan's first openly lesbian female government official. Otsuji was instrumental in passing 2005 legislation to allow same-sex access to Osaka Public Housing, a privilege that was previously reserved for married couples (Tsubuku, 2005). Osaka, like other major metropolitan cities in Japan, has long been the site of struggle by marginalized groups to gain equal access to public housing (Kawashima, 2009). In many parts of Japan, it is notoriously difficult to rent an apartment as a same-sex couple, and not uncommon to be questioned directly as to one's marital status as a routine part of the rental process. The feeling of vague riskiness attached to same-sex couples manifested in 2012 in the public comment by former Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro that gay people “have something missing” and are “deficient” (McCurry, 2012). High-profile public statements of this nature can highlight seemingly opposing sides of society-wide controversial issues, or what James Paul Gee (2011b) has called “Conversations with a capital ‘C’”. At the same time, this moment in Japan’s history has yielded unique opportunities for discussion about the role of civil society, especially women’s active participation in the rebuilding of Japan in a way that is more inclusive of diverse genders and sexualities.

Future Directions: Towards a More Multivocal Future

Approximately six months prior to conducting my fieldwork in Tokyo, Japan's massive earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown was the cause of tragic destruction, and unspeakable loss for communities affected by the disasters, the surrounding areas, and many people throughout the country. In the wake of the disasters, a deepened sense of democratization, and critical thinking about gender, diversity and social vulnerability has ensued. Ideally, this thesis in its limited scope, will be a small part of the struggle to destabilize false narratives of sameness and univocality which can offer comfort and safety in times of uncertainty.

In the context of economic decline, and the aftermath of the disasters of March 11, individuals have begun to question the legitimacy of the gendered social paradigm that enabled the nation's post-war economic rise. The corresponding myths of sameness can no longer conceal what has lay beneath all along: diversity, heterogeneity, and multivocality. These must be at the heart of a society which is respectful of the worth and dignity of all human beings. A critical next step, therefore, will be an analysis of the challenges of embracing diversity in the post-March 11 reconstruction. Such an analysis should evaluate the areas of livelihood security, state supports for women and the specific challenges emerging from a diversity of families affected by the disasters, based on the insights of individuals in same-sex partnerships, unmarried couples with or without children and others. I plan to return to Japan to explore these aspects at a later date, and look toward post-March 11 studies as a significant field of research to come.

With regard to Ni-Chome's women's events, a recent conversation with one of my interviewees revealed that they have continued growing rapidly, even since the fieldwork was conducted for this thesis. Reportedly, there are many more of these events and these are

happening with greater frequency, on a weekly, rather than monthly basis. As a possible next step, I would like to visit some of these emerging events and gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which they are being organized, the individuals who are organizing them, and the processes that are yielding these growing numbers. Furthermore, because organizers like HG have begun using the words gay and lesbian on their promotional materials, it would be worthwhile to investigate the degree to which organizers are using their agency through the mobilization of queer identity to constitute an asset from an entrepreneurial standpoint. Notably, this is a marked shift from the past, when queer-identifying words were specifically avoided. Ambiguous as they may be, queer women's events and establishments are continuing to grow and multiply, and both researchers and the general public will eventually have to take notice.

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Appendix A

Guiding Questions For In-Depth Interviews

Questions for all interview participants
hometown, time lived in Tokyo, occupation, age, languages spoken, places visited/lived, times visiting Ni-Chome in an average month
“Could you tell me how you ended up here?”
“Tell me about your experiences with Girlfriend.”
“Can you describe how it feels when you are there?”
“If you have been there several times, how has the event changed since you first went?”
“What kind of people go to Girlfriend?”
“Why do you think people attend Girlfriend?”
“Why do you think people attend Girlfriend?”
“Why do you think people attend Girlfriend?”
“What do think the message of Girlfriend is?”
“Why do you think the event has company sponsors?”
“How often do you go out in Ni-Chome?”
“Do you usually go out alone or with friends?”
“Why do you think women come to Ni-Chome in general?”
“What is the current image of these women?”
“Has that image changed at all?”
“What do you expect for the future of women like you?”

Questions for planners and managers only

Questions for planners and managers only
hometown, time lived in Tokyo, occupation, age, languages spoken, places visited/lived, times visiting Ni-Chome in an average month
“How did you end up in the position you are in?”
“What sorts of challenges have you encountered?”
“What type of women attend Girlfriend?”
“What are their attitudes about sexuality?”
“How would you describe the atmosphere in Ni-Chome?”
“How would you describe the atmosphere in Girlfriend?”
“To what do you attribute the recent increased presence of women-only bars in Ni-Chome?”
“What is your dream for the future of Ni-Chome? Japan? The world?”
“How have attitudes toward homosexuality changed in recent years?”
“How do you expect they will change in the coming years?”

Questions only for HG, Organizer of Girlfriend
“What percentage of your clientele are regulars?”
“What kind of people come to your event?”
“How has Girlfriend evolved over the years?”
“How has media such as Tokyo Wrestling affected Girlfriend?”
“How did you hook up with your sponsors?”
“What has the influence of the sponsors been?”
“How did you choose the sponsors?”
“Have there been other sponsors?”

Questions only for HG, Organizer of Girlfriend

“In what ways do sponsors help with design, decor, and messaging?”

Questions only for YK, owner and editor of Tokyo Wrestling webzine

What would you say is your goal for this community?

Why do you offer the magazine in Japanese, English and French languages?

How is Tokyo Wrestling produced?

What role does Tokyo Wrestling play in this community?

How did you meet HG?

How did you get involved in this community in the way that you are?

“What role do sponsors have in the events that you write about?”

“What is the relationship if any between Ni-Chome’s events and the fashion industry?”

“What is the relationship if any between Ni-Chome’s events and other industries?”

Appendix B

Profile of Individual Respondents

AH: Case Study 1: An Inside-Outsider

AH is a 29-year old-office worker who identifies as lesbian and grew up in rural Shizuoka. She lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for five years and returned to Japan in 2005 to move back home with her parents where she currently lives in Tokyo. Because of her time living in the US, she is fluent in English, so the interview took place in English. She describes life with her parents as difficult, because neither of them accepts her lesbian identity, the reason for her leaving their home in Shizuoka in 2000. While AH has been honest with her mother about this aspect of her life, her mother refuses to acknowledge it, and continues to hope that she will marry a man. Her father knows nothing about her sexuality and he and AH do not share much in common. One of AH's close friends is the owner of another monthly women's event called Panache which is a rival of Girlfriend. I was introduced to AH by another interviewee, AT who was a friend of one of my personal friends, HI.

AK and IK: Case Study 2: Shelter and the Cold

AK and IK, ages 23 and 24 respectively, are a couple who met in high school in rural Hyogo prefecture. They moved to Tokyo together approximately four months prior to our interview in order to escape the pressures of being a couple in their small town. They asked to be interviewed together rather than separately. Both are students, and AK works part time as a waitress while studying to be a nurse's aide. IK is open with her family about her sexuality. Her mother and sister reacted as though they knew all along, while her father and brother reacted with surprise and disappointment. AK is very apprehensive about sharing that aspect with her family, and worries that they will reject her. This interview was conducted in Japanese

AT: Case Study 3: The Euphoria of Getting Lost

AT is a 32-year old-hairdresser from rural Sendai. She was introduced to me by HI who is a personal friend. She has been frequenting Girlfriend for more than a decade, and has knowledge of Ni-Chome's history, having moved from Sendai in 2000 in order to be closer to women-only events there. She identifies as a lesbian and is open about her sexuality to her coworkers, but not her family. Several times she referred to Ni-Chome as a small foreign country which is separate from the rest of the Tokyo and has its own independent set of realities. She described the elation she felt at escaping into this little foreign country and referenced the wildness of the previous years as the best times she had in Ni-Chome. She repeatedly lamented the fact that Girlfriend's pole dancers were no longer performing regularly, citing this as a sign that Girlfriend was growing boring. This interview was conducted in Japanese.

HG: Case Study 4: The Other Within

HG is a 41-year-old entrepreneur and owner and organizer of Girlfriend. She moved to London in the 1980s after breaking up with her first girlfriend. She described having to hide her heartbreak from her family as a main reason for going to London. There, she was inspired to start Girlfriend after initially making contact with the local gay community. I first interviewed HG for an article I wrote in 2009 about another one of her businesses called Bar Motel. It is largely because of that article, which painted her business in a favorable light, that HG agreed to allow me to interview her for this thesis. This interview began in English, but switched to Japanese after it became clear that she was struggling to express herself in English.

HI: Case Study 5: The Agony of Belonging

HI is a 33-year-old self-identified lesbian from Tokyo and works doing technical support for an electrical company. HI is a personal friend who I met while living in Japan approximately five years ago. Her family is aware of her sexuality and accepts both HI and her live-in partner of four years who is a woman. She came out to her family after having her heart broken by her first girlfriend and being unable to hide her pain from her mother. HI was very candid in sharing her personal struggle to accept her own body, and disclosed that she recently had breast reduction surgery. She said that prior to having surgery, she had felt desperately trapped inside of her own body, which was more feminine than she felt inside. She even thought about suicide on several occasions. After the surgery, which she underwent a few months prior to our interview, she reported feeling more comfortable and more like her body matched her identity. This interview took place in English.

HM: Case Study 6: Finding Strength in One Another

HM is a 33-year-old office worker who is also a lesbian activist living in Tokyo. HM introduced herself with a business card that reads: “Nice to meet you, I am a lesbian activist” in Japanese and English. She started an activist group called Rainbow Action Network which has its own webpage and engages in various demonstrations and public actions organized around the theme of equal rights. She has lived in Geneva Switzerland and Paris France and speaks fluent French. She first moved to Switzerland as a means of escaping her family, who she worried would not accept her sexuality. This interview took place in a ramen shop on the ground floor of her office during her lunch break. After we shared lunch, she invited me to her office upstairs where the interview continued. I was introduced to HM by HG, the owner of Girlfriend. Another interviewee, MT, also told me that she knows of HM having heard about her activism in the community. At the time of this interview, HM disclosed that she was in a

new relationship with a woman which she did not want to share with the public. At the time of submission of this thesis, HM and her partner had made international news when they challenged Tokyo Disneyland to allow them to hold a wedding ceremony there (McCurry, 2012). This interview was conducted in Japanese.

MT: Case Study 7: The Shortcomings of Department Store Sexuality

MT is a 35-year-old activist for multiple non-profit organizations. She identifies as bisexual and is very active in various social movements, including the movement for gay rights. She has lived in the US, and Chile, and is fluent in English and Spanish. She is originally from Fukushima. I was introduced to Miho by a close personal friend who is also active in nonprofit organizing. Out of all participants, MT was the most critical of Girlfriend. She felt that queer women need more radical, diverse, positive images of femininity. For MT, Girlfriend offered only one type of beauty which she found to be based on men's fantasies of women as objects. She likened this representation to the images of women one finds in Tokyo department stores. This interview took place in English.

NT: Case Study 8: Cautious Exploration

NT is a 35-year-old, engineer for a computer company. She grew up in Tokyo, and chose not to identify her sexuality and seemed somewhat uncomfortable talking about women-only events and her personal experience with them. I tried to steer the conversation with NT in the direction of the events more generally in order to make her feel comfortable sharing her thoughts with me. She did not seem to be able to use words such as *lesbian* or *queer*, but instead paraphrased these concepts throughout much of the interview. It was revealed that NT, while intensely curious about Ni-Chome events, was unable to approach them without the help of one of her friends who agreed to take her there for the first time. Since then, she has been

enjoying Ni-Chome events on her own, but often feels lonely when approaching others who seem to enjoy being in their own group of friends. I met NT at Bar Motel, the small bar owned by HG and located near Girlfriend's location. NT is a regular customer there and Bar Motel's manager HC introduced us. This interview was conducted in Japanese.

NI: Case Study 9: Ni-Chome as a Pressure Valve

NI is a 25-year-old office worker from Tokyo who visits Ni-Chome almost every weekend. She is attending university to become a counselor. She was with a boisterous group of friends who were very friendly to me while attending Girlfriend, so I asked if any of them would be willing to give me some of their time for an interview. NI was very willing to agree to an interview, but was clearly heavily intoxicated. She drank alcohol until the morning, as I spotted her lying on the sidewalk with her friends outside of the club at dawn. While many of her friends responded enthusiastically that evening to the prospect of doing an interview the following day, it was NI who actually took the time to come and meet me in spite of what must have been a dreadful hangover. She identifies as lesbian but is not open with her friends or family about her sexuality, and moved out of her family home to avoid being discovered by them. She currently lives with her sister, who is unaware of her sexuality. She described her friends as thinking that "being gay is gross," and therefore she felt uncomfortable sharing that part of her identity with them for fear of their reaction. The interview was conducted in Japanese.

RI: Case Study 10: Reckless Panache

RI is a 35-year-old event organizer and owner of Panache, another monthly event that takes place in Ni-Chome, and features a selection of hosts who entertain guests individually by the hour. She grew up in rural Shizuoka and moved to Tokyo to find a job in the entertainment

industry. She identifies as a lesbian and was happy to be able to incorporate that aspect of her identity into a career in Ni-Chome. Her family does not condone her job or her sexuality. RI is the star host at her event, Panache, where she entertains women professionally, drinking and smoking with them and providing a fantasy-laden atmosphere which she calls “adult play.” The event also features five other hosts, as well as go-go dancers and pole dancers. RI and HG are considered rivals in Ni-Chome, and are often in direct competition for time and space to hold their events. I was introduced to RI through AH, who was a friend of AT, who was introduced to me by my personal friend HI. The interview took place in English with AH and HI also present.

WY: Case Study 11: Women Are Power

WY is a 21-year-old student from rural Ibaraki prefecture living alone in Tokyo. A third year university student, she goes to school by day and works the graveyard shift at a large karaoke box by night. She is open to her mother about her sexuality but has chosen to keep it a secret from her father for fear that he will be angry with her. This was a factor in her decision to move to Tokyo. We met for the first time at Bar Motel, a small bar owned by HG and located near Girlfriend’s location. She has never attended Girlfriend, because her schedule has not permitted, but frequents a number of other bars in the neighborhood. After conducting the interview, WY offered to take me to another women’s bar called Adezakura to help with my research. She was very curious about this thesis and extremely enthusiastic to share her time and insights. WY also stood out among the other respondents for her bright optimism about the future of queer women in Japan, believing that women have historically been the drivers of social change. This interview was conducted in Japanese.

YK: Case Study 12: Entertainment Overlaps Both Gay and Straight

YK is a 36 year old writer, entrepreneur and activist who was born in Switzerland, and moved to Japan at age 27 to attend graduate school. She identifies as lesbian and lives in Tokyo, but spends a minimum of two months per year abroad in Europe and the US. Girlfriend's website had a link to YK's webzine, *Tokyo Wrestling*, which is published in English, Japanese, and French. I approached YK via email through the website, and set up our interview prior to my trip to Tokyo. YK speaks French, English and Japanese fluently. This interview was conducted in English.