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“Little Girls” Go West?

On a green lawn under the bright sunshine, three blonde-wigged young Japanese women in 1950s/60s American party dresses dance around, fall over, and have a tea party to the accompaniment of the song “Good Morning,” from the classic American film *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). In the film, “good girl” Kathy, played by Debbie Reynolds, dubs the blonde-bombshell star, but this American song is used to dub the dance performance of this Japanese troupe, which is also named KATHY. What can such a performance tell us about contemporary Japan’s national self-image? Do the antics of these performance artists reveal gender conflicts within Japan?

The previous three chapters explored girls’ aesthetics in contemporary Japanese performance and visual arts, focusing on their three characteristics: girls’ wish to reside everlastingly in a space open only to them, their desire to be romantically bonded to each other, and their contradictory pleasures as citizens of both “real” and “imaginary” nations. This last chapter will also consider various characteristics identified in girls’ aesthetics – two-dimensionality as a strategy to reject essentialized Japanese womanhood, twisting the function of female confinement, and westernized imaginative bodies – but it examines performances in which these traits are used to comment more actively on the social conditions of contemporary Japan. Girls’ aesthetics attempt to distance themselves from the reality outside of the girlie sphere, and in this regard performances discussed in this chapter are not always “girlie” as in the previous chapters. They may be considered as an extension of girls’ aesthetics.
In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which the above characteristics are utilized to challenge an influential masculinist framework of postwar Japanese arts and society proposed by male visual artist Murakami Takashi. He argues that postwar Japan was symbolically castrated by the United States of America after the defeat in World War II and was forced to adopt the status of “Little Boy,” alluding to the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima of the same name. This framework renders women invisible, as there is no way that they can be castrated, symbolically or otherwise. In this chapter, by analyzing performances by the all-female Japanese dance troupe KATHY, I will look at the ways the troupe critiques both postwar Americanization of Japan and the masculinist Japanese nationalism à la Murakami that emerged as a reaction to it. Through parodying American/Western dance traditions in its work, KATHY resignifies the Japan-US relationship. Like the typical girls in girls’ aesthetics, the Japanese members of KATHY appear westernized. However, in their performance, the West/US is not portrayed as the dreamland into which they would imaginatively escape from their material reality. On the contrary, they challenge westernization/Americanization, and through this challenge reconsider their Japanese women’s bodies, constructed as its byproducts, and aim at opening a new space in their material reality.

This chapter will discuss KATHY’s parody of Singin’ in the Rain in its video work Mission/K (2002) and also briefly examine the troupe’s parody of the same film in its live performance, KATHY Cruises in NADiff (2003). It will scrutinize how the troupe appropriates the theme of the film, which is the split between body and voice (that is, the dubbing of the female voice) that arose during the change from silent film to talking pictures. Formed in 2002, the troupe, with a name evoking the image of generic Western white women, has three members who wear blonde, bobbed wigs and 1950s/60s-style pastel-colored dresses in almost all their performances, not just in the ones discussed in this chapter. This nostalgic image of “good girls” is mixed with grotesqueness since they cover their faces with black tights and their arms and legs with white tights, thus obscuring their racial and personal identities. They depersonalize themselves, claiming to be under surveillance and controlled by an invisible, powerful, god-like entity called Kathy. Thus, the group name is also the name of this entity that urges them to dance/perform. Henceforth, following