

Wandering Son's Negative View of the Transgender Experience: An Emphasis on Pain and the Marked Absence of the Transition

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Abstract: The Japanese manga *Wandering Son* (2002-2013) centers around several transgender youth as they grow into high schoolers. Although it features many empathetic, realistic scenes of the transgender experience, its worldview is pessimistic, concluding with its characters being discouraged from transitioning. Its once-hopeful transgender protagonists are forced to suffer more and more as the series continues, traumatized without recourse. Ultimately, it becomes a question if *Wandering Son* is explorative or exploitative of the transgender condition. Transgender literary criticism of *Wandering Son* vis-a-vis its harmful aspects is limited to informal spaces, and not easily present in published academic discourse. This paper aims to elucidate the series' critical flaws: a disappointing lack of familial support or mentorship, its overreliance on exhausted transgender tropes, and transgender-boy-to-cisgender-girl Yoshino Takatsuki's "de-transition." Another cause for concern is the potential influence of *Wandering Son* on its readership. Its non-transgender audience can put down the manga and leave the characters' struggles behind, but the perpetual anguish of the transgender characters in *Wandering Son* offers closeted and vulnerable transgender readers – many currently living through similar forms of pain – only despair. Even though revolutionary in concept, *Wandering Son* is objectively not to be labeled as the epitome of transgender representation in the medium of manga. There already exists an abundance of narratives that disrespect its transgender characters, and like *Wandering Son*, only further dominant societal misconceptions of how we live and survive.

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Takako Shimura and her other works was invaluable as a great starting point for my research. I would also like to extend my

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My perspective on being transgender is limited; I am only one white American transgender man. I am completely divorced from transgender communities in Japan, and I am certainly bringing into this discourse my own misguided or misinformed beliefs. My frame of reference is primarily shaped upon Euro-American thought, and I want to clarify that and acknowledge my own shortcomings. I am approaching this analysis with good faith with the goal to further the analysis of transgender media. I encourage more informed people than myself to respond to this paper with criticism and/or build upon the modes of transgender literary theory which I have made the foundation of my analysis.

Introducing *Wandering Son*

Manga artist Takako Shimura's work *Wandering Son* (2002-2013) is a coming-of-age story about three transgender children as they grow up from elementary schoolers to high schoolers. Having received critical acclaim and multiple awards,¹ it is considered by some to be *the* manga most representative of the

transgender experience.² Transgender female anime fan, Allison Haddick, in her article analyzing *Wandering Son's* television-broadcast animated adaptation, writes of how conversations of "transgender identities will inevitably prompt discussion of [*Wandering Son*], most often as the sole example of trans representation in anime which many people will cite."² With *Wandering Son's* high ratings, popularity, and abundant positive reviews³ praising how realistic the manga's depictions of transgender life are, it is a staple entry on recommendation lists geared towards transgender manga readers.⁴ This is in part due to how *Wandering Son* introduces itself as a revolutionary and hopeful narrative seeking to help its readership's understanding of the transgender community. The series' initial volumes could be used as a helpful resource for teachers; it could be read by teenagers and parents alike so that they can better identify with the transgender community through fiction. However, because the manga holds firm to its commitment to tragedy and pessimism,⁵ the later volumes ultimately doom its transgender characters. What once was a narrative supportive of transgender youth becomes

¹ "ALA Rainbow Book List | 2013 | Awards and Honors | LibraryThing," LibraryThing.com, n.d., <https://www.librarything.com/award/1537.0.0.2013/ALA-Rainbow-Book-List-Middle%25252FEarly-Young-Adult-Fiction-2013>.

² Alicia Haddick, "Shimura Takako's *Wandering Son*: Conflicting Thoughts on a Life-Affirming Anime and Manga of the Decade," OTAQUEST, January 21, 2020, <https://www.otaquest.com/wandering-son/>.

³ See, for example, the reviews of *Wandering Son*, volumes one through seven, on Fantagraphics', its official English publisher's, website: Fantagraphics, "Wandering Son: Volume One," n.d., <https://www.fantagraphics.com/collections/wandering-son/products/wandering-son-volume-1>.

⁴ Many transgender anime and manga fans will seek out recommendation articles and library lists to find characters and narratives like themselves. A query search on Google for "transgender anime and manga" may turn up results highlighting *Wandering Son* such as:

- 1) Britt Peterson, "Japan's Trans-Friendly Comic Book Revolution."
- 2) Connor Stevens, "Best Anime with Great Trans Representation."
- 3) Jill Pantozzi, "Visual Representation: Trans Characters in Manga."
- 4) Nicolov, "How Manga Is Guiding Japan's Youth on LGBT Issues."
- 5) Levana Jane Chester-Londt, "8 Great Transgender Anime Characters,"
- 6) Shannah G, "Manga with Trans/Non-Binary Characters"
- 7) Simmons University's College Library and Information Sciences, "LibGuides: Transgender Characters in Japanese Manga: Main Characters."

⁵ The manga holds itself to a "grim" and "unhappy" ending, as foreshadowed by translator Rachel Thorn in her article in: Takako Shimura. *Wandering Son*. Vol. 2. 226-227.

exploitative and voyeuristic of the worst parts of the transgender condition, as the story shifts to increasingly torment them, punishing them for their identities and offering them little reprieve from their suffering. It exploits their pain as a tool to further the story. Regrettably, it becomes counter-intuitive to recommend *Wandering Son* past its ninth volume, as the series concludes with its characters trapped in a pathos of deep sadness and desolation. It callously denies its trans youth their dreams of transitioning, never treating gender dysphoria as something horrific – immediately requiring outside support and medical care– but only as a status the characters must learn to resign themselves to. The fatalistic aspects of *Wandering Son* are often missing from the discussion, which does a disservice to those who enter the series intending to read a compassionate narrative that uplifts the transgender community.

The events of *Wandering Son* follow its protagonist Shuichi Nitōri, a transgender girl, the deuteragonist Yoshino Takatsuki, a transgender boy, and later transgender girl Makoto Ariga, their classmate and best friend of Shuichi. A complicated web of school age crushes unfolds: Shuichi having feelings towards Yoshino,^[6] Makoto liking Shuichi,^[7] and Yoshino not liking anyone for the majority of the series.^[8] The core of *Wandering Son* is of Shuichi's, Yoshino's, and Makoto's attempts to, firstly, survive school life, and secondly, maintain their friendships – all despite their

increasingly-worsening bodily dysphorias, being bullied by their classmates, and living under the watchful eyes of their unsupportive family members. Their somewhat-familiar school-related stresses are compounded by their agonizing existences in the closet. All three children primarily interact with their cisgender family members and friends; however, they do meet occasionally with two transgender adult acquaintances: the socially and hormonally-transitioned Ms. Yuki and the non-passing and un-transitioned Ms. Ebina. *Wandering Son* offers the potentiality of in-group companionship and mutual understanding through its fairly large transgender cast. Unlike in media with a sole transgender character,⁹ Shuichi, Yoshino, and Makoto can find solace with each other, vent about shared issues, defend and assure each other when awful things happen, and talk about ways to cope with the horrors of puberty together. The manga grants the oft-invisible transgender community a voice, and attempts to write a poignant story about transgender children as they transition to adulthood.

⁶ See: Vol. 1. 165, 168., Vol. 4. 98. 150.

As this paper is based upon the *Wandering Son* manga, and the standard “Ibid” reference portion may become repetitive to readers, I’ve chosen to henceforth bracket all citations of my primary sources:

For volumes 1-8, the official English publication is:

Shimura, Takako. *Wandering Son*. 8 vols. Translated by Rachel Thorn. (Seattle, Washington) Fantagraphics Books, 2011-2015.

https://archive.org/details/wanderingsonvolu0000shim_e8m8/page/n9/mode/2up

For volumes 9-15, the fan-made English translation I utilized was: Shimura, Takako. *Wandering Son*. 7 vols. Translated by (Hourou Musume). 2009-2013. <https://mangadex.org/title/c61a3fe7-2210-4eed-aaa0-b7cb49e006c8>

⁷ Vol. 10. 15, 17. 20-22.

⁸ Vol. 4. 152.

⁹ And where transgender characters are often relegated to being side-characters, villains, or the punchline of a joke.

The Question of Genre: Seinen or Shojo

Wandering Son was first published in the magazine “Comic Beam,” a seinen publication,¹⁰ and is, according to translator Rachel Thorn, *not* a shonen or shojo manga.^[11] However, perhaps due to its school-age protagonists, predominantly-female cast, and shojo-like¹² art style, it has been mislabeled as a shojo manga.¹³ And that *Wandering Son* takes ample inspiration from the same literature as various shojo manga is another potential contributing factor to the confusion of its genre. The story directly references *The Rose of Versailles*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Romeo and Juliet*,^[14] all narratives centered on romance and girlhood. These classical tales are unlikely to be reimaged in any conventionally-male-driven contemporary seinen, but are present in *Wandering Son* and its shojo contemporaries. For example, in Yamagishi Ryōko’s shojo manga *Shiroi heya no futari*, a

theater production of *Romeo and Juliet* also takes place; in similar fashion, *Takako Shimura* may have been inspired by GL¹⁵ fiction. The *Cinderella* story, like in *Wandering Son*, is featured through a school play that takes place in the pivotal yuri¹⁶ anime *Maria-sama ga miteru*.¹⁷ And Shuichi, the protagonist of *Wandering Son*, is more alike to shojo heroines than of the “male” leads in other seinen manga. She fulfills five out of six of Hico Tanaka’s “common elements” of the shojo shosetsu¹⁸ genre – other than how she is not an “orphan,” she does have “an eccentric and/or obstinate guardian,”¹⁹ “a vivid imagination,” and the reductions of her “imagination” are “compensated for” a romantic relationship;^[20] moreover, in the world of *Wandering Son*, as per Tanaka’s guidelines, “masculinity is checked and modified by physical and mental/emotional illnesses and weaknesses” and “romantic heterosexual love is treated ultimately as the

¹⁰ Unlike shonen manga, advertised to boys and young men, and shojo manga, written for girls and young women, seinen manga have the expected audience of adult men. Examples of seinen manga include the hyper-masculine Kentaro Miura’s *Berserk* and Hirohiko Araki’s *Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure*, but also manga with predominant female casts such as Kamome Shirahama’s *Witch Hat Atelier*, Aki Hamaji’s *Bocchi the Rock!*, and Aka Akasaka and Mengo Yokoyari’s *Oshi no Ko*.

¹¹ Vol. 2. 227.

¹² The archetypal shojo style of manga may include: more softer, muted colors than in the saturated shonen style, rounder lines than in the angled shonen style, characters with simplified designs, characters with large eyes and detailed hairstyles, the usage of sparkles, flowers, and similar background textures, characters with long eyelashes and perpetually-flushed cheeks, etc. The watercolor style of *Wandering Son* is also a visual element more evocative of shojo manga than of other genres.

¹³ Muszynski, Joseph Peter. 2014. Structure, form, and content: Mythology and comics. Ph.D. diss., Pacifica Graduate Institute, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. 80.

¹⁴ *Rose of Versailles*: Vol. 2. 227.

Anne of Green Gables: Vol. 2. 48-49. 208., Vol. 11. Ch. 88. 19., Vol. 12. Ch. 92. 16., Vol. 12. Ch. 96. 14.

Cinderella: Vol. 4. 63, 68.

Sleeping Beauty: Vol. 4. 98

Romeo and Juliet: Vol. 5. 201, 212-214., Vol. 6. 189, 205.

¹⁵ “Girls’ love” fiction explores female/female romance and sexuality.

¹⁶ The genre of Yuri encompasses fictional works, usually of but not limited to those of Japanese origin, with a focus on female/female love and intimacy. It can often be interchanged with the term “GL.”

¹⁷ Verena Maser, “Beautiful and Innocent: Female Same-Sex Intimacy in the Japanese Yuri Genre” (PHD Dissertation, Universität Trier, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.25595/1250>.

Romeo and Juliet in *Shiroi heya no futari*: page 54., *Cinderella* in *Maria-sama ga miteru*: page 80.

For any scholars curious to learn about how crucial *Maria-sama ga miteru* is to the yuri/lesbian Japanese fanbase, Maser’s dissertation goes into great detail. The show could be likened in popularity and impact as *Revolutionary Girl Utena* is to the Western GL sphere.

¹⁸ Shousetsu (小説) meaning “novel” or “fictional narrative.” Shojo novels were the precursor to shojo manga, as detailed in: Aoyama, Tomoko. “Transgendering Shojo Shosetsu: Girls’ Inter-Text/Sex-uality.” In *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan*, by Mark J. McLelland and Romit Dasgupta, 50-57. Taylor & Francis, 2005. https://transreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2021-07-16_60f1a1a320da1_mark-mcllelland-genders-transgenders-and-sexualities-in-japan.pdf.

¹⁹ More discussion on Shuichi’s mother will be featured in the “Transition and Family Support as an Impossibility” section.

²⁰ Evidentiary from Shuichi’s thoughts in Volume 15. Ch. 118. 22.: “Being with Anna-chan / might make me realise that I’m a man / And maybe I’ll stop wanting to dress like a girl.” Her relationship with Anna causes her to limit her trans-feminine expression, as she tries to be “normal” for her sake.

most important value.”²¹ This last point, heterosexuality being of utmost importance, has been noted in *Wandering Son* by other scholars. In other words, while the manga is explorative of the feminine and transfeminine psyche, it also adheres to heterosexual norms.²² And in comparison to the fantastical, optimistic nature of many mainstream anime series which present wish-fulfillment narratives through the genre of isekai,²³ *Wandering Son* has more in resemblance to tragic yuri narratives like *The Rose of Versailles* or *Shiroi heya no futari*. Fujimoto Yukari differentiates these lesbian works as those that “cannot escape” from “reality” “into the territory of fantasy,”²⁴ and *Wandering Son* is a similar gender-transgressive tragedy grounded in reality.^[25] It has the lesbian-shojo sorrow of femininity and adolescence is at its heart, not the triumphant masculinity of most shonen, nor the struggle of adulthood or violent nature of most seinen. Transfeminine character Makoto Ariga, when describing herself and Shuichi, lampshades²⁶ this reading,

saying; “We’re like heroines in a tragedy” / “That’s kind of romantic, don’t you think?”^[27] *Wandering Son* also makes mention of the all-female Tarazuka Revue theater troupe,^[28] which is interestingly cited as a fundamental inspiration to Japanese shojo culture, alongside the “translated ‘classics’” like “*Anne of Green Gables*.” These romantic and gender-subversive tales influence many of shojo’s “favorite” themes: “bishonen (beautiful boys), androgyny, transgender, transsexuality and male homosexuality.”²⁹ In fact, transgenderism and transgender themes have been a part of shojo manga since its conception. The male-female protagonist of Tezuka Osamu’s “*Ribon no kishi*” (1953), said to be “widely known as the first shojo manga ever to appear,” “dress[es] and fights like a knight,”³⁰ and they, like Oscar of Ikeda Riyoko’s “iconically representative” *The Rose of Versailles*,³¹ are more similar to protagonist Shuichi than the typical gender-normative protagonists of seinen manga are. Although it was published in a seinen magazine,

²¹ Aoyama, Tomoko. “Transgendering Shojo Shosetsu: Girls’ Inter-Text/Sex-uality.” 51. citing: Tanaka, Hico. “Monogatari No Naka No Kanojo Tachi.” In *L Bungaku Kanzen Dokuhon*, by Minako Saitō, 18–24. Magajin Hausu, 2002.

²² Haddick, in her article: “Shimura Takako’s *Wandering Son*: Conflicting Thoughts on a Life-Affirming Anime and Manga of the Decade” writes of the “heteronormative” worldview unchallenged by *Wandering Son*, noting that the “relationships portrayed within the story are strictly heterosexual,” “creat[ing] a scenario where heterosexual relationships are portrayed as being more legitimate.” The only confirmed non-heterosexual couple is Anna and Shuichi, and it is not until the very last chapter, 123, page 28, that Anna finally accepts she’ll be a “lesbian” with Shuichi – having consistently misgendered Shuichi and thought of her as a “man” until then.

²³ Isekai (異世界) is the genre of media that typically has its protagonist(s) introduced into a new, hopeful fantasy world – a world much different than the hyper-capitalistic, depressing, and isolated realities of the present day. Isekai manga and anime have dominated popularity charts as of the past few decades, as detailed in: Agence France-Presse, “What Is Isekai? How the Japanese Anime Genre in Which down-and-out Characters Are Transported into a New Life Is Exploding in Popularity,” *South China Morning Post*, April 29, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3218533/what-isekai-how-japanese-anime-genre-which-down-and-out-characters-are-transported-new-life>.

Allison Stalberg, “How Isekai Became Anime’s Most Popular Genre,” *Game Rant*, November 12, 2021, <https://gamerant.com/how-isekai-genre-became-so-popular/>.

²⁴ Yukari Fujimoto, “Where Is My Place in the World?: Early Shōjo Manga Portrayals of Lesbianism,” trans. Lucy Fraser, *Mechademia* 9, no. 1 (2014): <https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.2014.0007>. 33.

²⁵ For example, how the fantastical and ubiquitous exchanging or switching bodies trope is refuted by author Takako Shimura through Saori Chiba’s words to Shuichi Nitori in Volume 6, page 194.

²⁶ To “lampshade,” or “lampshading” something, is for any writer or creative to be self-referential in one’s work without being too obvious or direct. For those curious, feel free to read: “Lampshade Hanging,” *TV Tropes*, n.d., <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LampshadeHanging>.

²⁷ Vol. 4. 57.

²⁸ Vol. 1. 74.

²⁹ Tomoko Aoyama, “Transgendering Shojo Shosetsu: Girls’ Inter-Text/Sex-Uality,” in *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan*, by Mark J. McLelland and Romit Dasgupta (Taylor & Francis, 2005), 49–51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

³¹ As taken from Rachel Thorn’s article in Vol. 2. 227.

Wandering Son is remarkably shojo. Its crux on transgenderism and tragedy give it a wider appeal to younger audiences, many of whom may have specifically sought *Wandering Son* out due to its transgender characters and high reviews. It will have been read by many shojo fans, as well as by many transgender youth and adults.

Transgender Literary Theory

Transgender literature, with regards to literary theory, is often written about as an afterthought. It sometimes is “picked up as an “extension” of queer and/or feminist scholarship, as a new object of study belonging to these existing theoretical domains,”³² but is rarely treated as its own stand-alone lens of analysis. That is not to downplay how transgender analysis, according to queer scholar Traci Abbott, “benefits and enriches” ... “intersectional queer and feminist media scholarship,” insofar as how it “generate[s] theoretical viewpoints that critique, for example, pregnancy and childbirth as a heterosexual female domain.”³³ And, how transgender critique on the “constructedness of masculinity and femininity”³⁴ fits right into analysis in the feminist discourse. Yet, it is still sorely missing in literary theory. Research on transgender and transgenderism, especially from those outside of the Western global hegemony, can aid to de-

Anglicize the literature. The study of transgenderism through an Asian lens aids “to provincialize, decolonize, de-Cold War, and/or decolorize the category and practice of trans[ness];”³⁵ furthermore, critique on “the assumed universal applicability of Eurocentric conceptualizations of gender/sexual non-conformity” reinvigorates study on the indigenous transgender behaviors and mythos in many societies. As indigenous transgender behaviors and mythos have a long history in Japan, interdisciplinary scholarship should “call attention to the ways in which the fields of transgender studies and Japanese studies can enrich each other.”³⁶ Transgender literary theory is important for American and European queer studies, and I am grateful for the literature available to English-speaking Americans like myself, but I wish for it to flourish in non-Western literary spaces as well.

The value of transgender theory is its relationship to gender. It simultaneously challenges but also affirms gender, reframing it as something that should be allowed to be discarded or embraced. Gender, and the male-female binary, is a worldwide construct that near-universally forces certain non-normative people to submit and conform. A transgender analysis of gender argues that gender is not a fixed concept; instead, that gender is malleable – under one’s control, a conscious choice, and a site of reclamation. One can enjoy being female,

³² Mia Fischer. “Queer and Feminist Approaches to Transgender Media Studies.” *Feminist Approaches to Media Theory and Research*, 2018., as cited in Thomas Billard, et. al.

“Rethinking Transgender Media Representation: A Roundtable Discussion.” *International journal of communication (Online)* (2020). 4500.

³³ Thomas Billard, et. al. “Rethinking Transgender Media Representation: A Roundtable Discussion.” 4498.

³⁴ Mackie, Vera. “How to Be a Girl: Mainstream Media Portrayals of Transgendered Lives in Japan.” *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820802298538>. 414.

³⁵ Howard Chiang et al., “Trans-in-Asia, Asia-in-Trans.” *TSQ : Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-6900682>, 299.

³⁶ Yuen Shu Min. “From Marginality to Possibility: Doing Transgender Studies in Japanese Studies.” *New Voices in Japanese Studies*, vol. 13, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.21159/nvjs.13.01>. 1.

male, or gender non-conforming. As we as transgender people have made the conscious choice to change ourselves, we offer to others the freedom of becoming your best self. When all are able to perform and express gender without fear or shame, then it can bring an end to the policing of gender that harms cisgender, transgender, and gender non-conforming men, women, and nonbinary people alike.

Transgender study elevates academic study of media, past the man-made cisgender essentialist gender binary, and to a framework where gender is transformative. Transgender literary scholarship is wasted when it is limited to a few sentences of acknowledgement, or just tacked onto the end of a paper on LGBT+ studies. It is disappointing to transgender scholars like myself to see how few scholars study transgender media and/or attempt to critique media through a transgender lens. The inclusion of transgender analysis creates spaces that both deconstruct and embrace gender, applicable to any study into gender, gender inequality, and gendered norms.

The Existing Scholarship

Despite *Wandering Son*'s awards and recognition, there are not many academic sources available in English that have explored

Wandering Son in-depth. Joseph Muszynski's 2014 doctoral dissertation "Structure, form, and content: Mythology and comics,"³⁷ John S. Hoskins' 2013 master's thesis "The Son and Daughter Who Wander: Representations of Transgender in Takako Shimura's *Wandering Son*,"³⁸ and Cláudio Vescia Zanini's and Marcell Solano's 2015 article "(TRANS)GENDER AND IDENTITY IN SHIMURA TAKAKO'S WANDERING SON" are three important exceptions. I thank Muszynski, Hoskins, Zanini, and Solano for their contributions to the scholarship of transgender literary analysis.³⁹

With that said, there are glaring flaws within the papers of these researchers.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, within their analysis, they all disrespect the identities of *Wandering Son*'s lead transgender characters: Nitori Shuichi and Takatsuki Yoshino. Muszynski incorrectly calls Shuichi the "lead male character" and Yoshino the "female lead" and invalidates their transgender statuses by referring to them with the inappropriate gendered pronouns.⁴¹ Zanini and Solano also refer to Shuichi with "he/him" pronouns and to Yoshino with "she/her" pronouns.⁴² Hoskins misgenders Yoshino and Shuichi as well.⁴³ In addition, he uses incredibly reductive, transphobic language when it comes to Yoshino. He writes of Takatsuki Yoshino's monthly menstrual cycles as "constantly

³⁷ Joseph Peter Muszynski. 2014. Structure, form, and content: Mythology and comics. PHD Dissertation, Pacifica Graduate Institute, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

³⁸ John S. Hoskins. "The Son and Daughter Who Wander: Representations of Transgender in Takako Shimura's *Wandering Son*." 2013. University of Massachusetts Amherst, M.A. Thesis. *ScholarWorks @ Amhurst*, <https://doi.org/10.7275/4034022>

³⁹ I thank Muszynski for his analysis into the societal myth-making of gender, and Hoskins for providing the history of transgender people in Japan and his linguistic analysis of the speech patterns of the characters in *Wandering Son*. As well, I am grateful for Zanini and Solano, and how they excellently dissect gender, analyze manga tropes, and also situate *Wandering Son* in the manga sphere besides Osamu Tezuka's

Princess Knight, Riyoko Ikeda's *The Rose of Versailles*, and other gender-transgressive anime and manga from the past thirty years.

⁴⁰ It is assumed that Muszynski, Hoskins, Zanini, and Solano, like the vast majority of scholars, are cisgender, i.e., non-transgender.

⁴¹ Joseph Peter Muszynski. Structure, form, and content: Mythology and comics. 209-223.

⁴² Cláudio Vescia Zanini and Marcell Solano. "(TRANS) GENDER AND IDENTITY IN SHIMURA TAKAKO'S WANDERING SON." *Cenários* 1, no. 12 (2015). 24-29.

⁴³ John S. Hoskins. "The Son and Daughter Who Wander: Representations of Transgender in Takako Shimura's *Wandering Son*." 26-28, 41-45.

[reminding her] that she is not a boy, but a girl who is becoming a woman,” emphasizing that “Her breasts, like her period, are a constant reminder that she is a girl and not a boy.”⁴⁴ Even as well-meaning as Hoskins likely may be, his descriptions of Yoshino here are unacceptable. What he is describing is the unfavorable conditions of Yoshino’s body, not things that define Yoshino’s gender. A key tenant of the transgender community and trans-inclusive politics is the recognition that one’s body doesn’t necessarily correlate to one’s gender, and this notion simply contributes to societal misunderstandings of gender and transgender people. These blunders by reputable researchers indicate that the transgender condition is still widely misunderstood in academic spheres. I hope to impress upon scholars the significance of accurate transgender critique.

In the interest of furthering societal knowledge, transgender analysis from transgender scholars is a necessity. Transgender academics and their lived experiences enable them to directly connect to the material. This specialized expertise allows them to clear up points of contention. It is a fact that even well-regarded, published cisgender LGBT+ and feminist writers with good intentions have published articles that harm the transgender community. Although feminist and non-

transgender LGB people can comprehend aspects of the transgender condition, it should not be presumed that “by virtue of their expertise in feminist or queer studies” any non-transgender scholars should “feel entitled to speak with authority on trans subjects” without “welcom[ing] transgender studies’ specific material or political investments.”⁴⁵ The scholarship of *Wandering Son* and other media with transgender themes is done a disservice if researchers do not study into the history and societal circumstances of the transgender community. I hope that more cisgender people will read works about our lives and seek out transgender scholars. Our perspectives help us to better dig past the theoretical and surface-level aspects of gender-subversive works – to burrow into the hidden undergrounds of transgendered media. Any analysis on transgender fiction that disrespects transgender existences is insufficient; likewise, research that does not consider the manufactured images of transgender people in fiction may overlook the ways that we are mocked and stereotyped.

Why Transgender Representation Matters

Transgender characters, when featured in fictional media, are often the punchlines to jokes or sidelined to being victims or serial killers in procedural police shows.⁴⁶ When they

⁴⁴ Ibid., 42-43.

To say that someone with breasts or who menstruates cannot be male is to insult the millions of transgender men living worldwide. This rhetoric is used to attack some of the most vulnerable – often minors or closeted transgender people who cannot medical transition for safety concerns – and calls into question one’s legitimacy as a scholar attempting to add to research on the transgender community.

⁴⁵ C. M. Keegan. Getting disciplined: What’s trans* about queer studies now? *Journal of Homosexuality*, 67(3), 2020. 386. as cited in Thomas Billard, et. al. “Rethinking Transgender Media Representation: A Roundtable Discussion.” 4500.

⁴⁶ For further research on how transgender people, both real or fictional, have been depicted in media, see:

- 1) Juan José Bermúdez De Castro Acaso’s paper: “Psycho Killers, Circus Freaks, Ordinary People: A Brief History of the Representation of Transgender Identities on American TV Series,” *Océánide* 9 (April 27, 2017). Universitat de les Illes Balears. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6236610>
- 2) Jessica Jobe’s thesis paper: “Transgender Representation in the Media” (2013). Honors Theses. 132. https://encompass.eku.edu/honors_theses/132
- 3) Various episodes of the *Jerry Springer Show* or “Jim Carrey puking his guts out at the sight of a trans character in *Ace Ventura*:

are seen, it is usually within the contexts of the entertainment⁴⁷ or the adult pleasure⁴⁸ industries. Having said that, *Wandering Son*, a work with multiple transgender characters whose actions are central to the plot, is groundbreaking as a work of fiction. It breaks the mold by placing the spotlight on transgender youth and their lives. Gender scholar Kelsey Whipple has observed “a specific absence of depictions of trans youth who are younger than 18” in news coverage of the transgender community,⁴⁹ meaning that information about the existence of transgender children is not always available to the public. This is especially true outside the context of the contemporary manufactured “trans panic” and subsequent “anti-trans legislature,”⁵⁰ where transgender people are increasingly only discussed as opportunistic predatory adults trying to enter women’s bathrooms, sports, and locker rooms to commit sexual crimes. Transgender children, if mentioned, are commonly treated as a nightmare scenario to incite panic in parents. Media influences reality and the opinions of

real-world people,⁵¹ and media like *Wandering Son* that is empathetic of transgender children and their struggles is desperately needed to counteract these narratives. As Muszynski writes, “Readers unfamiliar with [LGBT] kids need to see positive archetypal roles of people reacting to them without fear, hatred and mistrust.”⁵² Trans-friendly media that shows transgender people as who they are – regular people going about their days like everyone else – promotes understanding and models allyship to non-transgender people. That *Wandering Son*’s transgender child characters are written to be sympathetic is innovative. Through Yoshino, Shuichi, and Makoto, wider audiences can glimpse into the realities of transgender youth and begin to relate their own struggles with puberty through a transgender context.

Puberty as Traumatic

Wandering Son deserves praise for its raw and realistic glimpses into the transgender experience.⁵³ The distress of its characters as

Pet Detective” as discussed in Willow Maclay and Cressa Beer’s article: “‘Anime Was a Safe Space’: On Magical Girls, Damaged Villains, and Trans Adolescence,” *The A.V. Club*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.avclub.com/anime-was-a-safe-space-on-magical-girls-damaged-vil-1847511040>

⁴⁷ Vera Mackie. “How to Be a Girl: Mainstream Media Portrayals of Transgendered Lives in Japan.” *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820802298538>. 412.

Michelle H. S. Ho. “A Different Kind of Transgender Celebrity: From Entertainment Narrative to the ‘Wrong Body’ Discourse in Japanese Media Culture.” *Television & New Media*, vol. 23, no. 8, 2022, pp. 803–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764211052912>.

⁴⁸ Mark McLelland. “From the Stage to the Clinic: Changing Transgender Identities in Post-War Japan.” *Japan Forum* (Oxford, England), vol. 16, no. 1, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0955580032000189302>. 1.

⁴⁹ Thomas Billard, et. al. “Rethinking Transgender Media Representation: A Roundtable Discussion.” 4496.

⁵⁰ For more analysis and research, see: M. Killian Kinney, Taylor E Pearson, and Julie Ralston Aoki, “Improving ‘Life Chances’: Surveying the Anti-Transgender Backlash, and Offering a Transgender Equity Impact Assessment Tool for Policy Analysis,” *Journal of Law Medicine & Ethics* 50, no. 3 (season-03 2022): 489–508, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jme.2022.89>.

⁵¹ Effie Ophelders, “The Transvestite, the Transsexual and the Trans Woman: The Transmisogynist Representation of Transgender Killers in *Psycho*, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *The Mantis*” (B.A. Thesis, Utrecht University, 2019). 4.

⁵² Joseph Peter Muszynski. *Structure, form, and content: Mythology and comics*. 26-28, 41-45.

⁵³ To define the “transgender experience” in its multifaceted entirety is a difficult endeavor. Non-conforming individuals who’ve crossed gender boundaries and lived as their non-birth genders have existed around the globe for millennia, from historical records of the Bronze Age gala priests of ancient Sumer and the gallus/galloi of Ancient Rome¹ who practiced “self-castration” and voluntary “emasculat[i]on,”² to indigenous “two-spirit” Americans recorded in “at least 155 tribes” and the māhū of Hawaii³, to the hijira of India, the bākla of the Philippines, the kathoey of Thailand, the travesti of Brazil, the onnabes of “contemporary Japan,”⁴ and the fa’afafine of Samoa⁵ (See: 1. Patrick Taylor. “THE GALA AND THE GALLOS.” 175-176.; 2. Will Roscoe. “Priests of the Goddess.” 203, 213-215; 3. Will Roscoe. “Will Roscoe. “Sexual and Gender Diversity in Native America.” 5-6, 9; 4. Arlene Stein, *Unbound*. 13-14., 5. Jeannette Mageo. “Samoans: Men and Women.” 799.) In any case, let’s start by rejecting outright that certain conditions must be fulfilled for a transgender person to have lived a “true” transgender

they face puberty speaks to transgender child and adult readers alike. The agony of helplessly going through the “wrong” puberty is something that can be difficult to express to cisgender people; it can be said to be a form of bodily horror, like gradually seeing extra eyes appear on one’s face, or slowly growing extra limbs. Transgender anime fan Cressa Beer likens puberty to a “violation,” in her words: “You’re watching your body do things you not only can’t understand but deep down know are painfully incorrect, and having literally no one to talk to about it because it either gets dismissed or becomes fodder for more bullying and violence.”⁵⁴ Once their puberties begin, transgender youth are put into a lose-lose situation. They can suppress their feelings of self-hatred, or, they can try to come out and be vulnerable, adjusting their outward appearance at the cost of ramifications including, as Beer says, bullying⁵⁵ and physical assault.⁵⁶ Many transgender children endure in silence, unable to articulate their horror as their bodies slowly morph into grotesque versions of themselves that they cannot identify with.

The issue of puberty for transgender kids is a mainstay of *Wandering Son* from its very first volume. Yoshino’s undesired bodily changes start before Shuichi’s or Makoto’s; he is merely ten or eleven years old when his period starts.⁵⁷ His period cramps⁵⁸ cause him physical pain, and his period rears its head at the most inopportune times,⁵⁹ often triggering his bottom dysphoria⁶⁰ and making him depressed. At one point, this even leads him to shout that he wishes he had “...a dick.”⁶¹ Even though Yoshino’s unwanted menstruations are tragic and relatable to many transgender men like myself,⁶² it also provides an important educational lesson: that some boys and men get periods too. Furthermore, *Wandering Son* is informative about how other forms of gender dysphoria can manifest in transgender girls and transgender boys. Contrast, for example, Shuichi gazing at an unknown woman’s breasts in a bikini with jealousy and desire⁶³ to Yoshino’s disgust to the lumps of meat forming on his chest under his shirt⁶⁴ which are excellent examples of chest-based dysphoria in transgender people. Both kids also experience height dysphoria in opposing ways: Shuichi is horrified of her growth⁶⁵ and compares her

experience. This encompasses the notion that “gender dysphoria” must be experienced in a particular way, as it would be dismissive of many historical, indigenous, and pre-Christian gender-transformative identities. The “transgender experience” is better defined as the various commonly-shared experiences, traumas, and sources of joy that bridge together members of the transgender community. Although many transgender people’s journeys involve socially transitioning, changing one’s name, hairstyle, and clothing, hormone replacement therapy, and gender-affirming surgeries, unhappiness and dysphoria are not the be-all-end-all of transgender life.

⁵⁴ Maclay and Beer, ““Anime Was a Safe Space”: On Magical Girls, Damaged Villains, and Trans Adolescence.”

⁵⁵ Shuichi is bullied for her gender nonconformity, such as in scenes like:

- 1) Shuichi being called a “faggot” in Vol. 2. 188, 200.
- 2) A paper reading “faggot” / “okama” taped to her back in Vol. 3. 96.
- 3) Boys in Shuichi’s class who gang up to keep the classroom doors shut on her in Vol. 9. 69.
- 4) Shuichi called a “tranny” at school in Vol. 9. Ch. 69. 2

⁵⁶ Shuichi is physically and sexually assaulted by classmates in Volume 2, pages 187-188, who undress her to “check” her genitalia. Yoshino is also sexually assaulted by Yuki-san’s boyfriend Shiina in Vol. 2. 100-103.

⁵⁷ Vol. 1. 160.

⁵⁸ Vol. 1. 191.

⁵⁹ See: Vol. 1. 160, 167. Vol. 2. 172., Vol. 3. 164., Vol. 7. 61.

⁶⁰ “Bottom dysphoria” being shorthand for genital-based dysphoria.

⁶¹ Vol. 11. Ch. 90. 11.

⁶² Periods can be sadistic things, as I’ve experienced firsthand. They like to start right as gym swimming units, school trips, summer camps, vacations, trips abroad, etc., begin. It is difficult to have fun and be active when one is in the worst pain of their lives and incredibly exhausted due to their periods.

⁶³ Vol. 6. 78-79.

⁶⁴ Vol. 5. 181-182.

⁶⁵ Vol. 13. Ch. 107. 9.

height to her shorter cisgender male classmates,^[66] while Yoshino wishes puberty made him as tall as other guys, disappointed that he has possibly already “stopped growing.”^[67] While the puberties of those designated female at birth typically begin during the start of middle school, it is during junior high school that Shuichi’s and Makoto’s unwanted “male” secondary sexual characteristics begin to develop. They are tormented by “male puberty” and what it entails – muscle growth,^[68] coarse body hair,^[69] and deepened voices.^[70] Makoto laments to Shuichi that “Once our Adam’s apples start growing and our voices drop it’ll be too late!”^[71] And in the years preceding high school, Shuichi becomes mortified by her voice breaking^[72] and dropping.^[73] Her thicker neck and Adam’s apple then cause her more stress as it becomes harder for her to “pass” as a girl.^[74] Puberty is already a strange and embarrassing phenomenon for cisgender teenagers. Even so, these body-wide changes wreck a particularly insidious havoc on transgender youth, shattering their body images and spiraling one’s self-confidence into self-loathing. For transgender youth that cannot begin medically transitioning, many utilize clothing to counteract their dysphoria. Androgynous, loose-fitting clothing can hide broad shoulders, big chests, and Adam’s apples; it is one way that transgender youth can express themselves as they would like. However, for many transgender school-age Japanese people,

mandatory school uniforms negate this possibility.

School, Uniforms, and Teachers as Sites of Harm

The struggles of school for many transgender youth is a crucial part of accurate transgender representation. In this aspect, *Wandering Son* succeeds in emphasizing school as a nerve-wracking location for its protagonists. Paul Jackson, for the Australian Teachers of Media’ *Screen Education* journal, writes that “School provides an apt location for a series exploring gender issues because male and female segregation is constantly enforced.” He goes on to argue that, because of the prominence of school and how “Japan’s school uniforms – sailor outfits for girls and trouser suits for boys – [have] become symbolic of the binary categorization of gender,” *Wandering Son* “is the ideal text to address [the] need” of “texts suitable for school-age viewers” ... [with its] “representations of trans* people.”⁷⁵ Jackson has a point – gendered school uniforms do haunt Yoshino and Shuichi, and they, like many transgender students in reality, are forced to reckon with their burgeoning feelings of despair. Right before they enter high school, Yoshino divulges to Shuichi that he is “only fixating on the uniform” and it is “all [he] can think about right now,” and Shuichi confirms she is going through the same dilemma.^[76] School uniforms

⁶⁶ Vol. 15. Ch. 119. 13.

⁶⁷ Vol. 11. Ch. 90. 10.

⁶⁸ As discussed between Shuichi and Makoto in Vol. 13. Ch. 106. 4.

⁶⁹ Vol. 10. Ch. 81. 14.

⁷⁰ Vol. 5. 149-150, 191.

⁷¹ Vol. 5. 156.

⁷² Vol. 10. Ch. 80. 20.

⁷³ Vol. 10. Ch. 82. 22-23.

⁷⁴ Vol. 15. Ch. 117. 10-13.

⁷⁵ Paul Jackson. “‘Wandering Son’ and Gender Identity.” *Screen Education* (St Kilda, Vic.), no. 78, Australian Teachers of Media, 2015, 33-35.

⁷⁶ Shimura. *Wandering Son*. Vol. 11. Ch. 89. 6.

are meant to maintain order and harmony, but for transgender students, the uniform forms into a daily, perhaps seemingly-never-ending, reminder that their true self is unaccepted. It also ramps up their chances of being misgendered. Seeing one's same-gender peers able to freely dress in the "correct" uniform can also lead to closeted transgender students feeling bitter or jealous;^[77] they might not even be able to understand the envy they feel, and it may cause them to reject or damage any potential homosocial friendships. Their relationships with teachers can also become strained. Even teachers with the best Intentions can unknowingly terrorize their transgender students, and this only helps to maintain school as a distressing location for them.

Gendered uniforms are passive objects of harm for closeted transgender youth, but another pressing matter are the active agents of harm in every school – teachers. Educators seek to help students and become their role models and mentorship figures; however, teachers can also be gender enforcers, unintentionally bringing harm to transgender students in their care. School staff overwhelmingly will have positive intentions in upholding dress codes as a matter of school policy. Regardless, their offhand comments or orders can dehumanize transgender students. *Wandering Son* portrays how teachers can prompt panic and dread in their closeted or pre-transition students, as seen

when a volleyball teacher tells Yoshino, to his horror, to start wearing a bra,^[78] or when the teachers publicly call out their students' dress code "violations" at the school gate.^[79] Teachers are essential elements to schools; with this said, educators must understand that certain school uniforms can be agonizing for their transgender students to wear. Various schools in Japan, like Gyoda Junior High School in the Chiba prefecture, have started to offer unisex uniforms and/or are allowing girls to wear slacks.⁸⁰ This is a great start, but until "boys" are not punished for wearing skirts, many transgender girls will continue to be unable to fully express themselves. It is only when "girls" have the choice of wearing *gakuran* and "boys" can wear sailor suits unpunished that transgender students will have the same freedoms as their cisgender peers.

Gender Euphoria: Trans Happiness

Transgender media that doesn't feature gender euphoria⁸¹ is, at its baseline, leaving out an important part of the transgender experience. Thankfully, the transgender characters of *Wandering Son* are able to express trans joy

⁷⁷ This reasoning is supported by the scene of Shuichi staring at Maho's school uniform in jealousy in Volume 8, page 12.

⁷⁸ Vol. 5. 172-174

⁷⁹ Vol. 7. 56-57, 72, 74, 76, 119.

⁸⁰ Tsuyoshi Goto, "Japan Schools Easing Gender-Based Rules for Uniforms," *The Mainichi*, March 13, 2023, accessed December 19, 2023, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20230311/p2a/00m/0na/019000c>. Tomomi Terasawa and Rie Kowaka, "Schools across Japan Work on Adopting Pants as Option for All," *The Asahi Shimbun*, June 22, 2022,

accessed December 19, 2023, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14645544>.

⁸¹ Gender euphoria is the opposite state of gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is an uncomfortability or distress with one's body and outward-inward self-mismatch, but gender euphoria is the joy one feels to dress and present as one likes, be welcomed into same-gendered homosocial social spaces, and be accepted as one's true gender. Trans happiness is often ignored or underutilized in media, so *Wandering Son*'s repeated inclusion of gender euphoria is groundbreakingly refreshing.

often through the mediums of clothing⁸² and hair.

Shuichi is visibly happier after she wears a wig^[83] or lets her hair grow out,^[84] buys or receives her own hair accessories, or gets to wear beautiful dresses.^[85] The naturally “cute” Shuichi is also, multiple times, glad when to be “mistaken” as a girl – accidentally gendered correctly.^[86] And like Shuichi, trans girl Makoto becomes excited, twirling and blushing, when she is able to wear affirming clothing.^[87] And as for transgender boy Yoshino, the story shows him ecstatic after he gets a short haircut.^[88] He also enjoys wearing men’s clothing,^[89] and when he bravely wears the male school uniform to class, *Wandering Son* allows for him to have a positive experience. He receives compliments from his peers,^[90] and after he confirms to his homeroom teacher that he “hates the girls’ uniform,” he is allowed back to class.^[91] Clothing affords transgender people a well-needed avenue for gendered expression. It allows for some control of their outward appearances – even just unisex clothing can assuage their bodily hatred caused by their puberties. Yoshino is able to hide his hips and breasts underneath a sweatshirt^[92] until he eventually obtains a chest binder.^[93] On the opposite side, Shuichi, who hates that she does not “have a chest,”^[94] once excitedly tries on her

older sister’s bra and panties^[95] to imagine what having breasts would be like. Clothes, in *Wandering Son*, are one instigative avenue of internal transgender euphoria in its characters. An additional external source of euphoria, though, is encouraged in protagonist Shuichi through the promise of communal acceptance. She encounters the potential of being accepted into a homosocial, girl-led community – of being welcomed by her peers into the wondrous world of girlhood.

A transformation in one’s outward presentation can lead to gender euphoria, but euphoria is also felt when one is embraced into same-gendered spaces. *Wandering Son* goes above and beyond with Shuichi by placing her in dreamlike scenarios other transgender girls would die for. She has female friends, but she has not been invited into the flock of girlhood; and yet, the story teases this potentiality. Shuichi is dressed up by other girls multiple times^[96] and also receives the incredible opportunity to be her sister’s “twin” at a modeling agency^[97] – meaning that she would be not only allowed to, but rewarded in financial and social capital, if she dressed in girls’ fashion. A modeling career is enviable for any girl, cisgender or trans. And this inspires Shuichi to daydream about modeling with Maho.^[98] As much as she wishes to dress like a girl, she also enjoys imagining

⁸² And as said by Muszynski in *Structure, form, and content: Mythology and comics*. 215., “As identification of who we are, clothes play a significant role.”

⁸³ Vol. 2. 20-21

⁸⁴ Vol. 10. Ch. 75. 81

⁸⁵ Vol. 1. 47-48, 116, 123, 135., Vol. 5. 209., Vol. 6. 136-137., Vol. 8. 87-89., Vol. 10. Ch. 76. 13-14.

⁸⁶ Vol. 1. 21-23, 51, 160-161, Vol. 8. 63.

⁸⁷ Vol. 3. 120., Vol. 6. 57-58. 136-137.

⁸⁸ Vol. 1. 95.

⁸⁹ Vol. 3. 163-164. Vol. 10. Ch. 80. 1.

⁹⁰ Vol. 8. 124, 129, 134.

⁹¹ Vol. 8. 130-133.

⁹² Vol. 5. 181-182.

⁹³ Vol. 7. 117.

⁹⁴ Vol. 6. 141.

⁹⁵ Vol. 6. 156.

⁹⁶ Vol. 1. 44-45, Vol. 3. 180, 186-187.

⁹⁷ Vol. 3, 23-28.

⁹⁸ Vol. 3. 25-26.

herself being loved and supported by her older sibling. These are rare chances for Shuichi to foster homosocial bonds with other girls, and be nurtured and accepted as herself. The story gives this kindness to Shuichi in spades by, moreover, bending over backwards so that she can dress in beautiful clothing at her school without repercussions. The narrative creates these certain occasions for her multiple times by employing three cross-dressing plays^[99] and a fashion show^[100] wherein Shuichi may dress femininely, as she would like. It is also, perhaps, closer to divine intervention than just a lucky break that when Shuichi looks for work, she manages to stumble upon a hard-of-hearing elderly man who hires her as a female worker in his coffee shop.^[101] This after-school job allows her to wear a girl's uniform^[102] and is a reprieve from her otherwise gray, “boymode”^[103] life. *Wandering Son* is extraordinarily indulgent of Shuichi's inner transfeminine desires. In these dreamlike situations, she becomes a site of transfeminine fantasy for readers – especially for transfeminine youth who can imagine themselves being embraced like her.

Transgender Friendship

Transgender characters, when seldomly included in fictional works, are typically alone. They are often without transgender friends or

compatriots, the sole transgender character in the ensemble of an all-cisgender cast.

Transgender people are not allowed to talk to each other in fiction, not allowed to support each other; but, to the credit of Takako Shimura, this is not the case in *Wandering Son*. The series' diverse transgender cast – five named transgender characters, three being main characters, and two as the main leads – is a new and original concept in media. Transgender characters talk with each other, and they vent to each other about transgender-related troubles throughout the story.^[104] Transgender homosocial friendships are most portrayed through the best friends, Makoto and Shuichi. They use affirming language to address each other: Makoto giving Shuichi the more feminine nickname “Nitorin,” and Shuichi calling her “Mako-chan” in return.^[105] Makoto is a crucial ally of Shuichi; she is representative of how transgender girls can reinforce each other in real life. She includes Shuichi into girls' activities she enjoys, sharing sweets and stuffed animals with her, and is there to advocate for her. She defends her against a girl's claim that Shuichi is a “pervert,”^[106] and she rightfully calls out Shuichi's older sister, Maho, on her “physically abusive” nature.^[107] When Maho taunts Shuichi on her worst insecurities, teasing her on how her “voice will change” and she will “be all hairy,”^[108] Makoto is there to recognize it as being “verbal abuse” and comfort Shuichi.^[109]

⁹⁹ See: their sixth grade *Rose of Versailles* play where Shuichi plays Rosalie in Volume 1, pages 134-135, 181; their gender-swapped rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* in Volume 5, Shuichi's gender-swapped play in Volume 10, chapter 82, pages 22-23.

¹⁰⁰ Vol. 12. Ch. 89. 25., Vol. 13. Ch. 92. 8, 16-18, 22.

¹⁰¹ Vol. 12. Ch. 97. 23-24., Ch. 98. 10.

¹⁰² Vol. 12. Ch. 98. 14-16.

¹⁰³ “Boymode” or “Boymoding” is transfeminine lingo for those who present as “male” despite being a transgender woman. “Boymoders” often crossdress as men for their own safety and well-being.

¹⁰⁴ Vol. 1. 200, Vol. 5. 140-142.

¹⁰⁵ Vol. 3. 103-104.

¹⁰⁶ Vol. 3. 201-205.

¹⁰⁷ Vol. 3. 102, 135.

¹⁰⁸ Vol. 6. 86, 94.

¹⁰⁹ Vol. 3. 102, 135.

And when Shuichi's former teacher "compliments" her on getting "tall" and growing "a good manly face," Makoto can reassure her it was just small-talk, and that she should not take her words to heart.^[110] Makoto is Shuichi's best friend, an ally by her side. Likewise, it is particularly heartwarming how main characters Shuichi and Yoshino encourage each other. The two secretly take train trips to dress up in gender-affirming clothing together^[111] and offer to swap their names around,^[112] a fantastic example of transfeminine and transmasculine solidarity. Yoshino also gifts Shuichi, the poor girl who never receives feminine clothing from her family on her birthday, his older sister's old school uniform,^[113] a present Shuichi treasures^[114] far more than most else. *Wandering Son* is radical to not just have multiple transgender characters, all with plot relevance; that it has its transgender characters care for each other is something entirely original in fiction. The bonds between Yoshino, Shuichi, and Makoto should become the prototype of other transgender narratives. Transgender people find shelter within each other, and *Wandering Son* uniquely paints accurate portraits of transgender camaraderie.

¹¹⁰ Vol. 10. 11-12.

¹¹¹ See: Vol. 1. 144., Vol. 2. 22-25, 64, and Yoshino's acknowledgement of this practice as a cornerstone of his relationship with Shuichi in Vol. 4. 215.

¹¹² Vol. 2. 24-25., Vol. 6. 144.

¹¹³ Vol. 1. 146.

¹¹⁴ Shuichi, in Volume 8, page 75, talks about how she's happy to have clothes of her own so that her older sister Maho can't get angry at her for borrowing hers. More on Maho later, but regardless, Shuichi is starved for feminine clothing and this sailor suit is a cherished present she wears various times through the series.

Delving Past the Proto-Revolutionary Image of *Wandering Son*

The Broken Mirror: Shuichi and Yoshino

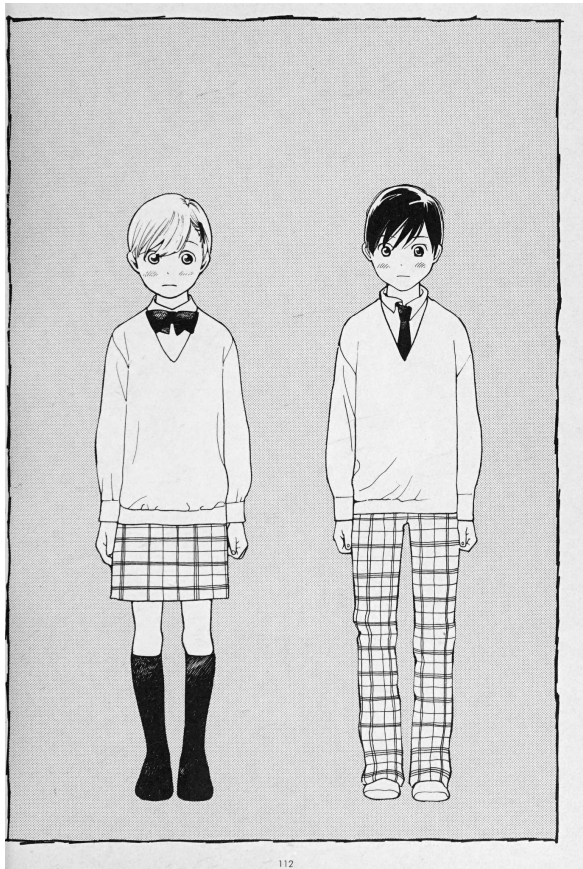


Figure 1: A page from the manga of Yoshino Takatsuki and Shuichi Nitori standing side-by-side. Both children are blushing and wearing the gendered school uniforms that would be appropriate for their gender identities, not as what is assigned for their birth sexes. Volume 1, page 112.

Wandering Son's narrative sets up transgender girl Shuichi and transgender boy Yoshino as foils of each other, positioning the two children as mirror opposites.^[115] Muszynski also makes a mention of this aspect, writing that they see their "internal [selves]" reflected through one another.^[116] Shuichi and Yoshino exist as a girl trapped in a boy's body and a boy trapped in a girl's body, respectively, with both being able to understand the strange circumstances the other is going through. They dress in opposite clothing styles, and playfully switch names with each other,^[117] playing around with the idea that they could trade places.^[118] Although this thematic mirroring is established in the first volumes, the last three volumes of *Wandering Son* take a hard pivot to Yoshino accepting her "birth" gender.^[119] Yoshino's ambiguous return to the closet, and abandonment of their authentic gendered self, shatters this Yoshino-Shuichi mirror. The narration in the final volume shuts the book on Yoshino's and Shuichi's story: "One wanted to be a boy / one wanted to be a girl / One stopped wanting to be a boy / ... / That's all there is to it,"^[120] concluding with an unbothered affect – despite the glass shards of the broken mirror it had delicately set in place conspicuously littering the floor. Although *Wandering Son* is

¹¹⁵ See:

- 1) The juxtaposition of Shuichi in a girl's school uniform and Yoshino in a man's uniform, both blushing and happy in Volume 1, page 112
- 2) The chapter pages of Shuichi happily dressed as female and Yoshino as a high school boy in Volume 1, pages 125 and 155
- 3) The two as allies/foils/comrades who both 'cross-dress' in Volume 1, pages 129-131; both of them with the same "dream" of transitioning and living as their true selves in Volume 2, page 32
- 4) Their conversation about gender dysphoria and wishing they were like the other in Volume 5, page 191
- 5) Shu's declaration of wanting them to affirm each other and for them to be Romeo and Juliet in Volume 6, pages 22-24.

¹¹⁶ "Each one sees someone else that mirrors his or her own internal self. Takatsuki sees Shu, a boy who feels more like a girl, and Shu sees a girl who seems more like a boy."

Joseph Peter Muszynski. Structure, form, and content: Mythology and comics. 210.

¹¹⁷ Vol. 2. 24-25.

¹¹⁸ See Yoshino's words to Shuichi: "Wouldn't it be nice if you and I could trade places?" in Volume 1, page 200.

¹¹⁹ Not that there were not already some foreshadowing/hints to Yoshino's "detransition." I'd argue its main catalyst is Yoshino's and Chiba's relationship repairing, starting in Volume 7, pages 146-147, opening the door to Chiba's increasing influence on Yoshino – and not for the better.

¹²⁰ Vol. 15. Ch. 123. 25-26.

fully accepting of Yoshino's detransition, and wishes for the audience to swallow this development without question, as a transgender man, it disturbs me. I am interested in examining the circumstances leading up to Yoshino's detransition, and why and how "he" is influenced to return to being a "she."

The Tragedy of Saori Chiba's Characterization

Saori Chiba, a classmate and friend of Yoshino and Shuichi, is introduced as one of the heroines of *Wandering Son*. From volume one to the start of volume four, she is an incredible ally to her transgender friends, and her actions offer concrete ways to support transgender people.^[121] After the middle of volume four, though, Chiba's characterization^[122] de-evolves until she is little more than another bully.^[123] This split in Chiba's personality occurs after her confession to Shuichi is rebuffed.^[124] The same Chiba who once defended Shuichi,^[125] "early Chiba," is vastly different from the Chiba from

mid-Volume 4 on: the Chiba who weaponizes transphobia against her "friends." This Chiba calls out Yoshino for having "used Nitōri-kun harshly" during their middle school excursions in gender-affirming clothing,^[126] insinuating that it was all Yoshino forcing Shuichi to do so. Chiba then joins her peers in rejecting Shuichi after she comes to school in a girl's uniform – victim-blaming Shuichi for her causing a "fuss."^[127] She refuses to be an advocate in Shuichi's corner as she enters one of the lowest points in her life.^[128] Even more heinous, if that can be believed, is how Chiba continuously rejects Yoshino's transmasculine identity. She comes across as having the goal of convincing Yoshino that he is really a girl, and her efforts ultimately pan out.

Yoshino's Detransition: Not a Boy After All

Despite being established as a transgender boy with bottom and top dysphoria,¹²⁹ the mirror state of transgender girl

¹²¹ Saori starts out as a fervent ally of Shuichi and an instigator of cross-dress play. She's one of their only confidants, affirming, prompting, and complimenting Shuichi in Volume 1, pages 42, 54, 64, and 82. She even gifts Shuichi feminine clothing in Volume 1, pages 116, 123, and Volume 2, pages 147-148. Chiba also introduces the idea of their class performing a cross-dressing play in Volume 1, page 69 – this affords the two transgender protagonists a rare, socially-permissible opportunity to present and act as their true gender.

¹²² Saori's unrequited crush on Shuichi places her at odds with Shuichi's one-sided crush on Yoshino, a situation not too different from the basic "love-triangle" cliché in young fiction media. Rather than her remaining as one of the heroines of the story, these burgeoning romantic tensions come to reduce Chiba's initially-heroic character to an antagonist, transforming her into an obstacle of the group's friendship and a barrier of Yoshino's camaraderie with Shuichi. Her relevance in the story declines after this point. Sarashina Chizuru (and Ninomiya Fumiya, to some extent) replaces her as an ally, and Anna replaces her as Shuichi's female love interest.

She desires a lesbian relationship with Shuichi, per Vol. 5, page 95, but after her romantic confession is rejected, she breaks up their friend group in response, shown in Vol. 4., pages 176, 190, 210. In stark contrast with her kindness in the beginning of the narrative, see Vol. 7. 64-65, 120; Vol. 8. 105-107., Vol. 10. 97., Vol. 14. Ch. 115. 13-14., for specific instances of Chiba expressing childishness, jealousy, pettiness, and bitterness.

After Shuichi gets a girlfriend, Chiba begins to warm up to Yoshino again, as seen in Vol. 7. 28, 155-156, 163-164, 180.

¹²³ Oka Takanori and Doi Shinpei being the other main bullies of *Wandering Son*, i.e., the two who steal and read aloud Yoshino's and Shuichi's exchange diary in Volume 3, pages 60-61, 67, 70., outing them to their classmates. Funnily enough, the last chapter of *Wandering Son* has Chiba and Doi apologizing to and forgiving each other (page 18). The narrative seemingly wants to redeem them – to absolve them of their past actions – but strangely decides not to have them apologize directly to the victims of their bullying: Yoshino, Shuichi, and Makoto.

¹²⁴ Vol. 4. 176.

¹²⁵ As seen when Chiba dumps her breakfast on the bully who keeps calling Shuichi a "faggot" in Volume 2, pages 200-205. Also when she tells their teacher the children bullying Shuichi should "harakiri" themselves in Volume 3, page 77-75, or when she defends Shuichi in Volume 4, page 48, assuring her after hearing that a girl named Anna confronted Shuichi and called her a pervert in Volume 3, pages 180-181, 189-190.

¹²⁶ Vol. 8. 109.

¹²⁷ Vol. 9. Ch. 72. 16-17.

¹²⁸ Shuichi begins to skip school (Vol. 9. 102, Ch. 70. 22., and only returns to school to head directly to the nurse's office in Vol. 10. Ch. 74. 156.

¹²⁹ "Top dysphoria" is the dysphoria of one's chest/breasts

Shuichi, Yoshino ends the series as a cisgender girl.¹³⁰ By volume fourteen, she has decided she is comfortable with being treated as a girl and wearing girl's clothing.^[131] She confirms as such to Shuichi, telling her "I don't think about wanting to be a boy anymore..."^[132] Saori Chiba, an antagonistic ex-friend whom Yoshino later reconciles with, is the main catalyst of this change; she exerts the most pressure on her to de-transition. Chiba appears to believe that Yoshino's gender dysphoria is due to her discomfort with "being a girl;" i.e., that misogyny is the internal true source of her confusion. She tells Yoshino to grow her hair out, with the justification that some boys have long hair, too.^[133] She also excitedly encourages Yoshino to try on some of her feminine clothes.^[134] And, after a boy confesses to Yoshino that he likes "her," Chiba calls Yoshino a "normal girl" for being "elated" after being "confessed to," calling him "cute."^[135] Later, when Yoshino asks for Chiba's opinion of him in theatrical men's clothing, if he "looks like a man, a proper one" or not, Chiba responds that he "look[s] like a boyish girl." She invalidates his identity, calling Yoshino dressing up "in men's clothes" a "disguise," insisting that he just wants to be "mistaken for a man" because "It seems [she] just hate[s] being a girl."^[136] Chiba continues pushing this transphobic rhetoric, again later suggesting to Yoshino that why she wants to "be a man" is because she "doesn't want to be a girl." And this time, Yoshino

admits that "maybe she's right."^[137] Even though wearing womens' clothing used to be agonizing, she wears feminine clothes to her school's fashion show.^[138] Yoshino begins to take it to heart when other girls compliment her height, legs, and waist and tell her to "show your body off more."^[139] She joins Anna, Maho, and Meiko's all-girls modeling agency^[140] and embraces her long-ignored inner femininity, going out in secret to dress up in cute clothing^[141] as a somewhat insidious callback to Shuichi's and her past excursions outside in gender-affirming clothing. Yoshino now feels like she is "floating on air" when she is dressed as a girl in public, and she gets hit on by a guy^[142] to her delight. She is rewarded for her gender conformity with support from her cisgender peers and attention from cisgender men. This appears to suggest that gender dysphoria is minimized after one conforms to gendered expectations. Yoshino's detransition is suggested to be an inevitability by Chiba: she praises Yoshino as she accepts she is a girl by telling her "It's happened exactly as I said it would / You're getting steadily cuter / You'd be even more amazing if you'd embrace it."^[143] Although Chiba's ulterior motives with Yoshino make her reactions understandable, Yoshino's transgender peers also really do not bat an eye to her de-transition. Instead of worrying about Yoshino's mental health, or even reaching out to him, they quickly accept it as a natural facet of life. Makoto even insinuates that being a

¹³⁰ Others have interpreted Yoshino as genderfluid (Kaiser et al., "Chatty AF 21: Wandering Son Retrospective (WITH TRANSCRIPT)."), but this is my interpretation.

¹³¹ Vol. 14. Ch. 108. 20-21.

¹³² Vol. 14. Ch. 121. 13.

¹³³ Vol. 7. 205-206.

¹³⁴ Vol. 11. Ch. 91. 7.

¹³⁵ Vol. 9. Ch. 72. 10-12.

¹³⁶ Vol. 10. Ch. 75. 91-93.

¹³⁷ Vol. 13. Ch. 105. 22-23.

¹³⁸ Vol. 12. Ch. 92. 14-18.

¹³⁹ Vol. 13. Ch. 107. 21, 23.

¹⁴⁰ Vol. 13. Ch. 107. 9.

¹⁴¹ Vol. 14. Ch. 110. 3-6.

¹⁴² Vol. 14. Ch. 110. 9-11.

¹⁴³ Vol. 14. Ch. 110. 24.

transgender boy was a phase of Yoshino's, and their transfeminine adult friend Yuki-san replies with the reductive, lazy reasoning that "there's nothing wrong with changing your mind."^[144] The story treats the same Yoshino who once asked his mother, "Why did you make me a girl?"^[145] as a girl who was just experiencing temporary childish angst, not someone with actual dysphoria like Shuichi, and all she had to do to be happy was for her to accept her femininity. It is reprehensible for any author, cisgender or transgender, to suggest that life improves once one stops being transgender. This is not a revolutionary belief, but a falsehood very much argued for by anti-transgender activists.

While it is true that some transgender people do "change their minds," this is not the prevalent transgender experience by any means. Published rates of detransition remain fairly low – a 2021 paper based upon the U.S. Transgender Survey citing a 13.1% prevalence in 27,715 adults surveyed,¹⁴⁶ and sociologist Rowan Hildebrand-Chupp finding a <5% average rate of "medical detransition after gender-affirming surgery happens" from their aggregate research circa 2020.¹⁴⁷ The detransition rate of the transgender community as a whole is unknown; still, according to experts it remains relatively "rare."¹⁴⁸ Despite this, the de-transition as a phenomenon is overrepresented in Western media. It has been historicized as the

continuation of the ex-gay movement,¹⁴⁹ as the evolution of bigotry now that homophobia is relatively unpopular and disallowed in mainstream society. Yoshino's heel-turn into *really* being a cisgender woman supports cultural norms with regards to transgressive genders and sexualities being little more than "experimentation" or a "phase." This rhetoric emboldens transphobes and supporters of conversion therapy, and is antithetical to those in and supporting the transgender community. Sadly, it is not just Yoshino that exists in *Wandering Son* as paradoxical to its supposed philosophy of being "empathetic" of the transgender experience. Yuki-san, the adult transgender female friend of Yoshino and Shuichi, is also depicted as perplexingly, counter-intuitively unaccommodating and predatory.

Yuki-san as a Failed Mentor

Yuki-san, or Ms. Yuki, is the main reference point of transgender adulthood for Shuichi and Yoshino. She is their primary role model, and she has the ability to protect them as vulnerable transgender children, with her apartment being a place of refuge. She, a transitioned adult, can also guide these youth towards trans-friendly resources. For example, she could share with them how she accessed hormones, which clinics and doctors she has

¹⁴⁴ Vol. 14. Ch. 115. 19.

¹⁴⁵ Vol. 3. 73-74.

¹⁴⁶ Jack L. Turban et al., "Factors Leading to 'Detransition' among Transgender and Gender Diverse People in the United States: A Mixed-Methods Analysis," *LGBT Health* 8, no. 4 (June 1, 2021): 273–80, <https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2020.0437>. Noteworthy is how the vast majority of detransitioners cite an "external factor," and how some come to realize their genders don't fit into the male:female gender binary.

¹⁴⁷ Rowan Hildebrand-Chupp, "More than 'Canaries in the Gender Coal Mine': A Transfeminist Approach to Research on Detransition," *The*

Sociological Review 68, no. 4 (July 1, 2020): 800–816, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120934694>.

¹⁴⁸ Various follow-up studies post-surgical care of transgender individuals have found a <1% regret rate, as per: Jonathan Cohn, "The Detransition Rate Is Unknown," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 52, no. 5 (June 12, 2023): 1937–52, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-023-02623-5>.

¹⁴⁹ See: journalist Katelyn Burn's article: "The Ex-Gay Movement Crawled so the Detransition Movement Could Run" *Xtra Magazine*, November 10, 2023, <https://xtramagazine.com/health/detransition-ex-gay-movement-259178>.

seen, and how the process usually works. She does nothing like this. Still, Yuki-san has some minor positive impact in their lives – her words once inspired Shuichi to stand up to her bullies and not cry.^[150] And she shares stories about her life,^[151] including showing them pre-transition photographs of herself in a suit instead of a kimono during her coming-of-age ceremony.^[152] And, one Christmas, she buys Yoshino cufflinks and Shuichi a necklace.^[153] However, Yuki-san is never there when Yoshino and Shuichi truly need her. When they come to Yuki-san in desperation, she fails to provide them any assistance. All things considered, as she does not make much of a positive change in Shuichi’s and Yoshino’s lives, the story would have likely continued with only minor differences without her.

Despite how real-life mentor figures of LGBT children fight for those in their care, sheltering youth from abusive families and environments, the primary mentor figure in *Wandering Son*, Yuki-san, fails to protect the minors in her care. It can be reasoned that she, as a transgender woman, has first-hand knowledge of how excruciating it can be to be misgendered. Even so, while at her apartment

she misgenders Yoshino without hesitation or apology,^[154] even once going so far as to tell him to dress like a girl more,^[155] further invalidating his identity. She disrespects Yoshino as a transgender man, and her apartment becomes a hostile – not supportive – environment for him. If Yuki-san truly thought of Yoshino as male, it is strange that she never seems interested in sharing her experiences of living as a man with him. She could have offered to give him her hand-me-downs, or shown him how to tie a tie.^[156] There are material ways she could have encouraged him, like giving him an old suit of hers to try on, but she does nothing similar to the ideas I have provided. She is their “mentor,” but she also lets Shuichi down. She does not practice make-up with her,^[157] nor does she defend her or offer comfort after she is told what happened when Shuichi wore a sailor suit to school.^[158] And, most egregious, when Shuichi asks to work at Yuki-san’s bar once she is a “little older,”^[159] Yuki-san rejects her for the job, giving her little reason why.^[160] And like most transgender girls in the real world,^[161] Shuichi then, predictably, finds it difficult to find employment.^[162] LGBT+ elders often hire young LGBT people, or help them find work and

¹⁵⁰ Vol. 2. 216.

¹⁵¹ Vol. 3. 144-145, 158-159., Vol. 9. Ch. 73. 5-23.

¹⁵² Vol 2. 108-109.

¹⁵³ Vol. 12. Ch. 92. 3-6.

¹⁵⁴ Vol. 3. 148, 151, 154, 156.

¹⁵⁵ Vol. 5. 60-61.

¹⁵⁶ Rather, it falls to a cisgender female classmate of Yoshino’s, Sarashina Chizuru, to encourage Yoshino to dress up in the men’s uniform (Vol. 8. 8.) and attempt to teach him how to tie a necktie (Vol. 7. 77.)

¹⁵⁷ Doi Shinpei and Fumiya Ninomiya, two cisgender men, arguably do more to help Shuichi than Yuki-san: Fumiya dresses up femininely with Shuichi (Vol. 9. Ch. 72. 19., Vol. 10. Ch. 74. 8-10.) even despite thinking of her as a “faggot” (Vol. 6. 50) and really only pretending to be girly as “bait” for Chiba (Vol. 9. Ch. 68. 10-12.). Doi, unlike Yuki-san, encourages Nitori to come to school in a girl’s uniform, saying she is “really cute” and insisting that “Takatsuki

[came] as a boy” (Vol. 8. 162-164). When they’re alone, he tells Shuichi she looks great as a girl (Vol. 10. Ch. 77. 7). She also pushes back on other kids calling Shuichi a “tranny.” (Vol. 10. Ch. 79. 2.) Doi and Shuichi practice make-up, even though Doi thinks Shuichi is “crazy” and “gay” (Vol. 11. Ch. 90. 21-22).

¹⁵⁸ Vol. 9. 84.

¹⁵⁹ Vol. 9. Ch. 72. 22.

¹⁶⁰ Yuki-san gives this ambiguous explanation: “I understand that you’re impatient / I was the same / I never listened to what adults told me either / But now I’m an adult too so I have to tell you you can’t!” in Vol. 12. Ch. 97. 18-19.

She also refuses Makoto a job on uncertain grounds as said in Vol. 15. Ch. 122. 4.

¹⁶¹ Vera Mackie. “How to Be a Girl: Mainstream Media Portrayals of Transgendered Lives in Japan.” 411-412.

¹⁶² Vol. 12. Ch. 97. 20-22.

housing to get them on their feet, as they themselves likely relied on elders during their youth. However, Yuki-san rebuffs Shuichi when she comes to her with a reasonable request, and she is dismissive of them, weirdly unsupportive of Yoshino's gender in particular. She is open to talking about her own life, but unlike other mentors of queer youth, she is diametrically opposed to providing them shelter or employment.¹⁶³ In fact, it could be said that Yuki exerts a negative influence on the children. At times, she presents as an active danger to Yoshino.

The “Trans Woman Predator” Trope, Once Again

Yuki-san is yet another stock example of a “predatory” transgender woman – by preying on the “feminine” Yoshino for some sort of psychosexual gratification, she only follows in the footsteps of Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Jame Gumb or “Buffalo Bill” in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*,¹⁶⁴ and the ever-terrifying transgender bogeymen poised to “invade” women's restrooms. It is difficult to read Yuki-san as anything except a pedophile with nefarious intentions towards Yoshino, as on their first meeting, she hits on him and gives him her number. This is while he is noticeably wearing a middle school uniform,¹⁶⁵ an unmistakable child. Her attempts to get Yoshino

alone in her apartment are also troubling. She tells Yoshino to come without Shuichi the next time, and is annoyed when they both visit again, angrily reminding him what she had said.¹⁶⁶ Her intentions are unknown, but they can be inferred from the second volume's striking sequences of her being confronted by her boyfriend. From his reactions and lines of questioning after she is “caught” with the children in her apartment,¹⁶⁷ she may have been caught by him coming home with young children before. Is this to imply that Yuki-san has had sex with underage people in the past? Is the narration suggesting that she has molested children before, or is it saying that transgender women in general should not be trusted around minors unsupervised? It is unclear. Regardless, her boyfriend is similarly awful. He sexually assaults Yoshino as he escorts them out of their apartment – first with the tropic “crotch-grab,”¹⁶⁸ and then by touching his chest. This distresses Yoshino enough that he has to hold back tears. Not satisfied, Yuki-san's boyfriend then confronts Shuichi on her genitalia.¹⁶⁹ Yuki-san continues to be inappropriate with Yoshino after he is forcibly outed. During another visit with only Yoshino, she explicitly asks to see his underwear and his “budding breasts.”¹⁷⁰ She later blames these behaviors on her being in “male mode.”¹⁷¹ This “excuse” of hers is disgusting; it acts in service to the stereotypes of transgender women as predators because of their genitalia and their then-

¹⁶³ It seems as if the narrative sees her as a successful mentor, if taken from Shuichi's goal to become a mentor and “provide the support [she] received when [she] needed it” as she describes in Vol. 15. Ch. 123. 11.

¹⁶⁴ Ophelders, “The Transvestite, the Transsexual and the Trans Woman: The Transmisogynist Representation of Transgender Killers in *Psycho*, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *The Mantis*.” 1, 4.

¹⁶⁵ Vol. 1. 106.

¹⁶⁶ Vol. 2. 65, 94.

¹⁶⁷ Vol. 2. 95-97.

¹⁶⁸ For other examples of this trope, see: “Crotch-Grab Sex Check,” TV Tropes, n.d., <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CrotchGrabSexCheck>.

¹⁶⁹ Vol. 2. 100-103.

¹⁷⁰ Vol. 2. 148-149.

¹⁷¹ Vol. 3. 155.

supposed proximity to “maleness.” This essentialist rhetoric is weaponized to generalize people with penises as being “naturally” inclined to rape. It ignores the rampant, societal-wide excusing of men’s sexual crimes and the silencing of victims, and it positions people with vaginas as hapless, innocent victims. Rape culture is not innate, it is learned, and people with vaginas can, and do, commit heinous sexual offenses as well. These uncomfortable parts of Yuki-san’s character are rarely mentioned by scholars such as Muszynski,¹⁷² Zanini and Solano,¹⁷³ who all gloss over her predatory behaviors. The anime adaptation of *Wandering Son* also refrains from showing the aforementioned scenes of Yuki-san. This was praised by anime reviewer Vrai Kaiser as “one of the great cuts,” as in the anime, she exists as better transgender representation as solely a supportive adult figure to Shuichi and Yoshino, “whereas in the manga, it’s this horrific moment of, “Oh, the trans woman is a sexual predator.”¹⁷⁴ Although reestablished as a wholesome mentor in the anime, Yuki-san in the manga is, disappointingly, another name in the long history of sexually-deprived transgender women in media.

Family Support as an Impossibility

Although Shuichi seldomly meets with Yuki-san, she sees her family members every day. Shuichi’s older sister, Maho, and their

mother, Satomi, are the predominant familial figures of *Wandering Son*. Although they are close to Shuichi, appearing in many scenes throughout the manga, they find it difficult to understand her. Being transgender is an internal state, and cannot be easily seen when one is closeted and does not express transgendered behaviors. Therefore, because “transgender experiences are still relatively invisible in our culture, even those closest to trans people often just don’t “get it.”¹⁷⁵ Maho and Satomi love Shuichi, but they love her as a brother and a son. In the first volume, they both say they want to see Shuichi wear a girl’s school uniform – a great first sign. This establishes them as potentially supportive, and they accept Shuichi when she wears these feminine clothes, and Satomi remarks that it “looks good” on her.^[176] Some pages later in the first volume, Maho remarks to Shuichi: “You should have been born a girl.”^[177] While her words sting, they signal that Maho would, perhaps, be fine having a little sister instead of a little brother. They may mean that, at this time, she could come to love her transgender sister if Shuichi came out to her. More evidence pointing towards Maho being a possibly supportive force is her defense of Shuichi in the third volume. She punches her classmate Seya, after he questions if there is “something wrong” with her and Shuichi. She then kicks him after he follows up by asking if Shuichi is “sick or something.”^[178] These scenes could be interpreted as Maho possibly being open to having a transgender sister. Even so,

¹⁷² Joseph Peter Muszynski. Structure, form, and content: Mythology and comics. 217-219.

¹⁷³ Cláudio Vescia Zanini and Marcell Solano. "(TRANS) GENDER AND IDENTITY IN SHIMURA TAKAKO'S WANDERING SON." 29.

¹⁷⁴ Vrai Kaiser et al., “Chatty AF 21: Wandering Son Retrospective (WITH TRANSCRIPT),” *Anime Feminist*, September 3, 2017, accessed

December 19, 2023, <https://www.animefeminist.com/podcast-chatty-af-21-wandering-son-retrospective/>.

¹⁷⁵ Stein, Arlene. *Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity*. Pantheon, 2018. 28.

¹⁷⁶ Vol. 1. 146-47.

¹⁷⁷ Vol. 1. 185.

¹⁷⁸ Vol. 3. 175-176.

Maho is often an enigma, her intentions unclear and her actions impulsive. Many times, it seems as if she only can accept Shuichi's girlhood if it poses a benefit to herself, like when she encourages Shuichi to dress up like a girl, but only for the sake of getting closer to Seya, a boy she has a crush on.^[179] Or, when she supports Shuichi being her sister, but only if it helps her pass the modeling auditions.^[180] In this scene, she appears to be using Shuichi's desire for acceptance for her own gain, and is not really supportive of Shuichi's girlness if it inconveniences her. Regardless of Shuichi's inner turmoil, it is only after they get their call-back that the elated Maho tells her that "As of today, we're sisters!"^[181] This tenuous "support" is really only held on by Maho's selfishness. It crumbles when Shuichi's femininity stops being of use to her, and by the middle of the series, Maho becomes just another obstacle to Shuichi's transgender identity.

Maho chooses to end any tolerance of Shuichi's girlhood during the sixth volume. She states she has had enough with Shuichi "pretending to be a girl,"^[182] and from that point forward, is antagonistic to Shuichi's transgendered behaviors. One event that completely sets her off is her realization that Shuichi tried on her bra and panties set. If one views Shuichi as male, and her penis as a frightening and foreign object, it would be somewhat understandable for her to be

disturbed. However, Shuichi is Maho's sister regardless of her genitalia. Her overreaction – calling Shuichi "creepy" and a "pervert" and throwing the "tainted" pair away^[183] – is objectively terrible eldest sibling behavior. Real-life sisters share clothing.^[184] Maho could have given her undergarments to Shuichi as a hand-me-down, but she stubbornly decides that Shuichi cannot even wear her discarded clothing. This even extends to clothes that are in such disrepair that they cannot be worn, as Maho refuses to allow Shuichi to mend them.^[185] Maho views Shuichi's femininity as an embarrassment. In her eyes, it is something perverted Shuichi does that "he" must stop. She deems herself more important, as she says that she does not "want a little brother who's cuter than" herself.^[186] She sees Shuichi as a deviant, pressuring Shuichi to stop dressing "like a girl" while dating her modeling coworker Anna because, to her: "Anna isn't like you, she's normal!"^[187] She is even grossed out when other girls try to support Shuichi, as when Anna says she might be fine with Shuichi dressing up, Maho confronts her, asking: "Why're you being so understanding? / Isn't it gross having a boyfriend who cross-dresses?"^[188] Maho's treatment of her little sister is appalling. The role of an older sibling is to look after one's younger siblings; and whether they like it or not, their job is to be their role model. Instead, Maho offers her little sister nothing but hatred,

¹⁷⁹ Vol. 3. 54-56, 101, 112-134.

¹⁸⁰ Vol. 3. 18-19.

¹⁸¹ Vol. 3. 28.

¹⁸² Vol. 6. 82-85.

¹⁸³ Vol. 6. 171-173.

¹⁸⁴ My little sister and I wore the same undergarments. We were both designated female at birth, but I hope that I would have supported my sister if she had been designated male at birth. I recall in elementary school that an older girl was bullied for wearing boxer shorts, and I was

confused why – what does it matter if she wears boxers? I would have been fine wearing boxers. It's not the end of the world. Nobody sees your underpants, anyway. Then again, I am a transgender male, so maybe this relaxed perspective of mine is atypical.

¹⁸⁵ Vol. 8. 55-56., 67-68.

¹⁸⁶ Vol. 8. 68.

¹⁸⁷ Vol. 8. 34-35.

¹⁸⁸ Vol. 8. 57.

bigotry, and abuse – all things already familiar to Shuichi. Maho fails to be a positive role model for Shuichi. And their parents, in allowing her to hurt Shuichi, neglect their duty to ensure their children treat each other well. Though, based on how their mother Satomi acts towards Shuichi, it could be said that Maho is just following the household precedent already set in place. That Maho's actions go unpunished is unsurprising when considering how Satomi also scorns her transgender daughter.

Satomi makes little effort to shield Shuichi from Maho's abusive behaviors.^[189] She does not question why Shuichi stops modeling with Maho,^[190] even though Shuichi seemed over the moon at the opportunity. She seems to favor Maho, and she is unconcerned with their strained sibling relationship. She does not try to understand her transgender child; rather, within earshot of Maho, she criticizes Shuichi for “pretending to be a girl like that,” saying she “can't keep that up forever.”^[191] She dismisses her dressing up as a girl as “him” being “at a rebellious age.”^[192] The prevalence of teenage angst manifesting in cross-dressing is not an oft-

researched subject; regardless, due to the potentiality of being disowned or assaulted, it is not likely something most teenagers would do to “get back” at their parents. Satomi is horrified when Shuichi goes to school in a sailor suit, joining the majority of Shuichi's classmates, teachers, and family members in rejecting her.^[193] Moreover, regardless of how Shuichi is victimized by this event through social ostracization and familial exclusion, she, like Maho,^[194] takes herself to be the actual victim of Shuichi's actions. In the fourteenth volume, when Satomi looks back on Shuichi wearing the sailor suit, her internal monologue goes as follows: “Why would he go to school dressed up like that / he must have known he'd be ridiculed / I hate it / I really hate it.”^[195] She is so against Shuichi “wanting to be” a girl that Satomi asserts she would never tell their grandparents “something like that,”^[196] forever keeping them in the dark.¹⁹⁷ By the final chapters, Satomi is still confused about Shuichi: “I wonder what my son wants to be / Satomi Nitōri racked her brains over this question.”^[198] It may be an obvious conclusion to transgender people that Shuichi, for years, has desperately been trying to

¹⁸⁹ Satomi's reaction to Maho making Shuichi cry, in Vol. 2. 67, reveals she is aware of Maho's untowards behaviors towards Shuichi.

Original Japanese: “まーたシュウちゃんいじめて” [You're bullying Shu-chan agaaaain?]

Thorn's translation: "Are you teasing Shu-chan again?"

Satomi then laughs (“あはは”) at Maho for dressing Shuichi up and flippantly says “いい加減にきなさいよもー” [Cut it out already~], leaving the room right afterwards.

¹⁹⁰ Vol. 4. 38.

¹⁹¹ Vol. 4. 39.

¹⁹² Vol. 15. Ch. 119. 5.

¹⁹³ Please forgive the page numbers in this citation, as the page numbers for Horou Musume's fanmade translation seem to switch between the serialized Comic Beam version of Wandering Son and the self-standing manga. Here's the pages, from Horou Musume's scanlations, in chronological order:

Vol. 8. 188., Vol. 9., 86-87, 92, 74, 90, Ch. 69. 2, 69, 9.

¹⁹⁴ Maho stops going to school in shame. Although Shuichi did nothing to apologize for, she apologizes to Maho as if it was all her fault. Vol. 9. Ch. 68. 23.

Shuichi also apologizes to her mother in Vol. 15. Ch. 122. 17. for not being the “son you wanted me to be.” Again, Shuichi did nothing that she should be at fault for. I dislike this framing; that transgender children should have anything to apologize for their family members for. She's transgender – that's not anything shameful or illegal.

¹⁹⁵ Vol. 14. Ch. 109. 6-7.

¹⁹⁶ Vol. 10. Ch. 76. 5.

¹⁹⁷ It is the duty of most parents of transgender children to inform their extended family members about their kid's transition. My parents did the same, all for my sake, and now I can fully enjoy family gatherings like I did as a child. Even despite the occasional misgendering, I feel welcomed and I am excited to talk with my family members. I no longer wish to shrink in the corner and keep feeling bad about constantly lying about myself, and I am able to get closer to my family members because the walls I constructed to try and protect myself have been lowered.

¹⁹⁸ Vol. 15. Ch. 119. 5.

tell her family that she's a girl – Maho even directly tells Satomi that “He wants to be a girl” after the sailor suit incident.^[199] However, Satomi never attempts to talk in-depth with Shuichi. She is never ready to hear what Shuichi wants to say, and so she continues to misunderstand her, never connecting Shuichi's actions as cries for help. She views Shuichi as perverted and “strange,” being “scared of her own son,”^[200] and is unable to accept the thought that she has a transgender daughter. It is a shame that the two closest people in Shuichi's life – two women she is with every day – are resoundingly against her. Maho and Satomi actively speak down to Shuichi and make decisions that place her well-being in jeopardy, and their potential for character growth is abandoned.

A precursor of transgender peoples' happinesses is that they must be accepted. If not by family, then by friends, if not by family or friends, then by strangers. They must be acknowledged and seen for who they are, or it becomes difficult to cope with their life living in the decomposing corpse of the wrong-gendered person that they no longer are. It is disheartening that *Wandering Son* overwhelmingly portray the family as hateful of transgender youth. Familial exclusion hits home to many transgender people in real life, but fiction is written to explore possibilities, and it is a shame that Satomi sets a bad example for parents of transgender children. As Muszynski writes, “parental acceptance is often lacking, and

thus needed, in modern myths. Positive reactions from parents in response to cross gender identity questions or play from their kids and the friends of their kids is positive archetypal behavior to mimic.”²⁰¹ Satomi's character had the potential to inspire parents to try to understand and love their transgender offspring. Not having familial love is sadly too frequent of an experience, and it directly correlates with worse health states for transgender people. Studies have found that “...young adults who reported low levels of family acceptance had scores that were significantly worse for depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and attempts,”²⁰² with “Transgender youth also report[ing] elevated rates of child abuse compared with their cisgender peers.”²⁰³ It is regrettable that Maho and Satomi are repackaged depictions of all-too-familiar forms of bigotry, instead of being original characters that break the mold by revolutionarily affirming and loving their transgender relatives.

However, there are two rare positive parental figures in *Wandering Son*: Makoto's mother and Shuichi's father. While underutilized in the story, they provide an example of how parents should act. They cannot counteract the strength of the world pressing down on the transgender children in *Wandering Son*, but they do offer some amount of promise for a better future. It is remarkable that Makoto's mother is potentially supportive of Mako after she comes out to her.^[204] She comes

¹⁹⁹ Vol. 8. 87.

²⁰⁰ Vol. 14. Ch. 121. 7.

²⁰¹ Joseph Peter Muszynski. Structure, form, and content: Mythology and comics. 214-215.

²⁰² Caitlin Ryan et al., “Family Acceptance in Adolescence and the Health of LGBT Young Adults,” *Journal of Child and Adolescent*

Psychiatric Nursing 23, no. 4 (November 1, 2010): 205–13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2010.00246.x>.

²⁰³ Sabra L. Katz-Wise, Margaret Rosario, and Michael Tsappis, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth and Family Acceptance,” *Pediatric Clinics of North America* 63, no. 6 (December 1, 2016): 1011–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pcl.2016.07.005>.

²⁰⁴ Vol. 14. Ch. 113. 16.

up to see Makoto and Nitori in Makoto's room, loving and unsure, and offers advice for Mako to "wear makeup" or get "plastic surgery."^[205] It is her, not Yuki-san, who introduces these avenues of transition to the miserable transfeminine Makoto and Shuichi, and in doing so, she invites them and the audience to imagine how they could look. Surgeries and make-up may allow for them to reclaim their femininities and enjoy looking at their bodies again. As for Shuichi's father, he is a stabilizing pillar for Shuichi after she is sent home in her sailor suit incident. He recognizes Shuichi's anxiety and rescues her from the Satomi and Maho-led family interrogation by taking her to the convenience store,^[206] a neutral and less stressful place. In his talk with Shuichi, he decides to tell her a story about their grandparents betting on their genders. He explains how their grandma changed her mind on Shuichi's gender mid-way through her gestation, implying that she may have been right.^[207] While a small gesture, his attempts to cheer up Shuichi could also be read as him being supportive of Shuichi's transgender identity. Although *Wandering Son* is dominated by antagonistic people who rebuke Shuichi's, Yoshino's, and Makoto's transness, the instances with Makoto's mother and Shuichi's father are refreshingly optimistic. Not all family members will act like Maho or Satomi, and if one reads *Wandering Son* to learn more about how to treat the transgender people in their lives, they can, at least, see a few examples

of adults properly displaying kindness and empathy.

The Pernicious Ways Makoto, Yoshino, and Shuichi Undermine Each Other

Shuichi, Makoto, and Yoshino primarily interact with their cisgender family members, classmates, and schoolteachers. It's only when they are alone with each other that they can share how they feel as fellow closeted transgender kids. They are "kindred souls,"^[208] so the fact that they repeatedly undercut each other's identities comes off as bizarre. For example, take how Makoto and Yoshino are shown to be attracted to Shuichi for her masculinity, not for her femininity. Yoshino romantically dreams about Shuichi as a male adult,^[209] not as the girl that Shuichi and Chiba imagine. Yoshino only begins to requite Shuichi's crush on her after Shuichi's body has been masculinized by puberty.^[210] Makoto's attraction to Shuichi also suggests that she considers Shuichi to be male. Makoto is consistently into men,^[211] but curiously enough, she never once considers Yoshino as a romantic interest. Rather, she views Yoshino as different from other men;^[212] this suggests that she either does not accept Yoshino to be a transgender boy, or that she believes transgender men are not "real" men. However, Makoto does have feelings for Shuichi.^[213] She even internally

²⁰⁵ Vol. 14. Ch. 113. 20-21.

²⁰⁶ Vol. 9. 93-94.

²⁰⁷ Vol. 9. 96-97.

²⁰⁸ Vol. 14. Ch. 120. 22.

²⁰⁹ Vol. 4. 133, 146.

²¹⁰ Vol. 14. Ch. 120. 16, 23.

²¹¹ As Makoto is into Seya (Vol. 3. 123, 128., Vol. 10. Ch. 79. 15. Ch. 80. 6-7.), "boymode" Yuki-san in a suit (Vol. 6. 200.) or just Yuki-san in general (Vol. 14. Ch. 112. 10.) which also suggests she sees Yuki as "male." She also likes male teachers (Vol. 5. 74., Vol. 8. 25. 73-74., Vol. 10. 153-154., Vol. 11. Ch. 87. 5-6.), and other various men (Vol. 11. Ch. 89. 12-14., Vol. 14. Ch. 112. 6-7.).

²¹² Vol. 5. 76.

²¹³ Vol. 10. Ch. 78. 15, 17-22.

misgenders her,^[214] which is a horrible thing for a transgender girl to do to her transgender girl best friend. Shuichi figures out that Makoto's only into her as a man, and this makes her feel "pride but also a kind of sadness."^[215] Yoshino and Makoto, as Shuichi's friends, also act abnormally when it comes to how they discourage Shuichi from dressing femininely. Makoto is her closest friend, but after she hears that Shuichi has scored a cafe job that allows her to dress femininely, she suggests Shuichi "stop for now,"^[216] something quite unrealistic for one's best friend to say. Yoshino, as well, talks Shuichi out of them going on their day trips anymore since Anna, Shuichi's girlfriend, "wouldn't like it."^[217] These trips were platonic, for the sake of wearing gender-affirming clothing, and Yoshino's reasoning for why they would impede Anna's and Shuichi's romantic relationship is not stated. Later, the story has Shuichi take it as a given that Yoshino and Makoto will oppose her wearing a girl's uniform to school,^[218] even though Yoshino wore the men's uniform the day before without much repercussion. She presumes them, her transgender best friends, to not be her advocates. And like Shuichi expected, Yoshino is against her idea, refusing to lend Shuichi his feminine school uniform^[219] for some reason. The idea of transgender solidarity – of Yoshino dressing up in a male uniform again, and Makoto joining Shuichi in a girl's uniform – is not even considered. That Yoshino and Makoto would support Shuichi is denoted as something

preposterous, but expecting one's friends to have one's back is an ordinary thing to do.

At least, though, it could be said that protagonist Shuichi likes Yoshino as his transmasculine self. Her confession to Yoshino has her say that she wants him to "...look at me like a girl ... Because ... I look at you as a boy."^[220] This scene happens as Shuichi rewrites *Romeo and Juliet* with herself and Yoshino in mind, passionate to create "A happy ending for everybody" with Yoshino as a boy and her as a girl.^[221] On the other hand, Shuichi seems to also like Yoshino for his femininity. Right before she confides to Shuichi that she does not identify as a man anymore, meaning that Shuichi would likely still regard him as a transgender boy, Shuichi says this out of nowhere: "Takatsuki-san in a skirt, huh? / It would suit her."^[222] She is describing the same Yoshino who had, years prior, vented to her about her unease with the female school uniforms – the same Yoshino who chose to dress in pants as often as he could. It is very peculiar that Shuichi, Makoto, and Yoshino are uncertain or hesitant to affirm their friends' transgendered states. If one has transgender friends, one would know that this is not normal. We like to praise and encourage each other. We swap old clothes and walk into public bathrooms together to look out for one-another. We correctly gender each other, on purpose, when nobody else will. The ways that Yoshino, Shuichi, and Makoto disrespect each other leads me to believe that author Takako Shimura is not

²¹⁴ Vol. 13. Ch. 106. 6.

²¹⁵ Vol. 14. Ch. 119. 14.

²¹⁶ Vol. 13. Ch. 101. 14-16.

²¹⁷ Vol. 7. 113-115.

²¹⁸ Vol. 8. 167.

²¹⁹ Vol. 8. 174, 178.

²²⁰ Vol. 6. 22-23.

²²¹ Vol. 6. 24.

²²² Vol. 14. Ch. 108. 26.

close to many transgender individuals. It may be that she has read narratives of one transgender person in an all-cisgender cast, but it does not seem that she knows how we act around each other. This oversight brings into question Takako Shimura's credibility as an author of transgender subjects.

The Role of Author Takako Shimura

The limitations of Takako Shimura, *Wandering Son's* non-transgender author, are fairly absent from the discourse. Not much of Muszynski, Hoskins, or Zanini and Solano seemed to be critical of Shimura and her choices in writing *Wandering Son*. Bear with me, but as Shimura is a cisgender person, she must rely on what she is able to learn and study. As Shimura is disconnected from the transgender experience and from transgender pain, she is ignorant to what she does not know and what she cannot fully understand. She can draw upon memoirs, autobiographies, and interviews of the transgender community, but her conclusions, even if drawn upon endless research, would pale in comparison to the complexities of understanding one gets from being a transgender individual. Her knowledge of the transgender community is limited to the second-hand and theoretical, while I am drawing upon my material, first-hand experiences as a transgender man. There is not a barrier of disconnect between my identity and the identities of Shuichi, Makoto, and Yoshino, and how these characters are written leads me to

conclude that Shimura's perspective of being transgender is flawed. Shimura stated her intentions with the story in an interview with *Manga Erotics F* magazine; she said she set out to write "Nitori-kun" as "a certain type of boy" and "Takatsuki-san" as "a certain type of girl" ... "want[ing] to draw them going through voice changes and physical changes in their body, and the internal conflict that arises from those things."²²³ She describes her own detachment from the trauma of the "wrong" puberty, appearing not sympathetic, but fascinated by transgender anguish. It is also quite telling that she, here, describes Shuichi as a "boy" and Yoshino as a "girl." By thinking of them as such, she is fundamentally misunderstanding her main characters from their conception. This reading is also supported by her title of this series: *Wandering Son*, which is almost certainly in reference to Shuichi, remarkably not-a-boy, and therefore, not-a-son. She misgenders her transfeminine main character from the offset; this is not a great look for a series that is meant to be educational or empathetic of the transgender community. Even the manga's English-language translator Rachel Thorn is cognizant of Shimura's faults. She states that "It's really late in the series, frankly, that Shimura starts to do some research... she was really basically winging this for more than half the series, and then, finally, I think she starts to do some research."²²⁴

Using the Trope of "Getting Caught" as a Crutch

²²³ Wolfhonyaku, "[Interview Translation] Manga Erotics F Vol. 82 Interview with Shimura Takako," Wolf Translations, March 2, 2020, <https://wolfhonyaku.wordpress.com/2020/03/02/interview-translation-manga-erotics-f-vol-82-interview-with-shimura-takako>.

²²⁴ Kaiser et al., "Chatty AF 21: Wandering Son Retrospective (WITH TRANSCRIPT)."

The possibility of being discovered, and then forcibly outed, weighs heavily on the minds of many transgender people. To be outed is to likely become a social pariah, lose one's job, and have the stability in one's current lifestyle come to a sudden end. The trope of "being caught" is a common part of transgender and gender-transgressive media.²²⁵ The beginning of *Ouran Highschool Host Club* has protagonist Fujioka Haruhi being discovered as biologically female;²²⁶ this may be an example that most shojo manga readers are familiar with. The Japanese verb used to describe being caught, as featured in the inner cover page of *Okama dakedo OL yattemasu*, which is an autobiographical manga book by transgender female office worker Nomachi Mineko, is "'mitsukatta"! (Caught out!)" Nomachi visualizes her dread at this – her horrified expression emblematic of the terror that grips transgender people in their working lives.²²⁷ Shuichi Nitori, like Nomachi Mineko, fears being found out as a transgender girl, i.e. as a "boy" who likes to dress like a "girl." To be caught is indescribably humiliating. Unfortunately, Shuichi's transgendered activities are caught by Maho, her unsupportive elder sister, multiple times.^[228] Although Maho's unfortunate timing entering the scene is sometimes played off as comedic,²²⁹ the trauma

of being exposed is inflicted on Shuichi from these confrontations regardless. As Shuichi is caught by Maho, again and again, it almost becomes expected that she will be found out by Maho whenever she dresses up. Shimura relies heavily on this one trope – of transgender people being "caught" or "exposed." Since Shuichi is hurt almost every time she takes a risk with her outward presentation, the story comes off as punishing her for her transgender identity. This also happens to Makoto, as she is "caught" by someone she knows when she bravely ventures outside alone in feminine clothing. This leads her to conclude, "See. It ends in regret,"^[230] an overly-pessimistic judgment that suggests that Makoto will never again try to go outside wearing gender-affirming clothes. The trauma of being outed is one part of many transgender people's lives, but this trope is overrepresented in *Wandering Son*.²³¹ Shuichi and Makoto, like hermit crabs suffocating in their shells, emerge, vulnerable, to the world to seek better possibilities, but are stabbed again and again, forced to retreat back into the safety of their shells every time. Despite being so close to the promise of happier circumstances, *Wandering Son* shoves them back into the darkness which is familiar. They try to build themselves up as independent, confident subjects, reconstructing the fragile sandcastles of

²²⁵ "Unsettling Gender-Reveal," TV Tropes, n.d., <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/UnsettlingGenderReveal>.

²²⁶ "今日から君はホストだ [Starting Today, You Are a Host!]" (Bones, April 4, 2006), accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.funimation.com/shows/ouran-high-school-host-club/>.

²²⁷ Mackie, Vera. "How to Be a Girl: Mainstream Media Portrayals of Transgendered Lives in Japan." 413.

Mitsukatta (見つかつた) is the past-tense form of the verb Mitsukaru (見つかる), to be discovered. Another verb that would fit this situation is Bareru (ばれる), to be found out or exposed.

²²⁸ Maho finds Shuichi's wig and sailor suit in Vol. 2. 71., Maho catches Shuichi introducing herself on tape as "Maho" in Vol. 5. 160., Maho figures out Shuichi tried on her bra and panties set in Vol. 6. 169-173.,

Maho catches Shuichi wearing her sailor suit and wig again in Vol. 11. Ch. 89. 15-16.

²²⁹ There comes a limit to where the dramatic irony of Maho choosing *right then* to enter the stage loses is humor.

²³⁰ See: Makoto running into bully Okumura in Vol. 14. Ch. 112. 15-19. The trope of being "caught" here at first subverted, with Okumura saying he hadn't even recognized her in Ch. 113. 5-8., but it wounds Makoto regardless – especially after Okumura says there was no way he "could picture [her] as a woman."

²³¹ Perhaps because the less-salacious daily events of transgender people's lives cannot also be readily exploited for drama.

their psyches after repeated trauma, and the world of *Wandering Son* kicks them down again and again. They are not allowed to dress up, they cannot do anything about their puberties, and they are routinely misgendered – in these same circumstances, many transgender youths in the real world consider suicide. To a world that discourages you over and over again, what is the conclusion that its transgender characters will naturally come to?

Pessimism as the Natural Conclusion to a Cruel World



Figure 2: Two manga panels of Shuichi Nitori and Makoto Ariga talking. Nitori says, "It's a cruel world...", and Makoto replies, "Indeed it is / I've said it before but you're fairly blessed." Volume 13, Chapter 106, page 5.

When something can go wrong in *Wandering Son*, it often will. At a point, whenever something positive happens to Shuichi, Yoshino, or Makoto, the reader may come to wonder how long this joy will last. For this reason, it may be good for readers and scholars to develop a healthy suspicion of author Takako Shimura. *Wandering Son* seems to delight in snatching away hope right after giving

it, as seen in scenes such as: Yoshino's and Shuichi's first ride out to Fujisawa in gender-affirming clothing, but Yoshino gets his first period,^[232] Shuichi dreaming of herself as a girl, but she wakes up and sees her nighttime emission,^[233] Yoshino hypes himself up to dress as masculinely as he would like, but then he gets his period, again,^[234] Shuichi passes the modeling audition with Maho and is embraced by the other girls, but it is revealed shortly thereafter that they do not truly accept her, merely considering her a "novelty."^[235] These are incidents just from the first three volumes – before Chiba has become another bully of theirs, and while it could still be argued that the story is optimistic overall about Shuichi and Yoshino being transgender. Moving forwards, consider these sequences: Makoto is chosen randomly for the lead role of Juliet in their school play,^[236] but Yuki-san's comment that it was "too bad" Shuichi wasn't Juliet breaks Makoto's spirit, causing her to mess up her performance and the audience laughs at her.^[237] Another performance-related bait-and-switch happens with Shuichi. As she goes on stage for her part in her play, that is the *exact moment* when her voice drops.^[238] Shuichi is often a target of torture like this. She is sent home after wearing a girl's uniform, despite how Yoshino was let off the hook.^[239] Soon after she manages to get a job as a female waitress in a coffee shop, she is asked for her resume, a document which would list her legal name and gender, outing her to her employer.^[240] She keeps her job, but then

²³² Vol. 1. 157-160.

²³³ Vol. 3. 34-37.

²³⁴ Vol. 3. 163-164. His period coming at the worst time for Yoshino loses its novelty after the umpteenth time it occurs. Then, it just seems like a karmic punishment for him as a transgender man.

²³⁵ Vol. 3. 180-182, 213-215.

²³⁶ Vol. 6. 99-101.

²³⁷ Vol. 7. 21-24.

²³⁸ Vol. 10. 22-23.

²³⁹ Vol. 8. 186-188.

²⁴⁰ Vol. 12. Ch. 99. 4-5.

becomes the unwitting research subject of a virtual stranger.^[241] This person publishes pictures of her online without her consent, and Shuichi is forced to read the appalling comments of strangers about her body – destructive words mocking her “clearly male” bone structure, as an example.^[242] The world of *Wandering Son* takes a sadistic pleasure at the expense of its transgender characters. It is as if it wants its protagonists to give up; its ethos being that suffering and trauma are endless, and that hope is a futile effort. And the transgender main characters in *Wandering Son* do give up, embracing pessimism and sinking deeper into cycles of depression.

Wandering Son pushes the notion that being transgender is a state of infinite suffering, where one is never fully transgender until one obtains sexual-reassignment-surgery (SRS),^[243] but this is not the case. Unlike what is portrayed, transgender youth can transition. For many, our transitions do not start with hormones or surgeries, but simply after we make the mental switch to simply just *being* a girl, boy, or nonbinary person. It is not that complicated, and regardless of what any authority figure may say, anyone assigned male at birth, like Shuichi, can simply *become a girl at any time*. The same is true for those like Yoshino who were assigned female at birth. They *are* a boy as soon as they know they are one. Gender is internal and extremely subjective; only oneself can truly

comprehend one’s gender. And therefore, to be told that you are not your gender is incorrect. Once you decide who you are, that is who you are. It is intrinsic – trying to force someone to believe they are a certain gender is like trying to make someone accept a name that is not theirs.

Transgender people, in reality, fight to assert ourselves and demand that we are normal.^[244] This shift in mindset – recognizing one is one’s true gender regardless of what others may believe and say – is one of the initial steps in our transitional journeys that we will take. Frustratingly, though, the transgender protagonists of *Wandering Son* cannot seem to realize or fully commit to this. They are ever-unsure: Shuichi and Makoto entertain the mistaken belief presupposed onto them that they are men, Shuichi saying “I’m a man / That’s the inevitable reality of the situation / ... I want to wear girls clothes / And I’m a man”^[245] and Makoto stating “I’m the way I am, and I’m not a girl.”^[246] Their defeatist attitudes make pragmatic sense in the context of the cruel world of *Wandering Son*, but the world outside of this manga is not always so horrible. For transgender girls and their allies, it is very depressing to see these fictitious transgender girls surrender to transphobia and self-hatred. Ms. Ebina, a closeted adult transgender woman later introduced in the manga, also decides to give up on transitioning.^[247] She even discourages Shuichi from doing so,^[248] because, as

²⁴¹ Vol. 13. Ch. 100. 13., Ch. 101. 18., Ch. 102. 21.

²⁴² Vol. 15. Ch. 118. 11.

²⁴³ Vol. 6. 194.

²⁴⁴ Some LGBT people situate themselves as outside the boxes set by society, embracing concepts such as “genderfuck” (Vera Mackie. “How to Be a Girl: Mainstream Media Portrayals of Transgendered Lives in Japan.” 418.) and proudly celebrating that they are different from the norm. Others wish to be seen as “normal” and “ordinary.” This is up to each individual; neither way is inherently more right or wrong.

In Japan, like in Asia, most LGBT+ people live in survival mode. They cannot afford to be out, and many seek “normativity” and live “under-the-radar,” as discussed in:

Shu Min Yuen. “From Marginality to Possibility: Doing Transgender Studies in Japanese Studies.” *New Voices in Japanese Studies*, vol. 13, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.21159/nvjs.13.01.4-5>.

²⁴⁵ Vol. 15. Ch. 117. 13-14.

²⁴⁶ Vol. 14. Ch. 112. 9.

²⁴⁷ Vol. 13. Ch. 103. 13.

²⁴⁸ Vol. 13. Ch. 103. 14.

transfeminine YouTuber Cayla Coats says, Ms. Ebina is “...used as this sort of narrative tool to make Shuichi a little bit scared of transition.”²⁴⁹ This is the icing on top of a narrative that, by the ninth volume, is overwhelmingly negative about the transgender experience. And by the thirteenth volume, it is even explicitly voyeuristic of transgender people. A transgender woman wanders onto the scene whilst Ms. Ebina explains to Shuichi why she cannot transition, and the camera takes aim at this unsuspecting transgender woman, the panels zooming in on her hairy legs and Adam’s apple.²⁵⁰ The narrative, by this point, has decided to shed its hopeful, optimistic perspective on transgender people. It exploits the image of an easily-clocked, “mannish” transgender woman that has neither shaved nor accessed hormone therapy – a simulacrum routinely used, often in comedic effect, to dehumanize the transfeminine community. Takako Shimura may think of Shuichi as a man,²⁵¹ but like all transgender women, including Ms. Ebina and other pre-transitioned transgender women, she is not one. Unlike what Shimura portrays, surgery is not the only way to “become a woman.”²⁵² To be a woman is not gate kept by biology, outward appearance, or access to often-expensive surgical care. Again, one can be your actual gender – and transition as much as you can, as slowly or quickly as you wish and have access to, whether it be purely transitioned online, socially, or medically– and be happy with yourself as who you are. Happy

endings are not only for heterosexual and cisgender people,²⁵³ but are possible for transgender people like myself.

Where is the Transition?: My Trans Perspective

For a work so intrinsically connected to familiar aspects of the transgender experience – gender dysphoria, puberty, and gender euphoria, the transition is entirely missing in *Wandering Son*. Only the opposite extremes are presented: the loved and transitioned Yuki-san and the isolated and pre-transitioned Makoto, Shuichi, and Ms. Ebina.²⁵⁴ Yuki-san’s character is not made full use of. She has likely been on hormone-replacement therapy (HRT) for years, but she does not discuss this with Yoshino, Shuichi, or the audience. Despite Yuki-san’s existence – a living example of what life could be like for transgender people after they obtain hormones and socially transition – the pre-transitional state of the main transgender cast is depicted as a permanent condition they have little control over. *Wandering Son* presents a discouraging, one-sided take on the transgender experience. Puberty is a struggle, yes, but what about “second puberty,” i.e., the “correct” puberty transgender people go through on HRT? It would follow that Yuki-san would be the perfect person to explain this, as she managed to survive living through the “wrong” puberty and has just achieved a “female” puberty. Estrogen-based HRT, as it helped her,

²⁴⁹ Kaiser et al., “Chatty AF 21: *Wandering Son* Retrospective (WITH TRANSCRIPT).”

²⁵⁰ Vol. 13. Ch. 103. 17.

²⁵¹ Quite telling is how Shimura frames transgender women, twice, with the shocking scenario of coming home to your “husband dressed in women’s clothes” in Vol. 9. Ch. 71. 3-4., Vol. 15. Ch. 117. 8.

²⁵² Vol. 6. 194.

²⁵³ Vol. 15. Ch. 123. 12-13.

Chiba is happily with Fumiya at the end of the story, Maho has Seya, and Kanako also has a boyfriend. Even two heterosexual one-off characters (in Vol. 12. Ch. 97. 13.) get a happier ending than Yoshino, Makoto, or arguably Shuichi.

²⁵⁴ And Yoshino, up until her de-transition.

would help Shuichi and Makoto. She could have mentioned this, as estrogen feminizes one's face, "...chang[es] fat distribution, [and] induc[es] breast formation,"²⁵⁵ allowing Shuichi and Makoto their dreams of becoming "cuter."²⁵⁶ And as Yoshino wants to be manly, not "boyish,"^[257] there is testosterone available to "masculinize transgender men." It can take little time for transgender men to look at themselves in the mirror and feel happiness, as "Within three months of initiating testosterone therapy, the following can be expected: cessation of menses (amenorrhea), increased facial and body hair, skin changes and increased acne, changes in fat distribution and increases in muscle mass... [while] Later effects include deepening of the voice."²⁵⁸ Hormonal therapy would get rid of the periods that plague Yoshino, lower his vocal tone, and make him more like the man he wants/wanted to be. Other transgender scholars have raised questions about why "hormone treatment doesn't come up" in the series.²⁵⁹ A 2013 article states that routine "CSH [cross-sex hormone] therapy can be started at age 15 years" for Japanese youth,²⁶⁰ and it is exasperating that medical care for transgender people is never taught to Yoshino, Shuichi, or Makoto. Even puberty blockers being available to minors and young adults is absent from the

conversation. Transgender youth who are able to hormonally postpone their "biological" puberties report "less anxiety, depression, stress, total problems, internalizing difficulties, and suicidal ideation" than those who endure a "nonaffirming puberty."²⁶¹ Prescribing puberty blockers only began in 2000 in Amsterdam,²⁶² and its usage in Japan is not well-documented in English literature. Perhaps puberty blockers were not available in Japan during *Wandering Son's* publication, so this criticism is less warranted, but I believe puberty blockers are still deserving of mention as a compromise that transgender youth can take if they or their parents are not fully on board with traditional HRT.

Besides hormonal therapy, merely transitioning socially is not treated as a possibility in *Wandering Son*. Shuichi and Yoshino swap names a few times, and the last volume has Shuichi being given the name "Lily" by Lulu, the owner of the trans-friendly bar she works at,^[263] but the transgender characters do not consider new names for themselves. This is an integral piece of one's transition. Many transgender people try out different names until they find the right one. Some name themselves after their favorite fictional characters, others

²⁵⁵ Cécile A. Unger, "Hormone Therapy for Transgender Patients," *Translational Andrology and Urology* 5, no. 6 (December 1, 2016): 877–84, <https://doi.org/10.21037/tau.2016.09.04>.

²⁵⁶ As they each say in: Vol. 6. 142., Vol. 7. 19.

²⁵⁷ Vol. 11. Ch. 91. 4.

²⁵⁸ Cécile A. Unger, "Hormone Therapy for Transgender Patients," *Translational Andrology and Urology* 5, no. 6 (December 1, 2016): 877–84, <https://doi.org/10.21037/tau.2016.09.04>.

²⁵⁹ Kaiser et al., "Chatty AF 21: *Wandering Son* Retrospective (WITH TRANSCRIPT)."

²⁶⁰ M Nakatsuka. "[Puberty-delaying hormone therapy in adolescents with gender identity disorder]." *Seishin Shinkeigaku Zasshi = Psychiatria et Neurologia Japonica*. 2013 ;115(3):316-322. PMID: 23691819., <https://europepmc.org/article/med/23691819>, as cited by

Simone Mahfouda et al., "Puberty Suppression in Transgender Children and Adolescents," *The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology* 5, no. 10 (October 1, 2017): 816–26, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2213-8587\(17\)30099-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2213-8587(17)30099-2).

²⁶¹ Kerry McGregor et al., "Association of Pubertal Blockade at Tanner 2/3 with Psychosocial Benefits in Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth at Hormone Readiness Assessment," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, December 1, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2023.10.028>.

²⁶² Norman P. Spack, Laura Edwards-Leeper, Henry A. Feldman, Scott Leibowitz, Francie Mandel, David A. Diamond, Stanley R. Vance. "Children and Adolescents With Gender Identity Disorder Referred to a Pediatric Medical Center." *Pediatrics* March 2012; 129 (3): 419. 10.1542/peds.2011-0907, <https://www.transperheet.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Pediatrics-2012-Spack-418-25.pdf>

²⁶³ Vol. 15. Ch. 122. 9.

honor their deceased family members, and some choose the names that their parents had picked out for them had they been assigned their actual gender at birth. Some go by gender-neutral nicknames – “Alex” as shorthand for “Alexander” “Alexandria” or “Alexis,” or “Ash” as shorthand for “Ashley” or “Ashton,” for example, or “Haru” to mean “Haruka” or “Haruto.” Other than when Makoto’s mother once mentions plastic surgery,^[264] the numerous surgeries available to transgender people are also not talked about in the manga. Shuichi’s and Makoto’s top dysphoria can be stabilized through breast implants, and the double mastectomy²⁶⁵ procedure is done by doctors worldwide for transgender men like Yoshino. There is facial feminization surgery (FFS) available for transgender women that can shave off their Adam’s apples and resculpt their faces, electrolysis to “remove [one’s] beard,”²⁶⁶ and there’s sexual-reassignment-surgery (SRS) to grant transgender people more affirming genitalia. As I look back upon *Wandering Son*, argued to be the epitome of transgender representation in manga and anime, I have to ask – where is the transition?

Conclusion

Shimura, like the predominantly-cisgender readership of her works, cannot comprehend the ramifications of the series’ lack of support for – and repeated traumatization of

– its transgender main characters. Rather than *Wandering Son*’s narrative standing as educational and empathetic about the transgender experience to various transgender readers as myself, it exists instead as a voyeuristic and misinformed take of transgender life that carelessly exploits transgender suffering to fuel its plot with drama and tension. It took effort to continue reading from the ninth volume onwards. From the fourteenth volume, it became a psychological form of self-harm for me to continue reading *Wandering Son*’s pessimistic myopia for research purposes. *Wandering Son*, a manga which regularly misgenders its transgender characters^[267] and depicts the transgender experience with pessimism should not be the principal recommendation for transgender manga and anime fans. I would rather that we recommend narratives that provide well-rounded perspectives of the transgender experience. For manga that feature transgender men, I would recommend: *To Strip the Flesh* (2020) by Oto Toda, *Yuureitou* (2010-2014) by Nogizaka Tarou, and *Haikei, Seken-sama* (2022-2023) by Shin Kanzaki. Although these stories are far from perfect,²⁶⁸ the transgender men in these stories are able to transition, access hormone therapy and surgical care, and find amazing romantic partners that love them regardless of their transgender statuses. Yuhki Kamatani’s *Shimanami Tasogare* (2015-2018) also has transgender characters in its supporting

²⁶⁴ Vol. 1. Ch. 113. 20-21.

²⁶⁵ Which is also referred to as “top surgery.”

²⁶⁶ Vera Mackie. “How to Be a Girl: Mainstream Media Portrayals of Transgendered Lives in Japan.” 414.

²⁶⁷ The manga frames Shuichi and Makoto as “Boys who want to become girls” (女の子になりたい男の子) and Yoshino as “A girl who wants to become a boy” (男の子になりたい女の子), seen in Vol. 10. Ch. 74.

See: all character introduction pages in each volume. Also, the ending blurbs on the manga’s back covers.

²⁶⁸ *Yuureitou* in particular is deserving of criticism for its incredibly flawed portrayals of gay men and transgender women. This is my favorite manga, but because of characters Yamashina and Marube Doukuro, I cannot recommend this series for any gay male or transgender female manga readers without content warnings for transmisogyny and homophobia.

cast, and is a lovely pro-LGBT narrative. As for well-written transgender female anime and manga characters, I'm admittedly less well-read on transfeminine narratives, but I can recommend *Stop!! Hibari-kun!* (1981-1983) by Hisashi Eguchi.²⁶⁹ These stories are inventive of better possibilities for transgender people and do not reduce us to tropes and stereotypes. Transgender people deserve better narratives that do not bolster outdated anti-transgender beliefs like how being transgender is to suffer, reducing us down to our "victimhoods," or how detransitioning can save oneself from the "terror" of the transgender condition.

I remember crying underneath my blankets as I watched the first episodes of the *Wandering Son* anime as a closeted transgender junior high student over a decade ago. It spoke to me like nothing had. I also cannot forget the betrayal I felt with Yoshino – the disappointment that he decided never to go to school in a men's uniform again. I read the

manga as an adult, many years ago, hoping that I could revisit the series in a better state. However, I felt an even worse amount of stomach-flipping, soul-crushing despair as I read Yoshino resigning himself to femininity. I cannot claim that my takeaways from *Wandering Son* are universal, but I have no doubt that other transgender men were hurt as I was. That *Wandering Son* tortures its transgender characters and implicitly encourages them not to transition is unacceptable. Transgender people are vulnerable – not only as present scapegoats of reactionaries, but as a community overwhelmingly alienated, traumatized, impoverished, and murdered. Empathetic transgender media and transgender literary theory are avenues of change, and while we discuss transgender representation in fiction, we must fight against the perpetuation of stereotypes that target transgender people and keep us closeted.

²⁶⁹ With the caveat that many parts of *Stop!! Hibari-kun!* have not aged well – its usage of the iconography of indigenous Americans in

particular. The transgender girl of this manga is, though, lovingly supported at school as a girl.

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