

Queering the *Koseki*: Marriage, Family Registration and Queer Alternatives in Ekuni Kaori's *Twinkle, Twinkle* (1991)

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The institution of marriage in Japan, including the *Koseki Seido* (Family Registration System), stipulates that marriage be a union between a man and a woman. This legal framework systemically reinforces heteronormativity, including its set of traditional gender norms that places expectations of reproduction and childrearing on women in service of an idealized “happy family.” Ekuni Kaori’s 1991 novel *Twinkle, Twinkle*, however, disrupts this logic by illustrating alternative ways of living intimate and familial relations beyond the conventional model of a husband, wife, and kids. In the novel, a gay doctor named Mutsuki and a woman diagnosed with mental illness named Shoko enter into a marriage of convenience with one another, as two people who would otherwise be considered “unsuitable” for marriage in Japan. The arrangement allows them to appear to fulfill society’s expectations on the surface, while they continue to live according to their own desires in private. Reading *Twinkle, Twinkle* through a queer feminist lens, what is examined in this article is how the novel both critiques the heteronormative and patriarchal logics underpinning marriage in Japan and invites reflection on the possibilities and limitations of queer kinship enacted from within the institution of marriage.

Keywords: marriage, family, kinship, heteronormativity, disability

I. Introduction

On October 21st, 2025, the Japanese Diet elected the country’s first female prime minister, Takaichi Sanae, sparking anticipation around the world that her leadership might serve as a positive force for advancing gender equality. However, like past leaders of the Liberal Democratic Party, Takaichi has expressed conservative values—particularly related to marriage and family—that align with longstanding patriarchal and heteronormative traditions in Japan. While she is open to the use of former surnames on various documents, such as passports and driver’s licenses, for convenience purposes, she opposes amending

Japan’s current *Koseki Seido* (Family Registration System) that requires spouses to share the same surname. Similarly, she has stated that “same-sex partnerships are fine,” (Sankei Shimbun, 2025) but is against the legalization of same-sex marriage. Her opposition to changing the *Koseki Seido* reflects the consistent stance of her party that “traditional family values must be protected” (Nikaido, 2025).

This stance exemplifies a familiar refrain in Japan to “[p]rotect the family tradition,” which Japanese feminist Ueno Chizuko (2009: 3) identifies as “a conservative discourse that has always been heard in times of change to represent a reactionary view...People are frightened by

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the very fact that they do not know what may be waiting for them after the change.” In other words, it is a fear of the unknown that drives some people to insist that there can only be one way to “be a family”—having a husband, wife, and their children living together under one roof. While some people have found this way of life to be fulfilling, others such as queer individuals have pointed out that it does not meet the wants and needs of *everyone*. These people’s nonnormative perspectives help question if the traditional model of the family is, in fact, a “universal good” or if alternative forms of social relations might also be good in the ways they foster support, care, and joy among community members.

Ekuni Kaori’s 1991 novel¹ *Twinkle, Twinkle* offers its readers one such imagination of a possible intimate familial relationship beyond the heteronormative husband/wife model prescribed by the current system of marriage in Japan. Told through a series of chapters that rotate between the first-person perspectives of the story’s protagonists, Mutsuki and Shoko, the book details their entrance into a marriage of convenience with one another to appear to live up to their parents’ expectations that they marry and start a family. As two persons considered “other” in 1990s Japanese society—and therefore, unsuitable for marriage—they come to this creative agreement to help each other out. Specifically, Mutsuki, as a gay doctor with a boyfriend named Kon, is “othered” for his sexuality, while Shoko faces the stigmatization of being a woman living with mental illness (depression and alcoholism), understood here through a framework of disability. Their arrangement, therefore, allows them to appear to be a traditional husband and wife on the surface, while they continue to live according to their own desires in private.

However, despite their creative solution to societal pressures, as a married couple, Mutsuki

and Shoko confront new expectations from their parents, friends, and even Shoko’s therapist about having children. Their relationship is further complicated by Shoko’s development of romantic feelings for Mutsuki. Eventually, Mutsuki—worried about Shoko’s worsening depression—seeks help from Shoko’s friend, a woman named Mizuho, and tells her the truth about their marriage. Mizuho subsequently informs Shoko’s parents, which triggers an intense confrontation with both families. In the aftermath, Kon decides to separate from Mutsuki for a while because he believes he is the root of all this conflict. By the end of the novel, however, Shoko arranges for Kon to live in her and Mutsuki’s apartment building, so that the three of them can be together as a kind of queer “family.”

In this article, I read Ekuni’s *Twinkle, Twinkle* through a queer feminist lens to critically reflect on how it questions the social norms and expectations interconnected with the *Koseki Seido*, while imagining possibilities for alternative forms of intimacy and kinship that might be more inclusive of individuals who do not fit with the traditional Japanese family model. Because Shoko and Mutsuki cultivate queer relationships while legally registered as a married couple, the novel offers an important perspective on possibilities and limitations of queer subversion from *within* the institution of marriage. Through closely examining the significance of Shoko’s and Mutsuki’s marriage of convenience to each of their experiences, I argue that *Twinkle, Twinkle* envisions forms of queer relationality practiced *in private*, yet ultimately reveals the fragility of these alternatives in the absence of structural change to the heteronormative, patriarchal, and ableist institutions of marriage and family in Japan.

The article’s interrogation of these institutions through literary critique both draws from and contributes to scholarship at the intersections

of Gender Studies and Queer Studies. Through bringing into conversation theorizations by Michel Foucault (1978) and Judith Butler (2004), I read the *Koseki Seido* in Japan as a mechanism of biopolitical power that shapes which ways of life receive broad social recognition as legitimate and which are rendered “abnormal” or “undesirable.” Because the system recognizes only heterosexual marriages, it plays a key role in legitimizing and naturalizing heteronormative relationships and family structures. Upon contextualizing and disentangling these workings of power, I trace how they operate within the novel itself. While previous queer critiques of the *Koseki Seido* have focused on the legal rights that the system denies LGBTQ+ individuals, I highlight how *Twinkle, Twinkle* offers an important perspective on the everyday affective violence that the system imposes on non-normative subjects like Shoko and Mutsuki.

Alongside this critique, I also consider how the novel adds to queer conceptualizations of kinship that disrupt and denaturalize the heteropatriarchal norms underpinning dominant notions of family. In their recent volume *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*, Teagan Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman (2022: 2) rethink kinship as a “bodily practice” within “a radical and open-ended field of relational experimentation.” That is, rather than limit kinship to forms of family supported by state authority and resources, they theorize the term encompassing possibilities for alternative forms of belonging that provide care, dependency, intimacy, and desire. My reading of the novel then extends this project by showing how *Twinkle, Twinkle* illustrates concrete examples of possible alternative kinship practices that Bradway and Freeman theorize, while also clarifying the limits of their liberatory potential when enacted from inside a system of marriage.

Finally, I characterize my approach to queer

kinship as specifically feminist due to its centering of intersectionality. Following Cathy J. Cohen (1997), I understand “queer” not as a singular identity opposed to “heterosexuality,” but as a *plurality* of identities and social practices that defy and/or are marginalized by heteronormativity due to their articulation through certain gender, sexuality, race, class, disability, and/or other categories of difference. Queerness in this sense, as Cohen shows, extends beyond homosexuality to include other non-heteronormative people who have historically faced systemic oppression, such as single mothers on welfare, interracial couples, Black and Latina women stereotyped as “hypersexual,” and women pathologized through diagnoses such as hysteria. This understanding of queerness enables me to read Shoko as queer not for her sexual orientation but because of her disability (her diagnosis of depression and alcoholism).

From this reading, I turn to Queer Disability Studies frameworks to help me attend to differences between the two protagonists. I work through how the intersection between Shoko’s disability and her marginalized gender identity produces forms of vulnerability and constraint that Mutsuki—despite his queerness—does not face as a neurotypical, able-bodied man. Their differences, I argue, reveal the limitations of queer kinship practiced within the *Koseki Seido* and, by extension, suggest a need for structural change. Through this analysis, what is ultimately offered here is an interpretation that brings disability to bear on existing critical scholarship on the *Koseki Seido* and prior queer readings of *Twinkle, Twinkle* that have both focused more on questions of gender and sexuality. In doing so, it foregrounds the multiple facets of heteronormativity and its intersections with patriarchy and ableism, asserting that queer kinship should be imagined and

practiced as a coalitional project across difference.

II. Contextualizing Japan's *Koseki Seido* (Family Registration System)

In Japan, one's individual civil status (birth, marriage, divorce, death, etc.) is recorded within the *Koseki Seido*, which identifies that person within a family unit under a head of household (*hittōsha*). This system requires that all other family members take the surname of the *hittōsha*, while it also maps them in relation to this person, designating them with terms such as “spouse,” “eldest son,” or “eldest daughter.” The type of family permitted by the *Koseki Seido*, as Vera Mackie (2014: 204) succinctly summarizes, is limited to “a heterosexual couple of Japanese nationality who produce children by biological reproduction of children genetically related to two parents.” To this I would add, its specification of biological children, differentiated from adopted children, reflects a broader assumption of able-bodied parents capable of reproducing children in their image. Historically, such ableist presumptions were supported by other legal frameworks, including the 1948-1996 Eugenic Protection Law, which led to the mass sterilization of people “with certain hereditary physical, psychiatric, and intellectual conditions (Article 4)” (Homei et al. 2025: 224).

Although operations of heteronormativity and patriarchy in Japan exceed any single administrative system, the *Koseki Seido* plays a key institutional role in shaping and reinforcing gender and sexuality norms. In Foucauldian terms, its regulation of kinship and reproduction can be said to be an instrument of the state's biopolitical power concerned with “the biological existence of a population” (Foucault 1978: 137). Because it legitimates only one family form defined through

heterosexual marriage and shared surnames, the *Koseki Seido* (re)produces subject positions defined according to their conformity or nonconformity with heteronormative family roles such as husband, wife, father, and mother. In this sense, it operates as a process of subjection that pressures individuals to take on these dominant roles. As Judith Butler (2004: 2-4) suggests, what is at stake in such processes is the desire to be recognized by others as “grievable lives” or “socially viable beings”—meaning as fully human. It thus can be inferred that, in Japan, the social norms articulated through the *Koseki Seido* shape the possibility of such recognition, insofar as they provide the frameworks that make certain ways of life more legible than others. In this way, the system of family registration participates in structuring social acceptance and intelligibility, rendering those outside of heteronormative forms of marriage and family in more precarious positions vulnerable to social marginalization.

Historically, the *Koseki Seido* emerged from Meiji political reforms at the turn of the century that drew from both Confucian traditions and newly introduced European ideas. These reforms culminated in the Meiji Civil Code (1898), which redefined the structure of the Japanese family (*ie*). Prior to the modern era, family formations had been more flexible without the requirement of blood-based kinship (Garon 2010: 320; Mackie 2014: 203). Yet through implementing the *Koseki Seido*, the code gave new privilege to direct lineage and primogeniture, while emphasizing the household's hierarchal patriarchal structure with the father at the top as the head of household (Toshitani, 1994: 67-68; Endo 2013: 117). At the time, the explicitly male term “*koshu*” was used to designate this role as opposed to the gender-neutral *hittōsha*.

As historian Hayakawa Noriyo (2014: 39-

40) has described, the Meiji Civil Code was informed by the Confucian doctrine of the “three obediences,” which reinforced the expectation for women to be submissive first to their fathers before marriage, then to their husbands, and finally to their oldest son if their husband passed away. European notions of marriage imported during the Meiji era further influenced the husband-and-wife dynamic stipulated by the code, as they confirmed the husband’s authority in the family and the wife’s role below him as his assistant in the household. The codification of these ideas within the *Koseki Seido* then contributed to reinforcing social norms that tasked Meiji women with the duty to serve their husbands and take responsibility for childrearing and other domestic tasks.

Following World War II, the Civil Code was revised under the US-led Allied occupation of Japan (1945-1952) and the implementation of a new Constitution in 1947. These changes shifted the *Koseki Seido* from a multiple-generation registry to a two-generation record to strengthen the nuclear family and, at least on paper, lessen the burden of caring for multiple generations of family members (White, 2018: 16-18). US leaders also sought to “democratize” the family by granting women equal rights to inheritance, custody, and divorce (20) and allowing them to serve as the head of household (amended to *hittōsha*). Yet despite these changes, heteropatriarchal norms have remained strong in Japan: not only do the majority of families still register with a male *hittōsha*, but also postwar Japanese families—as Ueno Chizuko has shown (2009: 68-69)—continue to be defined by patriarchal relations that perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities between men and women. Moreover, Japan ranked 118 out of 148 countries in the 2025 Global Gender Gap index, the lowest of all the G7 nations (World Economic Forum 2025). The persistence of this

inequality suggests that further systemic change may be needed to help transform the gender norms that are reinforced by the *Koseki Seido*’s heteronormative prescriptions of husbandry and wifehood.

Japan also remains the only G7 nation that does not legally recognize same-sex marriages. However, in the wake of such inequity, over 230 municipalities—starting with Tokyo’s Shibuya Ward in 2015—have started issuing partnership certificates to same-sex couples that acknowledge their unions as equivalent to marriage. While these certificates grant *symbolic* recognition to same-sex partnerships, they do not have any legal power and therefore, do nothing to change the *Koseki Seido*. Persons in such unions then continue to face systemic marginalization, as they are unable to qualify for tax concessions, inheritance of property, medical visitation privileges, joint child adoption, spousal visas (if their partner is not of Japanese nationality), among other rights (Maree 2014: 193; Shimizu 2020: 95).

Additionally, as queer and feminist cultural studies scholar Shimizu Akiko (2020: 98) argues, the partnership certificates further risk getting in the way of systemic change by making it seem that same-sex marriage is already “accepted” in Japanese society. These actions can then be seen as part of a larger history in Japan, in which the growing visibility of gay and transgender persons in the Japanese media since the late-1980s has created the perception that Japanese culture is more welcoming toward nonnormative gender and sexuality identities. Yet Shimizu, as well as linguist Claire Maree (2014), have pointed out, the claim that Japan is more accepting of queerness does not adequately reflect the tensions within contemporary Japanese society between cultural tolerance and legal restrictions toward same-sex couples. That is, the visibility of queerness,

especially transgender women and gay men, has largely been limited to the entertainment or nightlife scene—a place often regarded as separate from family life. Such non-heteronormative practices may be tolerated or overlooked since they do not appear to radically disrupt the traditional family values of Japanese society. This especially serves the interests of the national government, which “can demonstrate, to the international community, that it is making efforts to protect and promote LGBTQ+ rights and diversity, without actually making any effective legal or systemic changes that may offend the conservative constituency” (Shimizu 2020: 96).

Moreover, the partnership certificates limit the *Koseki Seido*’s problematics to the issue of same-sex marriage without considering the harm it causes persons practicing other forms of non-heteronormative kinship. In a United States context, Judith Butler (2004: 5) has shown how movements for gay and lesbian marriage ultimately (re)make marriage into a norm that may bestow social legibility to certain homosexual relationships, yet “render illegitimate and abject those sexual arrangements that do not comply with the marriage norm in either its existing or its revisable form.” A similar dynamic is at work in Japan, where debates around same-sex unions also leave out other members of the queer community who are not gay or lesbian and restrict kinship to state-sanctioned, monogamous marital forms. Yet in turning next to Ekuni Kaori’s *Twinkle, Twinkle*, I show what other forms of queer kinship the novel sheds light on that underscore the necessity for structural change to the *Koseki Seido* that move beyond mere tolerance of same-sex couples.

III. Queering the *Koseki Seido* in *Twinkle, Twinkle*

1. The Affective Harm of Heteronormative Marriage

Although the *Koseki Seido* is not named directly in *Twinkle, Twinkle*, its power to shape and reinforce social norms becomes palpable through Mutsuki’s and Shoko’s experiences of “othering” throughout the novel. By delineating what is “normal” and “abnormal” with regard to marriage and family-building, the system fuels societal pressures that permeate everyday life, including interpersonal relationships. Mutsuki’s and Shoko’s narration points to such instances, as they share times when friends, family, and other community members have pushed them toward heteronormative ways of life. Reading these moments of social pressure through a queer feminist analytic then opens up a way to not only denaturalize the social norms guiding their articulation but also gain insight into their affective consequences for non-heteronormative individuals.

Nowhere are the social pressures stemming from the *Koseki Seido* more apparent than in the circumstances driving Mutsuki and Shoko’s decision to marry one another. As Shoko reveals in her first segment of narration, neither she nor Mutsuki can readily fulfill the societal expectations of a “normal” marriage (Ekuni 2003: 4-5). Mutsuki, as a gay man, deviates from the heterosexual identity sanctioned by the *Koseki Seido*, while Shoko’s diagnosis with mental illness complicates her ability to live up to the ableist ideals of a wife and future mother. These differences from dominant constructions of normalcy, especially from heteronormativity, are what permit both Mutsuki and Shoko to be read as queer within Cohen’s (1997: 438) expanded theorization of the

term as encompassing a range of “*nonnormative* and *marginal* position[s]” outside heteronormative institutions and relationships. Yet the couple’s strategic navigation of social norms through a marriage of convenience suggests that their queerness is not only a site of marginalization, but also one of agency as they choose to be “real partners in crime” (6) to lessen societal pressures while continuing to live as they desire.

With this initial understanding of Mutsuki’s and Shoko’s queer vantage points, it becomes possible to trace the heteronormative logics that mediate their later interactions with other characters who judge them to be “abnormal.” For example, when the truth about the protagonists and their marriage becomes revealed to their parents, Shoko’s father reacts by calling Mutsuki a “man-woman” and “not a real man” (137). When read through Foucault’s (1978) theorization of subjection, her father’s response illustrates how the subject position of “husband” produced by the *Koseki Seido* is not a neutral title, but rather one constituted through a set of normative expectations that cover even sexual behaviors and desires. Furthermore, the emphasis he places on Mutsuki’s “manhood” shows how being a husband is also about performing masculinity—a masculinity defined by adherence to heterosexuality. In this way, Shoko’s father’s reaction reflects not simply an individual homophobic attitude, but a mindset produced by his socialization into a society where heteronormativity is unquestionably the norm.

Mutsuki’s mother makes harmful comments about Shoko that align with the normative view of society after finding out about her daughter-in-law’s diagnosis. His mother exclaims, “Homosexuality is a question of personal preference, but mental illness! Mental illness is hereditary” (137). Here, she insinuates that mental illness is a problem of the individual, which will

grow worse if people with such a flaw irresponsibly have children and pass down their disorders to their children. As with Shoko’s father, Mutsuki’s mother’s logic mirrors dominant understandings of “wifehood” reinforced by the *Koseki Seido*, which in this case encompass not only behaviors but also manifestations of the female body (and mind). Thus, her remarks make visible how the subject position of “wife” includes the duty of reproducing a socially productive population of able-bodied individuals.

In addition to these blatant expressions of prejudice by the protagonists’ parents, the novel also provides illustrations of softer or more subtle ways that certain characters reinforce heteronormativity in everyday life. In particular, it explores how marriage and having children get presented to the protagonists as unquestionably the “right” path for *everyone*. For example, when Shoko calls her friend Mizuho, upset over Mutsuki’s failure to call her during his night shift, Mizuho tells her: “If you have a baby, everything will be fine. I used to get really lonely when my husband went away on business, but once I had Yuta, things got fine” (63). Her advice presents having children as a “common sense” good that she assumes will bring Shoko happiness as it did her.

Queer feminist Sara Ahmed (2019) offers a useful framework for understanding how this association between heteronormative practices and happiness is made to seem like a natural progression. In her book *The Promise of Happiness*, she differentiates between the true *feeling* of happiness (which may not be definable or objectively measurable as it looks different for everyone) and the promise of happiness—a social *discourse* that tells us what will make us happy. As Ahmed puts it:

Happiness functions as a promise that directs

you toward certain objects, as if they provide you with the necessary ingredients for a good life. Happiness involves a form of orientation: the very hope for happiness means we get directed in specific ways, as happiness is assumed to follow from some life choices and not others” (54).

Historically, happiness, as Ahmed (29-42) shows, has reflected the dominant viewpoint of society and has created a singular path toward finding the good life. Across cultures and time periods, happiness has largely been associated with heteronormative conduct: things such as romantic love, marriage, children, or simply, “the happy family.” In turn, these associations have created what Ahmed calls “scripts” or discourses that tell us what we *should* do to be happy and construes deviations from these scripts as bad or causes of unhappiness.

Including Mizuho’s advice, *Twinkle, Twinkle* provides many examples of “happiness scripts” through the words of advice given by the novel’s heteronormative characters. One character who frequently uses them is Shoko’s psychologist, Dr. Octopus, whose name connotes his exercise of meddling and control over Shoko’s life. In fact, his speech appears exaggerated to the point of satire in the novel, which helps call attention to his medical advice as a socially constructed discourse and not an unquestionable truth. For instance, Shoko describes how when she first went to see him about her depression and alcoholism, he told her:

‘You aren’t *not* suffering from mental illness. Don’t worry, though—it’s no more than a case of emotional instability. Your drinking is probably a manifestation of it. I’m sure you’d start feeling better in no time if—and I say this just for instance—you got married’ (Ekuni, 2003: 5).

Then when she visits him after she gets married to consult him about the continuation of her emotional struggles, he responds: “I think the best advice I can give you now is to start thinking about starting a family. Everything will be fine once you have your first child” (66).

Dr. Octopus’s advice clearly lays out a path to happiness, which is characterized by taking part in a heteronormative lifestyle that includes marriage and kids. Yet because half of the novel is narrated from Shoko’s first-person viewpoint, the reader witnesses how this script does not translate into happiness for her. This especially becomes apparent when Shoko expresses to Mutsuki, “‘Why do they [Mizuho, Dr. Octopus, her parents] all have to tell me to have a baby?’... ‘I just wish we could stay like this’” (85). Yet despite her hope not to have children, the pressure continues to build and cause Shoko distress until she reaches the point when she decides to consult a doctor about artificial insemination.

Mutsuki, too, expresses feelings of anxiety caused by other people’s opinions about his “unhappy” marriage. Before finding out about the fake marriage and Shoko’s disability, on the question of children, Mutsuki’s mother tells him: “‘I’m sure her [Shoko’s] parents are hoping you’ll have a child soon, too’... ‘When I think of all the happiness you’re depriving Shoko of, it makes me so very unhappy’” (75). Here, her remark loops together Shoko’s happiness with that of both Shoko’s parents’ and her own happiness, and hence, places a large burden on Mutsuki to supposedly guarantee *all* of their well-being through his actions. From Mutsuki’s narrative viewpoint, it becomes apparent that this takes a toll on him mentally and emotionally. In a later chapter, after Shoko’s and his parents learn the truth about his homosexuality, Mutsuki shares such distress: “Memories came back to me: the strident tone

of Mother's voice, my father-in-law's angry glare, the pattern on my mother-in-law's tear-stained handkerchief, my father with his head drooping" (141). He paints a vivid picture of the list of people that he feels he is harming, which continues to haunt him by playing over and over in his mind. Eventually this stress causes him to oscillate over whether or not to break up with Kon to make everyone else besides himself happy.

These depictions of stress, anxiety, and depression from Mutsuki's and Shoko's perspectives help to clarify their experiences as queer persons in 1990s Japanese society. Yet rather than simply show how their identities as "others" cause them to feel as if they do not belong, the novel portrays how conforming to a heteronormative lifestyle does not bring them happiness. In this way, *Twinkle, Twinkle* queers the notion that marriage and reproduction constitute a *universal* good for *everyone*, exposing how these ideals—reinforced by the *Koseki Seido*—operate as regulatory norms rather than guarantees of happiness.

2. Imagining Queer Kinship within the Institution of Marriage

Yet because Shoko's and Mutsuki's queerness encompasses a sense of agency, their vantage points become not only a source of critique, but also a means of imagining ways of living beyond oppressive norms and systems. The relationships they cultivate thus exemplify the kinds of queer reworkings of kinship that Bradway and Freeman (2022) discuss, demonstrating practices of care, love, and belonging that reconfigure heteronormative models of family. In particular, their marriage of convenience functions as a subversive practice that undermines the authority of the *Koseki Seido*, while simultaneously becoming a site of connection and mutual support between persons otherwise marginalized within Japanese

society. Their arrangement allows them to be identified as "husband" and "wife" in legal discourse, but day-to-day they continue to inhabit identities composed of a variety of gender and sexuality practices—some which fit these categories and others which exceed their normative boundaries.

For example, Mutsuki and Shoko decide "that it didn't make any sense to say that a particular job was the husband's or wife's. Whoever was better at it would be the one to do it, whether it was cleaning the house or cooking the meals or whatever" (10). From this agreement, Mutsuki ends up doing the majority of the housework, which exemplifies a reversal of traditional gender roles. Additionally, Mutsuki takes on more care work within the home, as he attempts to soothe and comfort Shoko throughout her struggles with depression. This mutability of domestic and affective labor in *Twinkle, Twinkle* resonates with Butler's (1990) theorization of gender as a set of performance practices that constitute identity rather than innate characteristics tied to a male or female-sexed body. Hence, by calling into question the presumption that gender traits—including attraction to the opposite sex—are inherent characteristics aligned with biological sex, the novel also helps to queer the marriage system in Japan that relies on such normative alignments.

Moreover, while their marriage itself is fake and sexless, the two protagonists demonstrate a kind of queer intimacy between the two of them that deviates from traditional forms of romantic, heterosexual intimacy. One key moment in the text that demonstrates this connection occurs when Shoko has an emotional breakdown at an amusement park and Mutsuki comes to pick her up and take her home. At this time, Mutsuki lifts Shoko off the bed in the park's infirmary and Shoko thinks to herself: "I could feel his warmth,

his heartbeat. I felt comforted, like a child. Even though we had never made love, his body seemed to fit mine naturally” (99). The moment is characterized by close physical intimacy, as Shoko narrates the bodily sensations she perceives while in Mutsuki’s arms. Though Shoko does, at times, display a hopeless love for Mutsuki in a romantic sense, here the text paints a blurring of romantic desire and a different form of comfort than that between friends or platonic partners. However, it is *because of* this ambiguity that the reader is given the opportunity to give up on the categorizations of romantic/platonic or heterosexual/homosexual love and see this practice of intimacy for what it is: physical closeness and comfort without an identity label.

In analyzing this scene in the novel, Japanese literary scholar Grace En-Yi Ting (2021: 11) posits that “Ekuni clearly wishes for us to see this embrace—this marriage, including the couple’s lack of sexual intercourse—as entirely unnatural by society’s standards but also fitting and right.” Her reading, therefore, further sheds light on the queerness that underlines Mutsuki and Shoko’s relationship, which in its defiance of normative forms of intimacy and kinship makes visible an alternative form of connection and dependency beyond heterosexual marriage.

Furthermore, despite Shoko’s unreciprocated romantic feelings for Mutsuki, the novel illustrates that she understands their current relationship as it exists—platonic/sexless—is worth defending. When the couple is confronted by their parents about Mutsuki’s homosexuality and Shoko’s mental illness, Shoko is the one who stands up to them to protect their current way of life, including Mutsuki’s ongoing relationship with Kon. When she is presented with the option to have Mutsuki to herself, she asserts: “If Mutsuki leaves Kon... then I’m leaving Mutsuki” (Ekuni, 2003: 138). In this

moment, she attempts to return the kind of care and unselfish love that Mutsuki has repeatedly given her during her struggles with depression. Shoko, therefore, demonstrates how fulfillment can be found in a queer relationship defined not by sexual exclusivity and possession but by mutual support, comfort, and safety.

Notably, Shoko also arranges for Mutsuki’s boyfriend Kon to live in their apartment building, so that the three of them can be in close proximity to one another and become a queer “family.” Earlier, Kon had decided to go away for a while after witnessing the emotional toll his presence took on Mutsuki and Shoko, particularly in light of their parents’ reactions. However, the novel ends with a reunion of the three characters and a final toast:

‘Here’s to Kon for coming back safe and sound, and to the three of us, for our first year together,’ Shoko said.

‘And here’s to the happy couple, for becoming independent at last!’ added Kon (170).

Shoko’s mention that they are celebrating their group of three helps us to interpret Kon’s use of “independent” not as Mutsuki’s and Shoko’s independence from him but rather their independence from their concerns over what others think of their relationship and their individual “abnormalities.” In other words, their small “family” offers each queer person shelter and comfort from the harshness of the world around them that does not accept them for who they are. It, thus, can be considered an alternative model of kinship, which fosters reciprocal care, belonging, and joy for Kon, Mutsuki, and Shoko in ways that a heteronormative lifestyle cannot bring them.

3. Disability, Gender, and the Limits of Queer Kinship without Structural Change

Yet at the same time, the novel also reveals the structural limitations to such forms of queer subversion. In particular, because the couple challenges gender and sexuality norms from *within* the institution of marriage, their defiance does not have an effect on the *Koseki Seido* and subsequently, the heteronormative ideologies and expectations perpetuated by it. In other words, though Shoko and Mutsuki can live as they please in private, their true selves are still not accepted by mainstream society, which severely impacts how they participate in the public sphere outside the home. However, I turn again to Cathy Cohen's (1997) intersectional theorization of queerness to call attention to important distinctions between the two protagonists' access to this space. Following her assertion "that differentials in power exist within all socially named categories" (452), I trace the significance of gender and disability to Shoko's queer experience.

Spotlighting Shoko's difference especially sheds light on what is at stake when the system itself does not change. While Mutsuki as a queer man is still able to enjoy a large degree of autonomy in being able to work as a doctor in the public sphere and keep his sexual life separated within the private sphere, Shoko, in contrast, continues to confront obstacles to accessing the public sphere as a woman. The difference between their experiences can be traced in part to the *Koseki Seido*, which in its reinforcement of heteronormative husband and wife roles, contributes to upholding a structural division between the male public sphere and the female private sphere. As a result, Shoko feels particular pressure to act as a capable housewife by managing the space of the home. In one scene when Mutsuki announces that his father will be coming over to their apartment, Shoko frets

over having refreshments to give him and says to Mutsuki:

'Mizuho told me I should. When people come over, you have to have something to give them. That's the kind of thing that would *never* occur to me'...'She told me I need to be more considerate. To be a good wife' (106).

At this moment, Shoko illustrates how she takes her friend's words to heart and internalizes the heteropatriarchal expectation to oversee the domestic sphere. Despite her usual arrangement of household tasks with Mutsuki, the power of the social norm seems to drive her deeper into the space of the home and narrows her participation outside it.

Moreover, rereading the ending of the novel with a focus on Shoko elucidates the additional obstacles she faces to finding liberation from normativity—not only heteronormativity and patriarchy but also ableism. What should first be noted is that the story ends with a segment narrated from Mutsuki's point of view, which leaves Shoko's internal thoughts obscured from the reader. Although it is clear that Shoko loves Mutsuki and Kon and wants to live with them, it is less certain if this arrangement will ultimately provide her with a life that *she* finds fulfilling. Regarding the ending, Grace En-Yi Ting (2021: 14) comments, "After the tears and struggles of Shoko's efforts to protect the marriage, the lighthearted tone of the ending feels jarring and inappropriate, suggesting that this happy scene is only a hastily plastered solution doomed to fall apart." In other words, despite the possibility of finding joy and safety within her queer "family," the arrangement appears to do little to alleviate Shoko's anxieties over how she fits into mainstream society.

As the novel pictures Shoko's development

over her first year with Mutsuki, it describes her increased isolation, irritability, and feelings of loneliness. Mutsuki especially notices Shoko's separation from outside society, as her friends' and parents' expectations appear to be too much to handle. In one chapter, he narrates: "Slowly but surely, she was isolating herself from the world in which her parents, Mizuho, and all the people she had ever loved lived. I wondered if she even realized what she was doing" (Ekuni, 2003: 113). His remark attributes Shoko's isolating behaviors to her emotional instability, assuming that she is entirely responsible for cutting herself off from mainstream society. However, he fails to consider the barriers that society creates, which make her feel incapable of being able to live in the "normal" world just the way she is.

In fact, Mutsuki's assumption calls to mind a larger history of confinement within the home, not just for women, but also "mad" persons and especially "hysterical" women. As scholars of Disability Studies have shown, pathologized disorders such as mental illness and madness—similar to the category of queerness—are social constructions, which stigmatize certain persons and deem their bodies and minds as inferior to able-bodied and neurotypical individuals. Historically, these categorizations have supported inequitable structures—not unlike the gendered division of public/private—that have prevented persons with disabilities from freely accessing all segments of the social world. In Japan, persons with mental illness have historically been treated in "the private space of the family [that] assumed the role of care, control, and confinement," (Suzuki, 2017: 247). This tradition, therefore, illustrates a key practice of separating persons with mental disabilities from mainstream society rather than working to create a more equitable world that would include these persons.

Additionally, feminist scholars have been on the forefront of tracing connections between social constructions of femininity, emotionality, and madness through the diagnosis of "hysteria."² As Cecily Devereux (2014: 25) explains, the modern invention of hysteria in medical and psychoanalytical discourse in the late nineteenth century is inseparable from the invention of modern femininity that affirmed women's essential function as reproducers within industrial capitalist nations. Women who deviated from this function were pathologized as hysteric, justifying their restraint in "spaces of confinement—madhouses public and private, the clinic, the hospital, prisons of one type or another, attics and closets" (Rousseau, 1993: 175). Read together, these histories clarify how both disability and gender nonconformity have been grounds for social exclusion, making disabled women particularly vulnerable to the violence of confinement.

This context allows Shoko's experience in the home to be read in a new light, seeing her isolation as more than a symptom of her depression. Rather than be a space of retreat or comfort during difficult times, the home repeatedly appears as a site of suffocation and restlessness for her. In one scene while looking around the house, Shoko asks herself: "What was it that was making me feel so anxious and ill-at-ease, in this perfect space that Mutsuki had prepared specially for me?" (Ekuni, 2003: 115). Her uneasiness can be read as a sense of entrapment in a space that society sees as her proper place, yet she finds to be unsettling. The home thus echoes her insecurities, reminding her of the pressures she feels to be a good wife, have a heteronormative family, and conform to other norms reiterated by her parents, in-laws, Mizuho, and Dr. Octopus.

In this way, a queer feminist disabled reading of the novel's ending suggests that its solution may

not accommodate the distinct needs of women, persons with disabilities, and especially disabled women in terms of making strides away from the home. Without altering the *Koseki Seido* and the gender, sexuality, and ability norms it upholds, the home continues to be constructed as the proper place for a person like Shoko—as both a woman and someone diagnosed with a mental illness. That is to say, the structural barriers remain in place that condition Shoko’s isolation and feelings of entrapment. While the novel imagines an alternative model of kinship through Mutsuki, Shoko, and Kon’s living arrangement, Shoko’s perspective underscores the necessity of systemic transformation alongside it. Without such change, their community remains *separate* from mainstream society—confined to the private sphere—rather than in a world made genuinely inclusive, equitable, and accessible.

IV. Conclusion

Through a queer feminist analysis of *Twinkle, Twinkle*, I have offered critical reflections on the *Koseki Seido* in Japan and how it impacts the everyday ways that individuals navigate the world they live in. While some people do find happiness through heterosexual marriage and family-building, Mutsuki’s and Shoko’s queer perspectives remind us that this is not a universal experience. These two characters find these same heteronormative practices to be contradictory to their desires, so when the identities of husband/wife and father/mother become expectations, they confront nothing short of stress and suffering. Yet Ekuni shares their stories with us, so that we, as readers, may engage in a critique of the heteronormative structures and norms that oppress Mutsuki and Shoko and reimagine ways of existing

in the world that might allow queer persons the chance to experience joy, love, and belonging.

At the same time, I have been careful to note the importance of intersectionality when performing queer feminist critique. Intersectionality provides us with a lens through which to see liberation from heteronormativity as not just a matter for homosexual persons like Mutsuki, but also for queer, disabled women like Shoko. With attention placed on the entanglements between heteronormativity, patriarchy, and ableism, the significance of systemic change gains clarity. It pushes us to imagine what forms of equity and justice—not to mention joy—that might follow by transforming the *Koseki Seido* in Japan and supporting a plurality of kinship forms through which persons can live true to their self-determined identities and desires.

Notes

- 1 The English translation of her novel was published in 2003.
- 2 For examples, see Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (1975); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977); Julia Kristeva in *New French Feminisms* (1980); Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, ed., *In Dora’s Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism* (1985); Sander L. Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, and Elaine Showalter, ed., *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (1993). In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar broke critical ground in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, which examined the Western literary trope of the “overly emotional” and “hysteric” woman who must be locked up because her “insanity” makes her unfit to interact with society. Such representations have been common in Japan as well, where emotional distress linked to “madness” and female “spiritual possession” can be traced as far back as Murasaki Shikibu’s eleventh century Japanese classic, *The Tale of Genji*.

Numerous kabuki plays, rakugo storytelling, jōruri songs, as well as modern literary works by Japanese writers such as Higuchi Ichiyō, Shimazaki Tōsōn, and Yamamoto Michiko, have further drawn on this trope (see Suzuki 2017: 248).

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要旨

戸籍をクィア化する —— 江國香織『きらきらひかる』(1991年) における結婚・家族登録 制度とクィアな代替的親密性

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日本における結婚制度は、戸籍制度を含め、結婚を男女の結合として規定している。この法的枠組みは、異性愛規範を制度的に強化するとともに、それに付随する伝統的なジェンダー規範を通じて、「幸福な家族」という理想像のもとで、生殖や子育ての役割を女性に担わせてきた。これに対し、江國香織の小説『きらきらひかる』(1991年)は、夫・妻・子供から成る従来の家族モデルを超えた、親密性および家族関係のあり方を描くことで、こうした論理を攪乱する作品である。本作では、同性愛者の医師である睦月と、精神疾患を抱えて生きる女性である笑子という、日本社会においては本来「結婚に不適切」と見なされがちな二人が、便宜的な結婚を選択する。この関係によって、二人は表面的には社会的期待を満たしつつ、私的な領域においてはそれぞれの欲望や生き方を維持することが可能となる。本稿は、『きらきらひかる』をクィア・フェミニズムの視点から読み解くことで、日本の結婚制度を支える異性愛規範のかつ家父長制的な論理を本作がどのように批判しているのかを検討するとともに、結婚制度の内部から実践されるクィアな親密性／キンシップの可能性とその限界について考察する。

キーワード：結婚、家族、親族関係、異性愛規範、障害

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