Kamikaze Girls & Loli-Goths

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A true Lolita must nurture a Rococo spirit and live a Rococo lifestyle.[1]

Momoko Ryugasaki

So begins Novala Takemoto's novel, *Kamikaze Girls*, known in Japan as *Shimotsuma Monagatari*, [2] and the inspiration for Tetsuya Nakashima's 2004 film of the same name.[3] Spawning a *manga* version, illustrated by Yukio Kanesada in 2005, it is an example of *shōjo* (teenage girls') fiction that weaves together the stories of two unlikely companions, Ichigo ("Ichiko") Shirayuri (played by Anna Tsuchiya), a *yanki*, or delinquent biker-punk and member of a rough all-girl *bōsōzoku* (motorcycle gang); and the narrator, Momoko Ryugasaki (Kyoko Fukada),[4] a "Sweet Lolita" obsessed with the Japanese fashion label *Baby, the Stars Shine Bright*,[5] who lives in a constant reverie of Rococoesque sweetness and lavishness, as an escape from the realities of Shimotsuma and her ignominious upbringing. The main thread of the plot is the coming together of these two girls, at first a reluctant and seemingly incongruous partnership, and the bond that is formed through similar teenage anxieties related to "growing up", memories of childhood hardships, feelings of alienation and isolation, and their escapist personalities. In this essay, my aim is to propose that these themes are pertinent not only in a reading of the relationship between the two characters in *Kamikaze Girls* but that they represent general societal concerns in regard to contemporary Japanese youth culture, poignantly reflected in and inferred by ideologies surrounding the phenomenon of what is known as a Gothic Lolita.

Momoko Ryugasaki is a Sweet Lolita, a type of Gothic Lolita, or a Loli-Goth.[6] The style of the Gothic Lolita forms part of a subcultural youth movement, generally known as Gothic and Lolita, and is designated by fashions inspired by the Rococo, Romantic and Victorian periods. It is based on the spirit of Gothick,[7] on mourning garb; maidservants' wear; dolls' clothes; children's dresses; and clothing depicted in nineteenth-century illustrations of little girls, such as those by Sir John Tenniel for Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland/Alice Through the Looking Glass*; thus demonstrating a predilection for layers of bloomers, petticoats, panniers, aprons, pinafores and ruffles. The look is often topped with bonnets or Victorian headdresses, and completed with Mary Janes, or other platform shoes or boots; particular penchants, especially for Takemoto's Momoko, are

Vivienne Westwood's Rocking-horse Ballerinas. In the case of the Sweet Lolita, there is more of an emphasis on Rococo frothiness, the representation of the Child/Doll, bonnets and parasols. This is signified by a confectionary of frills, lace, broderie anglaise, ribbons, bows, and embroidery, generally made up in one pastel colour, mostly candy-floss pink or baby blue; sometimes white or cream, which can be combined with touches of raspberry or black; and occasionally accented with traditional Western fairytale motifs (inspired by stories such as *Sleeping Beauty* or *Little Red Riding Hood*). Also associated with the Sweet Lolita, but often re-categorised under Country Lolita, are inclusions of gingham, dainty dollhouse florals, and sweet fruit motifs (e.g. strawberries or cherries). Main sources for the sweeter Lolita ranges are *Angelic Pretty*, *Manifesteange Metamorphose temps de fille*,[8] and *Baby, the Stars Shine Bright* (BTSSB), the latter being, the fictional Momoko believes, the only purposeful point to her existence, and the ultimate requisite for many discerning real-life Rococophiles.

The figurehead for Gothic and Lolita is commonly identified as Mana, one of the leading designers of the movement. Although not the creator of the style, he is often accredited with its invention, due to his high profile as the genre's most recognised and prominent personality, and certainly one of the most influential. Mana gained his cult status as a member of the legendary Visual-kei, J-pop band, Malice Mizer (1992 – 2001).[9] Visual kei, again a Japanese popular culture movement, or subculture, is signified by a highly flamboyant, theatrical, heavily made-up fashion sense that places an emphasis on androgyny, and an effeminate, even feminine, form of male dress. Mana, of the now defunct Mizer, as the ultimate "Lolita", and consummate idol of the Loli-Goth, is renowned for dressing in an overtly feminine manner. Two of his most recognised personas have been, alternately, the Classic Gothic Lolita or Victorian Maid; more recently, for his current musical project, Moi Dix Mois, he has turned to an androgynous male look, adopting his more feminine identities mostly for the purpose of modelling his own fashion ranges. Although not the inventor, as the first prominent celebrity to embody the Lolita, Mana can be identified as an instigator of the craze, due to Mizer's fanatical following by young women who have mimicked his style. In that the "Gothic Lolita fashion has been one of the most popular looks in the Harajuku area since 1999",[10] the same year that Mana, coincidentally or not, created his fashion label, *Moi-même-moitié*, and first released his two lines, the *Elegant Gothic Lolita* and *Elegant Gothic Aristocrat*,[11] he may be said to be implicated in the momentum of its popularity, and may

certainly have been the first to combine the two terms, "Gothic" and "Lolita", to designate the phenomenon. Until one can undeniably confirm who actually coined the title, "Gothic Lolita", or identified the subculture as "Gothic and Lolita", facts that seem, at this point in time, to be a mystery, the identification of the accumulative ideas that have gone into formulating the movement, may be attributed to him.[12]

Novala Takemoto, the author of *Kamikaze Girls*, professes that there are "no leaders in the Lolita world", although he is "sometimes introduced as an authority on Lolitas".[13] Like Mana, he is also a self-confessed Rococophile and Lolita:

> I am… a Rococo writer who has been racing headlong in full-blown Lolita mode for years, in spite of being a straight male. Momoko… is pretty much my alter ego. So, if you found yourself identifying with Momoko's spirit, it means that I have been understood….[14]

In a 2004 article, journalist Ginny Parker commented that "Takemoto… practices what he preaches. In a recent interview, the 36-year-old author wore a long black dress… and talked about his childhood interest in dolls and fairytales".[15]

So, although the notion of the Lolita is represented by a feminine fashion statement, some of the most significant leaders of the movement are adult men.[16] Nevertheless, although there is also a minority following by cross-dressing young males, what sets this phenomenon apart from Western youth subcultures, indeed from the model of other subcultural groups as a whole, is that the face of the Gothic Lolita is paradigmatically female. As Yuniya Kawamura has noted, in reference to Dick Hebdige's observation, in the past, "girls have been relegated to a position of secondary interest within both sociological and photographic studies of urban youth, and masculine bias [has existed]… in the subcultures themselves".[17] The difference with Gothic and Lolita is that it is a girls' subculture.[18] Along with the fact that this is often the case with youth street cultures in Japan, this element also makes it quintessentially Japanese.

As the most visual expression of a subculture tends to be its fashion, so it is with Gothic and Lolita. And like any youth subculture, the Lolita phenomenon should not be investigated in terms of a mere fashion trend. For, whilst this practice is often passed off as being a purely part-time fashion statement and occupation, to some fanatics, including the fictional Momoko, the Loli-Goth persona is a way of life. In the introductory narrative of the film, she proclaims:

> Rococo: 18th-century France at its most lavish. It made Baroque look positively sober…. Life then was like candy. Their world so sweet and dreamy. That was Rococo…. It was very cute…! Hedonism and love making were all that mattered. Out of bed they liked embroidery. Then it was back to the bedroom. And then? Countryside walks. I was smitten by Rococo. A frilly dress and strolls in the country. That's how I wanted to live![19]

This nostalgic urge, especially the escapist desire to go back to a fantastic European, rather than historical Japanese, past, and to dress in an unreal doll-like manner, suggests and reflects deeper concerns. What are the psychological and ideological issues inferred by these motivations?

In its nostalgic, historicist, and revivalist aspects, the Gothic and Lolita phenomenon shows sympathies with Victorian Gothic Revivalism, particularly in the yearning for a more idyllic but fictional utopian past. It should be noted that gothic revivalisms tend to coincide with periods of societal confusion, transition and cultural malaise. As with the early years of the British Goth subculture, and in its reflective fashion offspring, the Recession Dress movement in the early 1980s, nostalgic impulses can also be seen to arise during economic crises. Kawamura has commented that, since "the early 1990s", the decade when the Lolita image began to take shape, "Japan has faced the longest and worst economic recession in its history".[20] The result is that, like the Victorian Gothic Revivalists, the Gothic Lolita demonstrates a fear of the future or, particularly, in her case, the reluctance to "grow up".

Ginny Parker, quoting Japanese psychiatrist, Rika Kayama, has stated that:

> Some Japanese students of youth culture see the Lolita look as a sign of anxieties resulting from growing up in a nation beset by economic insecurities since the early 1990s. 'They live in a society that doesn't feel very hopeful about its future'…. By dressing up like babies, the Lolitas are attempting to hang onto the carefree days of childhood….[21]

In other words, for the Lolita, this fear of the future, which is also, incidentally, historically tied to *fin-de-siècle* anxieties, and a wariness of the unknown,[22] is translated not only as a desire to return to an era that is perceived as being utopian but as a yearning for her own secure, idyllic past, that of her childhood.

In wishing to go back to bygone times, to days of happier memories, represented, symbolically, in her obsession with dressing as a frilly baby, the Lolita appears to mourn the loss of childhood and innocence. In her image as a little girl and, at the same time, young woman, she is both the Perpetual Child and the Sexualised Child, and, therefore, there exists the conflict between the desire to hang onto, or retain, childhood innocence and being sexually active; the Lolita recalls that moment whereby both the loss of innocence and fears of sexuality are mingled with the excitement of sexual awakening. Although it is often argued that the Japanese Lolita is not consciously sexual, supported by her choice to dress as a child, there exists this dichotomy: the Lolita persona neither wholly represses or embraces a sexualised identity; yet it does both. The Lolita, even in the sense of the term,[23] appears at once as the Sexualised Child and yet as an adult that refuses to grow up and be sexualised. This ambivalence is expressed eloquently via the characterisation of Momoko in the film version of *Kamikaze Girls*, who, in her want to live in the "sweet and dreamy" world that is Rococo, where everyone is continually jumping in and out of bed, removes herself from the "hedonism and love making" as something that *they* do, and visualises herself in that "candy" lifetime, embroidering, wearing a "frilly dress and [taking] strolls in the country".[24]

The sense of mourning for the loss of childhood sensibilities, symbolised in the Lolita's depiction of the Self as the Doll-like Child, could be extended to include the memory of another loss, the childhood doll, and the wish to replace or hang onto it. According to Alan Scott Pate, the "particular love of the Japanese for the [doll]… reflects an appreciation of the innocence of childhood and an attempt to continue to view the world through the child's eye long after the eye has matured into adulthood".[25] The Japanese possess a profound relationship with the doll. Whereas, in the West, a doll is largely perceived as being a child's, generally a girl-child's, plaything and an inanimate object, for the Japanese, the doll operates spiritually, psychologically and fundamentally, on a much deeper level. Traditionally, the Japanese have believed that the doll possesses or takes on a spirit, an instinct that is still said to be imbedded in the Japanese psyche. There is a "widely reported sensibility in Japan that *ningyō* (dolls) have a kind of soul (*tamashii*) and that they may carry the identity, motivation, or essence of a person".[26] As such, the relationships between the designer, maker, and or owner of a doll, with the doll itself, become complex and convoluted.

There is an indication that to the Japanese the loss of a doll represents a traumatic experience, which is suggested by the existence of ritual practices, or "rites of separation" (*kuyō*),[27] associated with the parting of a child, or owner, from their doll. These are also performed out of terror, should the soul come back to haunt:

> … a person might have a latent fear that an object is endowed with a spirit. If such an object is casually thrown away, the spirit might be offended and even curse the human. Therefore, the spitit must be pacified before the object can be discarded…. The chief priest of Awashima Kada Shrine, who performs *kuyō* rites for… dolls, expresses this sentiment: '[People] come to… dispose of dolls that might bring evil upon them…. It seems very cruel to treat [the dolls] as mere garbage'.[28]

The method of disposal is sometimes burial but usually dolls are destroyed by burning, as this "symbolically eliminates impurities and… mimics human cremation".[29]

This human element means that dolls can become substitutes for living things, and emphasises an attachment of the Japanese child to the doll that does not merely mimic the mother-daughter relationship; it is akin to it. Therefore, the grief experienced with the bereavement of a lost, damaged or destroyed doll can be similar to the loss of a child, or a loss of part of the Self. In this sense, the need for the Lolita to become, or replace, the Doll can be likened to a desire to find oneself or one's place in an unsettling world.

The Gothic Lolita also has an intense relationship with the doll: she is a doll, dresses as a doll, collects dolls, designs clothing for her dolls, dresses and plays with dolls, and parades with smaller versions of herself on the street. Contributing to this is a Japanese doll market that caters to the desires of not only little girls but adults, both male and female. To suit the tastes of the Lolita, the Japanese company, *Jun Planning*, in collaboration with Korean manufacturers, *Cheonsang Cheonha*, creates limited editions of Gothic Lolita dolls, as part of their *Pullip* (female), *Namu* and *Taeyang* (male) ranges, which are inspired and collected obsessively by their human counterparts.

In Japan there is, of course, a long-held fascination with the miniature and the cute, or all things "*kawaii*"; hence the Lolita's attachment to dolls is often seen as superficial and just another example of cute behaviour. However, this attitude overlooks the complex relationship, already discussed, that the Japanese retain, and the Lolita has, with the Doll, as well as anxieties that the motivation towards the cute is said to reflect. For example, Yuri Kageyama has stated that sceptics in Japan agree that the *kawaii* phenomenon "is a

sign of an infantile mentality and worry that Japanese culture… may be headed towards doom", whilst, Hiroto Mirusawa "believes that cute proves" that, once again, "the Japanese simply don't want to grow up".[30] This refusal to "grow up" is not confined to the Lolita; in Japan, these societal concerns run deeper.

Even in its apparent frippery, then, the Lolita's devotion to the doll, and thus the inclination towards the cute, underlines more serious issues. This desire to hang onto childhood, combined with the reluctance to enter an adult world, can be seen as the result of a shift in society, and traditional ideologies, due to Japan's recent economic instability. Kawamura claims that the old Japanese "ways of life" are "fracturing under the strain of economic stagnation":[31]

> … children find no hope in future Japan…. A feeling of helplessness, disillusionment, alienation, uncertainty and anger has permeated throughout society, from adults to children…. The entire society's value system, especially that of the teens, is going through a major transition.[32]

Says Tomoyuki Sugiyama, the "Japanese are seeking a spiritual peace and an escape from brutal reality through cute things".[33]

This brings us back to Novala Takemoto's Momoko. Her Loli-Goth mindset epitomises the general mentality of much of contemporary Japanese youth culture, whose concerns are about growing up in a society of uncertainty and anger. However, Sweet Lolita Momoko's obsession with doll-like frilliness and cuteness, and thus her desire to escape "growing up", is not chosen in an effort to hang onto her own childhood; her revulsion rests solely on the thought of joining adulthood. For her, childhood was less than idyllic, and does not represent a safehaven: Momoko's "brutal realities" are her memories of the adult world she has witnessed as a child; for Momoko, adulthood means entering a life of sadness, disappointment, struggle and pain. Growing up with no siblings, and no friends, her only real human contact has been with dysfunctional adults, with a prostitute mother who has left her as a young child with the heartbroken "Loser", her *yakuza* father, to be with another man, and a sweet, but insane, grandmother.[34] Momoko has coped with this upbringing by becoming resolute in the face of hardship, by creating a defense mechanism that does not allow her to experience emotion, and by "escaping" to another place that she has invented in her fantasies, to a "world so sweet and dreamy", where life was "like candy" and everything "was very cute".[35] Therefore, it is not her real-life childhood that she wishes to retain but that of her childlike dreamworld. She dreams of

the ultimate escape to a fictional representation of the "Rococo" past, a past that never existed except in the realm of her own reveries. Thus she wishes to reside, forever, within this land of frilly dresses, embroidery, fairytales, and dolls – and imaginary friends.

This, of course, further isolates and alienates Momoko. At one point in the film's narration, she states: "I thought I'd always be alone. Eighty years old, in a *Baby* dress, dying alone….".[36] But what alienates her more is her choice to become a real-life Lolita. This decision also makes her an outcast. Ginny Parker has written that "[despite] the nation's reputation as a culture with a love of all things cute, many in mainstream Japan are contemptuous of the Lolita look".[37] As with many subcultural identities that sit outside the normative, Lolita tends to shock and even anger its audience, as it is seen to disrupt the social order of what is acceptable. As Dick Hebdige has observed, "violations of the authorised codes through which the social world is organised and experienced have considerable power to provoke and disturb".[38] In regard to the Lolita, Parker claims that "[fans] of the style talk about being called stupid by strangers, getting mean looks, and having chewing gum stuck to their dresses".[39] As Jane Pinckard has written, whether it's right to react this way or not, "after all, [it's] alienating to want to be someone else, even in pretend".[40]

What saves Momoko from her fate of "dying alone", is the meeting of Ichigo Shirayuri, a foul-mouthed *yanki*, who, although she appears, in the beginning, to occupy the other side of the universe, is her soulmate. Momoko tells Ichigo's story:

> Ichigo Aged 14. Her life changed in high school. As a young girl her life was far from that of a *yanki*. She was fairly slow and the shyest in her class. She was bullied by her classmates. Filled with self-hate and frustration.[41]

When they meet, each girl is essentially friendless, lonely, isolated and alienated. What unites this pair, therefore, is the similarity in their differences. Each of these girls belongs to transgressive subcultural or outsider groups, making them, essentially, outcasts. What actually makes them unique, the same as each other, and different from other members of their respective groups, is that they live *outside* their outsider groups. In other words, they are outcasted *by* the outcasts.

What marks a subculture is that individuals, in an effort to *be* individual, or alternative, in order to reject or refuse to conform to normative society, paradoxically, choose to be

seen in the "uniform" of a movement, to align themselves with its membership. This "uniformity" is what usually binds members together and creates a group based on acceptances of similarities. However, what makes Momoko and Ichigo different, but fundamentally the same, is that they don't belong. Neither of them fit neatly into a paradigm of what consitutes a Lolita or a *yanki*; for a start they don't have any real friends and, therefore, they are not accepted. Momoko is completely friendless, partly because she knows no Lolitas in Shimotsuma, an element that emphasises her isolation, and Ichigo just doesn't fit in, especially since she's been seen with Momoko. So, what emphasises their sense of isolation is their alienation from their groups. However, this determination to *be* individual, even if it means being friendless, is what Ichigo ends up admiring the most about Momoko. In defending her, she says:

> Momoko ain't my friend, see? I kept saying we were buds but she never did. She never wanted to be friends with me. And you know what? I just figured out why. You all wanna be friends all the time. You all wanna be part of a group. But that's just cuz you're afraid to be alone, ain't it…? Momoko here's always alone, see? She don't listen to nobody.[42]

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Why "Kamikaze Girls"? Originally this label is representative of Ichigo's personality as a wild, rough biker girl who rides with an attitude of "live fast, die young"; because if you've got nothing much to live for you have nothing much to lose. Eventually, Ichigo is ousted and brutally ejected from her gang and this title becomes an apt description for Momoko who, after realising that she really cares about somebody for the first time in her life, and actually does have something to live for, goes screaming off, frills and all, on her crazy grandma's vintage motorbike to protect her new friend from the violence she is due to receive, thinking nothing of her own danger, and thus possibly sacrificing her life.

Oh Ichigo. My darling Ichigo….

You're also the one who showed me that growing up might not be such a bad thing after all.

Thank you, Ichigo… you're the best friend I could ever have.[43]

Like the Gothic and Lolita subculture, *Kamikaze Girls* is all about girls.

Fearless girls, flying in the face of adversity.

[1] Takemoto, Novala, *Kamikaze Girls* (Engl. Ed. Trans. Akemi Wegmüller. First published in Japanese as Novala Takemoto, *Shimotsuma Monagatari*, Shogakukan Inc., Japan, 2002), VIZ Media LLC, San Francisco, 2006, p. 5

[2] *Shimotsuma Monagatari* = "*Shimotsuma Story*".

[3] Released on DVD with English subtitles by VIZ Media LLC, San Francisco, January 2006.

[4] Both Anna Tsuchiya and Kyoko Fukada are J-pop (i.e. Japanese popular music) teen idols.

[5] *Baby, the Stars Shine Bright* (BTSSB) is a real-life fashion label, created by Akinori Isobe (played in the film by Yoshinori Okada), who runs the company with his wife, Fumiyo; its first branch opened in Shibuya, Tokyo, in 1988. The brand name is said to have been taken from the title of an album by British music duo, Everything but the Girl (EBTG), released in 1986.

[6] Sweet Lolita (Jap. *amaloli*), is a subgenre of the Gothic and Lolita movement, truncated to Goth Loli (Jap. *gosurori/gosuloli*, or Loli-Goth).

[7] Gothick = Victorian spelling of Gothic to designate Mediaevalist tendencies, Gothic Revivalism and the notion of "Gothic" in terms of the literary movement.

[8] Often shortened to *Metamorphose temps de fille*, or just *Metamorphose*.

[9] Visual kei (Jap. *vijuaru kei*) = "visual style"; again, J-pop = Japanese popular music.

[10] Kawamura, Yuniya, "Japanese Street Fashion: The Urge To Be Seen and To Be Heard", in Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun (eds), *The Fashion Reader*, Berg, 2007, p. 344

[11] Note that the Elegant Gothic Lolita (EGL) is often used to describe the entire movement. However, this term should only be used in reference to the creative output of Mana, who has, since 1999, applied EGL, and its male variant EGA (Elegant Gothic Aristocrat), to his ranges for *Moi-même-Moitié*.

[12] Although one should note that BTSSB opened its doors in 1988, offering the same style of clothing.

[13] Takemoto, op. cit., p. 213

[14] Ibid.

[15] Parker, Ginny, "Parasols and pink lace: Japan's Lolita girls; 'I'd like to go back in time, like to the era of Marie Antoinette', says 24-year-old nurse", *Globe Style*, *The Globe* and *Mail*, 25 September 2004, in *Factiva*, UNSW Library Databases, accessed 28/09/2004

[16] This is an entire topic in itself. Ideologies in regard to issues of gender and sexuality, reflected in the Gothic Lolita identity, and their foundations in Japanese history, will be formulated for a future paper, based on further research towards my PhD.

[17] Kawamura, op. cit., p. 344

[18] Ibid.

[19] Nakashima, Tetsuya (dir.), *Kamikaze Girls*, DVD, Engl. subtitles, VIZ Media LLC, San Francisco, January 2006.

[20] Kawamura, op. cit., p. 343

[21] Parker, op cit.

[22] See Barbara T. Gates, "Century's End: The Coming Universal Wish Not to Live", Chapter Eight in *Victorian Suicide: mad crimes and sad histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1988

[23] It is usually claimed that the Western notion of Lolita, in reference to Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel, does not apply to the Japanese Lolita. However, whether it's possible to remove the sexual connotations

from a reading of the Lolita is debatable. Suffice it to say, for the purpose of this current paper, what is conceivable is that the *intention* of the Lolita is to not look sexual, whether she/he is even aware of the ideology or not.

[24] Nakashima, op. cit.

[25] Pate, Alan Scott, *Ningyō: The Art of the Japanese Doll*, Tuttle Publishing, Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd, 2005, p. 18

[26] Schattschneider, Ellen, "The Bloodstained Doll: Violence and the Gift in Wartime Japan", *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2005, p. 330

[27] *Kretschmer, Angelika, "Mortuary Rites for Inanimate Objects: The Case of Hari Kuyō*, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 27, 2000, p. 379

[28] Ibid, pp. 384 – 385

[29] Ibid, p. 386

[30] Kageyama, Yuri, "Cute is king for the youth of Japan, but it's only skin deep", *The New Zealand Herald*, Friday 16 June 2006, p. B3

[31] Kawamura, op. cit., p. 343

[32] Ibid.

[33] Kageyama, op. cit.

[34] *Yakuza* = member of Japanese "mafia".

[35] Nakashima, op. cit.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Parker, op. cit.

[38] Hebdige, Dick, "Subculture: The Unnatural Break", in Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun (eds), *The Fashion Reader*, Berg, Oxford and New York, 2007, p. 152

[39] Parker, op. cit.

[40] Pinckard, Jane, "Playing Dress Up", *Zine*, 2003, p. 1
http://www.gamegirladvance.com/zine/200307play/playing_dress_up.html, accessed 13/09/2006

[41] Nakashima, op. cit.

[42] Takemoto, op. cit., p. 201

[43] Ibid, p. 211