

Urban Rivers as a Setting in Anime



Shuto Expressway Crossing the Arakawa River Adachi Ward, Tokyo

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Introduction

Riverside settings are common in anime. These settings include bridges, the river itself, the riverside, and the slopes and tops of the levees that form the banks of most urban rivers in Japan. The sidebar gives a partial list of anime series and movies where key events occur at locations on or near urban riversides. In at least two anime series, *FLCL* and *Arakawa, Under the Bridge*, the majority of the series occurs at or near urban riversides. This paper investigates why the urban riverside is such a frequent setting for events in anime.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the physical and social processes that shape urban rivers in Japan. The role of the river in Japanese religion and society is then discussed and examples from various anime are presented. Finally, the use of the physical dimensions of the river as an element in story telling is presented. A hypothesis is proposed that the riverside often serves as a liminal space for characters in anime.

Anime with events on or near urban rivers and streams

Arakawa, Under the Bridge
Cheeky Angel
FLCL
Ghost Hound
Honey and Clover
Wolf Children
Kashimashi
Kimi ni Todoke
Niea_7
Ran the Telepathic Girl
Spirited Away
Toradora
Twin Spica
Ultimate Boy
Wagaya no Oinari-sama
Windy Tales

The Determinants of the Urban Riverside in Japan: Geography, Climate, and Land Use

Japan is a country with diverse climate that ranges from cool temperate in the north to subtropical in the south. Rainfall varies with location and season. Japan is an island arc that is defined by a series of mountain ranges that together run the length of the country. These mountains increase the rate of rainfall due to orographic lift. The result of this geography and climate is a large number of small rivers that run east from the mountains to the Pacific Ocean and west to the Sea of Japan. These rivers will regularly flood their banks during heavy rain events.

During the late summer and autumn, Japan experiences typhoons. Such storms occur in anime series such as *Yokohama Shopping Log* and *Kamichu*. The impact of these storms is both locally heavy rain and storm surges. Storm



surges occur when the storm winds push the sea far above high tide levels, flooding land near the sea and pushing water back up the rivers to flood inland locations.

Rivers and Cities

Japan is a mountainous country with limited amounts of flat land. River valleys and river deltas make up a sizable fraction of the level land in Japan. As a result, it is not an option to avoid flood prone lands near rivers. Furthermore, rivers have many useful characteristics. Rivers provide cities sources of fresh water. The mouths of rivers provide harbors. The rivers themselves provide transportation inland to farming areas. Finally, rivers carry away wastes. As a result, cities tend to be built around rivers and urban riversides will be very familiar to most anime viewers.

Tokyo's Rivers

Because of the number of anime series and movies set in Tokyo, it is worth focusing on the urban rivers in this city. Tokyo is located at the northwestern end of Tokyo Bay. The city is divided into two parts, Yamanote (literally “towards the mountains) and Shitamachi (the low city). Shitamachi is built around the Arakawagawa, Sumidagawa, Shakujiigawa, Kandagawa and other smaller rivers that flow into one another and ultimately Tokyo Bay. The yellow and orange sections in the opposing figure indicate the approximate area of the Shitamachi. Historically, the upper classes (nobility, samurai, and bureaucrats) lived in the Yamanote. The merchant classes lived the Shitamachi. The Shitamachi is currently less developed than the rest of Tokyo and contains more of the older structures in the city.

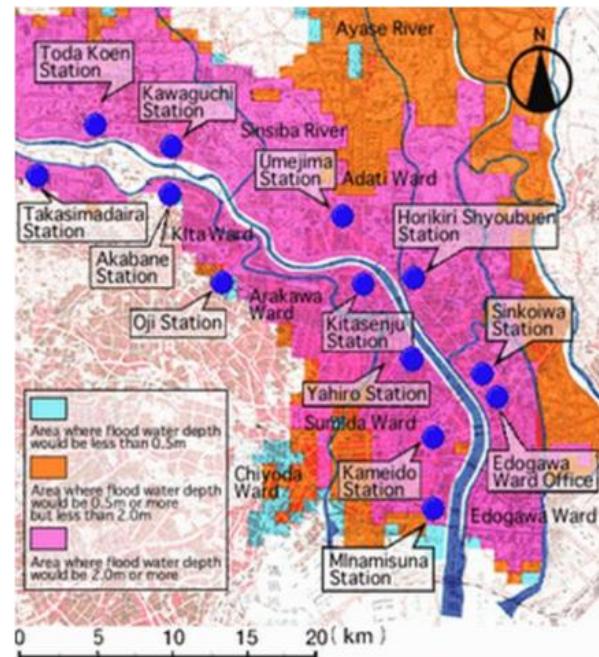


The Shitamachi has a history of flooding. The land is closer to sea level than Yamanote, closer to the rivers, and has a history of land subsidence. Land subsidence occurs when river deltas or riverside wetlands are cut off from seasonal flood waters that continually deposit new sediments. (An example of this in the U.S. is the city of New Orleans). As a result, parts of Shitamachi are now below the high tide level and unless protected by levees would flood daily. In addition, storm surges from typhoons push water up the harbor and into the river valleys; thus, flood controls must be designed along the river for many kilometers above the river mouths. The opposing figure shows predictions of the depth flooding that would be expected to occur along the Arakawa from a major storm.

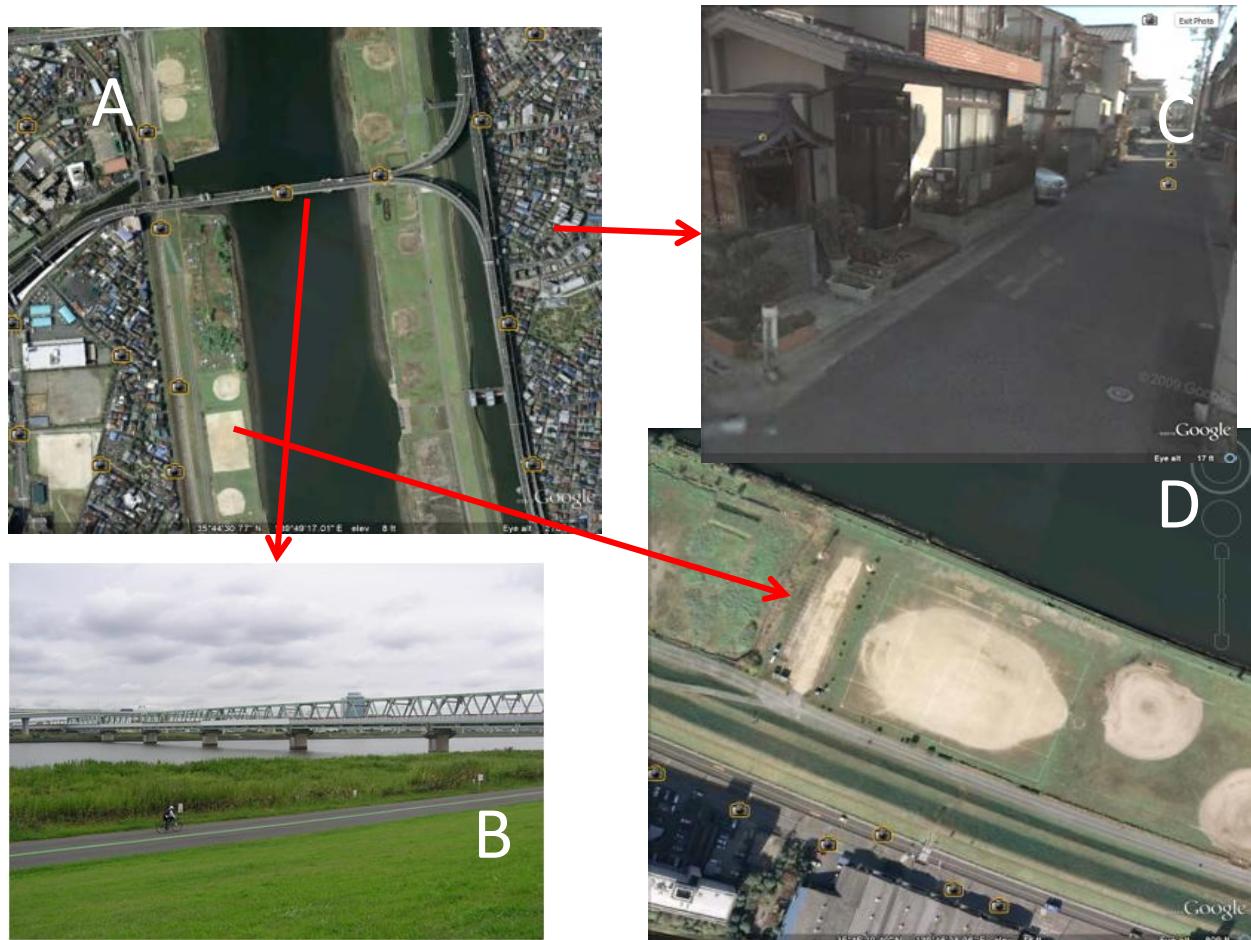
As a result of this risk of flooding, there have been massive civil engineering projects to change the movement of water in and around Tokyo. The Tone River was rerouted away from Tokyo Bay and the Arakawa and Sumida rivers were turned into artificial channels with high earthen levees or almost vertical concrete walls. In addition, locks and water gates were created that allow water from storms to be rerouted around the city. Massive pumping stations and huge underground vaults have been created to manage waters during heavy rain falls.

Even with these controls, artificial rivers still require considerable space. Wide banks are required along with high levees. While land is valuable in Japan, there are very limited options for use of the land along these engineered rivers. The rivers are expected to regularly flood and will put the land bordering the riverside under several meters of rapidly moving water. Such flooding will destroy buildings and any infrastructure on the riversides. As a result, homes, offices, schools, and streets cannot be built in these areas. The only land uses that are appropriate for these large spaces are uses that require minimal replacement costs. Examples of these are parks, flower gardens, athletic fields, golf courses, and walking/jogging/biking trails.

As a result, urban riversides represent a substantial portion of open space and recreational areas for cities. The opposing picture is an aerial photo looking north from Tokyo Harbor. The riverside of the Arakawagawa appears as the green band in the upper portion of the photo.



The impact of the river on land use in the Shitamachi is dramatic. Figure A is a satellite view of the Arakawagawa, approximately 12 kilometers upstream near Senjuakebonocho in Adachi Ward. Photo B presents the ground-level view of the riverside where the land is covered with grass and vegetation. The vista is wide and open to the sky. It also is a place of steel and concrete objects such as bridges, pumps, locks, and water gates, not homes and stores. In contrast, a few hundred meters away in the surrounding city, the view is one of narrow and relatively dark residential streets. Photo D shows an expanded aerial view of the river bank highlighting the soccer and baseball fields and adjacent parking areas.



**Photos of the land use on the Arakawagawa and in the neighborhoods adjacent to the river
(photos taken from Google Earth)**

There is a second option for smaller rivers such as the Kandagawa. The Kandagawa flows through Tokyo and joins the Sumidagawa before entering Tokyo Harbor. The Kandagawa was the subject of one of the Japanese prints by Hiroshige. In this 1857 print we see a river with high banks that can be used by small boats. The modern Kandagawa has been lined with vertical concrete walls and its banks converted to sakura-lined walkways.



History of Urban Rivers in Japan

As in the U.S. and many other developed countries, Japan has had a complex relationship with urban rivers. Prior to the development of land transportation (rails and trucks) rivers were crucial for transportation of goods and people. The riverside was a location of residential and industrial activities but the land was undesirable due to flooding and other problems. As a result, merchants and lower classes became associated with these riverside areas. The rapid development of cities resulted in viewing rivers as problems (cause floods and impede traffic requiring bridges) or as smelly places to dump wastes.

Since the 1960s, there was a movement to clean up the rivers and better manage sewage and urban runoff. More recently, urban planning has sought to make use of the open land along rivers and has introduced walking trails, gardens, and recreational areas. As a result, the urban river has been transformed from a “problem area” to a “destination.” What was a walled-off dump is now a valued public recreational space.



The Urban Riverside: An Experience of Nature, or Civil Engineering Run Amok?

Japan is a culture that in many ways fears nature. Whether it is floods, earthquakes, or typhoons, nature is not seen as friendly. This has resulted in a willingness to engineer safety in urban areas. This along with Japan's propensity to spend money on public works has largely eliminated the "natural" urban riverside. In anime after anime you will only see urban rivers that have been lined with concrete walls, concrete "tetrapods," or artificial earthen levees.



Tetrapods lining the banks of the Arakawa River



Fishing from the banks of a small river in Nara Japan



Another portion of the Kandagawa River

This is not to say that the natural river banks do not occur in Japan, but when they do they are in rural undeveloped area. Such rivers and streams do appear in anime such as *Ultimate Boy* or *Ghost Hound*.

However, anime set in even small rural cities, such as Takehara City (*Tamayura*), show engineered streams banks.

The Riverside as a Location of the Homeless in Japan

The traditional Japanese view of their society is that they are all “middle class”. There are fewer rich individuals than in Western societies, but everyone is supposedly taken care of by society and there are few poor in Japan. Unfortunately, the reality of this perception has been eroded over the last 25 years by the collapse of the Japanese economy and two decades of low economic growth. Camps of the homeless occur in all of the major Japanese cities. The plight of the homeless are explored in a number of anime (*Hinamatsuri* and *Paranoia Agent*) and is the focus of the movie *Tokyo Godfathers*.

The homeless are attracted to the urban riverside. The land offers space and separation from official activities of society. The separation minimizes the harassment from society, but the city with its resources of food and temporary work remains nearby. Camps of individuals occur along the banks of rivers and under bridges.

In the anime series *Arakawa under the Bridge* we are introduced to a diverse collection of the homeless. This group includes dropouts from corporate culture, floundering artists, gangsters, foreigners, and an armed cookie-baking religious transvestite. Together these marginalized individuals achieve a community where individual differences are respected and celebrated, where radical differences are embraced.



Aerial view of a homeless camp on the banks of the Arakawagawa



Tents and shacks (covered by blue tarps) of the homeless on the Arakawagawa

Our window on this world of the homeless is the opposite extreme. Kou Ichinomiya is the son of one the richest and most powerful families in Tokyo. Kou has excelled at life, winning at every stage of the competitive process of Japanese education. As a “thoroughbred” in business he has the personal connections and skills to be at the top of the social and business pyramid of Japan. He has, however, had a family life that was impersonal, cold, and emotionally abusive. At the riverside his social, economic, and intellectual inferiors demonstrate to him how acceptance of differences, absence of judgment, acceptance of each other’s gifts, and celebration of life can fill the empty parts of his life.



Kou Ichinomiya and “Sister” a well-armed transvestite nun and a valued member of the community of the homeless along the Arakawa River

The riverside setting is a major player in this anime. The riverside is often pictured as having tall vertical walls that keep the city and Tokyo society at bay. Inside of these walls the community can safely function, run farms, fish, hold festivals, and maintain the diverse and peculiar nature of the community members.

The River as a Spiritual Place

Rivers and water are important elements in both Buddhism and Shintoism. Thus, being present at a riverside has spiritual implications. A number of anime movies and series explore this aspect of the setting. For example, the urban river is used as a demarcation between life and the afterlife in *Wagaya no Oinari-sama*.

The concept of the river as a spiritual place is in tension with the misuse of the rivers. In the movie *Spirited Away* this is shown in two characters who are Kawa no Kamisama (a river god). The first of the two appears as a monstrosity of filth and stench. He is cleaned and revived and shown to be an important and powerful river god who has been weighed down by the garbage and waste that had been dumped in his river. Miyazaki physically depicts the fishing line, bicycles, cans and waste that have entangled and encrusted the Kawa no Kamisama. Upon his release the Kawa no Kamisama showers wealth in the form of gold nuggets and the presentation of a magical gift.



The polluted River God in *Spirited Away*

The River God Restored

Here the act of physical cleansing of the river god in the bath house, which in Shintoism is viewed as an act of spiritual purification, is directly connected to the physical act of cleaning up trash from Japan's rivers.

The second Kawa no Kamisama in *Spirited Away* is Haku. Haku is the Kamisama of the Kohaku River, who has had his true name, Kohaku, stolen and has become a slave to the owner of the bath house. The Kohaku River is described as being lost because of civil engineering. This apparently occurred when his river was replaced with a storm sewer system of covered culverts and pipes. Such processes occur frequently in the urbanization of land, where small stream valleys are filled in to make level land, and the streams are replaced with grates and underground pipes. This loss of the discrete river left

Kohaku with no home and made him vulnerable to the loss of his name and identity. While Kohaku recovers his name at the end of the movie, Kohaku remains homeless. Thus, for Miyazaki while the clean-up of rivers is possible, restoration of the river lost to engineering is not.

The combined message from *Spirited Away* is that the urbanization of the riverside has resulted in a loss of the sacred. This occurs both because of the thoughtless disposal of waste in the river and because of the deliberate transformation of the river into concrete-lined ditches that exist only to control the runoff of rainwater and minimize the impacts of floods. Thus, a journey to the riverside, while still a spiritual event, may require the visitor to dig deep to find the Kawa no Kamisama.



Figure 1 The restored Kawa no Kamisama

The Social Geography of the Urban Riverside: Creation of a Liminal Space

In Japan, as in most cultures, the concept of “place” (場) defines acceptable behaviors. Whether it is one’s home, workplace, bus, street, or school the range of behaviors is circumscribed by societal expectations. Such expectations allow individuals to live and work closely together in reasonably ordered lives.

As discussed above, the urban riverside is a relatively new environment for Japanese cities. It is a “public” space with minimal expectations. No one “owns” the riverside. No one (legally) lives at the riverside. There is no commerce, occupational, or consumer activities. No formal educational programs. Thus, many of the traditional roles that a person may take are not defined at the riverside. Engineering activities such as construction or maintenance do occur at riversides, but these are relatively rare and when these activities occur, portions of the river side are walled off from access (construction zones). When the activities are over, the space is reopened.

The expectations for public behavior that are imposed by the riverside are minimal. The user is expected not to disturb the hillside or damage flood control equipment, bridges, or roadways. If the land use is recreational the visitor is expected to follow the behavior appropriate for the area (not to interfere with baseball or soccer games in progress). The user is expected not to pose a danger to themselves or to

others. These expectations are small compared to expectations made by home, school, or the workplace environment.

As a result of the absence of most of the activities of daily life, the recent creation of the areas, and the minimal social requirements of the area, the riverside can act as a liminal space between urban places. This is not a new idea. Rivers, bridges, and riversides have long been recognized as liminal spaces. They often mark the edges of nations, states, cities, or city sections. Bridges crossing rivers represent places that are “between” these organized areas. As such they represent opportunities for confusion, choice, or reinvention of self.

An example of the riverside serving as a liminal space can be seen in the first episode of the anime series *Cheeky Angel*. The plot of *Cheeky Angel* revolves around gender roles, personal choice, and the conflict with physical characteristics. The main character, Megumi Amatsuka, is a female high school student who views herself as a rough and tumble boy/young man trapped in the body of an extremely attractive girl.

In the first episode, we learn how this confusion of personality and body came about in a “flash back”. The flash back shows a younger tomboy version of Megumi and a close female friend, Miki, at a riverside. Megumi behaves as an unruly boy, avoiding school lessons, slashing at vegetation with a toy sword, and picking fights with a gang of boys and later with an older teen. Megumi wins both fights handily. Megumi alternates between defending and threatening a strange adult who dresses as a wizard.

In the episode we watch Megumi rapidly transform from one role to another almost on a second-by-second basis. This fluidity is enabled by the fact that the riverside is a blank canvas where anyone can appear and take any role without violating the expectations of society.



Megumi Amatsuka



Younger Megumi and close friend Miki at the riverside

Into this space, a trickster appears and instead of granting Megumi's wish to become the "manliest of men" he makes her the "most feminine of women". This wish "or curse" leads to Megumi's transformation from rough tomboy into the feminine young girl who will become the most attractive girl in her high school.

In later episodes, Megumi is shown to always have been a girl. As such the story of the trickster's curse can be viewed as a representation of Megumi's view of the

impact of puberty on her choice of gender roles. As a prepubescent girl, Megumi was free to assume the male role of tomboy and her wish was to grow up to be a stronger, more dominant tomboy, but instead her body takes on a feminine form and denies her this option.

The setting of the story at the riverside provides the appropriate location for this reimagining of the events of Megumi's life. The setting does not raise issues such as family concerns, medical issues, or workplace expectations concerning gender roles. Instead the events occur in a space where choices, desires, and definitions of self are fluid.



Use of the Spatial Dimensions of the Urban Riverside in Anime

The urban riverside has distinct spatial characteristics that can be used as part of the plots of anime. The photo of the Kandagawa from the Ochanomizu train station show how dramatically different are the three spatial dimensions of width, length, and height for the riverside.

Width

While large rivers like the Arakawa have reasonably wide banks, smaller rivers like the Sumedagawa and the Kandagawa can be very narrow. The width of the river and its banks may often be smaller than a city block. As a result, crossing them in a train or a car takes only a few seconds. Bridges



Ochanomizu train station on the Kandagawa Photo courtesy of Marc Hairston

crossing urban rivers and streams have raised sides and railings that further obscure the view of the river. More importantly at the river nothing happens as far as the city is concerned. There are no businesses, no offices, no stores, no apartments, and no museums. Thus, there is nothing to attract the public's "attention" to the river. Because of this lack of activity and the narrow width, for many city dwellers intent on reaching their destination, the urban rivers become invisible. This invisibility allows the riverside to become a separate world only a few feet away from the heart of the city.

Length

In contrast to the narrow width, the length of the riverside is considerable. The riverside goes on for kilometers and in many instances crosses cities and in Tokyo reaches the harbor. This great length means that while the width at any one point is small, the total land area can be quite large. This great space can be used for a number of dramatic purposes. First, the river side can be a setting for lengthy journeys, or even separate kingdoms (*Arakawa under the Bridge*). Second, it is a place for challenging oneself by biking and running races (*Windy Tales* and *Arakawa under the Bridge*). Third, it simply gives a lot of space where you can be alone, you can have a private community apart from the city, or you can meet one another in relative privacy (*Toradora* and *Kimi ni Todoke*).

Height

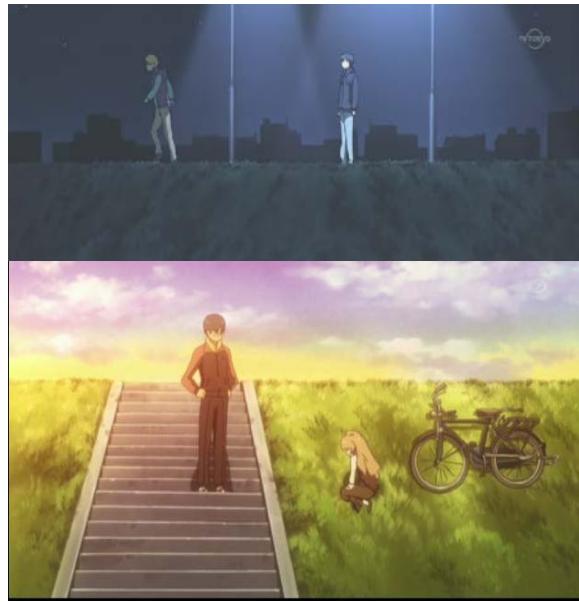
Height always exists at the urban river side. The river's banks are always raised to keep the river in place. The river can cut through hills. The river is continually crossed by elevated bridges. These differences in height can be used dramatically to emphasize the absolute or relative social or emotional status of individuals.

The anime *Toradora* uses elevation on a river bank as a measure of the emotional state. In the first scene Yūsaku, a successful, kind, and well-liked leader of his class, sits in the dark at the foot of a levee in despair. His love has announced that she is moving to the U.S. and leaving him to face his senior year alone. This event has called into question his role at school, the meaning of his life, and whether he should bleach his hair.



In the second scene that take place a few weeks later, Yūsaku now with blond hair, is at the top of the bank and has been talking with a friend. He has made his decision over what he will do, and he walks purposefully at the top of the levee moving from the light onto the dark.

In the third scene scene, Yūsaku looks with compassion and good will at his childhood friend Taiga. Taiga has just gloriously failed to master riding a bike. She has fallen and rolled halfway down the side of the levee. She lies curled up on her side, a figure of failure and frustration. The crashed bike lies on the grass hillside next to her. Taiga has strong feelings towards Yūsaku and her frustration is increased by his discovery of her in obvious disarray. However, Yūsaku has left the top of the levee and come down the steps and faces Taiga at the same level. This emphasizes that he does not look down on her failure. He ignores the obvious fact that she has fallen and instead congratulates her for her effort to master the bicycle. The scene concludes with Taiga, now with a newfound confidence, mounting the bike and riding off along the top of the levee.



Other examples of the use of height appear in series such as *Here's Greenwood* and *Arakawa under the Bridge*. In these series, individuals assert moral and economic authority by staring down at individuals living or simply present at the river's edge below them. In *Kashimashi*, one character expresses her fear and concern about a rival's relative advantages in a common love interest by looking up from a riverside at the rival who is walking on a bridge above her.

The Urban Riverside in Anime

The urban riverside is a common location in anime. There are many reasons for using a riverside setting in anime. Some activities naturally occur at the riverside. In *Windy Tales* two high school students photograph a runner in training. In *Honey and Clover* art students participate in drawing classes. Riversides provide variation in urban landscapes. In the first episode of *Niea_7* the long and tedious daily travel by the protagonist Mayuko is emphasized by the alternation of the urban train, urban bus, running across a bridge the crosses an urban stream, and then walking down a traditional neighborhood

More often; however, the riverside appears as a deliberate location choice and appears as an active component of the storyline of the anime. Ryūji and Aisaka in *Toradora* finally find a place to be honest about their emotions on a pedestrian bridge over an urban river. This liminal space, separate from each bank, hanging in air, mirrors the events prior to this scene. Both characters have run away from or have been abandoned by their families. They are isolated from friends, school, and life.

In *Kashimashi*, an anime that explores gender roles, sex changes, and romance, the river itself becomes a line of demarcation between masculinity and femininity. A normal but somewhat effeminate male teenager, Hazumu, changes gender because of an accident involving a UFO. He and his athletic and outgoing girlfriend, Tomari, struggle to redefine their relationship. With one side of the river defined as masculine and the other feminine they embrace in the center of the river where there are no clear criteria for gender roles or even gender. Hazumu asserts that while he/she may not have been strong or brave enough to be Tomari's groom, she/he was now sufficiently feminine that he could be her bride.



Conclusion

The urban riverside is a location familiar to the majority of Japanese audiences. While there are a variety of reasons for setting events at the riverside, the location is often selected to provide a liminal space where the definitions of self are open for reevaluation (role in society, relations with others, even gender). The individual behaviors are not dictated by the expectation of the location. Where social expectations and class definitions are blurred, and "hidden" desires can be expressed.

Encounters at the riverside are both problematic and potentially transformative. The status of other individuals is not defined by this location and their behavior is not predictable. The riverside is also a place to encounter the stranger, the marginalized, and the foreigner. As such the location is not always a comfortable place. Finally, the riverside is almost always a place of privacy where individuals and couples can be alone. Given these characteristics, the setting will continue to be a staple in anime.