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Editorial

Transnational boys' love fan studies

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[0.1] *Keywords*—BL; *Dōjinshi*; Gender; Homosexuality; Transnationality

Nagaike, Kazumi, and Katsuhiko Suganuma. 2013. "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies [editorial]." In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12. doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0504.

[1] We either become fans of something, or others invent us as fans. Fans can be infinitely diverse because no definitive or monolithic signifier is inscribed in the term *fan*. Some fans are conscious of their fan identities; others are less so. The idea that a certain (imagined) role of fan raises collective fan identities is valid for some fans, but not for others. Also, some fans are consciously (and subconsciously) willing to comply with the specific images of fans created and distributed by the media, while others refuse to do so. Identity formation is always multifaceted and in motion, and so are the ways of being and becoming a boys' love (BL) fan (note 1).

[2] In its early stages of development, BL in Japan represented a genre produced through interactions among fans. This remains true today. For this reason, the cultures of BL have always been intertwined with issues of fans and fandom. It may be appropriate, therefore, to first provide a brief overview of Japanese BL fan studies before broadening the discussion to incorporate transnational BL, which is the task of this special issue. Thus far, analysis of Japanese BL in terms of fans and fandom has ranged from ethnographic research on BL fans and communities focusing primarily on the processes of community building and identity formation to the rather essentialist attempts of psychoanalytic inquiry into the question, "Why do *women* crave BL?" Some of these psychoanalytic approaches attempt to uncover the psychological processes through which female BL fans sublimate negative notions concerning femaleness and femininity by imaginatively disguising themselves as boys/men in the BL world. For example, scholars such as Azusa Nakajima (1998), Midori Matsui (1993), and Tamae Tanigawa (1993) indicate that women's psychological alienation from their socially assigned gender roles leads them to adopt an imaginative masculine subjectivity. Another area of inquiry in Japanese BL fan studies is media discourse

analysis, which reveals the ways in which the media have often perceived female BL fans as those who are dubious of and deviate from heteronormative conventions. Mari Nishihara (2010), for example, demonstrates this historical tendency in media discourse concerning BL phenomena especially during the 1990s, when popular Japanese media, in accordance with the prevailing patriarchal ethos, generally portrayed female BL fans as socially/sexually immature, escapist, and essentially antisocial.

[3] Any discussion of recent developments in Japanese BL fan studies must consider several controversial issues regarding the term *fujoshi*. The concept of *fujoshi*, which literally means "rotten girls" and connotes the (presumably self-mocking) perversion of women who fantasize about male homoeroticism/homosexuality, has recently received a great deal of popular attention in Japan. In media discourse, the term has emerged as a female equivalent of the male *otaku* (obsessive fan or nerd). Midori Suzuki's Symposium essay included in this volume, "The Possibilities of Research on *Fujoshi* in Japan," provides the historiographical details of the term and its controversial public recognition. As Jeffry Hester (forthcoming) argues, while some analyses of *fujoshi* (Galbraith 2011) recognize the concept as potentially subversive in that it inherently involves nonconventional perceptions of female gender, popular media (mainly directed at male audiences) generally describe *fujoshi* fans within a patriarchal framework, purposefully containing their activities under the purview of heteronormativity.

[4] Moreover, perceptions of Japanese BL fans also reflect the importance of *dōjinshi* (amateur writings and drawings) in the subcultural context. The critical discussion concerning BL *dōjinshi* so far may be broadly characterized as a growing recognition of the autonomy of female self-expression and also as an attempt to comprehend the nature of female-oriented BL fan communities. Junko Kaneda's 2007 analysis of BL fan communities as *kaishaku kyōdotai* (collective interpretation) reveals one specific aspect of such groups: that they have a tendency to create jargon and behaviors that can only be shared among BL fans, and this in turn serves to enhance their solidarity. But BL fans' interactions can no longer be limited to human-to-human communication, as Keiko Nishimura's Symposium essay "Where Program and Fantasy Meet: Female Fans Conversing with Character Bots in Japan" explains. Nishimura examines BL fans' interactions with character bots (*kyraku-tā botto*), computer-generated characters programmed to post characters' lines from original comics, manga, and other artworks on Twitter. Nishimura says, "Conversing with a character bot constitutes affective play with a nonhuman program, but at the same time it can trigger the formation of a fan community or strengthen bonds in an existing fan community" (¶7.1).

[5] At the same time, the sexual orientation of fans can sometimes disturb seemingly well-balanced, monolithically harmonious BL communities. As Akiko Hori's Symposium essay in this issue, "On the Response (Or Lack Thereof) of Japanese Fans to Criticism that *Yaoi* Is Antigay Discrimination," clarifies, the *yaoi ronsō*, or *yaoi* dispute, was first provoked around 1992 by a self-identified gay activist who criticized BL narratives as derogatory and discriminatory in relation to gay men. Other gay critics subsequently claimed that on a subconscious level, female BL fans are homophobic; these critics thus accused BL of "plundering" gay men's images. Hori argues for the importance of discussing the ramifications of fantasies and realities presented in BL, and by doing so reminds us of the problematics of the internalized heteronormative psyche.

[6] In December 2012, one of us (Nagaike) attended a *yaoi* con called Blush, which was held in Manila (<http://blush-con.org/>). During the convention, she had a chance to observe the BL fan community in Manila and to interview both male and female BL fans. Close observation of BL fans (and fan communities) in the Philippines, with reference to the Japanese BL fan studies mentioned above, demonstrates the compelling necessity for BL critics to expand their own horizons. In the interviews that took place at the Blush convention, Nagaike encountered several testimonies that not only resemble but also differ from the Japanese situation. One female fan, who was wearing a mask to conceal her identity, said that her parents would kill her if they found out what she was doing. Some men echoed her confession. For example, a young man selling his sexually explicit BL *dōjinshi* confided that if his father discovered his BL *dōjinshi* activity on the Internet, he would disown him unless he ceased the activity. More than a few female fans remarked that whenever they disclosed their BL involvement to men, they were always asked if they were lesbians. Furthermore, most of our interview subjects, regardless of their gender, raised issues concerning Catholic accountability for their "sins." Not only religion but also class affect the ways BL artworks are consumed and created in the Filipino context. Most female and male convention participants have a good command of English and easy access to online BL networks, and identify themselves as educational elites. Our observations of Filipino BL fans and fandom were by no means carried out to confirm the originality or distinctive characteristics of their Japanese counterparts. Instead, we have been simply reminded of the cross-cultural diversity of BL fan and community cultures that both globalization and localization propel. This experiential realization of the urgent need to pursue transnational BL fan studies was crucial to the formation of this special issue.

[7] Toshio Miyake's analysis of nation anthropomorphism manga *dōjinshi* in terms of their discursive Occidentalism reveals the complex mechanisms that both construct and deconstruct ideas of nation, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Hidekaz Himaruya's nation anthropomorphism manga *Axis Powers Hetalia* was originally published online and instantly gained worldwide popularity in the field of BL *dōjinshi*.

Given the analytical scheme of Occidentalism as an active reconfirmation of the Occident performed by the Orient, *Axis Powers Hetalia* seems to comply with the idea of the consummate colonial power hierarchy (for example, the hard-powered nations are personified as male). However, Miyake points out that *Hetalia* personifies nations as childish, cute-boy characters and consequently parodies the power configurations of Occidentalism. Moreover, the parodic nature of *Hetalia dōjinshi* (that is to say, parodies of the original *Hetalia*'s parody of hegemonic Occidentalism) represent even more critical subversion by way of the essence of male homosexuality and its sexual appeal for female readers, neither of which is in accordance with heteronormative assumptions. In *Hetalia dōjinshi*, the very essence of historicity, politics, and racial constructions that emanate from Occidentalism could potentially be deconstructed through parody. At the same time, Miyake's investment in such a postmodernist potential is only partial. Miyake is careful to remind us of the flip side of *dōjinshi*'s parodic reproductions of the original and warns us against the eventual confirmation of pervasive hegemonic colonial structures.

[8] Mark McLelland (2011) shows in his recent study of censorship in relation to Japanese BL that the Tokyo metropolitan government passed a controversial bill to regulate and censor sexually explicit materials (including BL) that depict "seemingly" underage characters. Research concerning censorship issues surrounding BL can also be explored cross-culturally, as demonstrated by Paul M. Malone's "Transplanted Boys' Love Conventions and Anti-*Shota* Polemics in a German Manga: Fahr Sindram's *Losing Neverland*," included in this issue. Malone's essay introduces both the historical and present-day contexts of the comics industry in Germany, which allows us to fully grasp his analysis of OGL comic artist Sindram and her provocative *Losing Neverland*, which depicts seemingly underage characters engaging in homosexual intercourse. Malone's objective is to explore Sindram's discursive construction of her comic work (and herself) as the icon of the anti-*shota* (love for boys) pornography movement in Germany by examining German BL fans' reception of this particular work as well as the artist's own political statements on this issue. By elaborating on McLelland's analysis of Western expectations that single out Japan as a pathetic Orient lawlessly disseminating child pornography, as well as utilizing the cultural theory of popular culture capital and its subversive potential for resistance against authority, Malone views Sindram as an artist whose "necessary pursuit of money has cost her her productivity, and [who] has not necessarily gained the agency for resistance that [John] Fiske posited fans stood to gain from harnessing their creativity" (¶6.5).

[9] An analysis of *shota* desire, in fact, reveals a more complex mechanism than merely the harmful perversion of pedophilia. Tamaki Saitō (2007), a Japanese psychoanalyst and critic of popular culture, argues that the fictionality of *shota* is realized through its absolute distance from realistic everyday life, and he proceeds to

explore the similarities between male *shota* desire and the "space of perfect fictionality" of superflat art (note 2). A close exploration of Saitō's concept of *shota* reveals that the imaginative characters of *shota* provide a proxy for an ultimate fictionality through which adults can express their repressed desire to be boys (or something that is not masculine or feminine). Thus, the transnational research on BL *shota*, as Malone demonstrates in this issue, also contributes to the overall discussion of encoding/decoding practices of BL fans.

[10] By and large, the term *BL* itself does emit the "odor" of the Japanese cultural element, which does not necessarily represent the realistic, objective idea of Japan, as discussed by Lucy Hannah Glasspool in "Simulation and Database Society in Japanese Role-Playing Game Fandoms: Reading Boys' Love *Dōjinshi* Online." In this Praxis essay, Glasspool describes the conditions of transnationality of BL as cultural capital upon which the postmodern simulacrum (pseudoness) of Japaneseness is endlessly constructed as a seductive force for non-Japanese fans. Glasspool examines the online BL *dōjinshi* of RPG *Final Fantasy* in England (and other English-speaking areas), integrating several theoretical models including postmodernist simulacra; Kōichi Iwabuchi's (2002) theory of *mukokuseki*, which attributes the transnational popularity of Japanese cultures and productions to the very absence of specific Japaneseness; and Hiroki Azuma's (2009) data-based fictionality, which views the (imaginative) configurations of the database as our subjective orientations. Glasspool applies and at times expands these theoretical models to illustrate the complex processes of (un)making the images of Japanese cultures and gender constructions that take place within BL cyberspace.

[11] As we mentioned previously, academic discussion of BL narratives that uses psychoanalysis has focused much on the motivations that lead some women to write/read supposedly perverse narratives concerning male homosexuality. This psychoanalytic approach has been questioned by some scholars of Japanese BL, who treat BL products as polythetic entertainment media, rather than a simple manifestation of their audiences' inner psychological concerns. Björn-Ole Kamm's "Rotten Use Patterns: What Entertainment Theories Can Do for the Study of Boys' Love" (in this issue) demonstrates the significance of the diverse patterns of consumption of BL. On the basis of his ethnographic research conducted on BL fans in Germany and Japan, Kamm employs the uses and gratifications approach (UGA) to explore the possibilities of understanding BL materials as polythetic, not monolithic, entertaining media. He categorizes those fans into four different groups: the connoisseurs (active interest in sexual matter); the net girls (consumption, production, and communication via the Internet); the con girls (convention goers); and the sporadic (multiple practitioners). Kamm consequently integrates the

discussion of BL entertainment that involves limitless, interchangeable, and transformable acts among its producers and consumers.

[12] Erika Junhui Yi's Symposium essay "Reflection on Chinese Boys' Love Fans: An Insider's View" provides the important raw voice regarding Chinese boys' love fans. She discusses the official persecution of Chinese female BL writers and the harsh criticism they have received from state-controlled media. In order to fully explore the circumstances of BL fan cultures, we need to investigate the transnational influence of the BL phenomenon. Even though BL has become increasingly popular not just in Asian countries but also in North America and Europe, little research has been done on the effects of the countervailing forces of globalization and localization on BL. Regrettably, it seems to us that most Japanese BL scholars are often indifferent to BL cultures in other countries, and their frame of reference is usually limited to Japan.

[13] In the early 1990s, during which time the aforementioned *yaoi* dispute took place in Japan, BL writers and readers alike became an object of criticism for appropriating images of gay men. The logic behind this type of accusation is explicated through the concept of ownership. If one pursues this line of logic and extends it to the transnational context, then Japanese *fujoshi* themselves could now accuse non-Japanese BL fans of appropriating their materials across national boundaries. Critical discussion surrounding the idea of ownership is no doubt interesting and merits further investigation; however, the essays included in this special issue are concerned more with the questions of why and how BL is desired among different kinds of fans and within various geocultural contexts.

[14] Needless to say, Japanese BL continues to be spread abroad through the publication of legitimate and pirated translations, BL Internet sites, and so forth. This process has also transformed local BL contexts, both within and outside Japan. BL conventions are now held in numerous foreign countries, where local manga artists produce and publish BL narratives influenced by Japanese BL. Whatever the path future BL studies may take, scholars will have to open their eyes to the ever-evolving transnational realities and fantasies of contemporary BL praxis.

Acknowledgments

[15] The following people worked on TWC No. 12 in an editorial capacity: Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma (guest editors); Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (editors); Cameron Salisbury (Symposium); and Louisa Stein (Review).

[16] The following people worked on TWC No. 12 in a production capacity: Rrain Prior (production editor); Beth Friedman and Shoshanna Green (copyeditors); Wendy

M. Carr, Kristen Murphy, and sunusn (layout); and Amanda Georgeanne Retartha, Carmen Montopoli, and Vickie West (proofreaders).

[17] TWC thanks the journal project's Organization for Transformative Works board liaison, Andrea Horbinski. OTW provides financial support and server space to TWC but is not involved in any way in the content of the journal, which is editorially independent.

[18] TWC thanks all its board members, whose names appear on TWC's masthead, as well as the additional peer reviewers and Symposium reviewers who provided service for TWC No. 12: Patrick Galbraith, Sharon Goetz, Katrien Jacobs, Alexis Lothian, Sharalyn Orbaugh, and Druann Pagliassotti. We also extend special thanks to Nele Noppe and Lori Morimoto for their translation work.

Notes

1. As some scholars have pointed out, the category of BL may ultimately need to be differentiated from other related terms, especially within the Japanese sociocultural context. However, many BL researchers, including the contributors to this issue, use BL as an umbrella term, while the appropriate uses of other terms such as *shōnen ai* and *yaoi* have never been universally accepted. We therefore use BL generically to designate the entire range of popular narratives written by and for women that include fantasies involving male-male eroticism.

2. Superflat is a postmodern artistic style founded by the artist Takashi Murakami. Japanese manga and anime have had a discernible influence on the development of superflat art, which is based on the premise that the absence of reality (flatness) itself can be conceived of as the presence of postmodern reality.

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Theory

Doing Occidentalism in contemporary Japan: Nation anthropomorphism and sexualized parody in *Axis Powers Hetalia*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—*Axis Powers Hetalia* (2006–present), a Japanese gag comic and animation series, depicts relations between nations personified as cute boys against a background of World War I and World War II. The stereotypical rendering of national characteristics as well as the reduction of historically charged issues into amusing quarrels between nice-looking but incompetent boys was immensely popular, especially among female audiences in Japan and Asia, and among Euro-American manga, anime, and cosplay fans, but it also met with vehement criticism. Netizens from South Korea, for example, considered the Korean character insulting and in early 2009 mounted a protest campaign that was discussed in the Korean national assembly. *Hetalia*'s controversial success relies to a great extent on the inventive conflation of male-oriented *otaku* fantasies about nations, weapons, and concepts represented as cute little girls, and of female-oriented *yaoi* parodies of male-male intimacy between powerful "white" characters and more passive Japanese ones. This investigation of the original *Hetalia* by male author Hidekaz Himaruya (b. 1985) and its many adaptations in female-oriented *dōjinshi* (fanzine) texts and conventions (between 2009 and 2011, *Hetalia* was by far the most adapted work) refers to notions of interrelationality, intersectionality, and positionality in order to address hegemonic representations of "the West," the orientalized "Rest" of the world, and "Japan" in the cross-gendered and sexually parodied mediascape of Japanese transnational subcultures.

[0.2] *Keywords*—BL; Boys' love; Critical Occidentalism; *Dōjinshi*; Hegemony; Manga; Nation anthropomorphism; Parody; *Yaoi*; Youth subculture

Miyake, Toshio. 2013. "Doing Occidentalism in Contemporary Japan: Nation Anthropomorphism and Sexualized Parody in *Axis Powers Hetalia*." In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12.
[doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0436](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0436).

1. Introduction: Critical Occidentalism and hegemony from below

[1.1] In the modern age of colonialism and imperialism, Occidentalism as a constellation of discourses, practices, and institutions based on the idea of "the West" has played a hegemonic role in the configuration of collective identity and alterity. The imagined geography of "the West" has been effective in inscribing the whole of

humanity along hierarchic yet fluid lines of inclusion and exclusion, encompassing global relations of power in geopolitical contexts as well as knowledge practices in geocultural spheres. Although since the 1990s transnational, transcultural, and hybrid signifying practices induced by globalization have intensified, and critical engagements that question notions of "the West" have increased in postcolonial and cultural studies, "the West" continues to be reproduced as an unmarked assumption—a deep-rooted, self-evident, and ultimately naturalized term—in every sphere of public and private life, as well as in academic jargon (Hall 1992; Coronil 1996).

[1.2] I rely here on an extended notion of Occidentalism as referring to every discourse or practice that contributes to the idea of the existence of "the West" or "Western," setting aside whether it is a pro-Western or an anti-Western discourse. As has been pointed out in postcolonial and cultural studies, Occidentalism is not limited to a simple reversed or counter-Orientalism, expressed by anti- or pro-Western ideologies, and used strategically for internal nationalism or subversion. Rather, Occidentalism is the condition of Orientalism's very possibility and refers both to self-definition on the Euro-American side as well as to the definition of the other on the non-Euro-American side (Coronil 1996).

[1.3] The ambivalent historical position of modern Japan with regard to the Euro-American world order has already provided a strategic perspective to overcome monological studies focusing unilaterally on either the hegemonic or the subaltern, and to stress instead the interrelational process of Occidentalism, Orientalism, and self-Orientalism in regard to the construction of national identity (note 1). But today, even in the absence of direct domination or coercion exercised by a Euro-American power, Occidentalism continues to be hegemonic in Japan, as Naoki Sakai argues: "What gives the majority of Japanese the characteristic image of Japanese culture, is still its distinction from the so-called West...The loss of the distinction between the West and Japan would result in the loss of Japanese identity in general" (2002, 564).

[1.4] In order to contribute to further critical understanding of Occidentalism and to explore its contemporary rearticulation in Japan, I draw on an interrelational, intersectional, and positional approach inspired by the Gramscian concept of hegemony (note 2). Gramsci has suggested that there can be no effective hegemony without the active consent of the subaltern. This means that it is not only important to address, from above, the interiorization of the imagined geography of "the West" on an international and institutional level, but also its reproduction in common sense, everyday life, and popular cultures on an intrasocietal level, from below.

[1.5] The crucial question to ask is, what kind of strategic advantages does this subaltern self-positioning offer in relation to "the West" as universal reference? And focusing on the intrasocietal level, what kind of heterogeneous axes of sociocultural

identification and othering (nation, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, class) cumulatively intersect in this self-positioning? What kind of pleasures, desires, and emotions are mobilized to articulate it as attractive? Finally, how does this self-positioning and reaction to Occidentalism differ according to the specific positionality of the actors involved?

[1.6] Karen Kelsky (2001) has critically highlighted the gendered fetish of the "white" man and the longing (*akogare*) for everything "Western" among young women in contemporary Japan; such objects are strategic signifiers of emancipatory projects, internationalism, and social upward mobility. Similarly, the wider dissemination through mass media and urban consumption of an idealized "West" has been investigated by Yuiko Fujita (2009) as motivating middle-class youth to migrate to London and New York. And mostly significant for the purposes of this study, Kazumi Nagaike (2009), in analyzing boys' love magazines, has convincingly examined the stimulation in female fantasies of romantic tensions and male homosexual eroticism. These tensions and this eroticism are articulated through the superiorization of racialized "white" men.

[1.7] The tremendous popularity of the amateur Web manga *Axis Powers Hetalia*, which focuses on male-male intimacy between anthropomorphized Euro-American nations and Japan, offers a precious opportunity to reexamine, from below, Occidentalism and its intersection with a wide range of spheres of identity and alterity, be it geopolitical, historical, national, racial, gendered, or sexual (note 3). *Hetalia*, as the most adapted work among female-oriented *dōjinshi* (Japanese fanzines, ranging from manga to light novels and simulation games), provides further insight into the ways in which different dimensions of pleasure, such as parody and sexuality, are strategically mobilized in *yaoi*-inspired fantasies (note 4).

[1.8] This investigation of *Hetalia* builds on an earlier examination of its multimedia platform, including Web manga, printed manga, anime series, and amateur adaptations, and the heterogenous discourses surrounding it. Further integration of textual and visual reading of *Hetalia* relies on participant observation of national *dōjinshi* conventions ("*Hetalia* Only" events), informal interviews with organizers, authors, and attendants, and participation in the everyday *Hetalia*-related practices of fans, which includes Web surfing, karaoke, and gadget shopping (note 5). Finally, because the nation inspiring the original work is Italy, a brief period of fieldwork I conducted in Italy on cosplay groups and interviews with fan fiction writers has provided further insight into the transnational diffusion of *Hetalia* (note 6).

2. The boom of *Axis Powers Hetalia*

[2.1] *Hetalia* is a gag comic and animation series depicting historical and military relations between (so far) more than 40 nations, anthropomorphized as cute-looking and incompetent boys and kids (note 7). These male characters personify broad-stroke national, ethnic, and linguistic stereotypes; international relations are transfigured as intimate and childish quarrels, mainly between the trio of the historic Axis Powers (Italy, Germany, and Japan) and between the characters of the Allied Forces (the United States, England, France, Russia, and China). There is no general and linear narrative providing a unifying frame to the mostly four-panel manga format and to the 5-minute anime episodes. It is basically plotless, a loosely connected series of nation-character-centered, short, silly gags played across the background of World War I and World War II, but including also episodes from ancient and medieval history and present-day geopolitics.

[2.2] *Hetalia* started as a Web manga drawn by a male amateur artist, Hidekaz Himaruya (b. 1985), and posted on his personal Web site Kitayume (<http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/hetaria/index.htm>) in 2006 while he was a student in an art school in New York (figure 1). In the months that followed, the online text slowly gained a cult following among female Net surfers. This convinced publisher Gentōsha Comics in Japan to release in 2008 two printed volumes of *Hetalia*'s vignettes. By late 2009, a million copies had been sold. This was followed by the release of a third volume in 2010, a fourth in 2011, and a fifth in 2012. At present, the estimated total sales are 2 million copies (figure 2). Meanwhile, starting in 2009, an adaptation of the first series of short animation episodes (*Hetalia Axis Powers*) by Studio Dean in Tokyo was also released online by Animate.tv (<http://animate.tv/>); in late 2012, it was in its fourth season. A feature-length animated film, *Paint It, White!*, was released in 2010. As is usual for successful Japanese manga or anime, it has been heavily merchandised: CDs of character songs, dramatic CDs, video games, cute figurines, vending machines with *Hetalia* drinks, photo booths (*purikura*), and gadgets (note 8).



Figure 1. Screen shot of Kitayume

(<http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/hetaria/index.html>), the Web site of the original Web manga by Hidekaz Himaruya. [View larger image.]



Figure 2. Hetalia printed manga editions by Gentōsha Comics (2008–12). [View larger image.]

[2.3] If we consider that *Hetalia* was originally an amateur work with no aesthetic or graphic sophistication, nor any narrative consistency, even more remarkable than its commercial success has been its extraordinary popularity among *dōjinshi* (fanzines). During the summer and autumn of 2010, hundreds of *Hetalia*-inspired amateur adaptations were piled in boys' love corners in the biggest Animate and Mandrake manga stores in Tokyo, especially at Otome Road in Eastern Ikebukuro, one center of *yaoi* fandom and related *fujoshi* (rotten girls/women) subculture. An even larger number of texts—thousands of different titles, ranging from manga to light novels—were exhibited for sale at manga and cosplay conventions dedicated to the *Hetalia* world. Hundreds of "*Hetalia* Only" events have been held in major Japanese cities, from the all-inclusive "World Series" to the more segmented "Kyara Only" events, which are limited to specific characters and combinations (figure 3). Besides the biggest amateur manga/anime event in Japan, known as Comic Market or Comiket, attendance at "*Hetalia* Only" events from June to October 2010 ranged from 50 fan circles (approximately 1,000 visitors) to 450 circles (approximately 10,000 visitors). Excluding some of the organizers and myself, most of these events had an astonishing 100% female attendance. At the summer 2010 Comiket 78, the 1,586 registered *Hetalia* fan circles ranked second in number, only behind the more male-oriented shooting game *Tōhō Project* circles (note 9). From 2009 to late 2011, *Hetalia* was by far the most adapted work among female-oriented *dōjinshi* in Japan (note 10).



Figure 3. "*Hetalia* Only" events organized by Youmedia. "World Series" event (left); "Japan Only" event (right). [View larger image.]

[2.4] The chain of derivative works, parodies, and spin-offs of the original is not limited to Japanese versions but has spread to almost every language used on the Internet. Through the Web, thanks to intensive scanning (scanlation) and fan subbing, *Hetalia* has had a dramatic impact around the world among female lovers of Japanese comics and animation, even before being translated into English or other main languages (note 11). Since 2009, an *Axis Powers Hetalia* Day has been celebrated on October 24 among international fandom, especially in English-speaking nations, by gathering together, cosplaying *Hetalia* characters, exhibiting huge national flags, and discussing coupling combinations. In 2010, *Hetalia* Day was celebrated in 35 countries, with 160 registered meet-ups (<http://hetalia-day.com/2010/directory.html>). In late 2010, the first two manga volumes were finally published by Tokyopop in English, topping the *New York Times* manga best-seller list in the United States and entering a more commercialized stage of international diffusion.

3. Controversial success

[3.1] Hardcore fans, especially fans in Japan, prefer to consume and display their reproductions of *Hetalia* (*dōjinshi*, cosplay, fan art, fan fiction) in mostly intimate spheres together with other fans; they venture out to more public spaces such as *dōjinshi* events only when they are sure to meet other fans. There is a widespread reluctance to expose this hobby to the nonfan gaze, possibly to avoid incomprehension or refusal, or simply because it is easier, more enjoyable, and more rewarding to experience it only in intimate spaces or with other fans. This applies in general to many subcultural spheres as well, but it is arguably more relevant for a boys' love/*yaoi*-inspired and mostly female subculture, especially considering its overtly male homoerotic tone. Among all the *Hetalia* fans I interviewed in Japan, nobody expressed the desire to go public or to be acknowledged by the mainstream, and academic attention was considered surprising and extremely embarrassing. However, in Italy, as in many Euro-American countries, public display of huge *Hetalia* national flags and uniforms in the streets are standard during Japan festivals or events centered around J-culture (manga, anime, video games), likely the result of the variety of cosplay conventions and the accepted coolness of J-culture (figures 4 and 5). Still, as a result of homophobia, critical parents, and hate speech from other J-culture fans (and even some *Hetalia* fan girls), there is widespread criticism of *yaoi*-inspired activities (note 12).



Figure 4. *The Italian Hetalia Cosplay Project at Lucca Comics & Games 2010 (personal photo, November 1, 2010). [View larger image.]*



Figure 5. *The Hetalia Cosplay Project performing at the Lucca Comics & Games 2010 cosplay competition, November 1 (personal video, posted on YouTube by the organizer of the group; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0BhIDvzppw>). [View larger image.]*

[3.2] *Hetalia* might have passed quite unnoticed—like many works addressed to and reproduced by a specific, more or less subcultural audience, in this case mostly girls and young women in their late teens and 20s—by the mainstream had there not been some vocal protest among netizens outside Japan, who reacted vehemently to *Hetalia*'s representation of history, nationhood, and ethnicity. On the occasion of the scheduled broadcasting of the anime adaptation in early 2009 on Kids Station, a Japanese cable and satellite TV channel, a huge protest movement arose among South Koreans. They criticized the stereotypical rendering of the Korean character in the original Web manga, organizing a petition signed by about 17,000 netizens to stop the broadcast of the TV program. Finally, Congresswoman Jeong Mi-Kyeong of the South Korean Grand National Party, a conservative party holding the majority in the assembly, brought the protest to the National Assembly Committee. At the Special Assembly Committee on Defensive Measures for the Liancourt Rocks, on January 13, 2009, she accused the manga of being insulting to the Korean people, calling *Hetalia* a criminal act, even if created by a private person, and urging the government to take diplomatic action against the Japanese government as well as to draft a law in order to handle this kind of national offense. One of the most criticized aspects of this protest was the Korea character's obsession in the original manga with touching Japan's

breast (and Japan's reluctance to allow it). The breast was arguably taken to represent the Liancourt Rocks, a small group of islands, the sovereignty of which is disputed between South Korea and Japan (figure 6) ([note 13](#)).



Figure 6. Episode ("Boobs are forever!") showing Korea touching Japan's breast in the original Web manga. [[View larger image.](#)]

[3.3] This accusation was covered by both the South Korean and the Japanese media, and it brought about the cancellation of the TV broadcast of *Hetalia*. The anime adaptation continued its diffusion via Webcasts and mobile phones after the Korean character had been removed. More informal criticism was ubiquitous among online discussions worldwide, condemning the omission in the original *Hetalia* of disturbing aspects related to modern history, such as genocide, the Holocaust, and fascist totalitarianism, and disapproving of Euro-American cosplayers for dealing casually with controversial symbols of World War II, such as national flags and military uniforms.

[3.4] In other words, *Hetalia*'s national and global popularity, even if limited to a subculture, is inevitably embedded in complex, contested, and intertwined issues of identity, history, and power—issues that are not easy to disentangle. If we consider *Hetalia* in terms of its possibilities and limits, three sorts of questions may be raised according to their different positions and aims.

[3.5] First, is *Hetalia* anti-Korean? Is it a stereotyped, essentialized, and racialized rendering of national cultures? Is it historically misleading about the tragic reality of war and of totalitarian ideologies, contributing to aestheticism, banalization, and uncritical appreciation of global power relations? (Modernists, mostly male.)

[3.6] Second, is *Hetalia* a creative and empowering expression of an autonomous and female-oriented subculture inspired by boys' love/*yaoi* fantasies? Is it a typical mode of parodic, playful, and postmodern consumption of late capitalism, a mangaesque media mix detached from direct connections to social, political, or historical references ([note 14](#))? Does it favor a transcultural network of international fandom, thanks to increasing media convergence, Internet literacy, and the globalized popularity of Cool Japan? (Postmodernists and postfeminists, mostly academics.)

[3.7] Third, is *Hetalia* stimulating a cosmopolitan and genuine interest in other countries, their histories, and their people? Or is it simply funny, joyful, and entertaining, and therefore immune to critical scrutiny? After all, it is basically a gag comic created for fun by a young amateur and enjoyed privately as a hobby without any explicit message or ideological intention. (Fans, mostly female.)

[3.8] It would be easy to argue that each interpretation has validity. Furthermore, this division into three groups is inevitably shaped by my own subject position. I am Japanese, but not a Japanese native speaker (I grew up in Germany and Italy); I am middle-aged and married; and I am a man. During fieldwork, I displayed the following: a modernist impatience with historical mystification and ethnic stereotyping in regard to representational content; a sensibility inspired by cultural studies and gender studies for the potential of popular media and female youth subcultures; and, to a more limited extent, an appreciation of some of the fan practices as an enjoyable aspect of participant observation. In addition, considering the large and proliferating *Hetalia* world, all the questions listed above may be affirmable with empirical evidence. I suggest instead that a perspective inspired by critical Occidentalism can contribute to the understanding of some of the underlying assumptions of *Hetalia*'s popularity, for both the original and its adaptations, and on national and global levels.

4. Doing interrelational Occidentalism: Eurocentric cartography and whiteness

[4.1] A first crucial aspect for understanding the hegemonic role of Occidentalism and its ongoing reproduction is interrelationality with regard to the international sphere. In the contemporary postcolonial, postimperialistic age, the effectiveness of hegemony relies less on direct imposition from above supported by the political, military, or economical supremacy of a specific Euro-American nation, institution, or individual. Rather, Occidentalism relies for its reproduction more and more on acceptance and active consent from below by the non-Euro-American sides, more or less subaltern, including Japan. One effect of this interrelational process, a sort of globalized and dispersed mirror game articulating representations of specular identity and alterity, has been in modern times to mutually reinforce and reproduce the Eurocentric cartography of "the West" as the universal reference of the world (Miyake 2010).

[4.2] With regard to contemporary Japan, Yuiko Fujita in her fieldwork on Japanese cultural migrants highlights a revealing imagined geography, which can also be seen in the fact that the author, Himaruya, started composing *Hetalia* while he was studying in New York as an international student. Japanese young women and men were asked, before migrating to or going to study in New York or London, to draw a world map and write place-names on it. The main aspects of these drawings were, first, that Japan

was drawn in the center of the world and oversized relative to other countries and continents; and second, that the drawings focused on Euro-American countries. Nearly all respondents drew North America and Europe, but most omitted the so-called "Rest" of the world—Africa, the Arabian nations, and large parts of Asia (Fujita 2009, 44–45).

[4.3] The imagined geography as displayed in *Hetalia* world maps replicates these drawings and their interiorization of a Eurocentric cartography (Himaruya 2008, 10–11) (figure 7). Apart from Japan, almost all the main characters in the original manga and anime versions are cute "whites," namely the Axis Powers (Italy and Germany) and the Allied Forces (the United States, the England, France, Russia) and the Five Nordic Nations (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Denmark). Most of the episodes are inspired by events that occurred during and between World War I and World War II, and they center on intimate quarrels between the European characters, the American character, and Japan. In reality, most of the actual historical and military events in this period involved dramatic and tragic contact between imperial Japan and its Asian neighbors. However, in *Hetalia*, only a few Asian characters are included—mainly China as a member of the Allied Forces in some independent episodes, and to a limited extent Korea in the original Web manga. Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Vietnam appear mainly as sketch characters on Himaruya's Web page and blog.

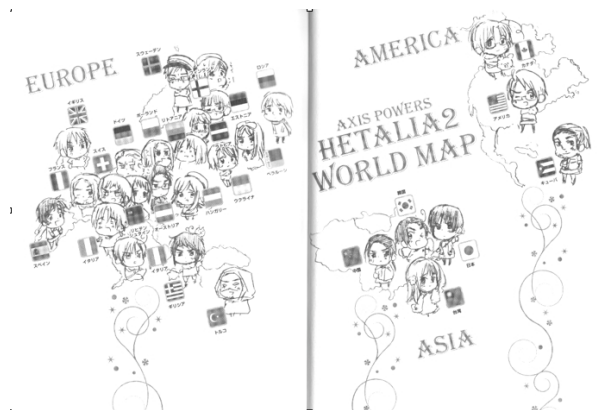


Figure 7. Eurocentric geography in the original *Hetalia* (Himaruya 2008, 10–11).
[[View larger image.](#)]

[4.4] In addition to the textual and visual levels of the text, the modern cultural history of national identity as regards "Japan" versus "the West" is confirmed by reader preferences for "white" characters. A readers' poll by *Hetalia* publisher Gentōsha Comics about the most loved characters looks like a kind of *gaijin akogare* (fascination for Western foreigners) ranking. After Japan, which was voted top, the most popular characters are the England, Germany, Russia, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Greece, the United States, and Sweden, with China, at a rank of 17, being the only character representing "the Rest" of the world (figure 8) (http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index_02.html).



Figure 8. Gentōsha Comics survey on preferred characters among *Hetalia* readers (July 2010). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.5] This kind of mangaesque and gendered attraction for the "white" man is also confirmed by the *dōjinshi* scene. Catalog maps at *Hetalia*-centered conventions show how the distribution of the author circles is framed according to the boys' love/*yaoi* code of *seme* (active, stronger, penetrating character) and *uke* (passive, weaker, receiving character) pairings. The most popular is the *seme* United States/*uke* England pairing, followed by the *seme* England/*uke* Japan pairing, the *uke* Prussia corner, the *seme* France/*uke* England pairing, and the Scandinavian characters' corner ([note 15](#)). Japan is not only the most popular character among general readers of the original, but also very popular as an *uke* character in the *dōjinshi* scene (figure 9). The circle distribution in the conventions that center exclusively on Japan as an *uke* character show that the most popular *seme* partners are all "white": England ranks first, followed by the United States, France, Prussia, Italy, and Russia ([note 16](#)).



Figure 9. Polymorphous and cross-gendered Japan (Kiku Honda) in *dōjinshi* works including amateur manga, illustrations, and postcards. [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.6] But Occidentalism is not only a matter of generic relevance attributed to "the West," to "Western" history, or to "whites." Occidentalism is deeply rooted in the modern history of colonialism and imperialism, framing asymmetrical and hierarchic dispositions of identity and alterity. This is evident and enforced in the parody configuration and appropriation by *dōjinshi* authors according to the *seme/uke* code of the *yaoi* grammar. Almost all pairings are framed by and reproduce a geopolitical and geocultural top-down hierarchy. The stronger, aggressive, more experienced, taller, masculine *seme* character is performed by the more powerful nation, while the more passive, younger, effeminate *uke* character is played by the weaker nation: *seme* United States/*uke* England, *seme* Germany/*uke* Italy, *seme* England/*uke* Japan, and so on (figure 10).



Figure 10. *Dōjinshi* manga covers. From left: United States × England, Germany × Italy, England × Japan (Koffy 2012; Gessekikan-Haiyoruloo 2010; Chimamire moimoigō, 2010). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.7] As regards the interrelational process of Occidentalism, the interiorization of a Eurocentric cartography plays a relevant role in the popularity of *Hetalia* not only in Japan, but also worldwide, especially in Euro-American contexts. Eurocentrism and whiteness contribute to the immediate familiarity and to the direct appropriation of the *Hetalia* world and characters by Euro-American readers, without any complex mediation imposed by displacing difference or otherness (note 17). This familiarity is further enhanced by the specific stereotyping of *Hetalia*'s original characters according to modern clichés of the so-called national characters, which have been adopted by Himaruya after mostly ethnic jokes diffused among his American friends while he was studying in New York. For instance, Japan is shy and well mannered, and loves the changes of seasons and technological gadgets, but is clumsy in communicating his feelings and thoughts. On the other hand, Italy is a light-hearted idler, a pizza-, pasta-, and music-loving coward. The United States is an energetic, self-confident, hamburger-eating character who loves to play the hero but is superstitious and afraid of supernatural beings.

5. Doing intersectional and positional Occidentalism: Nation anthropomorphism, *moe*, and sexualized parody

[5.1] A second crucial aspect for the hegemonic effectiveness of Occidentalism is intersectionality, which refers to a more intrasocietal level (note 18). Occidentalism has been in the modern age a self-definition as "the West," first in Europe and then in the United States, articulated through intertwined paradigms aimed at defining its presumed modern identity: reason, science, progress, universalism, individualism, masculinity, white race, adulthood. In other words, Occidentalism, as any kind of hegemonic identity, is not limited to an isolated or homogenous paradigm. It is instead the effect of a cumulative intersection, mobilizing very different axes of sociocultural identification related to nation, class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age, activating very different modes of representation, practices, and affect, and arguably cutting across every dimension of human existence.

[5.2] As Edward Said has shown, this modern self-definition of the so-called West was configured in the imperialist age by a hierarchic contrast with an other-definition about what is or should be other to itself (Orientalism), framing the existence and meaning of "the Rest" of the world as "the East," including Japan. This cultural other, being mainly constructed as antithetical to Euro-American modernity, will be, or must be, reduced to nonmodern paradigms: "the East" or the subaltern "Rest" of the world has been configured as a cumulative intersection of nonmodern paradigms including tradition, emotionality, stasis, particularism, groupism, femininity, colored race, and infancy. The paradigms and combinations of this imagined geography can obviously vary, depending on specific periods, contexts, and actors, and it may not necessarily be configured through a dualistic antithesis.

[5.3] Hegemonic effectiveness requires both interrelationality and intersectionality with regard to the acceptance and active consent from the subaltern other. This applies both to the other-definition of "the West" as cultural other (Occidentalism) made by the subaltern, as well as to the self-definition of the subaltern themselves as "the East" or "the Rest" (self-Orientalism), in both cases interiorizing and reproducing the paradigms and contrastive dualism articulated by Euro-American Occidentalism. The key aspect for Occidentalism is how the interrelational process is combined with a specific cumulative intersectionality activated from the subaltern side. Its hegemonic range relies on how imitation, interiorization, and reproduction of its intersecting paradigms contribute to corroborating the sameness of discursive identity and alterity; or, on the contrary, are able to introduce some ambiguity, slippages, or even subversive disruptions to the game of mirrors. Hegemony is intrinsically a polyphonic process, which means that Occidentalism is always a mutually constituted process, according to multiple and fluid positions of dominance and subalternity, as well as to the interacting convergence of different discourses and practices.

[5.4] Returning to *Hetalia*, besides its general Eurocentric cartography and fascination for whiteness, it is therefore important to pay attention to specific positions and differences introduced by its recontextualization of Occidentalism, and to acknowledge other intersections related to more ambivalent spheres of identification and to nuanced modes of appropriation. According to a survey conducted by *Hetalia* manga publisher Gentōsha Comics (<http://www.gentosha-comics.net/hetalia/enquete/index.html>) of general readers who were asked to define *Hetalia* in one word, *nation* was the second most appreciated aspect (figure 11). Nations are anthropomorphized as cute-boy characters (*shōnen*), and, in the absence of a supporting narrative and graphic sophistication, are condensed as the exclusive focus of the short episodes. This means that on the one hand Eurocentrism, whiteness, and geopolitical asymmetry are made clearer and more essentialized as a result of the wide use of stereotypes related to nation, ethnicity, and language, and because characters, at least in the original text, hold only nation names like Japan, Italy, and Germany (note 19). Entire nations are personified through a unified human body, personality, and name, contributing to the erasure of internal diversities and historical complexities. For instance, Occidentalism is enhanced by personifying the United States, Russia, or Germany as strong, blond, active characters, while self-Orientalism is reaffirmed by Japan as a shy, passive, insecure character.



Figure 11. Gentōsha Comics survey among readers on defining keywords of *Hetalia*: 1, love; 2, nation; 3, pleasure; 4, moe (burning-budding passion); 5, laughter (July 2010). [View larger image.]

[5.5] But on the other hand, it is the very anthropomorphic and caricatured incarnation of modern nationhood, as seen in the insistence on childish and intimate male-male relations, that introduces an ironic slippage to conventional images of world history, international relations, and national politics. This contributes to its exhilarating effects and stimulates a polymorphous range of symbolic associations and emotions, which have all been crucial in mobilizing the text's widespread readings and

adaptations. It is evident in the readers' preferences, where love ranked first, pleasure third, *moe* fourth, and laughter fifth (figure 11). It is even more evident if we consider *Hetalia*'s appropriation and multiplication among the *dōjinshi*-related fandom.

According to authors, cosplayers, readers, and organizers of the "*Hetalia* Only" events in Japan, two revealing points are recurrently underlined with regard to the attractiveness of the original *Hetalia*, as follows.

[5.6] First, by resorting to cute-boy (*shōnen*) personifications, *Hetalia* has extended to a female readership *moe* inspiring nation personification. Nation anthropomorphism has become popular in the last decade and was originally developed among male-oriented *otaku* culture (hardcore fans of manga, anime, video games, and figurines), but it was limited to cute-girl (*shōjo*) personifications and therefore was mainly targeted to boys and men (note 20).

[5.7] Second, compared with other popular original works adopted among *dōjinshi*, stories and characters in *Hetalia* are extremely loose in terms of emplotment, setting, and psychological characterization. This discloses infinite spaces of appropriation and parody. It stimulates the most genuine fantasy with regard to preferred nations and coupling combinations of characters.

[5.8] In relation to the first point, *Hetalia*'s male author, Himaruya, claims being originally inspired by discussions on the popular Japanese message board 2channel about war and military themes, and specifically about Italy being judged as having the weakest and clumsiest army in the world (http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/d_i0.htm). His inspiration can be considered quite male-oriented, as can be seen in the widespread *otaku* interest in online discussions about weapons, national characters, history, and race. However, the personification of this idea did not take the form of cute and sexy girls, inspiring the complex affective responses of *moe* (Galbraith 2009)—a conflation of childlike innocence and adult desire, an ambivalent and polymorphous stimulation of pure, protecting, and nurturing feelings for cute and helpless characters (*lolicon*, Lolita complex), and the stimulation of desire for eroticized young girls (*bishōjo*, beautiful girls). In *Hetalia*, the male-oriented and heterosexualized fantasy of *moe* has been transposed to a more female-oriented version, staging a combination of cute boys and preadolescent characters (*shotakon*, or Shōtaro complex), as well as emphasizing their intimate and male-male relationality. All main nations are personified in the original *Hetalia* as cute or androgynous boy characters and are alternated with mini cute versions. For instance, the ancient version of Italy, with his origins in the Roman Empire, is personified as adult, masculine, and strong; the premodern version of Italy is depicted as Chibitalia (Mini-Italy), a babyish and feminized version, wearing the characteristic maid outfit of

male *moe* fantasies and shown as the object of attraction for the stronger and aggressive mini cute version of premodern Austria (figure 12) ([note 21](#)).



Figure 12. Polymorphous Italy in the original *Hetalia*. From left, cute-boy modern Italy (main version), grandpa Roman Empire, mini cute modern Italy, mini cute premodern Italy (Mitarai 2009, 54, 61, 57, 108). [[View larger image.](#)]

[5.9] In relation to the second point, regarding the pleasure of parodying *Hetalia*, it is important to stress that the original is not a straight personification of Euro-American nations or of Japan, but rather a parody of them, a pastiche that oscillates between a homage to Eurocentric history and fascination for whiteness, and the mocking caricature of their national stereotypes and their infantile behavior. Occidentalism thus functions in the original as a kind of discursive hypotext. The hegemonic grand narrative of Eurocentric history performed by "white" actors, so familiar in both Euro-American and Japanese contexts, is transformed by resorting to an effective bricolage of highly popular icons, strategically borrowed from both male-oriented *otaku* and female-oriented *fujoshi* subcultures ([note 22](#)).

[5.10] Boys' love and *yaoi* fantasies are instead dominant in the *dōjinshi* adaptations, displaying in many cases a male homoerotic and sexually explicit, often pornographic version of Occidentalism (figure 13). On the one hand, anthropomorphized Eurocentrism and geopolitical hierarchy may be further emphasized as a result of the top-down *yaoi* code of *seme/uke*, focusing on a far more restricted relation and narrative as in the original ([note 23](#)). This makes the hierarchic and dualistic dialectic of identity and alterity even more evident. As Kazumi Nagaike (2009) has highlighted in her study on the racialized textuality of commercial boys' love magazines, this hierarchic dialectic is mostly performed as the masculine superiorization of the Euro-American other as *seme*, the feminine inferiorization of the Japanese self as *uke*, and the exotic orientalization or erasure of "the Rest" of the world.

Figure 13. "Learning Western culture." *Dōjinshi* sexualized parody of United States (*seme*) × Japan (*uke*) (3x3Cross 2009, cover, 10). [[View explicit image.](#)]

[5.11] On the other hand, unlike commercial and original boys' love works, these *yaoi*-inspired *dōjinshi* are amateur adaptations, parodies of the original *Hetalia*. So if Himaruya's *Hetalia* is already itself a parody of the hegemonic hypotext of Occidentalism, then these *dōjinshi* are a parody of a parody. As a result of the

different subject positions of *dōjinshi* authors living in Japan, the discursive distance with regard to Occidentalism and to Euro-American referentiality is therefore further enhanced and diluted. Himaruya was composing *Hetalia* while living in New York and was inspired directly by Euro-American friends and students when creating his manga characters. *Dōjinshi* authors are instead living in Japan, and therefore recontextualization is shaped both by different gendered positions and by reference to different material, social, and institutional conditions.

[5.12] According to my interviews, *dōjinshi* authors and readers are actually not very keen on Euro-American history and nations, whiteness, the original work and its author, or male homosexuality. That is, *Hetalia* authors and cosplayers are not necessarily interested in foreign countries or concrete persons per se. Most of them have never been to Europe or North America, have never met a white boy or man, and do not necessarily express interest in doing so. Instead, they focus on how to use these settings and icons according to the visual grammar and established conventions of the boys' love/*yaoi* genre in order to share and enjoy them with other fans. Much time may be invested in studying the preferred nation character's history, language, customs, dress, food, and architecture, all in the most minute detail. This includes bibliographic research, online or in libraries, and in some cases short trips to European cities, which may become on their return the setting for their own *dōjinshi* adaptation. Interestingly, this acquired knowledge can also be used to legitimate what might be perceived as an embarrassing hobby. What matters to these fans are the specific and concrete needs of a teenager or young woman in relation to the gendered and sexualized norms informing external relations with other teenagers, men, and adults, as well as their internal relations with the *dōjinshi* or *Hetalia* fandom (note 24).

[5.13] As the readers' poll suggests, it is the two top-ranked keywords, *love* and *nation*, that provide the reading paradigm among general readers of *Hetalia*, as well as, arguably, the discursive hypotext for the *dōjinshi* parodies. Love as an intense and idealized longing for absolute intimacy among nation characters is ubiquitous and often the only framing narrative of the very short *dōjinshi* adaptations, regardless of the presence or absence of explicit sexual content. It is often romanticized, with a profusion of dating, courting, and bridal symbolism (figure 14). But as the male homoeroticism and often overt sexualization suggest, most of the *dōjinshi* transfigure and parody both hegemonic love (in its modern form of a heteronormative ideology sustained by patriarchal, reproductive, or consumptive societal imperatives) and modern nationalism by insisting on an idealized love, explicit sex, and childish quarrels among nations (note 25).



Figure 14. *Dōjinshi romanticism. From left, Italy × Japan, England × Japan, Germany × Italy (Malomondo 2010; Miwa-Sakakibara 2010; Miyasha 2010). [View larger image.]*

[5.14] Cross-gendering or transgendering, combined with explicit representation of sexual intercourse, may induce playful and even therapeutic effects with regard to heteronormative, homophobic, or patriarchal restraints on female readers, fans, and authors in Japan (Suzuki 1998; Azuma 2009). It is this specific kind of mangaesque intertwining of ultimate love, male homosexual relations, and polymorphous cuteness that has proven to be effective in exonerating participants from anxieties regarding real heterosexism and in disclosing autonomous space for experimental fantasies and intimate fan practices. In a more general sense, it has been strategic in establishing over the last few decades the mangaesque media mix of boys' love/*yaoi* as arguably the most diffused genre of female-oriented erotica or porn production and consumption in Japan (note 26). The displacement and creative results are immediately evident on the textual and visual level of *Hetalia dōjinshi*, considering the sheer numbers and polymorphous parodies of nation characters. It is also visible on the social and interpersonal levels—consider the proliferating network of *Hetalia* communities, fostered by conventions, circles, cosplaying, and online fandom in Japan and worldwide (figure 15).



Figure 15. *Collective cosplay performance in Italy (including the contested Korea-Japan episode) at Rimini Comics, June 2010 (video posted on YouTube by a member of the group, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-fLtXG98T4>). [View larger image.]*

[5.15] However, parodies exhibit ambivalence, a paradoxical double bind with regard to their hegemonic hypotext in terms of critical subversion or repetitive confirmation; this also applies to youth subcultures and their relationship to wider society. Regardless of cosmopolitan idealism, socializing effects, and liberating potential, these parodies do not erase their founding hypotext or pretext, making it invisible or ineffective. On the contrary—racialized Eurocentrism and Orientalism, hierarchic geopolitics, and revisionist history still remain visible, as the South Korean protest and hate speech by European Net surfers both show. It may be too simple to dismiss it as nothing more than narrow-minded nationalism and essentialism.

6. Conclusion: The West or "the West"?

[6.1] Karen Kelsky's account of women's internationalist narratives and practices in late 1990s Japan might also apply to the *Hetalia* world: "The West becomes not so much a source of critical comparative perspective (which can be evaluated for its 'accuracy,' for example) as an imaginative simulacrum infinitely available for the production of discourses that motivate and explain resistance or accommodation" (2001, 28). But if "the West" as a simulacrum is everywhere, then does it make sense to criticize it? Should we instead resign ourselves to this ubiquity and limit our focus to its strategic uses in order to highlight resistance or accommodation in more specific contexts?

[6.2] Yet *Hetalia*'s textuality and related practices display many of the de-essentializing and liberating aspects for female authors, readers, and practitioners, at least in specific terms of sociality, gender, sexuality, and subjectivity, that have been widely investigated in boys' love/*yaoi* studies. Fieldwork on *Hetalia* fandom outside Japan, as in China, has focused on the critical potential in stimulating engagement with domestic politics and overcoming parochial nationalism (Yang 2011), or, in North America, on contributing to transcultural networks and allowing socially transformative, critical, and reflexive conversations, even on the controversial issues *Hetalia* itself has raised (Annett 2011).

[6.3] Nevertheless, if we shift our perspective to very different gendered and national positions (male Koreans, Italians, Japanese), we may reactivate mutually exclusive interpretations similar to the ones that have animated the heated debate on boys' love/*yaoi* discrimination of gay men and culture over the last two decades. On the one hand, boys' love/*yaoi* is entertainment for women who indulge in fantasies about homoerotic male intimacy shaped by idealized stereotypes in order to enjoy escapist stories about ultimate love; they may have no interest in real-life, concrete gay men or in their realistic depiction. On the other hand, it may be disturbing for gay men, who may feel uneasy at being objectified by this othering process, or who may criticize

its ineffectiveness in overcoming homophobic prejudice in contemporary Japan (Hori 2010).

[6.4] From the wider perspective of a critical Occidentalism, "the West" constitutes a problem not only for its historical origin embedded in colonial and imperialist capitalism, which has configured difference between civilizations, cultures, and people according to asymmetrical relations of geopolitical power. It also constitutes a problem on the intrasocietal level, because as a globalized and dispersed form of hegemony, it frames more specific axes of modern identity/alterity (nation, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality) and is reactivated through their cumulative and fluid intersection. In *Hetalia*, "love" and "nation" may be enjoyable objects of cosmopolitan, cross-gendered, and sexualized parody, at least for its boys' love/*yaoi*-inspired fandom. Nevertheless, as a kind of hegemonic hypotext or pretext, they continue to function as underlying criteria of reference used to mobilize more emotional, spontaneous, and physical dimensions, ultimately contributing to a biopolitical extension of Occidentalism. Without Eurocentric history and "white" men, and also without "love" and "nation," both the original and its adaptations would be impossible.

[6.5] What is at stake in this critical reading of *Hetalia* is not only the mangaesque reproduction of Occidentalism from below, but also its intersecting paradigms. Are the notions of "the West" intersecting "race," "nation," and "love," as established in the modern age, even if reproduced as postmodern simulacra devoid of empirical referentiality, like the air we must inevitably breathe? Is it even possible to imagine texts and images, or to practice alternative ways of geopolitical, societal, and personal relations, without relying on these criteria, even as parodic hypotexts?

[6.6] Stuart Hall (1990) has discussed inferential racism in contrast to overt racism, referring to those kind of discourses in which a subtle naturalization of unquestioned racial assumptions remains largely invisible even to those who deploy them. I suggest that the contemporary reproduction of Occidentalism relies largely on this inferential process, without depending on an overt or intentional Occidentalism with regard to representational contents in terms of modern racism, nationalism, sexism, and classism. Thus its hegemonic effectiveness is directly proportional to its becoming familiar, naturalized, and ultimately invisible, like the air we breathe.

7. Acknowledgments

This essay was presented in part at Global Polemics of BL [Boys' Love]: Production, Circulation, and Censorship, Oita University, Japan, January 23, 2011. I am indebted to Ling Yang for her suggestions and critical reading. My deepest gratitude goes to my younger sister, Yuka, for her indispensable mediation with *Hetalia* fandom in Japan.

Special thanks to Valentina Montanari (aka Yoko), the founding organizer of the *Hetalia* Cosplay Project in Italy, and to the more than 30 members competing as a cosplay group at Lucca Comics & Games 2010 for allowing me to participate in their preparation and performance, and for introducing me to the wider *Hetalia* fan girl scene.

8. Notes

1. Even if not using the same terminology, the tangled process involved in the construction of cultural identity in Japan regarding the West and the East has been investigated since the 1980s (Dale 1986; Iwabuchi 1994; Yoshino 1992; Sakai 1997).
2. Long before postcolonial studies and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Antonio Gramsci addressed the arbitrary notions of West and East, as well as the mutually constitutive relations of hegemonic effectiveness and subaltern interiorization, including Japan (Gramsci [1929–35] 1975, 874, 1419–20).
3. Studies on *Hetalia* have mostly addressed its transnational reception (South Korea, China, and North America), focusing on Web fandom and discourses (Kim 2009; Yang 2011; Annett 2011).
4. Like boys' love, *yaoi* refers to the transmedial constellation of female-oriented manga, anime, light novels, games, and so on, featuring idealized male-male intimacy. Unlike boys' love, which is related to original and commercialized works, *yaoi* is more associated with fan fiction, mostly self-produced, homosexualized short parodies of already existing mainstream works.
5. Fieldwork in Japan was conducted from May to October 2010 as a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science postdoctoral fellow, Department of Sociology, Kyoto University, Japan.
6. The word *Hetalia* of the title is a contraction of the Japanese slang term *hetare*, "incompetent, useless, pathetic," and *Italia*, "Italy." Fieldwork in Italy was conducted from October 2010 to January 2011 as a Marie Curie International Incoming Fellow, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy.
7. Some of the minor characters are female personifications (Belarus, Belgium, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Seychelles, Taiwan, Ukraine). For a detailed description in English of all the characters throughout the different media platforms, see the *Hetalia* wiki (http://hetalia.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_Axis_Powers_Hetalia_characters).

8. As for the CD nation character songs from the anime series, my informants (female college students) in Nara, Japan, used to spend 5–6 hours even on weekdays in karaoke boxes, singing, dancing, and performing their preferred character. Except for the first Italy CD, seven character CDs (Germany, Japan, England, and so on) were released monthly during 2009–10, and all hit the top 10 in the Oricon weekly rankings (<http://www.oricon.co.jp/>).

9. Comiket 78 (summer 2010): 1, *Tōhō Project* (2,416 circles); 2, *Hetalia* (1,586); 3, *Reborn* (822); 4, *Sengoku Basara* (575); 5, *Gin Tama* (532) (<http://news020.blog13.fc2.com/blog-entry-788.html>). An online survey of visitors to Comiket 78 have confirmed *Hetalia*-inspired works to be the most desired items for purchase among female attendees: 1, *Hetalia*; 2, *Reborn*; 3, *Durarara!!*; 10, *Tōhō Project* (http://otalab.net/news/detail.php?news_id=1024).

10. At Comiket 80 (summer 2011), *Hetalia* circles diminished but still ranked second: 1, *Tōhō Project* (2,808 circles); 2, *Hetalia* (1,302); 3, *Sengoku Basara* (880); 4, *Reborn* (572); 5, *Vocaloid* (558) (<http://otanews.livedoor.biz/archives/51807832.html>); YahooAuctionsJapan listed 8,443 Japanese *Hetalia dōjinshi*-related titles and 2,565 cosplay-related items (<http://auctions.search.yahoo.co.jp>).

11. In Italy—which according to Pellitteri (2010, 556) is the Euro-American nation with the highest number of Japanese animation series broadcast on television since 1978—*Hetalia* has been the most popular work among hardcore female cosplay and fan fiction fandoms since late 2009, even before being officially translated into Italian.

12. Some *Hetalia* cosplayers and fan fiction authors in Italy denied me interviews because I mentioned the term *yaoi*. Interestingly, Lucia Piera De Paola, the founder of the first Italian publishing house of *yaoi* manga and novels, Tekeditori, is a veteran activist against homophobia.

13. The picture of Korea touching Japan's breast shown at the National Assembly Committee was not an original but was arguably a product of Web fan art. An English translation of part of the speech is available on YouTube ("*Hetalia* is like a criminal act. Koreans are furious," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo_bt9-kM).

14. Jaqueline Berndt (forthcoming) has suggested considering the mangaesque as pointing to "collaborative creativity, codification and mediation, an aesthetic emphasis on fantasy rather than realism and impacts rather than messages, further, an astonishingly precise depiction of emotions and intimate relationships, often at the expense of allegorical and metaphorical thinking."

15. See catalogs of "*Hetalia* Only" events (Sekai Kaigi Series) organized by StudioYOU in Osaka (Intex Osaka, September 19, 2010, 1) and Nagoya (Sangyō Rōdō Center, September 12, 2010, 8).
16. See catalog of "*Hetalia* Nihon *Uke* Only Event: Sekai no Honda 2," organized by StajioYou in Tokyo (Ryutsu Center, September 5, 2010, 1).
17. For a critical investigation on whiteness in Euro-American media, see Dyer (1997).
18. Intersectionality has been theorized since the late 1980s by feminist sociologists in the United States to examine how attributions of identity interact on different, interdependent, and often simultaneous levels, thus contributing to a systematic configuration of social inequality, as in the case of Afro-American women.
19. In *dōjinshi* adaptations, personal names suggested by Himaruya himself on his Web site are widely used: Italy = Feliciano Vargas; Germany = Ludwig; Japan = Kiku Honda; United States = Alfred F. Jones, and so on.
20. For an investigation of the wider popularity of *moe* anthropomorphism in Japan, see Thompson (2009).
21. Fascination for Italy in Japan has played a prominent role in terms of gender and age since the early 1990s, resulting in recent national surveys listing Italy as the most loved foreign country when considering all female age groups (15–59 years) and all young respondents (15–29 years) (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute 2008, 113–16). A crucial aspect of this popularity has been the ambivalent configuration of Italy as an orientalised "West" framed by an ambivalent process of both a superiorization of its past (Roman Empire, Renaissance) and inferiorization of its premodern present (chaotic nation, joyful people, family-style cuisine, romanticism, fashion, and so on) (Miyake 2012).
22. Sexualized and male homoerotic overtones of Himaruya's *Hetalia* characters remain mostly implicit, allowing appreciation by a wider readership who are not interested in or may even detest *yaoi*-inspired themes.
23. Most of the *Hetalia* cosplayers in Japan perform as an *seme/uke* couple, while cosplayers in Italy appear more often in large groups as well as alone.
24. Among fandom in Italy, these needs and problems are very similar, attesting to the globalized structure of heteronormative and patriarchal norms, as well as the potential of *Hetalia* and *yaoi* fantasy to cope with them and to stimulate liberating pleasures, expressions, and practices. What differs is the specific way of expressing and performing the *Hetalia* world. Compared with Japan, there is less manga parody

and much more emphasis on collective cosplaying and fan fiction, as well as some involvement of male manga/anime fans. For a public, collective, and joyous performance, see the *Hetalia* Cosplay Group at Rimini Comics 2010 (figure 15).

25. In this sense, love may be considered as an expression of the recent pure love (*jun'ai*) boom, which cuts across both male-oriented *otaku* and female-oriented *fujoshi* subcultures (Honda 2005). Love as an ambivalent coexistence of both emotional attachment and ironic formalism and its connection to nation may well represent a gendered variation of the more general tendency to enjoy the nation as a depoliticized icon. In this regard, cynical romanticism has been pointed out as an emergent mode of postpostmodern youth nationalism in contemporary Japan (Kitada 2005).

26. See Akiko Hori (2009) for an analysis of the gendered gaze and visibility in male- and female-oriented erotic/porn manga.

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Theory

Rotten use patterns: What entertainment theories can do for the study of boys' love

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Focusing on the often neglected individual modes of consumption and ascriptions of meaning, I propose a theoretical and conceptual framework for the analysis of the diversity of the use and appropriation of the boys' love (BL) genre. Within the framework of theories of media gratification, I bring together key elements of BL fandom, such as playing with masculinities, and central concepts of entertainment research. To assess these concepts' appropriateness and to do justice to the transnational phenomenon that BL has become, I also consider qualitative interviews conducted in Japan and Germany. The gratifications sought and gained by BL fans (*fujoshi* and *fudanshi*, rotten girls and boys) vary, including the physiological (arousal), the social (exchange, belonging), the cognitive (parasocial interaction), and the aesthetic (immersion). My empirical findings highlight the diversity of BL use, while my conceptual framework additionally works as a reference for a comparison of these use patterns and other media preferences as well as global trends of media consumption.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Entertainment; *Fujoshi*; Media gratification; Media use patterns; Need fulfillment; Qualitative interview

Kamm, Björn-Ole. 2013. "Rotten Use Patterns: What Entertainment Theories Can Do for the Study of Boys' Love." In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12. doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0427.

1. Introduction

[1.1] In this article I review theories of media gratification and entertainment to propose a conceptual framework for the analysis of the use and consumption (de Certeau 1984) of the so-called boys' love genre, stories about male-male relationships in manga, novels, and games, usually aimed at a female audience. The narratives included in this genre range from explicit, detailed depictions of sexual encounters between men, to accounts of romantic affairs, to stories of very close friendships. Earlier discussions of the genre and its fans concentrated on women's reasons for engaging with narratives that lack female protagonists and focus on men only. Some explanations pathologized the readers and their sexuality (Ueno 1989; Nakajima 1995), and others charged them with homophobia and a need to elevate themselves

within a hierarchical society at the expense of homosexual men (Satō [1992] 1994). Implicitly assuming that all consumers read and interpret the genre in the same manner, many studies and critical appraisals continue to search for a single cause or motive, such as escapism or some essential trait of Japanese society (Yamada 2007 is a recent example). This perspective is surprising, given that one major subgenre of BL consists of derivative works similar to slash fiction ([note 1](#)). Its authors, who are usually not professional writers, borrow (appropriate) characters from mainstream manga or games, redefine homosocial relationships into homosexual ones (Azuma 2009), and self-publish their stories in the form of fanzines, called *dōjinshi*. As one commercial text is often the basis for many different adaptations, these derivative works can be seen as the physical documentation of individual (or at times concerted) consumption and interpretation processes, if nothing else ([note 2](#)).

[1.2] Like Tanigawa (1993) and Lunsing (2006), I was therefore dissatisfied with the pathologizing and homogenous explanations of the genre, the overemphasis on Japaneseness or particularities of Japan's society as causes, and the exclusive focus on female readers in this discourse (men also consume these stories; see Yoshimoto 2008). Within the more recent discussions of the genre in Japan, however, a new position has emerged, one highlighting the genre's *tayōsei*, that is, its diversity (Kaneda 2004; Nagakubo 2005; Yoshinaga 2007; Azuma 2009). The proponents of this position, mostly young Japanese female scholars but also some male ones, critique the methodology of earlier studies, such as their offering general propositions on the basis of an analysis of only a few well-known titles and their exclusive focus on female readers (Mizoguchi 2003; Y. Fujimoto 2007; Yoshimoto 2008). In addressing some of these problems, they also began to concentrate on modes of reception and appropriation, the agency of the consumers, and how they make the contents of BL manga and novels their own.

[1.3] This shift from asking the problematic question "why" to asking "how" mirrors developments during the 1970s within the field of media use research. A growing disenchantment with media effects theories led to a new interactive perspective on media use and to new concepts and models that understand media preference (such as for a particular genre) as arising from societal, biographical, and situational contexts and not from an essential personality trait. The same change is apparent within the discourse on boys' love.

[1.4] Exchange between the fields of communication studies and manga studies remains limited. Most manga research ignores theories of media use, neither applying nor critiquing them. Similarly, communication research still focuses on television as the sole producer of symbols, ignoring media systems outside the North Atlantic sphere—or, more precisely, outside the United States. Consequently, it continues to

rely on a Hollywoodesque "hedonistic principle" as the basis for theories of entertainment (note 3). Manga as an entertainment medium has been mostly ignored. The aim of this article is to address the weaknesses on both sides. In an attempt to foster a dialogue between communication studies and manga studies, I evaluate the uses and gratifications approach (UGA) and outline a conceptual framework for the analysis of boys' love and its diverse patterns of use. Following the UGA and attending to the genre's *tayōsei*, my framework also favors direct contact with the readers (and producers) instead of analyzing texts only.

[1.5] This article is based on five episodic narrative interviews I conducted in Japan (September to October 2007) and five in Germany (November 2007 to January 2008, and during October 2010) (note 4). Although boys' love has gained a foothold in most Asian, American, and European comic and animation markets, Germany has been established as a major importer. It was the first European country to which not only boys' love manga but also novels were introduced (JETRO 2006; "Bōizurabu-daitokushū" 2007). I interviewed German fans to do justice to the transnational aspect of the genre and to overcome the tendency to explain interest in boys' love as due to something inherent in Japanese consumers and producers.

[1.6] To assess the producers' own understanding of the genre, I also analyzed collections of interviews with boys' love authors and artists ("Fujoshi-manga taikei" 2007; "Sōtokushū—BL Studies" 2007; Yoshinaga 2007). I applied qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000) to these collections and interviews, following assumptions similar to those of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1999) (note 5). Although my interview sample was quite homogenous, consisting mostly of university students, the empirical findings still highlight a diversity of individual use patterns. By comparing my interviewees' propositions to concepts from entertainment and gratification research, however, we can build a theoretical framework that systematizes these use patterns and enables us to compare them to other media preferences.

[1.7] I begin by tracing the diversity of boys' love content and use, by providing a short overview of the genre and its broader reception. I then discuss in depth the three major concepts of my proposed framework: (1) boys' love as entertainment, (2) an active audience, and (3) rotten use patterns.

2. The boys' love genre and its rotten consumers

[2.1] Boys' love (*bōizu rabu*), or BL, is the most recent commercial variant of narratives focusing on romantic and sexual male-male relationships. BL began appearing in major bookstores in the 1990s and has estimated annual sales of 21.3 billion yen (approximately \$270 million; Yano 2010), with one million readers in Japan

(Mizoguchi 2008). Approximately 150 BL publications appear each month (Kaneda et al. 2007), including paperbacks as well as several literary and manga magazines. Manga in Japan are published in the form of weekly or monthly magazines, which generate great fidelity among readers. Japanese manga fans can be assured that new chapters of their favorite story will arrive on a regular basis—unlike fans of Franco-Belgian *bandes dessinées*, who might have to wait years between installments.

[2.2] Most male-male manga fiction in major German bookstores is commercial BL, licensed and distributed by publishers such as Carlsen and Egmont. Although complete data are not available, the most active manga fans in Germany—those attending conventions and replying to online questionnaires—appear to be female (Bouissou et al. 2010). *Shōjo* manga (girls' comics) sell better than manga geared toward a male audience (JETRO 2006), further indicating a large female fan base (note 6). Among both the imported *shōjo* manga and those produced by an increasing number of young German artists, the percentage of BL had risen to such a degree that by 2006 the term "boys' love hype" was commonly used by critics and commentators (Salzmann 2011, 87). One reason for this popularity might be that in the 1990s German magazines aimed at teen girls had featured androgynous male pop stars, perhaps priming the audience for BL (Malone 2010). In relative numbers, the proportion of BL manga for sale in Germany is larger than in Japan ("Bōizurabu-daitokushū" 2007).

[2.3] The expression "boys' love" has gained traction only recently in Germany, where a number of smaller BL-only publishing houses have begun to license, translate, and distribute male-male fanzines (Malone 2009, ¶24). Fans as well as publishers favored the Japanese terms *shōnen ai* (literally, boys' love) to denote romantic soft-core and *yaoi* to label sexually explicit, hardcore commercial works ("Shonen-Ai" 2009). One of my German interviewees told me that she had learned these meanings for the terms. The nomenclature in Japan remains contested, however, with younger readers accustomed to commercial boys' love (like most of my interviewees) using BL as an umbrella term for original commercial works and for both derivative and original fan-published ones. This terminology is also reflected in many recent publications on the topic in Japanese and English ("Fujoshi-manga taikei" 2007; "Sōtokushū—BL Studies" 2007; Levi, McHarry, and Pagliassotti 2010).

[2.4] However, older readers and authors, who became interested in the genre in the 1980s, prefer *yaoi* as a general term. The word is an acronym for *yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi* ("no climax, no punch line, no meaning"), emphasizing that many fan-published stories focused on sexual depictions of two men, without much of a narrative. Amateur *yaoi* was the strongest BL subgenre before larger publishers became interested in its fan base. The word connoted pornography, however, so they preferred to use "boys' love" instead (Mizoguchi 2003). Still, there are amateur works

dealing with romance only, and commercial series emphasizing sexual depictions. These variations in content within the larger genre make generalizations difficult, especially when researchers aim to understand the media gratifications that its consumers seek. Consequently, generalizations about consumer behavior appear arbitrary, particularly when *bishōnen* (beautiful boys) manga from the 1970s are added to the mix. These manga have been described as the predecessors of *yaoi* and BL, principally by having inspired the amateur authors of the 1980s. They offered a range of themes (such as coming of age and sexual abuse) for which the love between the young male protagonists (thus, *shōnen ai*) was a vehicle (note 7).

[2.5] Understanding the motives of one consumer does not enable us to understand the behavior of all consumers. For instance, consider a 19-year-old who daily reads a score of Web comics that depict the sexual intercourse of cute male 20-somethings, who are actually taken from yet another manga. She might (like my interviewee Ai) (note 8) consider works like Hagio Moto's 3,000-page *A Cruel God Reigns*, a *shōnen ai* archetype, to be classics of the genre of boys' love (note 9). But she still might not read them regularly, and analyzing them will not tell us much about her use of short online manga, which focus on sex only.

[2.6] Analyzing media texts is important, but it is only one of several steps that lead us to understand why humans use a specific medium or genre. The great extent to which critical interpretations of BL have differed becomes apparent when we contrast psychoanalytic readings of the *shōnen ai* classics with the intentions of the authors or the interpretations of readers. For example, in keeping with Freudian psychodynamic theory, Matsui (1993) views these classics as symbols of the female drive for the phallus. Yet some readers see their own experiences of child abuse reflected in the texts, regardless of the author's intentions, and may use the manga as a means to deal with these experiences (Hagio 2005). To gain a better understanding of readers' use of a specific medium or genre, investigators must assess how they use and interpret the texts (McQuail 1994).

[2.7] My interviewees engage mostly with recent titles (amateur and commercial), and I did not investigate how they had used BL texts in the past. As a result, the classics of the genre are not discussed here. Throughout this article, I adopt the language of my Japanese informants, using boys' love or BL as an umbrella term. This usage does not mean that I ignored the contents of what the interviewees read and wrote. Specificity is too often disregarded, but it is necessary (Noppe 2011, ¶7). Using an umbrella term as an abstraction, however, is an indispensable way of connecting my analysis with other studies and a means by which my interviewees make sense of the plethora of different materials. As I use the term here, BL means narratives—commercial and *dōjinshi*—that portray male-male relationships (considered in the

broadest sense) and share a number of characteristics, especially in playing with masculinities. I will describe these further when focusing on the entertainment value of these stories.

[2.8] This playing, which can be found in the rewriting of camaraderie (or antagonism) between male characters into homosexual narratives and encounters, is what the most active users of BL self-deprecatingly describe as rotten. By using such a label, the Japanese fans of BL reclaimed the term *fujoshi* (rotten girls) that had been coined by the mass media to describe them, much as the label queer was reappropriated by gay and bisexual people (Butler 1997). *Fujoshi* is written by replacing the kanji for "lady" with the homonymous character for "rotten." This pun is echoed in other labels used for different segments of the user population: *kifujin* are matured *fujoshi*, and *shufu* are rotten housewives, while *fudanshi* are male readers of BL. These terms highlight that the readership is neither entirely female nor entirely high school kids.

[2.9] The female readership has been a major focus of the mass media in Japan since the mid-2000s. This exaggerated media interest, visible in news reports, novels, manga, and TV series, ridiculed readership at times but mainly focused on their buying power as consumers. One reason given for this so-called *fujoshi* boom was an apparent decline in the male *otaku* market (Kaneda et al. 2007; Hardach 2008) (note 10). Following the mass media exposure, academic discourse on the readers of BL and the genre itself also bloomed—at times repeating old explanations. In various special issues of literary magazines, BL writers and artists state that they like BL because it is fun: "tada tanoshii kara" (Kaneda and Miura 2007, 13). I also encountered this explanation during my interviews. This simple explanation is often ignored or belittled by critics and researchers, who assume that the consumption of BL must be motivated by hidden reasons, such as problems with sexuality. We must take seriously the intrinsic motivation of enjoyment to begin to understand the consumption and production of BL. But what makes BL fun?

3. BL as entertainment

[3.1] Within the field of media entertainment research, a number of concepts have been used to categorize individual experiences associated with the enjoyment or entertainment value of the media. Having analyzed my interviews and the published ones I read, I grouped common BL themes, such as asking "What if these two characters of that manga fell in love, or did some other interesting thing?" into broader categories (e.g., "playing with the protagonists"). I compared these categories to other accounts of user activity (such as "playing with masculinities"; S. Fujimoto 2007; Kayama 2007) and to the concepts of entertainment research. The resulting list is not

exclusive, and not every BL title demonstrates the same themes. As the genre and its subgenres evolve, users' behavior and their estimation of the entertainment value of the products also change. Nevertheless, this systematization helps to lift BL studies out of its theoretical, psychoanalytic niche and its focus on hidden meanings.

[3.2] Incorporating general psychological principles of entertainment can be helpful in understanding the variety of consumer behavior. Most people aim for a level of cognitive and affective activation that they find pleasant (Zillmann 1988). In this sense, the cognitive-affective construct "entertainment" is the outcome of positively evaluated (media) experiences. Constant shock can be as unpleasant and boring as an eternal apple-pie world, and this is true of the unknown as well as the familiar (Früh 2003).

[3.3] Because BL is a wide genre, it allows for both consistency and variety. All of my interviewees see male couplings as the defining element of the genre. The diegetic backbone of amateur works and later commercial works has been what is called the *seme-uke* order. Typically, one character is drafted as the passive bottom, the *uke*, and the other as the active, dominant top, the *seme*. During the early *yaoi* period, this order helped to quickly indicate the power relations between the characters in short *dōjinshi*. Most of my interviewees appreciate the sense of familiarity and the joyful feeling of genre competence they gain when they recognize characters as *seme* or *uke*.

[3.4] The same theme, however, is a moment for surprise and diversity as well. The order has often been envisioned as a replica of the heterosexual order and as fixed, but in fact it is not necessarily static. Even if character A is the *uke* in his relationship with character B, he can be the *seme* in his relationship with C (Watanabe 2007). Both the *uke* and the *seme* incorporate both masculine and feminine traits (Nagakubo 2005), and both character types have a great variety of subcategories. This allows for many different kinds of stories as well as character development, ensuring variety, conflict, and suspense. Conflict is one of the major aspects of BL, and all my interviewees enjoyed it. Most conflicts, from their perspective, arise from the tensions created by the characters' love for each other, especially because contemporary BL narratives increasingly take place in real-world settings in which homosexuality is not the norm. Often tension results from one protagonist identifying as hetero but still falling in love with a man (Mizoguchi 2000). Despite having very different opinions on how explicit BL should be, the Japanese interviewee Suiko and the German Salome enjoy this tension because they see it as a real-world phenomenon. Salome was 23 at the time of the interview, a graduate student majoring in Japanese studies and a professional dancer. Twenty-year-old Suiko was majoring in history. Both preferred realistic settings (note 11). Both want to immerse themselves in the story and the

characters. According to them, this becomes difficult when a story's setting is too fantastic, such as a world where everybody is gay. Suiko added that male homosexuality alone gives her a thrill of the unknown, as it is far removed from her own experience.

[3.5] Self-determination is another major aspect of entertainment. Users of entertainment media can find complete self-expression and break taboos. Entertainment enables them to safely explore risky situations and release themselves from role stress (Früh 2003), because they are in control and do not have to fear real-world consequences of their thoughts and fantasies. It is important to note that enjoyment of fantasies "does not suggest that the fantasizer wants to act out these fantasies" (Shigematsu 1999, 143).

[3.6] BL offers fantasies of BDSM, anal intercourse, rape, and other mostly tabooed activities. Users can stop the encounter at any time, whenever they reach their threshold for entertainment or satisfaction. For Suiko this threshold is relatively low, and she prefers tamer, more romance-oriented stories. A second interviewee, 20-year-old Kaoru, who studies international relations, does not care about sex at all. "I'm not so much into the pictures and couldn't care less about the sex," she says. "For me the story matters most." In contrast, Salome, mentioned earlier, and Misato, a female 19-year-old history major, enjoy hardcore titles. "If there's no sex, why bother reading it?" asked Misato. Despite these differences, all my interviewees find enough reading material within the larger scope of BL.

[3.7] This controlled loss of control (Früh 2003) can allow readers to experience competence and identity building. Even feeling negative microemotions (Früh 2003), such as fear, shock, or sorrow, while consuming can lead to a positive macroemotion (enjoyment or entertainment) because users feel competent at coping with negative emotions or pleased at reaching a story's conclusion, possibly a happy ending, after having endured the negative content (Bartsch et al. 2006). Many older BL stories followed this schema (Mizoguchi 2003). For example, in some BL narratives both characters decide to end their lives to make their love eternal, as it has no place in this world (Pagliassotti 2010). Sharing the protagonists' emotions not only allows a moment of aesthetic immersion but may lead to a confirmation of the reader's own gender role ("the empathizing female"; Oliver 1993).

[3.8] Relationships between males are the genre's defining element, and those who produce BL especially enjoy playing with the characters and their masculinities. The main theme of many BL stories, especially the *dōjinshi*, can be summarized as "What if?" "What if those two got together?" "What if the *seme* raped the *uke*? How would the *uke* feel?" This playing and empathizing with media characters has been called parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl 1956), and it appears to be at the heart of the

appeal of many BL narratives and to motivate many authors as well as some *fujoshi*. "Before I write a first draft of a story, I experiment with many different character arrangements, for example, to see who fits and who doesn't. Writing a complete story is fun, too, but I think I get the most out of this experimenting, by immersing myself in the characters' thoughts," said Ai. Some of my interviewees like to cast not only fictional characters, but other media personalities, such as politicians, in *seme* and *uke* roles, seeing them through not pink but *yaoi* glasses, the *yaoi-megane* (Y. Fujimoto 2007; Kaneda 2007).

[3.9] Parasocial interaction refers to thoughts and behavior oriented toward media figures, and it occurs whenever humans are part of the media text (Hartmann et al. 2005). It may include dimensions of perception and cognition, such as an attempt to follow a character's train of thought, or musing on whether an actor fits the character's role (or, in BL terms, on whether a character is the *uke* or the *seme*). Displays of affection are also part of this interaction with media figures, such as empathizing or commiserating with a character, sharing in the character's joy, or, along with that character, gloating over and hating another.

[3.10] The processes of parasocial interaction and identification are interconnected and usually alternate. Parasocial interaction can be a motive for media use, but, like escapism, it is also a mode of reception and part of the quality of the entertainment experience. Parasocial interaction happens with any media or genre, but with BL it takes center stage and includes realistic social aspects. The many disputes among BL users about which character of a given series should be seen as the *uke* and which one as the *seme* demonstrate the extensive presence of this interaction (Nishikawa 2007). The *Kenkōji Kōjiken ronsō* (Ken-Koji Koji-Ken dispute), concerning the protagonists of *Captain Tsubasa* (Takahashi 1981), is the most famous of these debates. Today these disputes are also documented on Internet forums. The Japanese interviewees and two of the Germans described many similar discussions they had had with friends and other fans.

[3.11] This evidence suggests that even those fans who do not write their own *dōjinshi* are hardly passive consumers. Media contents cannot be treated as fixed stimuli but are open to interpretation by the audience (Aida 2005). The recipient of a media message ascribes meanings to it relatively independent of its content. These interpretation processes—a first level of appropriation, so to speak—are understood as *audience activity* in communication research. This activity is not limited to choosing media content. It also includes the process of attributing meaning to a text by interacting with it.

4. Active audience

[4.1] The uses and gratifications approach (UGA; Blumler and Katz 1974) has become the standard perspective on audience research since the 1960s, as scholars have become increasingly disenchanted with the earlier theory of mass communications that held that media simply inject their intended meanings into their recipients, as if with a hypodermic needle. The UGA is not concerned with the effect of the media on people, but focuses instead on what people do with the media. The first definitions of the UGA emphasized the active audience and the need to explore audience orientations on the audience members' own terms (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1974). Early UGA research limited the concept of audience activity to the decision-making process, for example, deciding which movie to watch or manga to read. This approach was based on the premise that people are aware of their needs and the media content that will best fulfill those needs.

[4.2] Instead of assuming that the world is completely knowable and individuals have access to all the information they need to make decisions, as rational choice theories imply, later conceptualizations of the UGA were more consistent with *symbolic interactionism* (Blumler 1969). Interactionists assume that the (life) world is "created by processes of defining situations and interpreting actions and objects...[and] that these definitions and interpretations are to be seen as neither natural nor permanent, but socially constructed and provisional instead" (Westerik et al. 2006). Humans process their world symbolically, because they act toward objects according to the meanings they ascribe to those objects. These meanings are based on experiences, on earlier interactions with these objects, and on interactions with other humans. Such interactions are recursive and framed by changing contexts, resulting in corresponding changes in the meanings.

[4.3] This discussion leads researchers into BL manga use, or media use in general, to a perspective that takes individual interpretations seriously but also considers the structures surrounding media use. Like any other action, media use is contextual and situational. For example, manga are read (used) differently in different locations: at home, on a train, or in a manga café. "I don't really read BL to become aroused but it has happened before, so I want to make sure that I can make use of that [arousal]. That's why I read BL at home," said Salome. Kaoru reads BL on the bus or at school because she has never been aroused by it, nor does she want to be. Additional contexts (e.g., societal and personal contexts, especially accessibility and availability) structure how BL is accessed.

[4.4] Figure 1 shows the contexts that frame media use and how former experiences feed back into expectations. These experiences and expectations form the basis of the decision-making process, resulting in ever-changing outcomes of interpretations and evaluations. If users evaluate a given media experience positively, because it fulfilled

or exceeded their expectations, they are more likely to choose the same media again, and a use pattern may emerge. This process is conditional and uncertain, not a necessity. Because the interactions with media (and any other object) are recursive, the outcome (the use pattern) is also not achieved forever.

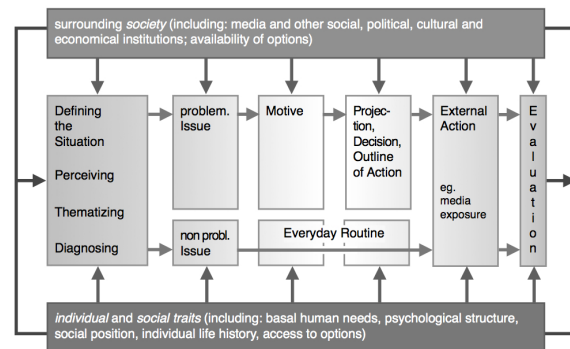


Figure 1. Process model for media use patterns (author's illustration based on Renckstorf and Wester 2004 and Kamm 2010). [[View larger image.](#)]

[4.5] After repeated experiences with BL, the interviewees in my study have learned what they can gain from it or, more precisely, from a specific range of titles and authors within the genre. A use pattern develops to such a degree that reading manga, commercial or amateur, sexually explicit or romantic, is not a "problematic issue" (figure 1) but a routine. When Misato comes home stressed after school, she knows that she can relax by rereading one of her favorite BL manga. There is no need for her to search for another way to find relief from stress. Because the time involved in the decision process decreases, use patterns can be seen as a form of media competency (Schweiger 2007).

[4.6] Consumers read BL differently. What one person gains from BL might be less important to another, or might not be a reason for yet another to read the genre at all. This holds true for any media or genre. For example, while most people associate the news with information about current events, many studies have shown that some watch the news to be entertained (Mangold 2000). Similarly, my informant Yoshiyuki, a 19-year-old male sociology undergraduate, was disgusted by BL until he encountered a *dōjinshi* written by a friend that appealed to him. "I like cute [*kawaii*] things...girls that look cute, of course, but also...how do you call it? Maybe psychological cuteness [*shinriteki kawaisa*]. That's why I sometimes read BL, too...A friend wrote a BL *dōjinshi* about the characters of an online game I played and she made one character into a *hetare seme* [wimpy seme]. He had this psychological cuteness...a realization that opened my eyes to BL. So if I like a title's description, I sometimes pick it up or borrow it." While BL did not become his favorite genre, his manga use pattern changed to include titles that fall into the category of male-male relationships.

5. Use patterns and user categories

[5.1] From its earliest conceptualizations, the UGA has been aiming at understanding media use from the perspective of the consumer. To achieve this aim, researchers must employ methodologies that assess consumers' motivations, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors toward a particular genre. However, practices like *tachiyomi* ("standing and reading," such as in a bookstore) and *mawashiyomi* (sharing manga and books with friends) make it impossible to obtain a representative sample of BL readers. Despite this limitation, interviewing consumers can provide valuable case studies that help us assess these psychological constructs.

[5.2] My sample consisted of mostly university students. Although it was largely homogenous, the sample nonetheless highlights the diversity of rotten use patterns, suggesting more than the four categories or use patterns I was able to derive from the data, which I describe below. Although the availability and variety of BL titles differ between Germany and Japan, none of the four patterns was limited to Japanese or German informants. The categories are defined by the kind of gratification gained from BL narratives or subgenres that appealed most to each informant. They are linked not only to the different degrees of pornographic content but also to the amount of community for which individual users aim. They reflect the way my interviewees used BL at the time of the interviews and should not be construed as evidence of personality types. I discuss only the most salient information from each interview here, because the full extent of the material is beyond the scope and aim of this article. As with Yoshiyuki above, I have tried to highlight important ruptures in the use patterns of some of my interviewees. The category names remain in their female form because only one participant was male. A single user can fall into more than one category (except for the "sporadic" category). Moreover, as stated above, use patterns can evolve and change.

[5.3] Salome and Misato read BL narratives with sexual content and consider the possibility of sexual arousal important. For this reason, their consumption (and production) of BL occurs almost exclusively at home. During the interviews, both confidently discussed their preferred reading habits and displayed no qualms in talking about their sexuality as it pertains to BL as well as to their real-world partners. The way they seek gratification, and their awareness of their own motivations, are similar to the desires and self-awareness of a gourmet. Therefore I call this type of BL user a *connoisseuse*.

[5.4] Connoisseuses not only show active interest in sexual matters, but also tend to identify with, or at least feel affection for, the *seme*. "*Hetare seme*, I cannot get the appeal. I want a mean *seme*, who is sexy and strong," Misato explained, laughing. "I

don't really care about the *uke*." In contrast, most of my other interviewees usually identify more with the *uke*.

[5.5] BL users who prefer an endearing *uke* and stories that depict feelings of belonging sometimes also want to connect with others. One reason for this desire might be that confirmation of one's gender role is part of building an identity (see ¶3.7). Because some of my interviewees enjoy going to conventions and see them as one of the most important ways in which they engage with BL, I categorized them as *con girls*. Exchanges with like-minded people as well as with favorite authors, and staying in touch after the cons are over, are at the center of their interest.

[5.6] "I am from the countryside, and there were not many conventions. At the university, a friend told me about the manga club, and now I spend so much time there, I even was elected club president this year. It happened by chance but it is very important to me, so I'm really stressed because, due to job hunting, I won't be able to come that often from now on," mourned Suiko when we broached this topic during the interview.

[5.7] Similarly, 24-year-old Lina, who is in training to be an administrative assistant, also emphasizes the importance of communication. She continues to read and write romantic BL narratives largely to connect with her close friends and people at conventions. She does not read "everything BL," as she once did, but concentrates on the "good" stories, saying that her friends are the best source of them. This statement is echoed by Misato, who prefers to read and write BL at home but who nevertheless does not want to miss the chance to talk to other *dōjinshi* authors at conventions.

[5.8] For other users, consumption, production, and follow-up communication occur mostly or even exclusively via the Internet. The *net girls* do not frown upon direct face-to-face contact with other users, but it is not their main interest, possibly because their participation in such contact might be limited by time constraints.

[5.9] "Since becoming a *rōnin* (note 12) and later a university student, I don't really have time to go to conventions. At home I can read and chat with others using my computer, or my mobile phone on the train. I don't read BL originals, just *dōjinshi*, because I can access those whenever and wherever I am through my phone, you know," explained Ai. She has attracted a small fan community through her Web site but makes sure that no minors can access her site, because it has some sexual content. She is mostly interested in the creation of couples, and her own stories are usually quite short.

[5.10] Unlike members of these three categories, some BL users treat it as only one genre among many that they like. They make up the *sporadic* category. This category

is the most heterogeneous because it includes collectors who choose BL titles because of their artwork, for example, and readers who consume almost anything friends give them. *Tachiyomi*, when possible, is a common way of consumption. Some sporadics enjoy reading just to kill time and often cannot recall exactly what they have read. "Don't ask me for titles," explained Kaoru. "I love sports manga, the more realistic the better. My friends know that, and if they stumble on a good sports BL title they ask me if I want to read it. I enjoy it at the time but I don't really care to remember the title, because I usually never read a manga twice." Others may similarly engage with BL irregularly and read only what friends give them. Their points of access to the genre differ greatly and are usually connected to other, more dominant areas of interest, such as sports in Kaoru's case and cuteness in Yoshiyuki's.

[5.11] Use routines may change dramatically over time, as can be seen in Suiko's and Ai's cases. This observation highlights the implausibility of rational-choice theories. Even if people could easily identify their needs and knew the perfect way to meet them, the products to satisfy these needs are not always available or accessible. For example, a myriad of *dōjinshi* are available in Japan but are mostly inaccessible to readers abroad. After Salome had read all the BL stories that she could find in Germany and on the Internet, there was nothing new for her to enjoy. She wanted new, exciting stories that BL, as a genre, could no longer offer. Faced with this "problematic issue," she eventually switched to gay porn novels. In contrast, Suiko fears that when she graduates from university she may not have enough time for BL any longer and might also have to "graduate" from her hobby (note 13).

6. BL and beyond

[6.1] In sum, the models and concepts I have illustrated make it possible to systematize BL content according to the concepts of entertainment value and connected use patterns. Understanding the relationship of the gratifications people expect and gain from particular BL themes to concepts from the fields of communication, media, and entertainment research also helps to relate BL consumption to trends beyond BL. The proposed frame of reference allows for such integrative comparisons, but conclusions are subject to the specifics of a particular genre and its consumers, in this case BL and its rotten fans.

[6.2] BL users exhibit diverse use patterns, reflecting the diverse gratifications they seek to gain by consuming and appropriating the genre. Some like to read at home and enjoy sexual arousal (a physiological gratification), while others favor communicating with like-minded people (a social need). BL as a genre is extremely diverse, but it still offers enough consistency, in its male-only relationships, to generate a shared frame for the users' expectations and preferences. Even though

particular preferences differ, the genre is able to house a plethora of stories to provide different gratifications. It is also highly accessible; accessibility is a variable that can be used in research going beyond BL.

[6.3] BL corners in bookstores have been seen as a safe haven for women, far away from the "male gaze," to buy erotic content. BL is thus highly accessible (Nagaike 2003). The same is true of pornography in general, because these days women can access it safely at home via the Internet (McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008). Although contents, uses, and gratifications differ, the increased accessibility of sexually explicit material for women through the Internet can be interpreted as adding to a trend that was earlier observed in conjunction with some BL manga and ladies' comics (manga for a mature female audience; Shigematsu 1999; Pagliassotti 2010).

[6.4] Further ethnographic inquiries into accessibility and rotten use patterns, and additional assessments of psychological constructs such as attitudes, motivations, and needs, are still necessary to understand the diversity of user approaches to the BL genre. I consider the concepts and theories presented in this article a fruitful framework with which to juxtapose these endeavors and the existing textual analyses of the genre's content and studies of other trends.

7. Acknowledgments

[7.1] My field research was approved by the Institute for Japanese Studies at the University of Leipzig and was supported by a travel grant from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). I thank Jaqueline Berndt (Kyoto) for her insightful advice and constructive criticism during and after the research period. My gratitude also goes to Michael Cofrin (Heidelberg) for his help and advice in preparing this article.

8. Notes

1. Slash is fan fiction with a primary focus on pairing male characters and depicting their romantic or sexual relationships, e.g., Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek* (see Jenkins 1992).
2. Many amateurs collaborate in circles (*sākuru*) to share publication costs and skills, since one might be better at scripting the story while another might be the better artist.
3. In contrast, Oliver and Bartsch (2011) recently focused on enjoyment by introducing the concept of appreciation, similar to the aesthetic immersion I discuss here.

4. All five interviews in Japan and three of those in Germany were conducted face to face. The other two German interviews were conducted via video telephony. I contacted some interviewees directly, and others were referred to me by people I had already interviewed or other informants. At the time of the interviews, they were between 19 and 28. All of them knew that I was an investigator and allowed me to use the information I obtained in my research.
5. Unlike quantitative content analysis, qualitative content analysis builds its categories from the text. In several steps, propositions are extracted from the text (which in this case consists of interviews) and consolidated (see ¶3.1).
6. Although *shōjo* manga are geared toward female readers and *shōnen* (boys') manga toward male readers, the target audience usually does not perfectly match the actual audience. Most *dōjinshi* by female authors borrow characters from mainstream *shōnen* manga.
7. The first *shōnen ai* manga was created by Takemiya Keiko, a prolific member of a group called 24nen-gumi (the 24ers). The group was named after the birth year of most of its members, Shōwa 24 (1949). Inspired by art nouveau, Takemiya, Hagio Moto, Ikeda Riyoko, and other female manga artists revolutionized *shōjo* manga by initiating the use of stylistic devices like internal monologue and the flowery aesthetics that still characterize these manga today.
8. All names are changed for anonymity, with non-Japanese names given to the German interviewees. The translations of quotations are my own.
9. Hagio won the first Tezuka Osamu Culture Award Excellence prize for this manga. The main protagonist, Jeremy, was brutally abused by his stepfather, and he kills him and his mother by tampering with his stepfather's car. His stepbrother, Ian, later tries to become Jeremy's protector while fearing that he will himself become like his abusive father because of his own feelings for the younger boy.
10. *Otaku* is a contested term with several meanings, one of which is similar but not identical to the English term *nerd* in referring to the stereotype of the socially inept, obsessive, and usually male user of pop culture media. From the producers' perspective, the term "*otaku* market" refers to media such as comics, animation, and games, among other things.
11. Even though Suiko and Salome disagree about whether Ragawa Marimo's "New York, New York" (published in *Hana to Yume* from 1995 to 1998) is a BL story, both like it very much because it depicts real-life problems, such as the coming out of the protagonists.

12. The word *rōnin* originally meant a masterless samurai. Today, it usually refers to students who failed to be accepted by the university of their choice and are seeking another chance.

13. The verb *sotsugyō suru*, "to graduate," is often used to describe fans' losing interest in their hobby or object of desire for various reasons.

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Praxis

Transplanted boys' love conventions and anti-*shota* polemics in a German manga: Fahr Sindram's *Losing Neverland*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Although manga arrived somewhat later in Germany than elsewhere in the West, the local publishers rapidly capitalized on its appeal to female readers and began fostering local manga artists in Germany. These are mainly young women producing *shōjo* manga, and increasingly integrating popular boys' love elements into their work. An unusual example of such work is Fahr Sindram's *Losing Neverland*, the story of an adolescent in Victorian London whose widowed father prostitutes him to middle-class men. Suggestive, though not visually explicit, such a story would likely run afoul of German and European Union laws against child pornography, were it not for the fact that Sindram continually reminds the reader that *Neverland* is in fact intended to raise awareness of child abuse and protest the dissemination of Japanese child pornography in Germany. Sindram thus openly advertises her work as a polemic, intended to mobilize the censorship of works seemingly much like her own; as a result, *Losing Neverland* has not only been socially accepted but even praised, earning an honorable citation from Germany's federal Council for Sustainable Development. Sindram's work thus accepts and capitalizes upon the globalizing aesthetic influence of manga, while at the same time adopting a defensive, quasi-protectionist stance against the spread of certain overtly foreign sexual attitudes associated with manga—and is visibly rewarded for doing so.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Cultural capital; Fandom; John Fiske; Popular culture; Yaoi

Malone, Paul M. 2013. "Transplanted Boys' Love Conventions and Anti-*Shota* Polemics in a German Manga: Fahr Sindram's *Losing Neverland*." In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12.
[doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0434](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0434).

1. Introduction

[1.1] Mark McLelland has recently described the extremely problematic nature of recent legislation—particularly, but not exclusively, in Australia—that criminalizes child pornography and "child-abuse material," both deliberately defined in the broadest possible terms. Such imprecisely conceived laws, McLelland (2012) argues cogently, limit fan-based production and artistic expression, above all in the fields of slash fan fiction and Japanese-inspired boys' love manga and materials. A major flaw in the conception of such anti-child pornography measures is their assumption that

sexualized depictions of young people can only ever serve to normalize the appetites of dangerous male pedophiles, overlooking the fact that both the producers and the consumers of such fan material are themselves overwhelmingly frequently young people, and in particular, young women, and thus members of the very community that such legislation is ostensibly intended to protect (469–70, 473). This essay examines the unusual example of a creative project originating within and aimed at such a fandom, yet motivated by the same intentions, and subject to the same misconceptions, as the antipornography laws criticized by McLelland; it also attempts to explain how and why this project—which in many ways replicates and even outdoes the transgressive elements of its target, thus skirting outright breach of the relevant local legislation—has become socially sanctioned and even singled out for praise on the basis of its polemic intent, rather than its problematic content. The project in question is Fahr Sindram's German-language manga *Losing Neverland*, which is ostensibly a call to action against Japanese *shota* (young boy) pornography and its imitators. Because Sindram's work is little known outside Germany, this article first contextualizes *Losing Neverland* against the background of the arrival and embrace of Japanese manga in Germany, which gave rise to a textually productive fandom and ultimately to locally produced professional manga in response. The particular popularity of the boys' love manga genre in Germany is then described, as well as the relevant laws that regulate the production and dissemination in German-speaking countries of erotic material depicting young or apparently young people. The examination then moves forward to sketch the genesis of Sindram's career and summarize the content of *Losing Neverland*, finally focusing on the varied reception of the manga by fans and the surprising degree of affirmation it has received from the official public sphere, even up to the level of the federal German government.

2. The rise of German-language manga

[2.1] Germany was a relative latecomer to the worldwide manga craze of the 1980s and 1990s; neighboring countries France, Italy, and Spain had already been importing manga, and had given birth to lively fan communities, before Germany finally opened up to Japanese comics in the late 1990s (Jüngst 2004, 87–89; Dolle-Weinkauff 2006). The sudden broad acceptance of manga was motivated on the publishers' side by the severe downturn in the relatively small German comics market. This market had overexpanded in the late 1980s, when it had still been *West* German, and was now faced with both an unexpected, lingering postreunification recession and a small, aging, and overwhelmingly male audience. Several smaller local publishers went bankrupt, and the surviving larger firms—almost all branches of multinational companies—were struggling to keep afloat (Knigge 2004, 69–70). Thanks to the then-recent arrival of private, commercial television networks in Germany—as opposed to

the state-run broadcasters ARD and ZDF—Japanese anime cartoon series, cheaply acquired to fill out programming schedules, had become popular with young viewers. The floodgates were opened between spring 1997 and late 1998, when first *Sailor Moon* and then *Dragon Ball* became runaway anime hits for the privately owned RTL 2 television network. The popularity of these series quickly led to the marketing of related toys, games, collectibles, and ultimately the manga that had been the bases of the television series. It was apparent that manga attracted a younger demographic than Western comics, and appealed to girls as much as to boys, if not more; these qualities made it the only growth area in the stagnant comics market, and so the remaining publishers (chiefly the "big three" so-called *Elefanten*: Carlsen Verlag, Egmont Ehapa Verlag, and Panini Verlag) capitalized heavily on this new trend to create a specifically German manga boom that quickly grew into millions of euros in annual sales.

[2.2] The huge success of *Sailor Moon* and *Dragon Ball* on German television motivated local publishers to license the original manga: Reiner Feest Verlag (owned by, and later absorbed into, Egmont Ehapa) acquired Takeuchi Naoko's *Bishōjo Senshi Serā Mūn*, while Carlsen won the rights to Toriyama Akira's *Doragon Bōru*. *Sailor Moon*, however, was published with its pages visually flipped to mirror images and reordered to accommodate Western readers used to reading from left to right; whereas *Dragon Ball*, at the creator's and Japanese publisher's insistence—and with serious misgivings on Carlsen's part—was printed in Japanese style, with pages unflipped and in right-to-left reading order. The tremendous success of this edition not only assuaged Carlsen's fears, but also established a yardstick across the German industry and readership for what constituted "authenticity" in the presentation of manga (Jüngst 2004, 87–91). This yardstick still remains in place over a decade later.

[2.3] The publishers' survival would have been ensured—at least in the short term—had they merely licensed and translated manga from Japan (and, slightly thereafter, manhwa from Korea). However, a significant weakness of the German comics industry, which had developed only after World War II, had always been its heavy dependence on licensed foreign properties. Given the relatively small readership, this had established a vicious circle in which there was never room on the market to support a critical mass of successful indigenous comics artists, and thus Germany had never been in a position to export comics, other than the occasional one-shot. Seeing an opportunity to finally redress this imbalance, the major publishers—particularly Egmont, Carlsen, and, from 2004 on, the German branch of the US firm Tokyopop—sought to leverage the traditional participatory nature of manga fandom: they used conventions, contests, and internships to recruit talented and enthusiastic fans and, from this group, to train, foster, and publish local German manga artists, or *mangaka*. The publishers were taking manga and anime fans' "textual productivity," in media

researcher John Fiske's terms—the appropriation of mass culture media by fandom as raw material for its own, normally unsanctioned, creations, such as Western fan fiction or Japanese *dōjinshi* (amateur comics)—and reappropriating it for their own ends.

[2.4] Borrowing and adapting ideas from the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu (particularly as elucidated in the latter's study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, whose English edition first appeared in 1984), Fiske (1992, 39) argues that fans "produce and circulate among themselves texts which are often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture. The key differences between the two are economic rather than ones of competence, for fans do not write or produce their texts for money; indeed, their productivity typically costs them money". Because this textual productivity circulates only within the relevant fandom, Fiske further claims, it constitutes "popular cultural capital" (42) that offers the possibility for resistance insofar as "the people are never at the mercy of the [cultural] industries" (48). Despite the utility of some of Fiske's terms, however, the weakness of this latter part of his optimistic argument may be demonstrated by the ease with which the German comics publishers implemented the policy of converting fans' active production of this cultural capital within fandom (Fiske scrupulously avoids using the term "subculture" or its derivatives) into hard economic capital within officially sanctioned commercial mass culture; even if this policy was not consistently successful, it has by no means been a failure (Malone 2010, 33–34; see Fiske 1992, 31).

[2.5] The German publishers' first attempts to promote homegrown *mangaka* were aimed primarily at the *shōnen* (young male) readership that had made *Dragon Ball* and other, similarly boy-oriented action series so successful. For a number of reasons, however—not least the difficulty of keeping to deadlines while simultaneously maintaining the quality and "authenticity" of the work—the manga of Jürgen Seebeck (*Bloody Circus*), Sascha Nils Marx (*Naglaya's Heart*), and Robert Labs (*Dragic Master, Crewman 3*) never found a sufficient audience to survive more than a couple of issues (Holzer, Jurgeit, and Krämer 2004, 7; Jüngst 2006, 251–52, 259). With an eye to the new and growing female readership, and in the hope that women might more reliably keep to a schedule, the publishers then aggressively turned to recruiting young women as artists; thus, the majority of German *mangaka* are now women in their late teens or twenties, most of them working within the conventions of *shōjo*, or girl-oriented, manga (Böckem 2006, 11). The result was a miniature homegrown *shōjo* boom that saw more female German comics artists published than ever before. This group, while still relatively small, also became disproportionately important in terms of both cultural and economic capital, as comics journalist Martin Jurgeit emphasized: "These artists, with their sales and the chord they've struck among readers, have the best economic conditions that the coming generation of comics in Germany have ever had" (Pannor

2008; all translations from German are my own). Ultimately, despite the huge popularity of a few imported *shōnen* manga, the German comics industry became unusually dependent specifically upon *shōjo* manga; and unlike other Western countries, at least until the manga wave began recently to subside, German publishers deliberately adopted a strategy of using original German-language (OGL) manga to "move to the other end of the value-added chain, namely, to sell licenses abroad," as Tokyopop's German manager Joachim Kaps openly admitted (Böckem 2006, 11). Their determination to pursue this end is demonstrated by the fact that they have so far maintained this strategy, despite the fact that it is far more expensive than simply licensing foreign material, and in the face of ongoing decline in the sales of manga in Germany in the last few years.

3. Boys' love manga arrives in Germany

[3.1] The *shōjo* manga phenomenon in Germany eventually came to include the small but important subgenre of "boys' love," more often referred to in German as *shōnen ai* or *yaoi*. Boys' love or *shōnen ai* manga arose in Japan in the 1970s, when Hagio Moto, Ikeda Riyoko, Takemiya Keiko, and other emerging female *mangaka* took over producing *shōjo* manga from male artists, and began creating stories about homoerotic relationships between androgynous *bishōnen* (beautiful boys). These stories were meant to allow female authors and readers to project themselves into the roles of the male protagonists, in a shared fantasy of perfect, egalitarian romance (Matsui 1993, 179). *Yaoi* was initially developed in the late 1980s among Japan's *dōjinshi* circles, which parodied the idealized romance of boys' love by depicting characters appropriated from established manga engaging in homosexual sex at the expense of plot; hence *yaoi*, a contraction of *Yama nashi*, *ochi nashi*, *imi nashi*, meaning "no climax, no resolution, no meaning" (Thorn 2004, 170–71). As is common with loanwords, Western languages use these terms with different connotations from those in the original language—indeed, both *shōnen ai* and *yaoi* are now somewhat old-fashioned in Japanese usage (McLelland 2000, 280; Valenti 2005, 122; Wood 2006, 394–95). In Germany, *yaoi* is regularly used to distinguish more sexually explicit portrayals of homoeroticism from *shōnen ai*, which has a more romantic tone; both terms can be used regardless of whether the material is fan-produced or professional.

[3.2] Both the presence of this type of homoerotic melodrama in Germany (most notably Ozaki Minami's *Zetsuai*, published by Carlsen from 2000 on) and its appeal for young women were documented in the July 2002 issue of *Kulturspiegel*, the cultural supplement of the leading German liberal newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*. Given that the stereotypical comics reader was still envisioned to be male, the idea that young German women might be indulging in portrayals of gay male romance, or even lust,

seemed to be particularly unsettling—it was sensationalistically played up on the magazine's cover and in the illustrations, despite a reasonably evenhanded discussion in the article itself (Böckem and Dallach 2002, 21–22).

[3.3] In reality, the three *Elefanten* publishers had done little more than dip their toes in the water of boys' love, despite such signs of panic. They remained extremely hesitant to publish material that might tarnish their cultural capital within official society—that is, their reputations as producers of respectable entertainment for children: Egmont had been the German publisher of the Walt Disney stable of comics for over half a century; Carlsen had weathered the recent bust primarily thanks to its book division's success in obtaining the rights to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books; and Panini was, and remains, the current licensee for American superhero comics from both Marvel and DC (Malone 2010, 29). In 2005, however, the newly founded Tokyopop Germany, with less reputation at stake, licensed Tananaga Hinako's *Little Butterfly*, inducing its competitors to follow suit and thus increasing the total output of boys' love manga from that point on. Nonetheless, in the 8 years intervening, boys' love has never become a key area of activity for the major publishers, and it took some time after 2005 for such themes to begin appearing in their OGL manga (Malone 2009; 2010, 30).

[3.4] In the meantime, German readers and aspiring *mangaka* interested in boys' love—and those who are thus interested tend to be passionately so—took recourse to the Internet, via such Web sites as the fandom-oriented Animexx.de. Maintained by Animexx, Germany's largest nonprofit manga and anime fans' association, this site counts over 130,000 online members, and includes space for fans to communicate and upload their own fan fiction, cosplay and convention photos, and particularly their *dōjinshi*, with several hundred sketches, pictures, and comics added to the Web site daily (<http://animexx.onlinewelten.com/doujinshi/>), as well as countless links to additional fan material on Web sites such as Myspace and deviantArt. The *dōjinshi* pages are in fact the largest and most popular section of the site (Pannor 2007), with *shōnen-ai* among its largest categories (many submissions are also cross-listed under multiple categories). Because Animexx.de previews all material submitted, both for quality control and legal acceptability (in terms of plagiarism, libel, and obscenity), before making it available to viewers, the site further serves a valuable gatekeeping function, and it facilitates capitalizing on submitted material in the wider social context outside of fandom (Malone 2010, 32–33).

[3.5] In accordance with German and European Union laws regarding child pornography and child abuse, for example, Animexx.de exercises a total ban on *shota* or *lolicon* materials, defining them as "the depiction, whether unambiguous or ambiguous, of very young characters (under 14 years old) engaging in sex or games

of violence or domination, with the participation of an adult or with children of the same age," and further pointing out: "Your characters may not look like children if you draw *hentai* [i.e., erotica/pornography] or the like (giving their ages in the text is no help—only the apparent age counts!)"

(http://animexx.onlinewelten.com/wiki/index.php/Hinweise_DJ-Hochladen). In making this stipulation, Animexx.de interprets as conservatively as possible the relevant section of the German Criminal Code (*deutsches Strafgesetzbuch*, or *dStGB*) regarding child pornography, which does not in fact explicitly equate drawings of fictional persons with photographic depictions of real children, as the laws of some other jurisdictions do (*dStGB* §184b). The fact that since November 2008, a separate category for "juvenile pornography"—depicting persons between 14 and 18 years old—has also existed, has not so far complicated matters, given that the wording of the new passage is closely based on §184b (*Bundesgesetzblatt*, part 1, no. 50 [November 4, 2008], 2149–51; *dStGB* §184c).

[3.6] Austrian law, in comparison, as codified in the *österreiches Strafgesetzbuch* (*öStGB*), makes no distinction between persons under 18 and those under 14, referring only to "pornographic depictions of minors" (*Pornographische Darstellungen Minderjähriger*; *öStGB* §207a); however, such depictions can be declared pornographic only if they are *wirklichkeitsnah* ("close to reality," defined in a later elucidation as practically indistinguishable from photographic documentation; *Gesetzeserläuterungen zum Strafrechtsänderungsgesetz 2004*, 17;

http://www.uibk.ac.at/strafrecht/strafrecht/straeg2003_erl.pdf)—a term that also figures, though less prominently, in the corresponding German law. Meanwhile, in Switzerland the *schweizerisches Strafgesetzbuch* (*sStGB*) penalizes anyone who "offers, shows, provides, makes accessible or broadcasts by means of radio or television pornographic writings, audio or video recordings, illustrations, other objects of such kind or pornographic performances of a person under 16 years old" (*sStGB*, art. 197). This would seem to be the most comprehensive formulation, inasmuch as it clearly includes illustrations (*Abbildungen*) and does not require or even mention verisimilitude (*Wirklichkeitsnähe*). Given the confusing thicket of laws that German-language material must deal with, the gatekeepers of Animexx.de are probably prudent to be extremely conservative in their standards. Note, however, that so long as it clearly depicts only adults, pornography is quite legal in the German-speaking countries; accordingly, Animexx.de has a large *hentai dōjinshi* section, though it is accessible only to registered members able to prove that they are 18 or older.

[3.7] In this gatekeeping function, Animexx.de's *dōjinshi* pages have introduced many budding German *mangaka* not only to a wider fan audience, but also to the print publishing scene, particularly to smaller niche publishers such as alternative comics press Verlag Schwarzer Turm, which quickly found the Animexx Web site an excellent

recruiting ground for its manga anthologies; or to those even smaller publishers founded expressly to produce German- and Western-produced boys' love material. These firms, some of which operate with only two or three impassioned full-time owner/employees, include Myriam Engelbrecht's Fireangels Verlag, Cursed Side (the result of a 2010 merger between Simone Neblich-Spang's The Wild Side and Julia Schwenk's Cursed Publishings), and Henning Kroll's Hotate Books. In most of these smaller publishers, the managers, editors, and designers are often themselves manga writers or artists, and the participation of *mangaka* whose first exposure came about via Animexx.de is fundamental to their activities. From Animexx.de's vetting process and this semiofficial recruitment have emerged many young women who have gone on to publish manga in Germany with the major firms, and sometimes even abroad through the hoped-for licensing deals, thus elevating their original cultural capital within fandom into the official cultural and economic spheres (Malone 2010, 33–34). One of the more unusual members of this group is Fahr Sindram.

4. Fahr Sindram and *Losing Neverland*

[4.1] Fahr Sindram—her real name, though because it is unusual it is sometimes taken for a nom de plume—was born January 28, 1981, in a small town near the major port city of Kiel, on the Baltic Sea in the north of Germany. According to a number of interviews conducted by online German comics and manga fanzines and news sites (e.g., Comicgate.de, Mangaka.de, Animey.net), Sindram began drawing in her childhood, starting with Disney characters and then developing her own designs; by the age of 14, she had decided that she wanted to become a comics artist in the Franco-Belgian tradition of Hergé's *Tintin* and Goscinny and Uderzo's *Astérix*. Not until she was 18 was she exposed to her first manga, Kishiro Yukito's *Gunnm* (published in German by Carlsen as *Battle Angel Alita*, 1996–98), whose beautiful but ruthless female protagonist inspired her greatly. When she later observed that other German artists, in particular Robert Labs, were being promoted as *mangaka*, Sindram decided to follow the same route; over the next 3 years, she determinedly taught herself to draw in the manga style with the aid of Japanese how-to books translated into French, and supplemented this training by practicing anatomy and perspective.

[4.2] Like many other hopefuls, Sindram entered the German manga scene by way of the Internet, taking advantage of the Animexx.de Web site; however, she was ultimately "discovered" in almost Hollywood fashion, when she was turning out sketches while minding a friend's booth at the 2005 Leipzig Book Fair. Michael Möller, head of the Verlag Schwarzer Turm, then sought her out, locating her by using her contact information on Animexx.de. Möller made Sindram a copublisher and editor, in which capacities she helped set up Schwarzer Turm's manga line (Pannor 2007; Ihme 2007, 56). In addition to Western-style alternative comics, Schwarzer Turm now also

publishes regular manga anthologies by German *mangaka*, likewise often recruited via Animexx.de. The most notable of these anthologies are the *Paper Theatre* series and the erotic series *Hungry Hearts*, the latter of which features both heterosexual and homosexual themes, often depicted rather more explicitly than in the stories the larger firms dare to publish. Several early volumes of the *Paper Theatre* series carried one-page humorous stories by coeditor Sindram, but in the second volume, appearing in June 2006, she also previewed her own manga series (which was already contracted to yet another small, young niche publisher, Martina Hardten's Butter & Cream Verlagsgesellschaft; Sindram 2006a).

[4.3] This "Gothic drama," *Losing Neverland* (the title refers indirectly to *Peter Pan* by parodying the title of the 2004 Johnny Depp film *Finding Neverland*—no reference to Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch property was intended), is set in an alternate Victorian London recently ravaged by an epidemic known as the Empty Plague (*die Leere Pest*). The protagonist is 14-year-old Laurence V. Laurence, known as Laurie, whose crippled sailor father, Johnny, killed Laurie's mother Amy 7 years ago in a drunken rage of jealousy. Now, with Laurie's wicked stepmother Ernestine, Johnny prostitutes Laurie to middle-class men to pay for his liquor. In a world in which almost every adult male is depicted as an eager pederast, Laurie's life is a litany of exploitation and pathos—when he returns home late at one point in the second volume, for example, his father punishes him by brutally sodomizing him, shocking even the callous Ernestine (Sindram 2008; both volumes are unpaginated). Laurie comforts himself somewhat, however, by afterward recalling that his father continued to whisper his mother's name, indicating that Johnny still loves and misses Amy after all. The perpetually malnourished Laurie, continually underdressed in anachronistic Gothic Lolita drag that bares his nipples and almost reveals his pubis, appears hardly more than 10 years old; his otherwise waiflike beauty is marred by cankers around his mouth. His only friends are his circle of fellow hustlers, who variously address him as "Laurie," "L.V.," or "Miss Law Violation" (in English, even in the German text); and a moldering fox-skin stole of his mother's named Fanny, who comes to life and speaks to Laurie as his "conscience" ("Like in Pinocchio!"; Sindram 2006b) when nobody else is around. In the course of the first volume, Laurie further makes the acquaintance of two other orphans: the tiny, adorable, but tubercular 4-year-old Tim Philips and his older sister, Coline, whose job as an exploited domestic servant to the mayor's family provides all three of them a tenuous connection to middle-class respectability, and therefore to some hope for the future.

[4.4] Like the vast majority of OGL manga, *Losing Neverland* is permeated with markers of authenticity that conform to at least some of the visual and generic tropes of established manga styles, particularly those of *shōjo* manga. These features often underscore the manner in which OGL manga imitate not so much original Japanese

models, but rather those models as already translated; thus becoming what Jüngst (2006, 258) calls "simulacra" or "pseudo-translations". The most obvious sign of this false authenticity remains the reversed reading direction (253), but frequent use is also made of visual elements such as a single giant sweat-drop to signal a character's anxiety, the X-shaped throbbing forehead vein of anger, or "super-deformed" simplification and distortion of facial or bodily features to show extreme emotion of various kinds (see 257). Likewise, the stories of OGL manga tend not to be set in contemporary Germany; most frequently, they are set in Japan, or in a nonspecific locale that could be Japanese or at least Asian. Even when the location is completely unspecified or utterly fantastic, there is a strong tendency for characters to be given Japanese (or Japanese-sounding) names. When the story is explicitly set elsewhere than in Japan, as it is here, there is often at least one token Japanese character who stands in for authenticity, and whose presence may or may not be convincingly explained. In *Losing Neverland*, this role is played by Shinya, one of Laurie's hustler friends.

[4.5] It is in Laurie's relationship with these three friends, whom Sindram calls the Chaos Trio in her notes to the reader, that *Losing Neverland* shows its closest connections to *shōjo*, and to boys' love manga in particular: fully introduced in the series' second volume, all three of them are variations on the *bishōnen* type, with large eyes and regular, delicate features. The Canadian Hillary Dove, nicknamed "Germinal" (presumably from Emile Zola's novel), is the poet of the group. At 22, he is also the oldest, with muttonchop sideburns that render his appearance less androgynous, and a crippled foot. He came to England as an orphan with his two younger sisters, and turned to prostitution to support them; but they both died after a few years, apparently of the Empty Plague. At his age, he has graduated from male clients to entertaining older women as a gigolo, and within the group he acts as a quasi-parental voice of reason among his peers. Otherwise, however, Hillary thus far remains undercharacterized compared to the other two companions, perhaps because, other than sympathy, he has as yet no strong connection to Laurie.

[4.6] Maurice Micklewhite, a hustler and pickpocket whose good looks are offset by a wooden prosthetic ear strapped to his head, is Laurie's closest friend; since an incident 4 years ago when he and Laurie were forced to perform sexually for a paying audience, however, he has fallen almost obsessively in love with Laurie, and hopes that they will be able to form a lasting romantic relationship. Often nicknamed "Maurizio" or "Momo" by his friends, Maurice is rather rough and abrupt by nature—his spoken German bears the markings of a Berlin accent, which by established German literary convention often represents London Cockney, though he describes himself as an Irish Catholic—and his direct, physical, and sometimes brutal attempts to gain Laurie's love put him in the position of *seme*, or pursuer, to Laurie's *uke*, or receiver.

Despite Maurice's violent temperament, his offer of love nonetheless represents a positive, more egalitarian alternative to Laurie's present existence; to that extent, the constellation of Maurice and Laurie reflects Sindram's frequently stated attraction to boys' love manga. For his part, however, Laurie cannot put behind him the fact that their only sexual encounter took place under duress and brought him no enjoyment. Laurie also recognizes that his friend with the missing ear is as deeply scarred within as he is without, and as a result, dangerously unstable.

[4.7] Moreover, Laurie's new friend Coline seems to offer him both a nurturing mother figure and a potential heterosexual love interest—indeed, the two of them sometimes function almost as parents to little Tim; but so far, it remains unclear whether either character represents a viable future for poor Laurie, who may well be doomed in any case (Sindram has stated that she would like to end her saga unhappily, though her publisher would prefer a happy ending). This, according to Anne Pätzke (2006) in her afterword to the preview of Sindram's manga in the second volume of *Paper Theatre*, is the meaning of the manga's title:

[4.8] [Peter Pan and Neverland], with their sense of fantasy and the idea that childhood dreams come true, are a synonym for what one can lose as a child—that is, everything. Laurie has no opportunity to become a grownup first and discover what he likes on his own. Whether he likes men, or women, or both. It's decided for him and he has to accept it. (106–7)

[4.9] The final member of the Chaos Trio is Shinya, the 17-year-old son of a Japanese kimono tailor who set off to travel the world with his wife and child after being burned out of his home in Japan. After the family had made its way across China and Russia, Shinya's mother died in Europe. Shinya and his father then traveled on to London to take part in an international exhibition of Japanese culture; shortly after their arrival, however, Shinya was abducted by the exhibition's English organizer—yet another middle-class pedophile—and sold as a sex slave to another man, with whom Shinya lived for 3 years before he found an opportunity to escape. With his father long since disappeared, Shinya found work in a brothel and later took to a life on the street. Shinya's anachronistic multiple facial piercings, makeup, and shaggy hairdo make him at the same time the most exotic and the most outwardly feminine of the Trio (in fact, his appearance is based on a female acquaintance of Sindram's). He is also both the group's resident drama queen and its clown, with a sharp tongue motivated by the fact that he has a crush on Maurice and regards Laurie as something of a rival in this respect. Partly to hide his affection and partly out of frustration, Shinya calls Maurice "*Baka-Mau*," using the Japanese word for "idiot," and he peppers their arguments with deliberately absurd threats such as: "Be ready for the blood revenge of the ninja! For *onigiri* [rice balls] and justice!" (Sindram 2008). Shinya's purposely comical self-

representation skillfully distracts from the fact that the character's mere presence in Victorian England, even when provided with a backstory, is itself improbable in the extreme.

[4.10] Although it is not visually sexually explicit, this rather grotesque and sometimes morbid hodgepodge of elements from Victorian literature, historical film, modern comics, Freud, and de Sade would nonetheless likely be a risky undertaking, given that *Losing Neverland* bends or outright breaks many of the rules set up by the gatekeepers of Animexx.de to keep within the law. Entire pages of Sindram's manga, for example, are given over to "the depiction, whether unambiguous or ambiguous, of very young characters...engaging in sex or games of violence or domination, with the participation of an adult or with children of the same age"; in particular, only a very naïve reader could consider the scene of Laurie's anal rape by his own father as ambiguous, though no penetration, and little of anything else, is shown (Sindram 2008). Moreover, despite Animexx's warning that "Your characters may not look like children...only the apparent age counts!" the characters in question almost all look much younger than their stated ages—indeed, Sindram herself draws attention to this fact, when Maurice jokingly accuses Shinya of trying to pass for 13 (Sindram 2008). Even the use of "Maurice Micklewhite" as a character name pushes the boundaries of the German libel laws that prompt Animexx.de to ban "realslash" [*sic*]*—the depiction of real people in fictive romantic or sexual relationships. The actual Maurice Micklewhite, a genuine Cockney Londoner better known as British actor Sir Michael Caine, might not be pleased to find himself depicted—even in name only—as a one-eared adolescent Victorian sex worker pursuing an underage transvestite. And yet, surprisingly, Losing Neverland has drawn generally positive mention in the little attention that it has been paid by the mainstream press—for example, in the conservative national newspaper Die Welt (October 24, 2008; <http://www.welt.de/regionales/berlin/article2623791/Auf-der-Suche-nach-dem-neuesten-Trend.html>); on the Web site of Germany's official international cultural association, the Goethe-Institut (May 2009; <http://www.goethe.de/kue/lit/prj/com/pcm/en5028581.htm>); or in Sindram's hometown newspaper, the Kieler Nachrichten (June 30, 2010; http://www.kn-online.de/schleswig_holstein/kultur/?em_cnt=159159&em_loc=1)—and seems never yet to have been in any danger of censorship or legal action, nor to have provoked a negative reaction from society at large.*

5. Fahr Sindram's anti-*shota* campaign: Outlaw for a good cause

[5.1] A major contributing factor to this situation has been the fact that both Sindram and her publisher Butter & Cream are at pains continually to remind the reader—within the manga's text and its supplementary material, as well as in

interviews and on the publisher's Web site (<http://www.butter-and-cream.com/butt/manga.htm>)—that Sindram's goal in *Losing Neverland* is in fact to raise awareness of child abuse and to protest both the "widespread child pornography in Japan," particularly *shota* material (depicting young boys as sexual objects), and its dissemination in Germany (<http://www.welt.de/regionales/berlin/article2623791/Auf-der-Suche-nach-dem-neuesten-Trend.html>; <http://www.comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/>). Even the characters within the story hint at this early in the first volume, during Laurie's first conversation with Fanny:

[5.2] **Fanny:** It *could* be worse. For example, you could get to spend every day standing in the cold, waiting for a nice uncle whose dick you'd be allowed to stroke for a penny! And then—*Hmpf* grsnle! (*Laurie holds Fanny's mouth shut*)

Laurie: Despite the touchy subject matter, this manga is attempting to be as G-rated as possible, you...smart-alec! *I don't believe it!*

Fanny: I only wanted to help the readers! (Sindram 2006b)

[5.3] Such straightforward deromanticization contrasts with the *shōjo* manga aesthetic that clearly marks Sindram's detailed artwork throughout; it both sets her work apart from the atmosphere of relatively egalitarian sexual desire and often-delayed gratification typical of many boys' love manga and makes clear that her target of criticism is elsewhere. Sindram avers that she is herself a fan of what she calls "Shonen-Ai-Mangas," though she adds, "But I don't want to see any sex. I only like implied eroticism, and then to bring my own imagination into play. I don't want to be offered anything explicit" ([comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/](http://www.comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/)); she has no problem, however, with *hentai* or *yaoi* in principle—in fact, she bluntly remarks that anyone who says that manga in general portray too much sex and violence "needs to be smacked" ("Wer so was sagt gehört geklapst!"; <http://www.animey.net/specials/77>). But child pornography is something else again: "There are boundaries being transgressed that are sacred. For the sake of money, publishers are letting go of everything that's important for decency and morality. I'm not just saying, 'Ooh, ick, they're naked' [*Pfui-Bäh-Nackig*]" ([comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/](http://www.comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/)).

[5.4] Sindram not only polemicizes against child pornography in general, but also takes as her target of repeated public criticism one specific example: Yun Kōga's popular manga *Loveless* [*Raburesu*], which has published nine volumes so far in German translation. *Loveless*, depicting a fantasy world in which everyone is born with cat's ears and a tail but loses them upon losing their virginity, is regarded by its German publisher, Egmont Ehapa, and by most Western readers as unproblematic, even unexciting. In his English-language primer *Manga: The Complete Guide*, in fact,

Jason Thompson tersely describes Kōga's manga as "Attractively drawn but frustratingly slow-paced, mopey, and introverted"; he does not even place the entry for *Loveless* in his book's *yaoi* section, since technically, it is at least superficially a battle manga, and "The suggestions of *yuri* [lesbian] and *yaoi* romance are mostly implied rather than shown" (Thompson 2007, 194). Even the *mangaka* Yun Kōga herself does not consider *Loveless* to be *yaoi*, although she grants that many of her fans do so (Hartzheim and Hong 2009). Nonetheless, passages such as one in which the 12-year-old catboy protagonist is assured by his older *bishōnen* mentor that the latter won't take his ears from him *yet*, and scenes of what Sindram calls "heavy petting to the max" ("Da wird geknutscht bis zum Geht-nicht-mehr"; comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/) motivate her not only to condemn the series outright, but also to mount an ongoing public campaign against it as "*Soft-Shotacon-Manga*" and a potential slippery slope to harder stuff (comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/). By declaring *Loveless* to be outright child pornography, Sindram clearly means to deprive it of its cultural capital and thus its ability to be converted into economic capital by Egmont—though there is no sign that this campaign has thus far hurt either *Loveless*'s reputation or its sales.

[5.5] Nonetheless, Sindram's relentless polemic has had the effect of diverting any serious criticism from outside manga fandom of her work as itself potentially pornographic—although she claims initially to have faced a great deal of backlash from fans of *shota*:

[5.6] I would have liked it if people had said: "This is a good cause. We have to support setting limits on child pornography. Finally we have a text to jolt us into it." But in the beginning most people wrote me that I must be a prudish cow. I'm uptight, I don't know what fun is, I'm frigid. As far as the story goes, I got things like: "[Laurie] ought to be fucked until he pukes up blood. That's what I want to see, with great big cocks!" Then I just didn't reply any more. (comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/)

[5.7] In the area of "anti-child-porn" I already feel like some kind of outlaw [the English word is used], à la 50 Cent or I don't know what kind of gangster, as if I were standing up for strange opinions. Basically, it ought to be exactly the other way round.

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20120208010904/http://www.animey.net/specials/77>)

[5.8] Sindram's confrontational attitude also provokes other boys' love fans who do not share her opinion of *Loveless*. The pseudonymous Swiss-German fan reviewer Suzu, for example, praised several aspects of the second volume of *Losing Neverland*, in particular Sindram's artwork, in Suzu's now-defunct (and unfortunately unarchived) blog "The Ulterior Motive" (once available at <http://tum.ahou.net/?p=535>). However,

she found the characters—above all Laurie—to be unconvincing, because of their overtly serving a didactic purpose, and then added:

[5.9] Fahr Sindram is also famous (or infamous) for declaring *Loveless* to be child porn without having correctly understood the manga. I have no use for her extreme attitudes against *shota* and *loli*, and I find it a real pity that she confuses fiction with reality without getting her facts straight. *Seulement si j'ai bien compris*.

[5.10] Sindram does in fact claim to have researched "far and wide" on her topic ("I read about 18 books on the subject, watched films, all that. At the end I was totally drained, but I think I can describe it a lot better as a result"), though she also admits that some of her initial assumptions were mistaken:

[5.11] The target audience in Japan is mainly female, just like in Germany, and the girls range in age from 12 upwards to 30. I'd assumed that men would be reading such things, but there I was wrong.
(comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/)

[5.12] While some of her ideas about conditions in Japan were clearly influenced by Western expectations and thus coincided neatly with the mistaken premises upon which much Western anti-child pornography legislation is based (McLelland 2012, 475–6), Sindram has not altered her views or her strategy since discovering that she was in error; moreover, she also continues to make equally broad assumptions about her own audience at home. To the question of whether or not manga have an important erotic aspect, she replies:

[5.13] If the manga is intended to be a blockbuster, of course eroticism plays a role. But I think the nature of the thing is that there has to be something for everyone. For example, now—because my manga doesn't offer a lot for men—I've given the sister of the little boy in the story [Tim's sister Coline] fairly big breasts. Just so there's something for everyone. And the things keep growing! At some point they're going to have to stop getting bigger. (*laughs*) (comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/)

[5.14] The apparent contradictions between Sindram's stated message and some of her methods of communication clearly frustrate readers such as Suzu, for example, who complained that giving Coline a large bosom to appeal to male readers is "pathetic" (*armselig*) in "exactly the last comic where fan service ought to appear"; and that the humor in Sindram's dialogue and pictures and the serious nature of her subject "go together like chalk and cheese" ("passen...wie die Faust aufs Auge"; literally, "like a fist in the eye").

[5.15] Moreover, Suzu found Sindram's choice of *Loveless* as a target of censure particularly bizarre, given that the two volumes thus far of *Losing Neverland* indirectly depict more sexual violence, and directly show far more nudity, than Kōga's manga. Reproducing one of Sindram's poster pictures of Maurice and Laurie, apparently caught in flagrante delicto by the reader, with a defiant Maurice's bare buttocks visible and a surprised Laurie clothed only in lace stockings and thong, she implied that Sindram is playing by a double standard:

[5.16] Looking at pictures like this, I really can't take her nagging about *Loveless* at all seriously; even if I've understood the symbolism of the picture, it's hardly any different from the pictures in *Loveless*, except that in the latter there's hardly any naked flesh displayed and the whole thing is much more symbolic and somber.

[5.17] *Losing Neverland* has also received some unreservedly positive notices from fan reviewers (for example, Kyoko for the online magazine *Pummeldex*, at <http://www.pummeldex.de/manga.php?cid=1117>)—largely on the basis of its skillful artwork and/or its intentions—and it has also even inspired a small amount of its own fan-based textual productivity, in the form of art, poetry, fiction, *dōjinshi*, and cosplay (for example, at http://www.animexx.de/themen/2235_Losing%20Neverland/, and on several deviantArt sites). Many of these, however, seem to be produced by a very small circle of people, at least some of whom are clearly personally acquainted with Sindram, who responds to much of the work (generally enthusiastically) and indeed provides some of it herself.

[5.18] Nonetheless, as two pseudonymous comments to her blog entry demonstrated, Suzu was not alone in having mixed feelings about Sindram's work: other readers also find *Losing Neverland*'s combination of boys' love and Gothic Lolita aesthetics with its stated antipornographic aims difficult to interpret. A forum discussion on Animexx.de started by Sindram herself in 2006, under the heading "How did you like *Losing Neverland*?" ("Wie hat euch LN gefallen?"; http://animexx.onlinewelten.com/forum/thread_146432/0/#11609889601374), also elicited a wide range of responses, finally petering out in early 2011 with a brief debate between two readers: both agreed that the manga is "a handbook of *shota* clichés," but could not agree as to whether these clichés were being deliberately used to demonstrate their crassness, or whether Sindram herself actually finds such clichés "totally *kawaii* [cute]" and cynically uses her anti-*shota* statements as camouflage in order to avoid criticism.

6. Boys' love as public service advertisement: *Losing Neverland* and cultural capital

[6.1] This apparent disconnect between medium and message in *Losing Neverland* has not prevented the manga from being not only socially accepted, but even praised outright. Indeed, for its anti-child porn message it earned an honorable citation in 2006 from Germany's Council for Sustainable Development (*Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung*), whose government-given mandate extends beyond environmental issues to facilitating "social coherence" and "social dialogue" (<http://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/en/the-council/mandate-given-to-the-german-council/?size=ovxidzcfup&blstr=0>). As a result, Sindram's photograph was featured in an exhibition depicting artists, designers, and architects contributing to the Council's mandate. This citation figures largely in advertising for *Losing Neverland*, is frequently mentioned by Sindram in interviews (and in the above-mentioned Web forum discussion), and is proclaimed on a large sticker on the first volume's cover. The Council's seal of approval thus institutionalizes Sindram's cultural capital in a manner similar to that of granting an academic degree, as Sindram recognizes: "[With this recognition] I've landed more or less in the culture corner" ("Ich bin damit so ein bisschen in der Kulturecke gelandet"; http://www.kn-online.de/schleswig_holstein/kultur/?em_cnt=159159&em_loc=1).

[6.2] To underline her work's value in this context, Sindram maintains that her books have already helped victims of child abuse, and that she is sent constant messages of support and thanks from such victims, who react to *Losing Neverland* by saying, "That's exactly what happened to me" (comicgate.de/content/view/420/76/); as well, she claims that she receives regular fan mail from as far away as Africa. She also claims that the manga has been used in school instruction, and taken up by several psychologists for use in therapy. Sindram has told interviewers that *Losing Neverland* is even in demand at "many Japanese universities," which want to make it available for purposes of *Aufklärung* (which in German means both "enlightenment" and "sex education"; <http://www.mangaka.de/index.php?page=interview-mit-fahr-sindram>). If this last claim is indeed true, there is a certain irony in the possibility that Sindram's work, which capitalizes upon the globalizing aesthetic influence of manga, while at the same time adopting a defensive, almost protectionist stance against the spread of certain overtly "foreign" social or sexual attitudes associated with manga in the West, might be reappropriated for a similar purpose within Japan itself.

[6.3] To facilitate such transfers, Sindram and Butter & Cream intend to capitalize upon *Losing Neverland* for export, with an English translation of the first volume available and French and Japanese versions in preparation—supposedly, copies of the German edition sold out within a day at Tokyo's 71st Comic Market (Comiket) *dōjinshi* fair in December 2006 (<http://www.silverxanime.de/article/258>). Moreover, since Sindram now plans to produce eight volumes of the series, *Losing Neverland* is positioned to become the longest-running OGL manga yet—if it can ever be finished.

Given that even relatively successful German *mangaka* work without assistants, other than occasional volunteers from among their friends, it is hardly unusual for their work to fall behind schedule. This is particularly true in the case of the many artists who juggle other, better-paying graphic work, day jobs in other fields, and/or full-time studies in addition to their manga creation. Though she is not a student, nor otherwise employed, Sindram nonetheless has a great deal to keep her busy.

[6.4] In terms of her artistic output, Sindram has ventured beyond manga to design promotional materials for Cinema Bizarre (a Berlin-based glam-rock group heavily influenced by Japanese *visual kei* bands), which disbanded in January 2010 after three albums and two major tours. She has also produced two books for children, with texts written by Walther Hans. *Lord Skeffington Scatters: Katzenärger* (2009) is the tale of a lovable zombie child who lives with 15 obstreperous cats—hence the "cat trouble" of the subtitle. *Pouka and Spooks: Das kleine Todes-ABC der Liebe* (2010) is a *Geschenkbuch* (a book intended to be bought and given as a gift) that takes elements from Edward Gorey by way of Roman Dirge to present "a little death-ABC of love" between the long-dead skeleton toddler Pouka and her Frankensteinian teddy bear, Spooks, who "haben sich einfach gern, obwohl sie völlig verschieden sind" (the pun here is untranslatable: "They just love each other, although they are completely *verschieden*," which can mean either "dissimilar" or "deceased"). She has also been working on a second manga series, *Cave Canem: Tales of a Journey*, a *shōnen* adventure story about Jiri, a Russian wolf-boy on the run from scientific experiments. He meets a girl in the Siberian woods, who of course turns out to be the tsar's daughter. Despite several previews online and at conventions, *Cave Canem* has not yet appeared; nor has another gift book project, *Garlics Liebe* (*Garlic's Love*), which concerns yet another macabre youngster: a young vampire who has fallen in love with a clove of garlic.

[6.5] Beyond the drawing table, Sindram's cultural capital has visibly served to consolidate her public position as author, arbiter, and expert, thus making even greater demands on her time: for example, the combination of her editorial experience and her high profile has repeatedly earned her a place in juries for manga drawing contests (an Austrian competition sponsored by stationer Stabilo, for instance, or the—sadly, now defunct—Comicstars competition sponsored by the publisher Droemer Knaur), helping foster further OGL manga talent. To the same end, she regularly gives workshops on drawing manga and appears at manga and comics conventions and at book fairs for signing sessions, talks, and roundtable discussions. She also occasionally speaks on moral issues in manga and comics, as she did in June 2011 at the Munich Comic Festival (<http://butter-and-cream-blog.blogspot.com/2011/06/cangas-und-momics-comicfestival-munchen.html>). It is, indeed, largely through the combination of all these activities, rather than directly from her books, that Sindram makes a barely

sufficient living to continue pursuing her career as a *mangaka*. Thus, although *Losing Neverland* was supposedly originally planned as a mere *dōjinshi* of two volumes (<http://www.silverxanime.de/article/258>), Sindram's discovery by the mainstream and the integration of her project into the market economy of publishing has produced an inversion of Fiske's (1992, 39) dictum that fans' "productivity costs them money"; instead, it seems that Sindram's necessary pursuit of money has cost her her productivity, and has not necessarily gained the agency for resistance that Fiske posited fans stood to gain from harnessing their creativity.

[6.6] In the long run, and likely not fully intentionally on her part, Sindram's success in appropriating cultural capital has come to obscure for broader society the fact that her work is in some ways even more transgressive of social and cultural norms than a great deal of the conventional boys' love manga that once seemed so shocking; at the same time, however, this success has to some extent co-opted her stance as a self-proclaimed "outlaw." Though she remains a polarizing figure within fandom, and the German manga wave has been subsiding for several years now, Sindram may nonetheless clear the way for yet more artists to take up the genre—possibly in ways that Sindram, despite her current position of apparent influence, may disapprove of, but be quite unable to control, as her utter failure to hinder the publication of *Loveless* has demonstrated.

7. Epilogue

[7.1] In November 2011, Sindram's publisher, Butter & Cream, posted photographs from the then-recent Frankfurt Book Fair on its blog page (<http://butter-and-cream-blog.blogspot.com/2011/11/ohne-worte-fbm-2011.html>). As usual, the publisher had a booth at the fair, where Sindram appeared for signings and to advertise her forthcoming volumes of *Losing Neverland*, *Cave Canem*, and *Garlics Liebe*, the first two long overdue but slated for release during the Leipzig Book Fair in mid-March 2012 (<http://www.losing-neverland.com/content/news.html>)—though to date they still have not appeared. Previously, Sindram had been almost as well known on the convention scene for her constantly changing neon hair colors and wild Gothic Lolita-inspired wardrobe as her artistic talents; at this event, however, to advertise *Cave Canem*, she spent at least one day quite uncharacteristically dressed. In the top photos she wears a chic but businesslike gray suit; her hair is neatly styled and a natural-looking brown. She is now a 30-year-old woman who practically embodies both cultural and economic capital. The ensemble is capped with a large pair of furry black wolf's ears on her head, but they are almost as feline in appearance as vulpine. She bears a striking resemblance to the characters in Kōga's *Loveless*. The similarity, however, goes unremarked; the series of photos is labeled *Ohne Worte*—"without words."

8. Postscript

[8.1] Since this article was completed, a further volume of *Losing Neverland* finally appeared in November 2012—though in the form of a "light novel" rather than a fully illustrated manga. Although supposedly available "wherever comics and manga are found," in fact the volume seems to be for sale only on the publisher's Web site (<http://www.butter-and-cream.com/butt/storybook.html>).

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Praxis

Simulation and database society in Japanese role-playing game fandoms: Reading boys' love *dōjinshi* online

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Japanese video games have been characterized as typifying contemporary postmodernity in the form of simulacra, both as a media form and in terms of their extensive localization for international markets, which creates user fantasies of Japaneseness that are not linked to an authentic or original Japan. These simulations are reappropriated by fans to create new content, in this case boys' love *dōjinshi*, which are in turn disseminated and consumed in an English-speaking online context. Fantasy role-playing video games, which often privilege heteronormativity and binary gender norms in their goals, narratives, and aesthetics, are among the most popular texts reimagined in this way. This study considers the concepts of simulation and database societies through an examination of the ways in which artificial contours of Japaneseness are constructed in the role-playing game series *Final Fantasy VII*'s boys' love *dōjinshi* fandoms, how far these fan texts develop possibilities for the deconstruction of heteronormativity, and how transnational digitized consumption methods facilitate the intersection of these phenomena.

[0.2] *Keywords*—BL; *Final Fantasy*; Gender; Postmodern; RPG; Video game

Glasspool, Lucy. 2013. "Simulation and Database Society in Japanese Role-Playing Game Fandoms: Reading Boys' Love *Dōjinshi* Online." In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12. doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0433.

1. Introduction

[1.1] Console role-playing video games, one of Japan's most successful international media exports (Consalvo 2010, 131), have been described as typifying contemporary postmodern culture. Darley (2000) suggests that as a site of simulation, Japanese role-playing games (RPG), as a form of digital media, inhabit the hyperreal as simulacra, characterized by pastiche, intertextuality, and a lack of cultural authenticity or sense of an original. Iwabuchi (2002, 15) describes the cultural "odorlessness" of these Japanese cultural products as *mukokuseki*: they have few characteristics of any culturally exclusive discourses that serve to delineate the boundaries of "Japaneseness" within Japan itself.

[1.2] However, fan activity surrounding these games outside Japan ascribes a certain cultural capital to ideas of Japaneseness. This is apparent in the dissemination and consumption of boys' love (BL) *dōjinshi* based on RPGs such as the Final Fantasy series, particularly in an online context, where both the content of the materials and the fan practices surrounding them have been considered to present a queer challenge to the hegemonic ideals of heteronormativity and gender binaries (Thorn 2004; Wood 2006) that are frequently contained within the narratives and visuals of the games themselves.

[1.3] Here I use materials surrounding the Japanese RPG series *Final Fantasy VII* to examine the ways that the artificial contours of Japaneseness are constructed in English-speaking BL *dōjinshi* fandoms; to examine to what extent these fan texts may also develop queer potentials that may be used to deconstruct heteronormativity; and to analyze how the two phenomena have been developed by the digitization of dissemination and consumption methods. I also consider whether such online texts and practices may simultaneously limit the ways fans deal with the queer potentials that do arise, encompassing the intersecting concepts of simulation, simulacra, and database society.

[1.4] Much work has been done on Japanese popular culture and fan activity within a US context (Allison 2006, 2009; Kelts 2006). Although my own cultural background and focus is the United Kingdom and the fandoms within it, this study is not entirely geographically specific. I focus here on electronically mediated and online activity, making it problematic to "theorize...about these texts by segregating communities of readers along cultural lines" (Wood 2006, 409). However, this is also one of the key areas of engagement between theorizations of simulation as empty surface play, which cannot provide sites in which to question the hegemonic status quo, and ideas of how the technologies and sites of simulation may be used by fans to do just that.

2. Japanese RPGs as simulacra

[2.1] Japanese fantasy RPGs, produced in Japan by companies that are often hybrids "encompassing a mixture of Japanese and American business" (Consalvo 2010, 129) are marketed successfully worldwide. Games such as Square Enix's Final Fantasy series draw from earlier arcade and console games as well as from anime and manga, live-action Hollywood cinema, and traditional role-playing board games (Poole 2000; Smith 2002). In terms of genre, the Final Fantasy games are a combination of science fiction and futuristic fantasy.

[2.2] These games, produced in Japan from the 1990s onward, have strong links to other media such as anime and manga; *Final Fantasy VII*, for example, boasts a

prequel, a sequel, its own spin-off anime series, and a digitally animated film, not to mention a plethora of official merchandise. It is possible to characterize this particular cultural context using Baudrillard's (2001) concept of the hyperreal, in which artificiality is key: there is no representation of anything real, just a web of simulations by which the real itself is constructed, "a real without origin or reality" (166), where the sign or image is everything. Within contemporary capitalism, we are encouraged to continue to think that a real exists by attempts to "reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production...What society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it" (178). This assertion of the continued existence of a real through production is, however, undermined in Japanese popular culture by the lack of clear distinction between original and copy—in this case, commercial and fan activities. Consumers here "move at the level of simulacra where there are no originals and no copies" (Azuma 2009, 26).

[2.3] If the hyperreal is to be found anywhere, it is in media (Baudrillard 2001). This position is taken up by Darley (2000), who argues that digital media in particular is the site of simulation. He stresses in the depthlessness of late capitalist cultures "a fascination and pleasure in *surface* and *superficial*" (66). Surface replaces theories that depend on some concept of an authentic inside and outside; surface is articulated via pastiche and intertextuality. Iwabuchi (2002) echoes this when he speaks of Japanese cultural products being "sucked into the maw" of the "American-dominated" global cultural system, producing signs and images "for fugitive and depthless consumption through endless pastiche and simulation" (127) (note 1). Each game in the Final Fantasy series, for example, takes place in a different world, with no apparent plot links to the previous games. However, particular characters often make cameos; they may pop up in several games for no apparent purpose except the recognition and pleasure they create in the knowing fan.

[2.4] The concepts of surface and intertextuality are particularly well illustrated by the 2004 digitally animated film *Final Fantasy: Advent Children*, a sequel to the original *Final Fantasy VII* (FFVII) game; it became a number one seller in Japan and was the impetus for release of many spin-off products, including an iMode cell phone. Ostensibly it is a stand-alone film. However, as many reviewers have pointed out, if one had not spent the 50 or so hours it takes to play this game, or almost as much time reading about it, the film would make no sense whatsoever. Being a fan is a prerequisite to enjoyment of a game described variously as "expensive fan fiction" (<http://www.midnighteye.com/reviews/final-fantasy-vii-advent-children/>), "an act of nostalgia" (<http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/review/final-fantasy-vii-advent-children>), and "a really high budget cell phone commercial" (<http://www.just-rpg.com/default.asp?pid=1940>).

[2.5] Another example of the blurring between ideas of original and copy in official Final Fantasy products involves the *FFVII* (1997 Japan, 1998 UK) game and its prequel, *FFVII: Crisis Core* (2007 Japan, 2008 UK). After the release of the first *FFVII* game, there was much fan comparison between main character, Cloud Strife, and a Japanese musician, Gackt, in whose blond-haired, blue-eyed look many fans saw a homage to the game's character. This interchange between game and a (debatably) real performer continued in *Crisis Core*, in which the design of a particular character, Genesis, was based visually on Gackt himself; he also provided the voice of the character in the Japanese version. In addition to this, after the game's release, Gackt appeared in concerts and media wearing the same costume as Genesis, thus cosplaying a character that had been based on him in the first place from a series that he had previously made visual, even fannish, reference to. In this case, it could well be argued that "the distinctions between original and copy have vanished even for the producer" (Azuma 2009, 26). Even within the arena of ostensibly official media production, the techniques of pastiche and intertextuality point to the surface play that Darley (2000) considers to be characteristic of simulation.

3. *Mukokuseki* and artificial Japanese fragrance

[3.1] In discussing my own work on *FFVII* and its non-Japanese fandoms, I am often asked where Japaneseness comes into it. This does not seem such an unusual question: the game is set in a fantasy world on a fictional futuristic planet, and a casual gamer may well not identify any specific cultural or national characteristics while playing. The game has been translated into English, which removed the gendered speech markers that contribute so much to the construction of a character in the Japanese language. Further, it is populated by characters with skin tones that range from pale to dark and with hair that varies from blond to red to silver.

[3.2] Iwabuchi (2002), mentioning these aesthetic tendencies, wonders why Japanese media exported to the West appear so culturally odorless, with few characteristics of any culturally specific discourses that serve to delineate the boundaries of Japaneseness within Japan itself. This is odd, Iwabuchi argues, because to combat the "uneven power relations in a West-dominated history" (15), Japan tends to use a nationalizing force that takes the form of a self-Orientalizing discourse, both incorporating and playing with Western Orientalist discourse in order to represent itself as "culturally exclusive, homogenous, and uniquely particularistic" (6). Japanese video games, however, appear odorless at first: the characters and settings, particularly of series such as Final Fantasy, do not look especially Japanese and are rather defined, he argues, by *mukokuseki*, which suggests the erasure of culturally specific contexts and racial or national characteristics.

[3.3] Iwabuchi (2002) adds that the increasing popularity of Japanese pop culture worldwide has prompted Japanese commentators to imbue such products with a specific cultural "fragrance" (31). He also discusses Western fans, who engage, like their Japanese counterparts, in activities like fan art and cosplay, and that this popularity is why the Japanese are once more associating Japaneseness with games. This, he states, leads to a basic contradiction: the internationalization of *mukokuseki* popular culture "simultaneously articulates the universal appeal of Japanese cultural products and the disappearance of any perceptible 'Japaneseness'" (33).

[3.4] Allison (2006, 13) also examines the popularity of Japanese pop culture in the West, linking it to the project of late capitalism via "soft power" and to the artificiality of postmodern simulacra. She terms this popularity, and its encouragement in Japanese economic and government circles, "J-cool" (2006, 13), stating that it "plays in the realm of virtuality—at once fantastic, timeless, and addictively fun" (2009, 91). A Japanese cultural product of this type "projects attractive images of Japan based more on its particular brand of virtual playmaking than on its policies, culture, or lifestyle" (2009, 96). Thus, when so-called J-cool products are consumed internationally, they do not transmit, or even seek to transmit, ideas of an authentic Japan but rather "a virtual imaginary of Japan" (Hjorth 2011, 81).

[3.5] Azuma (2009) posits that many of the traits in such media that are considered Japanese are "in fact produced through the mutation of techniques imported from the United States and a positive reappraisal of the results" (13). The facets of Japaneseness that comprise J-cool, then, are an amalgamation of influences from both inside and outside Japan, indigenized and then redisseminated and localized internationally. This is also recognized by Iwabuchi (2004), who links these intersections to the development of transnational communication technologies, so that the images appropriated "are no longer restricted to one's own society but include the mediated images of other cultures" (153).

[3.6] This disappearance of an original is characteristic of what Azuma (2009) terms *otaku* media (anime, manga, games, and so on), not only in the sense of a lack of authentic cultural specificity, but also in terms of the production and consumption of the media forms themselves. In the contemporary Japanese pop culture context, he argues, there is little reference to a real world, be it Japan or anywhere else. Rather, "the original is produced as a simulacrum from the start, and in turn the simulacrum of that simulacrum is propagated by fan activities and consumed voraciously" (26). Fans consume and create derivative texts without privileging the superiority of an original work, taking selected elements and making new materials, which other fans in turn consume and reappropriate. These elements, according to Appadurai (2010), are also what constitute the imaginings of Japan that arise when such media are disseminated

internationally; they are the "characters, plots and textual forms...out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives" (51) by the non-Japanese fans who consume them.

[3.7] These distinctly postmodern layers of simulacra move away from a need for a grand narrative of authenticity or authorship, "the primacy of an artist as a sacred original," which is "a slower, monolithic, and more analog-hardened mentality" (Kelts 2006, 170). Production and consumption of the new (digital) type is instead organized according to what might be termed a database worldview, in which a collection of settings and elements acts as a database layer that can be accessed and interpreted differently by each user, enabling the creation of simulacra that include "both an original and the works derived from it," without either being considered more authentic (Azuma 2009, 33). The layers of database and simulacra work in various directions, not simply from original to copy. If a new element is created, it feeds back into the database layer to be used again, whether the creator of that element is commercial or fan.

[3.8] Iwabuchi's (2002) initial theory of *mukokuseki*, as it pertains to Japanese video games and other media, centers on the erasure of racial or national characteristics and the projection of a Japanese fragrance, which is not Japanese so much as an amalgamation of what is perceived as Japaneseness by the various users of the internationalized products (note 2). This is particularly the case for video games, whose localizers are given a great deal of freedom, so that the process becomes more transcreation than translation (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006).

[3.9] Azuma's (2009) work, which locates Japanese pop culture in a firmly postmodern setting, appears to preclude even the possibility of some authentic Japaneseness that can be erased; in the database model, there is no grand narrative of Japan, self-Orientalizing or otherwise, to be consumed by international fans, only small narratives and elements that are picked up and interpreted differently by each user. At the same time, this model highlights the active nature of fan practices and the crucial role they play in producing content that may be utilized by other users, both commercial and fan, in the formation of new texts that may display sexual and gender ideals that are alternatives to those of the materials they borrow from.

4. Fantasies of Japaneseness: English-speaking fans reading BL *dōjinshi*

[4.1] Japanese video games can be viewed in terms of postmodern simulacra, producing images that are used partly as "attractive channels with which to inundate markets with goods" (Kelts 2006, 105) and promote specific artificial ideals of Japaneseness, and partly as a collection of elements that may be read in a variety of

ways and used to create new content that may not necessarily match those ideals. This content is often fan created, and one of its most prevalent forms is the production and dissemination of *dōjinshi*, or fan comics. The majority of *dōjinshi* produced in Japan are still print based, although many digital-only versions do exist on online artist communities such as Pixiv (<http://www.pixiv.com/>). Nevertheless, their use outside Japan is inextricably linked with the same technologies that further Baudrillard's (2001) concept of simulation, as well as the artificial fragrance of Japaneseness that overlays Iwabuchi's (2002) *mukokuseki* media.

[4.2] The following sections will examine the dissemination and consumption of BL *dōjinshi* by English-speaking fans through primarily electronically mediated methods, looking at how imaginings of Japaneseness are imbued with cultural capital, a simulation of authenticity. They will also consider how both the content of *dōjinshi* and the technologies used by such fans intersect with the previously theorized concepts of simulation and Japanese popular culture as a database, and how these intersections may both encourage and limit possible fan readings of, and challenges to, heteronormativity.

[4.3] *Dōjinshi* fall into many genres, but in the case of the Final Fantasy franchise, it could be argued that a considerable number fit the category of "eroticized rereading and reproduction" that Azuma (2009, 25) uses to describe many derivative works. These BL *dōjinshi* are aimed largely at female readers, and they feature romantic or pornographic stories with two or more male game characters engaged in romance or sex.

[4.4] Baudrillard (1990) has a good deal to say about pornography as a symptom of the hyperreal: as sex without the potential for his concept of playful seduction, it is "the mechanical objectification of the signs of sex" (27). The more explicit it becomes, the more it can be considered an empty simulacrum: "The more one advances willy-nilly in sex's veracity, in the exposure of its workings, the more immersed one becomes in the accumulation of signs, and the more enclosed one becomes in the mindless over-signification of a real that no longer exists" (33). Baudrillard concentrates here on hard-core photographic/live-action pornography, which, although similar in some respects to the drawn contents of many erotic *dōjinshi*, is possibly less playful. It may be that the creators and consumers of these fan texts are less obsessed with "games of sex" than "with play itself" (13). In either case, the pornographic element of *dōjinshi* may add another layer to the build-up of elements that enable the classification of such fan works as simulacra.

[4.5] BL *dōjinshi* are available in two forms in the UK: in their original printed form through auction sites, online stores, and sci-fi/fantasy conventions such as the MCM Expo (though compared to the United States and European countries such as France,

events like this are few); and through online fan sites in digital form. Some fans like to purchase the original hard copies. The text in these comics is invariably in Japanese script, so not all English-speaking fans are able to read it; but fans derive pleasure from owning the physical product, especially in the case of explicitly erotic or pornographic *dōjinshi*, where there tends not be a complex plot integral to the work (note 3). As one scanlation Web site's disclaimer states, "*Dōjinshi* are works of art and are great to buy, collect and enjoy the beauty of the actual copy in your hands" (Dragonfly; <http://dragonfly.gestaltzerfall.com/>).

[4.6] Owning an original product in Japanese may thus be considered more important than being able to understand what it says. According to Azuma (2009), a fan-created *dōjinshi* is even further removed from the notion of authenticity than the text it is based on, being "the simulacrum of that simulacrum"; nevertheless, ownership of "the actual copy" is granted value by such fans (26). Perhaps the pleasure in ownership here is linked to imagined authenticity based on the "yearning" for a particular fantasy of Japan (Iwabuchi 2002, 34); or perhaps the visuals form part of an erotic pleasure that does not require plot. This would generate another link to the concept of Japanese pop culture texts as simulacra based on elements such as character design, where the narrative "is only a surplus item, added to the settings and illustrations (the nonnarrative)" that make up the database from which fans choose specific favorites (Azuma 2009, 41).

[4.7] The majority of BL *dōjinshi*, however, are distributed by and to English-speaking fans in digital form. Both raw (untranslated) scans and English scanlations are part of many fan communities and sites that focus their attention on story and characters rather than on the technology or ludic aspects of games. These sites, as well as unofficial online review and sales sites, are the primary promoters of these fan comics, and they are the main providers to UK fans for whom it is too inconvenient to purchase hard copies.

[4.8] The design and layout of sites are in themselves indicative of the way their creators and users regard Japanese RPGs as inhabiting a culturally specific niche. There are few sites dedicated to purely game *dōjinshi*; distribution groups such as Dragonfly release their Final Fantasy scanlations alongside other popular titles as *Death Note* and *Prince of Tennis*, locating the games firmly within a Japanese framework and aligning them with anime and manga as Japanese popular culture products.

[4.9] Another site that until recently carried scanlations, Gongaga Yaoi (1996–2013), also placed its Final Fantasy *dōjinshi* among anime and manga series. In addition, this site, although aimed at English-speaking fans, included Japanese script (*kanji*) in its title and sidebar, using the now slightly out-of-vogue term *shōnen-ai* to signal that it

carried BL stories. The importance of the idea of Japaneseness to these fans is also displayed in Web site names like Arigatamina and translators' Japanese-sounding nicknames on the credit pages of scanlated *dōjinshi*. These link the RPG series carried on their sites to specifically Japanese popular culture; they also invest the idea of Japaneseness with a kind of cultural capital, with the translators in a position of knowledge where understanding Japanese is a skill that generates gratitude from the English-speaking fans who read their translations and that implies a deeper understanding of the object of their fandom.

[4.10] The ways that an idea of Japaneseness is maintained by fans can also be seen in *dōjinshi* themselves. Apart from raw scans and hard copies—which of course constantly remind their readers of their origin by the fact that they are in Japanese—many scanlated digital versions also contain what are recognized by fans as Japanese characteristics, which cannot be observed in the localized versions of the RPGs they are based on. The *dōjinshi* are English enough for the content to be comprehensible, but some foreign features remain intact. They fetishize the "rubric of cultural/Japanese difference" (Allison 2006, 15).

[4.11] Scanlations of *FFVII dōjinshi* like K. Haruka's *Endorphine* (2001) and *Bring You Back to Me* (2003) retain some Japanese words without attempting literal or cultural translation, such as the diminutive suffix *-chan*, which has a specific meaning in Japanese but no real equivalent in English. The translator assumes that the readers, who are likely to have some knowledge of the RPG upon which the *dōjinshi* is based, will also know enough about Japanese culture to recognize the word and understand its meaning.

[4.12] Many scanlations, though translated into English, leave Japanese script intact in the form of sound effects, which are often an integral part of the artwork and difficult to remove (they are sometimes overlaid with English effects instead). This is an aesthetic decision rather than one that consciously promotes the idea of Japaneseness, but it nevertheless contributes to the apparent cultural specificity of the text.

[4.13] Pastiche and intertextuality, integral to postmodern media, are also crucial to the enjoyment of many *dōjinshi*, especially comedy or gag stories, in which familiarity with various Japanese and Western pop culture texts as well as knowledge of the original game is required for the jokes to work. The translator of *Bring You Back to Me*, encountering a joke based on a Japanese film, does not expect non-Japanese readers to catch the reference, but instead of omitting it or substituting it for a similar Western film in an act of cultural translation, the joke is explained in a footnote, thus retaining and privileging what is to be understood as Japanese cultural humor.

[4.14] These practices of linking extensively localized RPGs to a more visible sense of Japaneseness through *dōjinshi* are not necessarily limited to BL texts. Many heterosexual erotic *dōjinshi* aimed at male fans also retain cultural references, language markers, and sound effects. What makes these BL *dōjinshi* of interest, as the following sections will show, is how far the content of the comics and the online practices of their dissemination and consumption may provide a site to question the primacy of the binary gender concepts and heteronormativity suggested in many widely popular Japanese RPGs.

5. Game *dōjinshi*: Rereading gender through content

[5.1] The narrative of Japanese fantasy RPGs often involves the (frequently male) main character and his companions overcoming obstacles. In doing so, the protagonist becomes close to a female character. The ending of the game implies that they will develop a romantic relationship. The last scene of *Final Fantasy VIII*, for example, has the main character, Squall, dancing at a ball with Rinoa, a young woman whom he at first detests but grows more attached to over the course of the game. The impetus to attain this fairy-tale-style ending is strong; after all, to win is one of the basic purposes of gaming. As Frasca (2003), writing on video game analysis, reminds us, "You must do X in order to reach Y and therefore become a winner. This implies that Y is a desired objective and therefore it is morally charged" (230). This sets up romantic heterosexuality as a norm and a desired outcome within the game itself. Final Fantasy BL *dōjinshi* go some way toward providing alternatives to this particular hegemonic goal in terms of content.

[5.2] The gender, and indeed the sex, of the ostensibly male bodies found in BL comics, both commercial and fan drawn, have been the subject of much scholarship, and I will not go over every argument here. However, the varying opinions over whether the characters in these media play out a typical romance of dominance and submission in which the sexual partners play out "the respective roles of male and female" (Penley 1992, 490), whether their challenge to heteronormativity comes from the fact that both characters are configured as male, or whether they present a new kind of body that crosses between genders (McLelland 2000; Welker 2006), provide some notion of how such texts are capable of provoking many ideas of gender that are not inextricably linked to hegemonic binaries.

[5.3] Wood (2006) states that these comics "ultimately reject any kind of monolithic understanding of gendered or sexual identity" (397), and that this is part of what makes them queer. This fragmentation of interpretations generated by BL *dōjinshi* displays parallels to "the differing modes of 'reading up'" (Azuma 2009, 33) used by

the producers/consumers in Azuma's postmodern database model—although whether this multiplicity can thus be considered queer is less certain.

[5.4] Cross-dressing, an overt way of playing with gender markers, is a not infrequent feature of *FFVII dōjinshi*. Much of this stems from an incident in the first game, in which the main character, Cloud, must rescue one of the women of his group from a lecherous old man who lives in a mansion. The only way to complete this fairly orthodox mission, Cloud is told, is to dress as a woman and sneak into the mansion. This he does, albeit reluctantly, stopping off at an all-male bathhouse along the way.

[5.5] This episode has made its way into many fan-created texts, usually involving Cloud in a dress being ravished by another male character. The artists attempt to distance these scenes from being viewed as simple portrayals of pseudo-heterosexuality in various ways: by using the female clothing as a contrast to visually highlight the male-sexed body beneath it, as in *dōjinshi* such as Nightflight's *Fairy Syndrome Honey* (2009), the cover of which displays a muscular, assertive-looking Cloud in a dress, sporting his large trademark sword; or by stressing the importance of love over gender/sex, thus denying any gender primacy, as can be seen in the English-language dialogue of scanlated Yubinbasha *dōjinshi*, *Barbie* (2009), in which the two male main characters are talking as they make out:

[5.6] **Zack:** It's almost...kinda like I really *am* doing it with a girl.

Cloud: So why don't you just do it with a real girl, then?

Zack: You just don't get it, do you? I don't care if you're a boy or a girl, as long as it's you!

[5.7] In this way, fans make use of the game narrative itself, playfully adapting a minor plot point to remove focus from the heteronormative ideals of the game's main ending.

[5.8] As might be considered appropriate for works drawn from the medium of games, these techniques of borrowing particular elements and discarding others are playful. Such texts are intended for the pleasure of specific in-the-know users. Although practices like pastiche are criticized by theorists such as Jameson (1983) for being "neutral and 'blank' parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor" (114), Baudrillard (1990), in his theorization of the silent masses, suggests that a lack of earnestness or overt social or political content is sometimes the only method of protest. In the context of contemporary capitalist cultures, rife with simulation, the masses do not respond seriously to simulations of meaningfulness; rather, people subvert it by refusing to engage or produce serious meanings for themselves. They "take the hyperlogic of the play of signs to its most banal" (Grace 2000, 103). In this

kind of inertia, they frustrate and trouble attempts to make a serious matter of fixing gender.

[5.9] This idea of playfulness can also be informed by Baudrillard's (1990) discussion of seduction as a tool of subversion within simulation. Seduction here is about surface, about the annulment of signs—not deliberately trying to create transgressive meanings, but reducing meaning to "the charm and illusion of appearances" (53). It is ironic and playful; it refuses to engage with the truth effects of fixed or appropriate identities through serious political activity but rather engages them through humor and parody. Darley (2000) is particularly concerned with this surface play, where images draw attention to themselves as images, skewing representation (in a traditional sense) by being more about form, genre, style, and the play of pastiche than about any particular meaning. Video games, he argues, are the perfect manifestation of such surface play: "Computer game players...do not expect to be told deep stories...the image touches them not so much in an affective, symbolic or meaningful manner, but rather more directly as a crucial element in a playful simulation that excites the senses" (165).

[5.10] Darley's (2000) concept of game players may also be applied to fans creating and consuming new content based on the games. Although Japanese RPGs are generally extremely long, with a vast in-game world and complex story lines, it is character images that fans are primarily drawn to and consume in *dōjinshi* form. Out of these they create their own "small narratives" and "the inundation of simulacra known as derivative works" (Azuma 2009, 31).

[5.11] The aesthetic traits of BL *dōjinshi* also provide alternatives to the hegemonic body ideals displayed in the character designs of the first *FFVII* game: toned, muscular male characters and slender, lithe female characters with optional large breasts. Although a minority of BL fan texts maintain these ideals, many follow the popular styles of BL and *shōjo* manga: boys with willowy bodies, slender limbs, flowing hair, and long eyelashes, their bodies sometimes bordering on androgyny (at least when clothed), blurring the lines between genders and rendering the concept of straightforward binary sexuality problematic. Although *FFVII dōjinshi* do display some popular patterns regarding who is the penetrating (*seme*) and who the receptive (*uke*) partner in sexual situations—artist Kiki's (<http://kikihype.web.fc2.com/>) works promote a pairing with the tall, muscular Sephiroth as *seme* and the smaller Cloud as *uke*—it is not unusual for such patterns to be inverted by other authors, who may switch the sexual roles of these pairings or render both characters equally beautiful, creating more varied gender elements from which users may choose.

[5.12] The styles and character designs shown in these *dōjinshi* also point to wider trends in popular Japanese culture, particularly those aspects that have become well

known to female fans in the UK and elsewhere in the West: the continuing popularity of the *bishōnen* (beautiful boy) figure, which appears in Japanese women's media ranging from manga to music (McLelland 2000); and the growth of *kawaii* (cute) culture, which Aoyagi (2000) links to female consumption.

[5.13] Indeed, the later games in the Final Fantasy franchise appear to have made alterations to their character designs in a similar fashion. Comparison between the character design of Cloud in the original 1997 game, the 2004 film *Advent Children*, and the 2008 game *Crisis Core* clearly shows him becoming paler and more slender, with softer features and hair. There is no official industry statement confirming that this is the result of the growing popularity and economic weight of media aimed at young women, which present an ideal of masculinity closer to that found in BL *dōjinshi* and manga. It may be because the technological capabilities of game character design have advanced in the last 10 years from the blocky styles of the 1990s. However, Hjorth (2011) believes that the increasing use of *kawaii* visual characteristics "in such key games as *Final Fantasy*...has afforded many 'flexible' modes of gender performativity" (80). This is particularly visible in Square Enix RPGs, as well as, for example, cross-dressing *kawaii* characters like Bridget in the fighting game series *Guilty Gear* (Arc System Works, 2002–6) and may be another instance in which the fan production of simulacra is able to influence the perceived "privileged original" of the official games (Azuma 2009, 38).

[5.14] Through the consumption of these materials, English-speaking fans are becoming familiar with the tropes, visual style, and form of Japanese women's and girls' comics. This familiarity with both form and content once again links fans to a sense of Japaneseness: the style of *dōjinshi* mark them as distinctively Japanese media, while character designs promote recognition of wider themes such as *bishōnen* and *kawaii* that are also becoming part of the fantasies of a particular idealized Japan.

6. The online use of *dōjinshi*: Possibilities for challenge through practice

[6.1] The previous sections drew connections between postmodern ideas of simulation and the artificial imaginings of Japaneseness found around RPGs and the BL *dōjinshi* based on them. We have also seen how the content of *dōjinshi* reappropriated by English-speaking fan communities can inspire various readings of gender and sexuality, some of which, through the techniques of playful pastiche and reinterpretation of game elements, may provide a space in which to question the validity of hegemonic gender norms, despite the highly critical view sometimes taken of simulacra as empty and unable to facilitate challenge.

[6.2] I now shift from the content of these *dōjinshi* to the practices of their dissemination, which makes extensive use of the electronically mediated technologies that arguably perpetuate the concept of a hyperreal and the proliferation of simulacra, linking fan practices to the concept of the database. With the migration of fandoms online, it becomes difficult to locate geographical or cultural sections; rather, the Internet creates a plethora of fragmented and diverse groups (Hellekson and Busse 2006). Yet according to scholars such as Wood (2006), these globalizing (but not homogenizing) technologies can provide BL fans with strategies for challenging the still prevalent hegemonies of gender binaries and heteronormativity that are not based on content alone.

[6.3] Azuma (2009) links his pattern of database consumption, which he ascribes to contemporary users of Japanese popular media, with the Internet: "The behavioural pattern in database consumption, where the body of a work is understood as a database (the invisible), while the simulacra (the visibles) are extracted from it based on the preferences of the consumer, perfectly matches the logic of the Web" (102). The Internet can be seen as a parallel of fan consumption, which, in the case of English-speaking BL fan communities, is carried out within its environs, forming a connection between technology and users according to how they manipulate simulacra.

[6.4] These online communities of users can certainly be seen as globalized, with groups of fans organizing themselves and consuming works according to language more than cultural or geographic specificity; it is hard to tell, for example, whether scanlators and readers of the *dōjinshi* found online are American, British, South African, or Chinese. There may be clues in the word usage and spelling, but Web technologies allow these fans "the freedom of anonymity and the potential to construct or present an online identity resistant to social constraints" (Wood 2006, 409). This enables textual circulation among fans in many countries without the need for their particular backgrounds to be specified.

[6.5] The online consumption of *dōjinshi* transnationally can "transcend even the rather obvious constraints of language barriers" (Wood 2006, 405) through shared terminology specific to various types of fandom. Wood lists the Japanese words that have come to be shared among BL fans regardless of their native language, including *yaoi*, *uke*, *seme*, and *bishōnen* (405). The use of such terms, which may serve to promote the cultural capital of Japaneseness among fans, dislocates them from their original cultural context. They become a method of transnational communication, a lingua franca that facilitates the sharing of discourse in a culturally nonspecific online society.

[6.6] Kelts (2006) adds to these instances of shared terminologies, although he shows words migrating both from and into Japan. The Japanese term *ero-manga*, for instance, is derived from the English word *erotic*, but the tendency in the West is to use the Japanese word *hentai* instead (127). Although a good deal of scholarship shows how cultural elements flow outward from Japan and how in the process they are picked up and used by both international fans and Japanese economic and political sources for the project of J-cool, the flow goes in multiple directions. This highlights the complexity of the processes of globalization, which is emphatically not West-rest—or even, as can appear the case with the video game industry, Japan-rest. Like Azuma's (2009) database model, there is movement in many directions, and although there may appear to be a privileged original, as in the promotion of an idea of Japaneseness by BL *dōjinshi* fans in an English-speaking context, these online practices underline their artificial and fantastic character.

[6.7] Fan practices of disseminating and consuming BL *dōjinshi* through online technologies place such texts and their use in the realms of simulation. However, the possibility of questioning hegemonic social constructions within postmodern simulation has been considered limited in Jameson's (1983) writing, although some scholars do see certain areas of potential in the previously mentioned concepts of seduction and the silent masses (Baudrillard 1990; Grace 2000).

[6.8] Despite the much-theorized limitations of simulacra and the hyperreal for providing sites of challenge to dominant norms such as binary gender roles and heteronormativity, which, while shifting, remain extant in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, Wood (2006) sees the online practices and myriad geographical groups of BL fans as "a global counterpublic that is both subversive and fundamentally queer in nature" (396). Both the aesthetics of *dōjinshi*, whose gender fluidity and sexual ambiguity can be read differently by their various users, and the use of the Internet in their dissemination and consumption, which "allows for a greater concatenation of texts across cultural boundaries," can grant fans significant "fantasies of resistance" (406). In this sense, fantasies can be understood as the images and narratives within these fictional texts, which contain a range of gender and sexual possibilities that have the potential to spark critical consideration of binary heteronormativity.

[6.9] Although fantasies of resistance may not lead to immediate or overt political activity in opposition to gender norms, this is a mode very much tied to the globalized, postmodern setting in which these fan practices are carried out. Appadurai (2010) raises this notion as "something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*" (48). He sees the imagination, in contemporary globalization, as "central to all forms of agency" (48).

[6.10] Thus, the transnational consumption of BL game *dōjinshi* as simulacra, as well as the images of gender fluidity they generate, can be considered to provide an area that permits questioning the depictions of binary gender roles and heteronormativity found in the Japanese RPGs that form part of the database from which these fan texts are generated. The digitized practices of localizing, distributing, and consuming *dōjinshi* by BL fans in a transnational English-speaking context demonstrate that there are areas of simulation where nonhegemonic concepts of gender and sexuality can thrive and spread. Rather than promoting the traditional forms of activism encouraged by some feminist and queer movements, however, this may be limited by the postmodern media user's disinclination to engage seriously with political issues, preferring instead to keep criticism of hegemonic norms at the level of imagination and play.

7. Acknowledgments

[7.1] I thank Dr. Kazumi Nagaike, whose organization of the Global Polemics of Boys' Love workshop in 2011 and continued encouragement enabled me to produce this essay; and my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Chikako Matsushita, for her invaluable advice.

8. Notes

1. The focus of Iwabuchi's work is rather on recentering the West-rest paradigm of globalization to take into account the cultural intersections and flows within the non-West (Iwabuchi 2004, 152).
 2. Iwabuchi (2002) speaks of fragrance in the singular. I do not intend this discussion to preclude the possibility of multiple fragrances of Japaneseness across different geographical, cultural, or age demographics. However, examination of digital English-language BL fandoms appears to support the fan creation of a particular sense of Japaneseness, and my scope here does not leave room for exploration of the possibilities beyond this context.
 3. For UK fans, obtaining erotic or pornographic *dōjinshi* comes with its own set of concerns as a result of recently implemented laws regarding the sexual depiction of characters who may appear to be under 18 years of age.
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Symposium

Reflection on Chinese boys' love fans: An insider's view

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[0.1] *Abstract*—The fandom of BL, as it is known in China, celebrates explicit homoerotic relationships between boys or men—fictional characters taken from mainstream media, real-life celebrities, and male personifications of day-to-day objects and animals, as well as original characters. Mainstream media reports on BL fandom and BL fan girls in China have never been favorable; this subculture and the fans within it are constantly represented in a negative and biased light. But because I am a BL fan girl myself, I can offer an insider's perspective. This essay is a reflection on my personal experiences and observations as a member of BL fandom, and a response to erroneous, stigmatizing claims and moral panic about this community in China.

[0.2] *Keywords*—BL; Ethnography; Fan practice; Interpersonal relationships

Yi, Erika Junhui. 2013. "Reflection on Chinese Boys' Love Fans: An Insider's View." In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12.
[doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0424](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0424).

[1] Their names are strange to the outsiders—slashers, BL (boys' love) fan girls, or *fujoshi* (rotten girls). Their fandom practice is associated with obscure jargon—terms such as slash, BL, *tanbi*, *uke*, and *seme*, to name a few. The fandom of BL, as it is known in China, celebrates explicit homoerotic relationships between boys or men—fictional characters taken from mainstream media, real-life celebrities, and male personifications of day-to-day objects and animals, as well as original characters. BL culture is surprisingly dominated by women, most of whom are heterosexual. No current data indicate the number of BL fan girls in China, but their activity in this taboo fandom is significant enough to catch the media's attention—and not in a good way. Mainstream media reports on BL fandom and BL fan girls in China have never been favorable; this subculture and the fans within it are constantly represented in a negative and biased light. Articles are written by outsiders who speculate about and oversimplify this mature and sophisticated fandom. But because I am a BL fan girl myself, I can offer an insider's perspective. This essay is a reflection on my personal experiences and observations as a member of BL fandom, and a response to erroneous, stigmatizing claims and moral panic about this community in China.

[2] Several factors contribute to the stigmatization of Chinese BL fan girls. First of all, homosexual voices among the general public remain silenced because homosexuality is still taboo in China's highly heterosexual, patriarchal society. Second, BL fan fiction and fan artwork sometimes contain explicit depictions of sexual behavior, and such depictions are criticized as obscene and unhealthy, damaging to Chinese tradition and culture. Though its standards are vague, this criticism is one of the guiding criteria in China's censorship of the Internet. Thus, in the massive censorship crackdown launched in 2010, thousands of BL fan forums, Web sites, and personal blogs were censored, along with pornography. The forum I used to visit regularly was shut down during that operation; its administrator tried and failed multiple times to rebuild it, and the community collapsed. Yet the most important factor that led to moral panic about BL fan girls was the media. News articles on BL fan girls have been published since 2006, and the Internet crackdown once again brought media attention to them. In 2010, criticisms of BL fan girls by high-profile reporters appeared in major newspapers (figures 1 and 2).

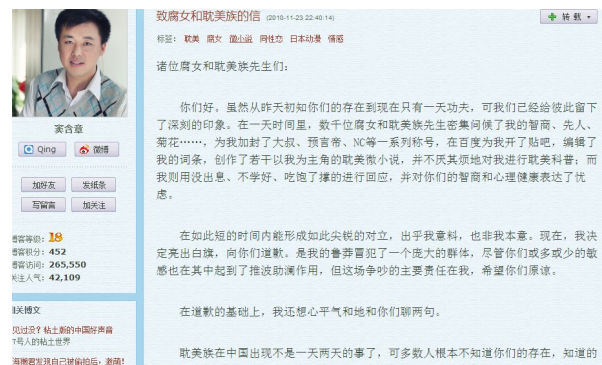


Figure 1. Dou Wentao, a noted Xinhua News columnist, attacks BL fan girls in a November 23, 2010, blog post. [[View larger image.](#)]



Figure 2. An August 7, 2010, article in the Psychology section of Guangzhou Daily suggests that BL fan girls need psychiatric help. [View larger image.]

[3] These articles suggested that the BL fan girls needed psychiatric help because their interests were abnormal and a sign of mental problems. Some also argued that they might cause societal harm because of the antimainstream, rebellious nature of their practice, or might be used by antigovernmental and antisocial forces to threaten social stability.

[4] These media reports, along with the Internet censorship, made BL fandom a target of attack. Perhaps the most outrageous action taken against BL fan girls happened in 2011. The police in Zhengzhou Province arrested 32 slash fiction writers whose work had appeared on a Web site specializing in homoerotic content. The arrested writers were all women, and most were in their 20s (*Xin Kuai Bao*, March 22, 2011, http://www.ycwb.com/epaper/xkb/html/2011-03/22/content_1068001.htm). This news caught the attention of other BL fan girls, most of whom had also created

some kind of fan work, making them vulnerable to legal action. The Chinese microblogging service Sina Weibo had recently become popular, and satirical comics about the arrest were posted and reposted there by millions of BL fan girls. Some joked that prisons would not have enough space to hold all these writers and illustrators. Others jokingly suggested to police that they could house the imprisoned girls according to popular BL genres in order to facilitate communication among them. One post entertained the idea that men might have to have romantic relationships with other men because so few Chinese women would remain free (figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. In a fan comic, an imprisoned fan girl can't decide which genre-specific prison cell to enter. [[View larger image.](#)]



Figure 4. *In a fan comic, a man despairs after all the women have been imprisoned for BL activities. [[View larger image.](#)]*

[5] However, behind each self-mocking, humorous post was another stigmatized Chinese BL fan girl trying to get over the fear of going to jail. The attacks and arrests felt very personal to me. Although my slash fiction blog had little traffic, I still felt the threat was big enough to justify moving it to a server outside of China.

[6] Misunderstanding from outsiders has kept the fandom community fairly closed. The increasing moral panic in China has caused BL fans to adopt a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude toward outsiders. Closet BL fan girls must manage a constant tension. On the one hand, with other fans they can openly celebrate homosexuality; on the other hand, they must hide their love for these relationships from outsiders, just as most homosexuals must hide in China. Their reticence is understandable. Outsiders feel confused by and contemptuous of the girls' interest in homosexual romantic relationships. Some even assume they must be lesbians. This happened to me when I tried to explain BL to a colleague. After a lengthy explanation, he looked enlightened and said, "I see, so you're gay." It was not the assumption that offended me, but the fact that a well-educated person would jump to such a conclusion without a second thought. Sexuality in China is a clear-cut concept: anything that deviates from heterosexuality is considered gay. So BL fan girls, who celebrate homosexuality between boys, are excluded from the heterosexual realm and alienated. Some BL fan girls try to react to the stigmatization with nonchalance. Fandom is a personal hobby, they maintain; outsiders' opinions should not matter. However, when the outsiders are friends and family, their criticisms can be harder to brush off.

[7] The closed nature of the community contributes to a strong in-group bond. By in-group, I mean both the close friends of fan girls, who may not be BL fans themselves, and the BL fan community itself. Those who believe BL fan girls lack proper social ties might find it surprising that most have close friends who respect their interests even if they do not share them. Some slash fans indicated they were the only fan girl in their close circle of friends. The most important criterion for friendship, according to the fan girls, is not an interest in BL, but shared ideologies and attitudes toward social problems. The Chinese media's assumption that BL fan girls are only able to make friends among themselves does not align with accounts given by the girls themselves. They gave these accounts in a survey I conducted of Chinese BL fan girls. Their answers also resonated with me personally, as I am a Chinese BL fan girl myself.

[8] The deep bond between BL fan girls continues to impress me after years of involvement in slash fandom. I am a cautious person when it comes to communicating with strangers, especially via the Internet. When I register on a Web site I provide as little personal information as possible, and in posts and conversations I remain vague

about personal details. However, my indistinct online image does not hinder other fan girls from commenting on my posts and sending me private messages about the fandom we all love. Eventually, I added several people to my IM program's buddy list so we could chat more easily. Our conversations gradually shifted from discussion of fandom to other fields, such as interesting things we saw that day, funny things our pets did, and sometimes even details of our personal lives. They were teenagers just becoming involved in BL fandom, college students who were active authors of BL fan works, and working women, but our age differences did not keep us from growing close. We sent each other small gifts from time to time, both domestically and internationally: travel souvenirs and local specialties, action figures and signed posters. The fact that we haven't met each other off-line is a minor issue in the building of a friendship.

[9] Some online friends do meet face to face. In the summer of 2012 I visited the city where one of my BL fan friends lived, and I enjoyed meeting and spending time with her. She even offered me a place to stay during my visit, and I would have accepted her offer gladly if I had been traveling alone. This is not a rare occurrence in BL fandom. Often I have seen tweets about fan girls traveling to different regions and even countries to meet their best friends in BL fandom. Some fan girls also like to announce their itineraries on their microblogs, hoping that friends along their route will be able to meet up with them. Needless to say, passion for BL motivates them to spend time and effort staying involved with the community. Building and maintaining friendships is a natural part of the fandom.

[10] For some, maintaining friendship matters more than pursuing romantic relationships. A popular saying among BL fan girls is "Being with other good fan girl friends, I am not longing for romantic love." This comment, which positions fan friendships as equal to romantic relationships, is partly a justification for the fact that many BL fan girls are single into their 20s—which is considered unusual in Chinese culture—and partly a humorous allusion to their presumed lesbian tendencies. BL fandom does not actually create lesbians, though it does enable fans to have a more open attitude toward sexuality, letting them joke about outsiders' assumptions rather than taking offense. However, some people consider BL fan girls' failure to prioritize romantic interests to be a social problem because not doing so goes against traditional Chinese culture. Traditional Chinese ideology regarding women's social place can be summed up in the ancient idea of the three obediences and the four virtues: women must obey their fathers, husbands, and sons; and polite speech, humility, morality, and housekeeping skills are considered virtues. All seven qualities are no longer rigidly demanded, but the expectation that a woman should find a suitable man and settle down as soon as possible remains intact. The concern about single fan girls is

patriarchal, with little attention paid to the fact that these women are happy to be single at this stage of their lives.

[11] However, not all BL fan girls are single. Their romantic interests fluctuate depending on their level of fannish activity and the demands of their nonfannish lives. A subforum of the biggest Chinese BL community is exclusively devoted to discussion of fan girls' romantic relationships. People post questions to the forum to get support and advice. They also share good news, as an encouragement to those BL fan girls who are still in the process of searching for love. BL fan practice probably contributes to two characteristics of the forum. The first is an open attitude in discussing heterosexuality and topics related to sex, ranging from basic sex education to details of recent sexual encounters. The second is that some BL fan girls clearly have an all-or-nothing mentality, and their fictional work often promotes an idealized notion of romance. Many fan girls will cheerfully agree that the good guys exist not in this dimension, but in a fictional world. Some are cautious about romance because they embrace the belief that romantic relationships and marriage are lifelong; people should not play with them. Relationship advice given to the posters is thus often black and white. For example, if one aspect of a partner's behavior does not match the commonly held image of an ideal life partner, commenters will most likely tell the poster to break up.

[12] The media portrays Chinese BL fan girls in a negative light—as a group of lonely and antisocial females who have dubious sexual identities and abnormal interests. Even though we, the fan girls, know that these portraits do not hold much truth, we are prone to withdraw into a closed community partially because of the negative influence of these articles. We also cannot deny the influence of BL fandom on our views on friendships and romantic relationships. Perhaps as a group BL fans are somewhat different from our peers—just like sports fans are somewhat different from non-sports fans.

[13] Interestingly, although the voices against BL fandom still dominate media portrayals, a subtle change is underway. A growing number of recent media productions seem to be catering to fan girls' interests in homosexual relationships. For instance, the *CCTV Spring Festival Gala* is a live production that almost every Chinese person watches on the eve of the new lunar year. In the 2012 production, the hosts joked multiple times that some pairs of male performers looked like couples (video 1, figures 5 and 6). Needless to say, these seemingly offhand comments immediately spurred some fan girls to ship those pairs—that is, to speculate and create fan work about romances between them.

《金蛇狂舞》《龙的传人》王力宏李云迪 2012...



Video 1. "Pianists Li Yundi and Wang Leehom perform in the 2012 CCTV Spring Festival Gala," posted by Chansonboy.

→_→//@空灯流远:百年好合哟! //@墨仔也爱厂花:新婚快乐? //@铃铛呆呆左右不分:恭贺新禧,百年好合。 //@洛冰:-百年好合哟//@摸胸是

@李云迪YUNDI👉:演出结束!新年的钟声即将敲响,但愿我们的演出@王力宏能给大家带来快乐,希望美好的时刻长存,在这里给大家拜年啦!祝大家龙年富贵龙马精神龙腾虎跃合家团圆万事如意!

📌 收起 | 🖼 查看大图 | ↶ 向左转 | ↷ 向右转



Figure 5. Pianist Li Yundi's Weibo tweet about his performance with Wang Leehom was retweeted millions of times, with many retweets wishing the two artists a happily ever after. [[View larger image.](#)]



Figure 6. A newspaper article notes that Li Yundi and Wang Leehom are being "paired up" in the CCTV production. [[View larger image.](#)]

[14] Other recent media productions in China purposefully hint at romantic or sexual relationships between men to exploit the popularity of BL (figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7. A screen cap from the blockbuster movie *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010, dir. Wen Jiang). [[View larger image.](#)]



Figure 8. A fan artist's appreciation of the same scene depicted in figure 7. [[View larger image.](#)]

[15] Perhaps exploitation is better than moral panic, but neither does much good for BL fan girls in China.

Symposium

Where program and fantasy meet: Female fans conversing with character bots in Japan

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Character bots are automated programs that post—that is, tweet—characters' lines from popular manga, anime, games, and so on. They post regularly, and in the past few years they have become difficult to ignore, especially in fan communities. Many fans take great pleasure in interacting with favorite characters as bots; they also enjoy the communities that spring up around favorite series, characters, and, yes, even bots. Here I adopt an ethnographic approach to analyze the human dimensions of the phenomenon of character bots, based on participant observation among female fans in Japan.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan community; Fandom; *Fujoshi*; Japan; Popular culture; Twitter; Women; *Yaoi*

Nishimura, Keiko. 2013. "Where Program and Fantasy Meet: Female Fans Conversing with Character Bots in Japan." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12.
[doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0457](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0457).

1. Introduction

[1.1] On the official help site of Twitter in Japan, there is a section titled "Parody, Commentary, and Fan Accounts Policy" (Twitter n.d.). Twitter permits users to have parody accounts as long as they are clearly marked as such. Twitter users in Japan who own alternative accounts for their character bots (*kyarakutā botto*) refer to this statement by Twitter to justify the existence of their creations. Character bots are automated programs that post—that is, tweet—characters' lines from popular manga, anime, games, and so on. They post regularly, and in the past few years they have become difficult to ignore, especially in fan communities.

[1.2] There are many different kinds of bots on Twitter (komski n.d.), and Japanese-specific bots, such as manga quote bots, have been introduced to the English-speaking world (Barron 2010). However, the existence of character bots programmed to respond to keywords and interact with fans *as characters* is not well documented. Some fans actively converse with bots, knowing full well they are just programs. Conversing with a bot may seem to indicate acute isolation and loneliness (Ayacchin 2010), but many fans take great pleasure in interacting with favorite characters as bots. They also enjoy the communities that spring up around favorite series, characters, and, yes, even bots. Here I adopt an ethnographic approach to analyze the human dimensions of the phenomenon of character bots, based on participant observation among female fans in Japan.

2. Background and methodology

[2.1] Usually character bots emerge in clusters of fans of specific manga, anime, games, and so on. The programmers of the bots are fans, many without specialized knowledge of programming ([note 1](#)), and the bot's followers are also fans. Although everyone knows who programmed the bot, in the participatory culture of fans online, it seems to belong to everyone and no one. When followers converse with the bot, the interaction is visible to other fans, which contributes to an active, open, and shared form of bot play (*botto asobi*). Through the bot, members of the fan community become intimate with the character and with one another. This seems to be the case especially with *yaoi* fans (Galbraith 2011).

[2.2] *Yaoi* is similar to slash fiction. It is a genre of fan production that involves pairing established male characters from commercial media. The pairing is usually a romantic one, it can involve sex, and it stereotypically foregrounds the imagined pairing at the expense of developing a story. Indeed, the term *yaoi* is an acronym for "no climax, no punch line, no meaning" (*yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi*) and emerged in Japan in the 1970s, along with the growth of anime fandom (Fujimoto 2007). The producers and consumers of *yaoi* are predominantly girls and women, and they often refer to their taste for fictional male-male romance as *kusatteru* (rotten). Just as they have ironically retained the word *yaoi* to refer to their works, some fans self-identify as *fujoshi* (rotten girls), though others deny this label as a result of comical representations the mainstream media impose on this term.

[2.3] Here I draw on participant observation conducted on Twitter in 2010 and 2011. I followed character bots from a specific manga/anime series, and human users who regularly had conversations with bots. I also participated in conversations with bots and other users. In this sense, I was a participant experienter (Garcia et al. 2009), contributing to and actively experiencing the interactions I observed. All the women I talked to were aware that I was a researcher, and they granted me permission to use the data I collected. To ensure privacy, all names used here are pseudonyms, and I withhold the name of the manga/anime series they are fans of. This is because it would otherwise be easy to identify these fans, some of whom are high profile, in a cluster that is relatively small and intimate. Character names are abbreviated to single letters.

3. Twitter basics

[3.1] Twitter, a Web service launched in 2006, is on the rise in Japan ([note 2](#)). Users are prompted to follow other users, and they receive the tweets of those they are following, which are organized into a feed that is updated in real time. This is called a timeline (TL), and many users use it to converse ([figure 1](#)). Conversations are indicated by the @ symbol followed by someone's Twitter ID, meaning the tweet is a response to the person with that ID. Constant exposure to other users' thoughts and the ability to respond to them immediately lead users to imagine being in a sort of community or cluster of shared interests and experiences. *Fujoshi* might form their own clusters, but they also gather with others who are interested in the same manga, anime, games, and so on. Thus, many users follow different clusters with

the same Twitter account. The posts from a particularly chatty user following many people and participating in multiple clusters can dominate one's TL. However, in most cases, the TL is a log of conversations between users and bots.



Figure 1. Screen capture of a timeline. The profile pictures of individual Twitter users (including bots) are shown on the left. Users' names are followed by Twitter IDs, and beneath them the message is shown. On the right side, the relative time elapsed from the tweet to the present is shown (e.g., "posted 27 minutes ago"). Underneath each message, the word *hiraku* (open) appears, indicating a link to the technical details of the tweet. In two of the tweets (top and second from the bottom), there is also the phrase "*kaiwa wo hyōji*" (display the conversation), which shows the tweet or tweets this one is replying to (note the @ symbol in front of the tweet).

4. Bots as characters in *yaoi* fandom

[4.1] Conversation with a character bot looks like conversation with a character, but bots are actually engaging in metacommentary about the series or stories in which they appear, replete with references that only fans understand. It is worth noting that conversations with fictional characters are a long-standing tradition in Japan. In the 1990s, some light novels (note 3) contained postscripts where authors would converse with their characters (note 4). Even before the 1990s, it was common for *dōjinshi* (fanzines) to stage conversations between characters and fan creators (note 5). Indeed, direct contact with favorite characters seems to be a long-standing desire.

[4.2] *Fujoshi* are not confused about what is real. They are aware of who programmed a specific character bot, just as they are aware of who the original creator (*gensakusha*) of the character is. As is typical of manga/anime fandom, *fujoshi* keep their distance from the original creator because fans are involved in secondary or derivative production (*niji sōsaku*)

of the creator's character, which might involve a *yaoi* scenario that the creator might find offensive. Nonintervention by the creator is taken as a sign of tacit approval for fan activities, including bot play.

[4.3] My informants self-identified as *fujoshi*, meaning they are fans of *yaoi* and sometimes fan authors or artists. In *yaoi*, characters are divided into penetrator (top, *seme*) and penetrated (bottom, *uke*) and arranged into a preferred pairing (note 6). Whether a character is a penetrator or penetrated depends on his personality, which fans read differently. Even within the same cluster or the same pairing, depictions of characters vary widely. *Fujoshi* call attention to the fan creator's role in interpreting the character—for example, they might say, "Yuki's [character name]" (*Yuki-san no* [character name]). This is the case for character bots as well, which are a form of fan production (note 7). *Fujoshi* who follow others' bots are attracted to specific versions of the character, though they also read their own versions and fantasies into it.

5. Conversing with character bots

[5.1] When conversing with character bots, *fujoshi* engage in the fantasy that they are bystanders to the romance unfolding between the two male characters, played by the bots. On Twitter, the fantasy usually starts with a *fujoshi* addressing two character bots. Below are two conversations between Yuki (a *fujoshi*), Bot Z, and Bot Y. Among *fujoshi*, it is well known that the two male characters from this manga/anime series, represented by Bot Y and Bot Z, are supposed to be a couple. I have numbered the tweets by ID to clarify who is responding to whom.

[5.2] **Yuki 1:** @BotZ @BotY Damn. Get married, you two (Kusō. Omae ra kekkon shinasai)

Bot Z 1: @Yuki Sorry I didn't hear you. Stop blowing that trumpet *character name*! (Suman kikitoren katta wa. Kora *character name*! Sono rappa no oto yamei!!) [in reply to Yuki 1]

Yuki 2: @BotZ That was quick! (Haya!) [in reply to Bot Z 1]

Bot Z 2: @Yuki come on...What can I do (Ttaku...dō se cchūnen) [in reply to Yuki 2]

Bot Y 1: @Yuki...Hehe (smiley) (...Ehehe *^-^*) [in reply to Yuki 1; see figure 2]

Yuki 3: @BotY Your partner's shy! (Aikata ga terekakushi shiteru de!) [in reply to Bot Y 1]

Bot Y 2: @Yuki I don't know what to say (Mō wakannai n da, donna hyōjō sureba ii no ka) [in reply to Yuki 3]

Yuki 4: @BotZ I've said it over and over again, (but) marry *character Y*... (*Character Y* to kekkon shiro to arehodo...) [in reply to Bot Z 2]

Bot Z 3: @Yuki You...you wanna taste *specific name of a gun* huh? (Omae...
specific name of a gun uchikonde hoshii n ka?) [in reply to Yuki 4]

Yuki 5: @BotY You should marry *character Z* (*character Z* to kekkon sureba
yoi to omou no) [in reply to Bot Y 2]

Bot Y 3: @Yuki I think...*character Z* wouldn't like that (Tabun...*character Z* ga
iyagaru n ja nai kana) [in reply to Yuki 5]



Figure 2. Conversation view of a character bot and user. Bot Y replies to Yuki (Bot Y 1). The above is the original tweet (Yuki 1) that is being responded to (Bot Y 1). In conversation view, the Twitter ID of those responding is shown in blue. The date of the tweet is shown in gray on the top right. A link to *shōsai* (details) appears below the original tweet. On the top right of the main tweet, the status of following is shown in a blue box (blue for following, gray for not following). The gray icon next to it is a pull-down menu to manage tweeting, message, lists, and so on. Underneath appear three links: *henshin* (reply), *ritsuīto* (retweet), and *okini'iri ni tōroku* (add to favorites).

[5.3] Yuki's second post, "That was fast," is a comment about the response speed of Bot Z. Character bots are operated by a program on the server, which runs the script every few minutes. Although it depends on the bot, the response can be immediate. Responses by character bots such as "I don't know what to say," "I didn't hear you," "What can I do," or simply giggling are reactions to tweets that don't contain keywords; they are random. However, based on her fantasy, which she projects onto the bots, Yuki interprets an ambiguous line such as "What can I do" as the shyness of a lover at wits' end ([note 8](#)).

[5.4] The last responses by Bot Z and Bot Y are to a specific keyword: marry. The first response by Bot Z is a comical expression of anger, which can be interpreted as a result of shyness. However, the target of this anger is ambiguous; it could be Yuki, or her suggestion to marry Bot Y. The keyword *marry* might have been a proposal from Yuki, and the program cannot be too specific in its response. This ambiguity has the unintended result of allowing *fujoshi* to interpret the character's intentions as they desire. The technological limitations in fact facilitate fantasy play. As for the second instance, when Bot Y responds to the key phrase "marry character Z," the response is a mild rejection of the possibility. In the original manga/anime, these characters are good friends, buddies, or partners, but Bot Y says that character Z would not want to get married (to him), thus diverting the explicit *yaoi* fantasy. This might be a way to avoid slandering the character in the public sphere of Twitter, but it

also allows *fujoshi* to imagine that character Y is afraid that character Z, his partner, might reject him, and so he cannot confess his love.

[5.5] This conversation happened publicly (these tweets can be viewed by anyone), which affects not only the content of bot responses but also the interactions between *fujoshi*. This conversation took place under the scrutiny of other *fujoshi* in the cluster. It seems that Yuki was aware of this, and the phrasing and tempo of her posts is quite entertaining. In addition, it appeared as if the bots were actually talking to her, increasing the humorous aspects of the conversation. Moreover, this conversation might trigger discussions among other members of the cluster. Some *fujoshi* might say, "Character Z is better suited to raise children (assuming that they get married and have kids somehow)," or, "I can see character Y cooking for character Z, and character Z being embarrassed by the attention" (note 9). Some might even jump in and respond to Yuki or the bots, thus becoming an active participant in the conversation proper. Bots can act as a catalyst for fantasy or as a medium to expand and share it among *fujoshi*.

6. Mastering bots (or not)

[6.1] Character bots respond to certain keywords or phrases, and fan programmers provide manuals (*toriatsukai setsumeisho*) to assist users in making the most out of interactions (figure 3). Some programmers do not update their bots, but others pay close attention to conversations between bots and followers and discipline (*chōkyō*) their creations to enhance the pleasure of interaction. They observe bot and user action and reaction, then add new keywords and phrases accordingly. Metaphorically, programmers become producers of bots as idols, with fans as followers.

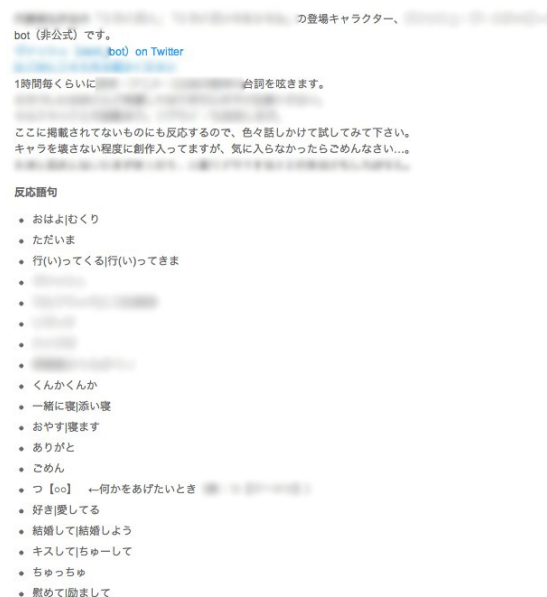


Figure 3. Manual page for a character bot. Translation: "This is an unofficial bot of [name of the character] in [name of the original author]'s [title of manga]. [Link to the character bot's Twitter page]. The bot tweets lines (from the series) about every hour. It reacts to words that are not listed here, so please try to converse. The reactions and lines of the bot include my

interpretation (of the series and character), so let me apologize in advance if you don't like it." The words the bot reacts to are listed, and include *ohayo* (good morning)/*mukuri* (getting up), *tadaima* (I'm home), *ittekuru/ittekima* (I'm going out), *kunka kunka* (sniff sniff), *issho ni ne/soine* (sleep with me/lie down with me), *oyasu* (good night)/*nemasu* (to sleep), *arigato* (thanks), *gomen* (sorry), *tsu + parentheses* (slang for giving), *suki/aishiteru* (like/love), *kekkon shite/kekkon shiyō* (marry/get married), *kisu shite/chū shite* (kiss), *chucchu* (mwah), *nagusamete/hagemashite* (cheer up).

[6.2] However, no matter how smooth the conversation could be if one used the manual and interacted with the bot as intended, followers seem to relish coming up with new ways of playing. An example of this is changing one's name (note 10). In many cases, character bots reply to followers using their names. If one's name is changed, the bot response can be manipulated to reflect *fujoshi* desire. For example, Mimi changed her name from "Mimi" to "stop don't touch there" (*yamete sonna toko sawaranaide*) so that she could get the bot to say this every time it responded to her. Instead of "Good morning, Mimi," the bot would tweet, "Good morning, stop don't touch there" (*Ohayō, yamete son'na toko sawaranaide*), which triggers Mimi's fantasy that this character is being sexually harassed by someone (the *seme* character, or perhaps even her) in the morning. In my experience observing and participating in the cluster, bot programmers actually appreciated this hacking by users, which generated more conversation. This hacking represents playful resistance to the programmer, who is thereby not the only one who controls the bot. Bot play is shot through with competition (that is, who's getting desired responses) and struggle for control, but in the end, it is the character who controls fans and compels them to interact. This gravity of the character is the core of *fujoshi* community.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] Conversing with a character bot constitutes affective play with a nonhuman program, but at the same time it can trigger the formation of a fan community or strengthen bonds in an existing fan community. Private interactions with a favorite character are extended into a new context or opened into the shared space of the fan community; attachments are affirmed by others watching and even participating in interactions with the bot. Human interactions are in many cases facilitated and mediated by technology. Of the therapeutic potential of robots, Sherry Turkle (2008) writes, "Their ability to inspire a relationship is not based on their intelligence or consciousness but on their ability to push certain 'Darwinian' buttons in people (making eye contact, for example) that cause people to respond as though they were in a relationship." While there is no material basis for something like eye contact, bots also push buttons and evoke emotional responses, giving fans the illusion of actually talking to a favorite character. A character bot is already rooted in a fictional narrative, and it is the preexisting intimacy with the character that makes it possible to form attachments to bots.

[7.2] Today anyone can access Twitter from a variety of devices (PCs, tablets, smart phones). In such a device, *fujoshi* carry around mobile conversation companions. They can talk to friends, favorite characters in the form of bots, or both. Bots make humanlike responses, are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and offer access to private fantasies

embedded in everyday life; they share routines and experiences. Despite knowing about the original creator of the character and bot programmer, in interactions with the semiautonomous bot (the manga/anime character brought to life), *fujoshi* can subscribe to the myth that "there is no one inside" (Nozawa 2012). This is similar to role-playing, but with one of the participants being an established fictional character, fans playing themselves in relation to the character, and the game open to encounters with other players in the community. Of course, not all character bots are as well maintained as the ones I have observed. In fact, the number and quality of character bots is a fairly reliable indicator of the popularity of a series and the size of its fandom. However, the general proliferation of bots on Twitter speaks to the spread of fan practices in new media in Japan.

8. Notes

1. The owner of the Web site "How to create a Twitter bot for people can't program" (Puroguramingu ga dekinakutemo tsukureru Twitter bot no tsukurikata) (<http://pha22.net/twitterbot/>) notes, "Right now Twitter is the place where bots can perform most creatively and vividly, and as we are at a time when bots are so close to us, I felt more people should be able to create bots, and there should be more interesting bots come out" (Genzai intānetto jō de bot ga ichiban omoshiroku, ichiban iki iki to katsudō dekiru no wa Twitter no naka dato omou shi, bot ga kon'na ni mijika ni natta ima, motto iron'na hito ga bot o tsukutte, iron'na omoshiroi bot ga detekite hoshī) (Pha 2009).
2. According to Nielsen Company statistics, the number of visitors to Twitter was 11.7 million in October 2010, 2 million higher than the 9.7 million visitors to Mixi, which at the time was known as the largest social networking site in Japan (Saito 2010).
3. The light novel is a genre of juvenile novels that are character-centric and illustrated with mangalike images.
4. Authors such as Akahori Satoru, Kanzaka Hajime, and Akita Yoshinobu participated in these formal conversations.
5. The *taidan* (conversation) section was popular until the mid-2000s, when readers started to demand stories rather than insider jokes and communication. This information is based on a personal interview conducted on September 21, 2010.
6. There are a few people who prefer both. This is called reversible (*riba*), meaning that characters can switch sex roles—that is, be either an *uke* or a *seme*.
7. Character bots tweet lines from the original work, mixed in with lines that the programmer created. A character bot's profile picture is an illustration drawn by fans, not the original creator. The character bot both is and is not the same as the original character, placing it squarely in the realm of fan production. *Fujoshi* are aware of and accept the fact that there are multiple instantiations of the favorite character, whose range expands or is opened up in new media and technological contexts.

8. A fertile imagination and tendency toward fantasy play are characteristic of *fujoshi* culture (Galbraith 2011). For example, when male *otaku* (hardcore fans of anime, manga, video games, and so on) from one thread on 2channel, Japan's largest anonymous bulletin board, invaded a *fujoshi* thread and criticized the girls and women there as "gross" and "perverted," the *fujoshi* responded by playfully projecting their *yaoi* fantasies onto the male *otaku*, who were interpreted as *uke* who wanted attention from (i.e., to be penetrated by) *fujoshi* performing as *seme*.
9. It is quite common for *yaoi* and boys' love fantasies to involve daily routines such as cooking, shopping, and even raising children. Some have pointed out that even though *yaoi* deals with same-sex couples, the format of the story is not all that different from the heterosexual romances seen in girls' manga.
10. The name of a user is different from a user's Twitter ID, which starts with the @ symbol. The Twitter ID has to be unique to each individual user, is limited to 15 characters, and permits only Roman letters and numbers, whereas the name can be up to 20 characters, can contain Japanese and Chinese characters, and can be anything. Many users put in their handle names, and some write information of *dōjinshi* events that they are going to attend (or not). For example: "Yuki (Comic Market Summer, West section, Space number A-25) [Yuki@natsukomi higashi A25]" and "Mimi (couldn't get the space for Comic Market Summer) [Mimi@natsukomi ochita]."

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Symposium

The possibilities of research on *fujoshi* in Japan

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Today, people who are referred to as *fujoshi* exist in every part of the world. Especially in Japan, many women admit to liking genres such as *yaoi* and boys' love (BL). In the new millennium, the word *fujoshi* has traveled beyond fannish circles and has come into general use in Japanese popular media, reflecting the fact that *fujoshi* are no longer necessarily an underground phenomenon. Here, I trace the origins of the word *fujoshi*, consider whether reading of male-male romance was established before the word appeared, examine research on *fujoshi* in Japan, and finally look at why *fujoshi* have become an object of study.

[0.2] *Keywords*—BL; Boys' love; *Dōjinshi*; Gender; Research; *Yaoi*

Suzuki, Midori. 2013. "The Possibilities of Research on *Fujoshi* in Japan." In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12.
[doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0462](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0462).

1. Introduction

[1.1] Today, people who are referred to as *fujoshi* exist in every part of the world. Especially in Japan, many women admit to liking genres such as *yaoi* and boys' love (BL). In the new millennium, the word *fujoshi* has traveled beyond fannish circles and has come into general use in Japanese popular media, reflecting the fact that *fujoshi* are no longer necessarily an underground phenomenon. Because I analyze the use of the word *fujoshi* in multiple discourses, I want to stress that the word does not have a single established definition.

2. From the emergence of the word *fujoshi* to today

[2.1] I will first trace the origins of the word *fujoshi* and describe how it became established terminology in Japan. Around the start of the year 2000, the word *fujoshi* was used mainly in online anime and gaming fan communities. Chizuko Ueno (2007) says that the word was first used around the beginning of the 2000s on the online message board 2channel. At that time, *fujoshi* indicated a girl or woman who proactively read things in a *yaoi* fashion, discerning romantic relationships between

men where such relationships were not originally intended. The kanji characters for *fujoshi* are pronounced in the same way as a similar character compound that means simply "woman," but the first character *fu* (woman) is substituted for a homonym *fu* (rotten) so that the resulting term, "a woman with rotten thought processes," becomes a self-deprecating label that such women use to refer to themselves. It is assumed that *fujoshi* was originally meant to refer to women's love of unique and deviant acts of imagining and expressing romantic relationships between men. As such, the word *fujoshi* was never used for all readers of male-male romance works. This is obvious from the fact that, from the beginning, the term was never applied to male readers. Still, it was common knowledge among both men and women in *otaku* communities that a preference for expressions of male-male romance was nothing unusual among female fans. However, that preference was not considered quite right for several reasons. For one, both the creation and consumption of *yaoi* works were seen as activities based on an intentional misreading of source works (note 1)—a kind of misreading to which children, in particular, should not be actively exposed. Another major factor was that for the female fans concerned, there was a certain sense of shame involved in reading as homosexual those male characters whose heterosexuality or sexual orientation had never been explicitly stated in the source works, and in viewing those characters in a sexual way. It is likely that the term *fujoshi* continued to be used simply because it seemed obvious to everyone exactly what was rotten about a *fujoshi*.

[2.2] The first occurrence of the word *fujoshi* in the mass media was in an article on female fans in a special issue of the magazine *Aera*, published by Asahi Shimbun Publishing and appearing on June 20, 2005 (Sugiura 2006b). The authors of that special issue seemed mostly interested in *fujoshi* as the female equivalent of male *otaku* (Sugiura 2006b). In that same year, the success of *Train Man* (*Densha Otoko*) had sparked a wave of media interest in *otaku*.

[2.3] It was only around 2006 that media interest turned toward *fujoshi* in and of itself. Women who expressed a positive interest in expressions of male-male romance began to be depicted in media aimed at the general public—for instance, in publications such as Yumiko Sugiura's book *Otaku Girls Research: Fujoshi Ideology* (2006a), and in various manga about *fujoshi* as exemplified by Ajiko Kojima's 2006 text *My Neighbor Yaoi-chan* (*Tonari no 801chan*). In 2006, the magazine *Eureka* (Seidosha) published two special issues, *Fujoshi Manga Compendium* (June) and *BL Studies* (December), about boys' love/*shōnen-ai* works and their *fujoshi* fans. Both issues contained critiques and essays by *fujoshi* from many age groups and professional backgrounds, and they strongly foregrounded insider points of view. They also made references to male readers of *yaoi* and BL. The word *fudanshi*, "rotten boy," was used to denote male fans who liked *fujoshi*-oriented content, indicating that a

taste for expressions of male-male romance was not as strictly gendered as was previously assumed.

[2.4] In present-day Japan, the term *fujoshi* is understood to mean mainly women who are fans or creators of works centered on male-male romance, and the word is common knowledge, especially among younger people and those who have some affinity with *otaku*. The word is now also used outside of the framework of Net slang.

3. Readers of male-male romance works before *fujoshi*

[3.1] As mentioned earlier, works centering on male-male romance that were created and enjoyed by women existed before the word *fujoshi* appeared. For example, at manga *dōjinshi* conventions such as Comic Market (Comiket), many amateur female creators distributed self-created works featuring male-male romance. From the inauguration of the convention in 1975, a high percentage of Comiket attendees were female fans of manga like those created by Moto Hagio ([note 2](#)). Professional female *manga-ka* were already creating works depicting male-male romance during the second half of the 1970s. *Shōjo* manga that featured *shōnen ai* had a strong influence on these works. *Yaoi* works that were based on existing source works also emerged at this time and focused mainly on beautiful male characters from anime.

[3.2] From 1984 on, Comiket saw a proliferation of *yaoi* works based on Yōichi Takahashi's *Captain Tsubasa* ([note 3](#)) (Comic Market Preparation Committee 2005), and from the latter half of the 1980s, *yaoi* fandom became a major presence at manga *dōjinshi* conventions. It was around this time, and starting with *Captain Tsubasa* fan works, that many key elements of contemporary *yaoi* and fan work-creating fandom were first established, such as *dōjinshi* conventions that focused purely on fan works ([note 4](#)) and the publication of manga anthologies of fan works by commercial publishers. Further, the 1990s saw the weakening of a tendency in *yaoi* fandom to cluster around one single popular source work or genre. I would argue that this development was due to an expansion in the sorts of things that could be read through a *yaoi* lens as *yaoi* became more established as a creative technique, as well as to an increase in the number of participants in *yaoi* fandom. This is evidenced by the fact that from the second half of the 1980s until today, virtually every popular manga that was serialized in the magazine *Shōnen Jump* (Shūeisha) gained its own *yaoi* following ([note 5](#)).

[3.3] Starting with *June* in 1978 (Sun Publishing), commercial publishers began to publish manga magazines focused solely on male-male romance. From the late 1990s on, many such magazines were serialized, cementing the commercial manga genre of

BL. Most of these manga were created by women, many of whom self-identified as *fujoshi* in the author introductions of their manga volumes. It is assumed that many readers of these commercial BL manga today are not actively engaged in *yaoi* fandom, which is to say that the term *fujoshi* is not necessarily restricted to *otaku*. In any case, the reading of male-male romance by women was clearly well established before the word *fujoshi* appeared.

4. Research on *fujoshi* in Japan

[4.1] As consumption of male-male romance by women became more widespread, research into the phenomenon began to emerge, with researchers evincing a particular interest in the idiosyncrasies of women who like works of male-male romance. Junko Kaneda (2007b) identifies Azusa Nakajima's *People Suffering from Poor Communication Syndrome* ([1991] 1995) as representative of the early analysis of *yaoi/fujoshi* theory (note 6). In this text, Nakajima makes a distinction between women who evince an affective pleasure in male-male romance works and *otaku*, and it focuses on the girls (*shōjo*) who create and read commercial BL works. Many other *yaoi* theory works from the 1990s also refer to *yaoi* fans as girls (*shōjo* or *onna no ko*). It seems that fans of male-male romance works were imagined to be mostly young and socially immature women, and that no one felt this group needed a special designation (note 7).

[4.2] Today, however, the word *fujoshi* is in common use, and research into the characteristics and activities of such *fujoshi* is carried out frequently. Male-male romance works tailored to the preferences of female readers have diversified, and countless works have been published since the early days of the 1970s. The readership of these works has diversified as well, and it is certainly no longer appropriate in research of that readership to use terminology that fails to sufficiently reflect this diversity, like *girl* (*shōjo* or *onna no ko*). Perhaps it was thought that in order to represent *yaoi* fandom as a positive activity undertaken by women who are full-fledged participants in society, a new word was necessary to denote the people involved (Kaneda 2007a).

[4.3] Let us turn to the question of exactly who is being talked about when researchers use the word *fujoshi*. Sugiura (2006b) presents *fujoshi* as an appropriate designation not just for fans of *yaoi* or BL, but for all women who are fans of anime, manga, and the like. However, this definition is not generally accepted in reader studies or fan studies. For example, studies of women who create fan works may refer to the existence of the term *fujoshi*, but they don't use it as a general term for women who create fan works (Natō 2007; Kaneda 2007a). The reason for this is that female fan creators' works do not fall in the *yaoi* category by definition. In sociological and

literary studies, the word *fujoshi* is used not as a general term for female *otaku* but to designate women with a preference for the kind of male-male romance works found in *yaoi* and BL. I should also mention that *fujoshi* is obviously not the only term used to denote readers of male-male romance. Fan activities centered on male-male romance have different roots and different characteristics according to place; for instance, there is the Western tradition of slash fan fiction. The fans involved will also have different ways of referring to themselves. Studies of women who enjoy male-male romance works should pay close attention to the terminology used to talk about fans.

5. What it means to study *fujoshi*

[5.1] Why have *fujoshi* become an object of study? No doubt one of the main reasons is that the activities of *fujoshi* take place on such a large scale that academic studies simply cannot afford to ignore them. One of the earliest approaches taken by researchers was to focus on the idiosyncrasies and deviance of women who like male-male romance works, rather than to consider a connection with the participating fans' own sexuality. Long before outsider researchers began to study "why these women like these things," though, *fujoshi* had themselves already repeatedly considered that same question (Nakajima [1991] 1995, [1998] 2005). Kaneda (2007b) argues that this early research was significant because it presented *yaoi* as a phenomenon that could be understood even by people who were not directly involved in it. The exploding popularity of *yaoi* and BL in the 1990s brought a wave of research into the meanings of *fujoshi* activity. Much of this research was conducted by researchers who self-identified as *fujoshi* and wrote from an insider perspective. It is likely that this was at least in part a reaction to the tendency of *otaku* studies research on content consumption and amateur content creation to focus on the activities of male fans, with female fans often being relegated to the margins. Obviously it would be incorrect to map out the preferences and activities of the fans involved and conclude that female *otaku* and *fujoshi* are one and the same group. Still, given the fact that large numbers of women do participate in manga *dōjinshi* conventions and *yaoi* fan work production, their presence absolutely cannot be ignored within *otaku* and fan studies (note 8).

[5.2] Considering the importance of *fujoshi* to fan studies, as well as the massive commercial and noncommercial output of male-male romances, I see two important research questions that future studies might consider. First, although it is certainly possible to discern a relationship between acts of reading male-male romance and taking pleasure in them, is it possible to make a theoretical distinction between these two things? Second, what are the limits of the gendered categorizations indicated by such terms as *fujoshi* (rotten girl) and *fudanshi* (rotten boy)? Anyone conducting research on contemporary *fujoshi* should keep these two questions in mind.

[5.3] Finally, I briefly want to consider the impact that the word *fujoshi* has on those who use it. Young people have been influenced the most by this term. *Fujoshi* was already widely used by the time most younger fans first encountered male-male works, which is probably why they tend to accept the term without reservation. Nevertheless, even today, one established convention among fans is the importance of keeping talk of the pleasures of male-male romance to a minimum outside the *otaku* community. There are many reasons why this convention persists (note 9). One is probably that although establishing themselves as deviant beings called *fujoshi* allows fans to craft an identity that sets them apart from others, it also affords outsiders a means of justifying their repression.

[5.4] There is also a tendency to see the word *fujoshi*—"rotten girl"—as a fitting term for women who not only have a preference for male-male romance, but also explicitly engage with works containing such romance by reading them and creating derivative works. This connotation of the word can be seen not only among people who have no ties to *otaku*/fan activities, but also among those within the *otaku* community itself. We could interpret these reasons as indicative of an evolution in the meaning originally attached to the word *fujoshi*; additionally, it suggests that the people who use this word are not always in agreement about who exactly *fujoshi* are. The various meanings encompassed by the word *fujoshi* are an important topic of discussion in contemporary *otaku*/fan studies. *Fujoshi* research must always specify exactly whose activities, and what kind of activities, are being examined.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] It has been over 10 years since the word *fujoshi* first appeared in Japan, and several years have passed since the term came into general use. Moreover, a great many works featuring male-male romance now exist, and just as what are now classic texts drew in the first generation of readers, contemporary BL will probably entice many more new fans. There are already considerable limitations to discourses about *fujoshi* that focus solely on one characteristic of these fans, namely their preference for male-male romance works created by women. Still, it is clear that *yaoi* fan works are being created by manga readers around the world, that BL is an established commercial manga genre, and that activities focusing on male-male romances are an important trend in contemporary popular culture. Research on *fujoshi* should provide important clues as to the characteristics of these trends and their function in society.

7. Acknowledgments

[7.1] The contents of this article are based on the author's MA thesis, which was submitted in February 2012. This article was translated from the Japanese by Nele

Noppe.

8. Notes

1. The fact that the source works' creators and media companies consider such derivative works copyright infringement and are wary of their possible influence on the reputation of the source works no doubt played a role as well.
2. The majority of Comiket participants are now girls and women.
3. *Captain Tsubasa* was serialized as a manga in the magazine *Shōnen Jump* (Shūeisha) from 1981 to 1988. An anime series was broadcast beginning in 1983.
4. These *dōjinshi* conventions were organized not just by company entities, but also on the initiative of fan creators themselves (Nishimura 2002).
5. Genre codes are used to divide *dōjinshi* circles at Comiket, and the code "FC (Jump)," meaning *dōjinshi* based on manga serialized in *Shōnen Jump*, was established in the 1990s as a subcategory of the genres manga and FC (fan clubs). Individual source works that are very popular sometimes receive a genre code of their own.
6. Nakajima's theories as outlined in *People Suffering from Poor Communication Syndrome* and the book that followed it, *The Children of Thanatos* (first published in 1998 by Chikuma Shobō), greatly influenced subsequent research into *yaoi* and *fujoshi*. For this article, I used the 1995 and 2005 Chikuma Bunko editions of these books.
7. On the other hand, works by Nakajima ([1991] 1995, [1998] 2005), Kazuko Nimiya (1995), and others do allude to generational transitions in the meaning and appreciation of *yaoi*. They discuss the possibility that depictions of male-male romance and their readership will be expressed through different trends over time.
8. Examples of works that discuss the characteristics of *fujoshi* as manga readers and the relationship between manga *dōjinshi* and *yaoi* include Itō (2007), Fujimoto (2007), and Yonezawa (1991). These works were presented as research on manga.
9. The problems related to copyright and expressions of sexual content that surround derivative works, as well as the general lack of understanding about women who like works containing male-male romance or pornography, are also probably contributing factors.

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Symposium

On the response (or lack thereof) of Japanese fans to criticism that *yaoi* is antigay discrimination

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[0.1] *Abstract*—In this essay I examine Japanese criticisms of *yaoi* as antigay discrimination and the reactions to these criticisms from Japanese *yaoi* fans. Japanese fans are often described as apolitical, and their apolitical attitude has been the subject of much controversy. Here, I identify the most salient aspects of fannish reaction to the charge that *yaoi* constitutes antigay discrimination. I want to reconsider criticisms of fans' reactions via an argument centered around people's conceptions of reality and fantasy, which gives more weight to the status of *yaoi* as a part of popular culture.

[0.2] *Keywords*—BL; Boys' love; *Fujoshi*; Manga; Sexuality

Hori, Akiko. 2013. "On the Response (Or Lack Thereof) of Japanese Fans to Criticism that *Yaoi* Is Antigay Discrimination." In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12. doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0463.

[1] In this essay I examine Japanese criticisms of *yaoi* (note 1) as antigay discrimination and the reactions to these criticisms from Japanese *yaoi* fans. I include both readers and creators among *yaoi* fans, and I will refer to this group as fans throughout the text; today, these fans are also referred to as *fujoshi* (note 2). Japanese fans are often described as apolitical, and their apolitical attitude has been the subject of much controversy. Here, I identify the most salient aspects of fannish reaction to the charge that *yaoi* constitutes antigay discrimination. The so-called *yaoi* dispute (*yaoi ronsō*) of 1992 and the writings of Hitoshi Ishida are my main points of departure. I want to reconsider criticisms of fans' reactions via an argument centered around people's conceptions of reality and fantasy, which gives more weight to the status of *yaoi* as a part of popular culture.

[2] Manga in Japan can be divided into two types: commercial manga, which are original works, and *dōjinshi*, which are often derivative works based on existing media. The *dōjinshi* convention Comiket was first held at the end of 1975. At that time, commercial manga magazines aimed at girls were already serializing a genre called *shōnen ai* (boys' love) that featured romantic relationships between boys (note 3).

[3] In the middle of the 1980s, fannish *dōjinshi* based on the manga *Captain Tsubasa* exploded in popularity, and *yaoi dōjinshi* circles proliferated accordingly. This caused *dōjinshi* conventions to grow as well, to the point that commercial manga magazines could no longer ignore the existence of the major *dōjinshi* circles. These major circles consisted of woman creators who, although amateurs, had often amassed large fan followings of their own. Publishers reasoned that they could save themselves the effort of cultivating new artists if they let these popular fan creators publish in commercial magazines. They began to scout popular *yaoi* fan creators, and commercial manga magazines that focused solely on boys' love were launched one after the other. With the availability of *yaoi* in regular bookstores, a massive expansion of *yaoi* fandom ensued. However, a less desirable consequence of *yaoi*'s commercialization was that a hobby that had previously been underground was now thrust into the public eye.

[4] Around the same time, support organizations for Japanese gay men began to be established as a result of the spread of the AIDS epidemic. In the 1990s, antigay discrimination began to be challenged in Japanese courts of law, and gay rights were increasingly foregrounded as a social issue. As Japanese popular culture experienced a gay boom with popular magazines at its center, *yaoi* broadened its readership through both *dōjinshi* and commercial boys' love; many women became very open about their liking for gay-themed films and novels (note 4), and many openly stated that they wanted to be friends with gay men. Reactions to this boom varied considerably. *Yaoi* was a genre in which men belonging to the homosexual minority were being depicted in a purely fantastical way by and for women belonging to the heterosexual majority, and it began to attract criticism from support organizations for homosexuals and from individual gay men. It was one of these criticisms that became the starting point of the 1992 *yaoi* dispute.

[5] The *yaoi* dispute was a debate held in the pages of a feminist zine (note 5), beginning when one gay man criticized *yaoi* stories as discriminatory against gay men. A female fan wrote a rebuttal of the criticism, the original critic responded, and other readers got involved in the discussion.

[6] The fan who first responded pointed out that gender inequality was still pervasive in Japanese society, and that using a male-male relationship in their fiction allowed female fans to write stories that would be impossible to write (and enjoy) if they featured a male-female relationship. She explained that enjoying "fantastical" *yaoi* stories was a very important part of female fans' lives, and that such stories gave them comfort in a way that male/female romances never could. *Yaoi* novelist Kaoru Kurimoto expressed a similar opinion. Writing under an alias, Kurimoto said that women "are constantly classified based on how they look, how they fulfill female-gendered functions, how they perform as home maintenance machines, how much

'added value' they're perceived to have, or how 'fresh' they are," and speculated that these women imagine *yaoi* to be "a place where the gaze of men and society doesn't exist, and where they themselves—always the objects of that gaze—don't exist either" (Nakajima 1991, 100, 191).

[7] During the *yaoi* dispute, the fan who responded to the initial criticism wrote that "*yaoi* does not depict real gay men" (CHOISIR 1994a, 14). This assertion ended up inviting even more vehement criticism; some felt that she was basically arguing that *yaoi* fans are just taking peeks at gay romance in order to escape from their own gender-related problems.

[8] Of particular interest is the contribution of another woman in the debate. She had been a *yaoi* fan at one point, but had stopped reading *yaoi* works by the time the dispute erupted. This former fan emphasized that she felt it was shameful that she had once used gay men as fuel for her own fantasies. She had been both a *yaoi* fan and an *okoge* (fag hag) (note 6), but as she got to know gay people she became aware of her own discriminatory attitude toward them and stopped reading *yaoi* works as a result. The *yaoi* fan who had argued that *yaoi* is purely fantasy replied that she couldn't "just let go of *yaoi* altogether, even if it's discriminatory" (CHOISIR 1994a, 29), and she explained that *yaoi* meant something special to her because she herself could never be entirely free, no matter how hard she tried to resist gender boundaries. In response, the gay man and the former *yaoi* fan wondered, "Why is an intelligent feminist like you choosing such a politically incorrect stance?" (CHOISIR 1994b, 11).

[9] Gender was one of the most important issues under discussion during the *yaoi* dispute. Some participants attested that as women, they could not enjoy fantasies tailored to their desires if they were expressed through stories about heterosexual romance. This claim is based on the idea that a fictional romantic relationship between equal partners is much more likely to appeal to, and be plausible to, female readers and creators if the relationship is between two men. In a society with a marked power imbalance between men and women, it's hard to suspend disbelief and imagine that romance might somehow be the one exceptional context where men and women can be equal.

[10] Other participants in the dispute countered that *yaoi* works contain power imbalances too (Hori 2009). The gay man argued that "*yaoi* completely ignores gay realities," and that a system in which members of a majority group (straight women) write stories of romance between members of a minority group (gay men) is inherently discriminatory (Hori 2009, 4). Besides gender and sexuality, a wide variety of other politically significant issues were eventually raised, including more general problems of representation (who represents, who is represented) and feminist

critiques of pornography (specifically, how *yaoi* inverts the relationship of watching versus being watched to make gay men an object of the gaze).

[11] After the *yaoi* dispute wound down, the expanding Internet gave a boost to the boys' love market, the word *fujoshi* came into use around the year 2000, and *yaoi* began to draw the attention of the mass media. *Yaoi* and *fujoshi* also caught the eye of researchers, but as Hitoshi Ishida notes, the *yaoi* fans who were the subject of such research tended to respond with "Leave us alone" (Ishida 2007). Ishida points out that *yaoi* fans—who imagine a gay romance that is not apparent in the original works on which *yaoi* is based—usually don't react to hearing their activities called disgusting or *yaoi* denounced as antigay discrimination.

[12] For Ishida, the fact that *yaoi* always already references real, existing gay people means that it is a mistake to see it as no more than a fantasy or fiction that has nothing to do with reality. Wondering if "*yaoi* may be misappropriating gay symbols" (Ishida 2007, 114), Ishida mentions that Japanese fans tend to look the other way when confronted with a serious issue like antigay discrimination, or say things like "Real gay people and *yaoi* have nothing to do with each other" (Ishida 2007, 116). This attitude stands in stark contrast to the tendency of *yaoi* fans in other countries to associate their love of *yaoi* with support for the LGBT movement. Japanese fans have no doubt noticed critiques that they are apolitical. Why is it, then, that they still tend to stay in their shells—or seem to do so?

[13] I argue that fans' attitudes are related to their tendency to emphasize the divide between reality and fantasy. For example, it used to be common for male characters in *yaoi* to tell their lovers, "I'm not gay or anything. I just love you because you're you." Such a claim (which is somewhat less common in contemporary works) has been criticized as discriminatory. However, it can also be interpreted as reflecting the obviously fantastical nature of *yaoi*, because in real life it's probably rare for a heterosexual man to fall in love with another man despite his own sexual orientation.

[14] Because popular culture is popular, it is rooted in mainstream norms and values. Antigay discrimination and the heterosexual, gender, and sexual norms associated with that discrimination surround *yaoi* creators, readers, and works. Individuals may subscribe to these norms or try to ignore them, but they will always carry those norms with them into fictional works. However, unlike the *okoge*, who want to interact with real gay men, most *yaoi* fans are keenly aware that their fantasies are exactly that—fantasies, and nothing more. I suspect that this strong awareness of the dividing line between reality and fantasy is what leads *yaoi* fans to attest that *yaoi* has nothing to do with real gay men.

[15] *Yaoi* can be conceptualized as a subculture that is centered on fantastical works that remain rooted in mainstream values, but that nonetheless resists those values. (I wonder how many *yaoi* works are basically thought experiments in which the creators try to depict love that overcomes their own sexualities.) Culture should not limit itself to acknowledging only politically correct creations. All political and social issues exist along an axis of reality and fantasy, and the reactions (or lack thereof) of *yaoi* fans to claims of antigay discrimination are a fascinating example of this axis at work.

Acknowledgment

[16] Translated by Nele Noppe.

Notes

1. I use *yaoi* as a general term for works about male-male romance that are aimed at a female audience. Such works can also be divided into *yaoi* (fan works) and boys' love (commercial works), but I use *yaoi* to describe both.
 2. *Fujoshi* means "rotten girl." The word is a self-deprecating expression that refers to the practice of imagining male-male relationships where none exist in the source works. *Fujoshi* used to refer only to women who created and enjoyed fan works, but these days, readers of commercial boys' love are also called *fujoshi*.
 3. Examples include Moto Hagio's *November Gymnasium* (1971), *The Poe Family* (serialized from 1972), and *The Heart of Thomas* (serialized from 1974), and Keiko Takemiya's *Song of Wind and Trees* (serialized from 1976).
 4. Examples of gay-themed films include *Another Country* (dir. Marek Kaniévski, 1984) and *Maurice* (dir. James Ivory, 1987). Examples of gay-themed novels include *A Boy's Own Story* (Edmund White, 1982) and *Valley of the Shadow* (Christopher Davis, 1988).
 5. This feminist zine, *Yaoi ronsō gōhon* (CHOISIR 1994a, 1994b), is privately published and is now out of print. See Hori (2010) for a detailed account of the discussion contained within it.
 6. *Okama*, a slang term for homosexual, literally means "pot," and *okoge* means "burned rice," which sticks to the bottom of a pot.
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Book review

Mechademia Vol. 6: User Enhanced, edited by Frenchy Lunning

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[0.1] *Keywords*—Anime; Audience; Gender; Manga; Theory

Close, Samantha. 2013. *Mechademia Vol. 6: User Enhanced*, edited by Frenchy Lunning [book review]. In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12. doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0421.

Frenchy Lunning, ed. *Mechademia Vol. 6: User Enhanced*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, paperback, \$24.95 (319p) ISBN 978-0-8166-7734-4.

[1] Editor Frenchy Lunning's *Mechademia* series takes a provocative and insightful look at manga and anime. The volumes showcase traditional and nontraditional academic work produced by scholars and artists in the United States, Canada, Japan, and beyond. After receiving an overwhelming response to their call for work on fans and fan practices, the editorial team extended this discussion over the most recent two issues of the series. *User Enhanced*, the sixth *Mechademia* volume, investigates the transformation of fans from consumers to users of Japanese popular culture.

[2] The topic, both here and in volume 5, *Fanthropologies* (2010), makes the work of immediate general interest to fan studies scholars, particularly those whose work relates to Japan. Given the specific focus of *User Enhanced* on creative fan practices, however, there is a surprising lack of emphasis on fan-created works as such. Some essays, such as Kumiko Saito's comparison of Japanese boys' love manga *dōjinshi* and English slash fan fiction, do discuss fan-created texts, but most interrogate practices associated with fans, such as costume play (cosplay), as depicted in official texts, or discourses, such as letter writing, that add to text worlds but are usually not creative in the same sense as fan fiction or fan-created videos. One result of this selection decision is that fan engagement is largely framed as an add-on—an enhancement to the official texts rather than as significant in its own right. In the introduction, Thomas Lamarre notes that *User Enhanced* takes a critical look at the transforming relationship between fans and media worlds with a special emphasis on economic and political

considerations as "the user enhanced...straddles the dynamics of 'value added' and 'user empowered'" (xv). This is an important investigation, but it places primary importance on the new status of the source text rather than that of the audience.

[3] A major theme across the 18 contributions is the importance of building a theoretical framework that can support working with nontraditional objects, such as transmedia narrative worlds or a text bounded by a particular character's media presence rather than by a narrative. In "Beyond Domesticating Animal Love," Christine Marran looks at fan desire as a social force in the discourse around Tama-chan, a bearded seal that left the ocean for a well-publicized stay in various Japanese rivers. Choosing a source discourse of news reports, letters, popular memorials, and other actions one might associate with a popular zoo animal rather than a fictional character suggests nonfictional media fandoms as a unique area of interest for fan studies. Marran challenges traditional understandings of fans as a discrete, often marginalized group by showing Tama-chan's fans to be drawn from and emblematic of mainstream Japanese society. Her conclusion that the fannish love for Tama-chan encouraged Japanese people to reconsider the relationship of humans with nature, rather than simply to consume Tama-chan as a cute object by putting him in a zoo, also speaks to debates in critical animal theory about how to recognize and respect animals' autonomy while still living with them. Miri Nakamura translates the foreword and first chapter of Gō Itō's groundbreaking *Tezuka Is Dead*, in which Itō makes a strong case for the importance of adapting formal analysis methods to multiplatform texts. Itō argues that auteur-style analysis misrepresents the relationship between contemporary manga and its audience. He instead develops a framework based on manga's formal elements and manga reading practices that could be a helpful approach for scholars working with a variety of source texts.

[4] *User Enhanced* deals mostly with material in Japanese cultural contexts, but there is clearly attention to a wider scholarly audience. The essay titles presume a certain familiarity with terms like *shōjo* (girls), but many pieces come with informative footnotes or clear summaries to guide a reader unfamiliar with *ganguro* fashion or NEETs. Matthew Penney, for example, does thick historical and primary-source research into the situation of Japanese youth in "Exploited and Mobilized: Poverty and Work in Contemporary Manga." Penney contrasts common governmental critiques of poor Japanese youth as abandoning their responsibilities to society and choosing poverty out of laziness with the way poor, working-class youth are depicted in manga texts. Penney argues that contemporary depictions of poor youth in manga illustrate the actual hardships in their lives, in contrast to earlier rosy depictions following the official line, and treats the reading public of manga as a force to be mobilized for social change. Cathy Sell is one of the only writers to consider explicitly the non-Japanese fans of Japanese popular media, an important group for the English-language

Mechademia series. In "Manga Translation and Interculture," Sell performs a contextually aware analysis of both translated manga volumes and original non-Japanese manga. She highlights the creative process of these non-Japanese fans in developing their own interculture rather than parasitically imitating Japanese culture.

[5] Kumiko Saito's "Desire in Subtext: Gender, Fandom, and Women's Male-Male Homoerotic Parodies in Contemporary Japan" and James Welker's "Flower Tribes and Female Desire: Complicating Early Female Consumption of Male Homosexuality in Shōjo Manga" both analyze slashlike practices associated with boys' love—discourses likely to seem initially familiar to many fan studies scholars, particularly in this special volume of *Transformative Works and Cultures* focusing on boys' love. This pair of essays performs an enlightening defamiliarization by analyzing the configuration of these slashlike practices in two Japanese cultural contexts. Saito highlights the ambiguous blending together of the commercial manga market and that for fan-made slash manga (boys' love dōjinshi), both of which are commonly sold in commercial bookstores. Although her comparison with English-language slash is hampered by a limited conception of those works, Saito's conclusion that boys' love dōjinshi often serves conservative functions for its female readership is an important reminder that active reading and fan creation is not necessarily politically liberating. Welker performs a close reading of *Barazoku* and other magazines aimed at gay male Japanese readers that feature letters from and even special features for female readers. He challenges the oft-heard denial that any connection exists between homosexuals and boys' love manga by investigating the complex and contradictory reading processes of these magazines' female fans.

[6] Another prominent theme across the essays is femininity and fannish engagement by women. Besides the essays considering female fans of male-male romance already mentioned, Frenchy Lunning's own contribution, "Under the Ruffles: Shōjo and the Morphology of Power," takes a highly theoretical look at currents of power and abjection in "girly" visual culture as it develops under patriarchy. Lunning argues that the paradox of denying any meaning and substance to cute, girly culture while recognizing that it utterly dominates the commercial media realm signifies the reentry of the feminine into the Japanese public sphere. Brian Bergstrom considers similar themes in a close look at the actual text and social context of Lolita fandom as conceived by a male author in "Girliness Next to Godliness: Lolita Fandom as Sacred Criminality in the Novels of Takemoto Novala." By privileging the present moment and continually returning to girlishness rather than marching onward toward womanhood, Bergstrom reads the shōjo as a figure of queer rebellion. Both of these essays, particularly Bergstrom's, clearly connect to fan studies by considering fan practices of costuming, reading, and purchasing supplementary goods. They also speak to debates in queer theory through analyzing ideas of drag and antifuturity, refusing to define the

present by what it can contribute to the future. Aden Evens destabilizes a stereotypical conception of first-person shooter gamers as male in his essay "The Logic of Digital Gaming." Evens fleshes out a way of understanding interaction with media beyond the analysis of differing representations. He argues that the arbitrary relationship between objects in virtual and physical worlds means that scholars should analyze the player's process of learning how to play, and not necessarily the content that features on screen.

[7] *User Enhanced*'s traditional essays are broken up into four main sections: "Countering Domestication," which considers the sociopolitical implications of fannish practice; "Commodity-Life," which considers fannish engagement via formal analysis; "Desiring Economies," which works to conceptualize desiring and wanting as practices; and "Untimely Effects," which analyzes interacting with texts as a process that occurs over time. Looking at the introduction and overall essay organization, it's clear that the volume wants to be more critical of the idea of "user-enhanced" than most of the essays actually are. Thus some of the essays, such as Yoshikuni Igarashi's "Tsuge Yoshiharu and Postwar Japan: Travel, Memory, and Nostalgia," feel less connected to the volume's theme—this despite Igarashi's persuasive close reading of Yoshiharu's biography and manga works. A running tension exists between the extensive research into how fans engage with media worlds showcased in many essays and suggestions, often placed in conclusions, of the importance of political change and not forgetting to engage with the so-called real world. The relationship between media and concrete worlds is considered most extensively in Shinji Miyadai's essay "Transformation of Semantics in the History of Japanese Subcultures since 1992," translated by Shion Kono. Although the deep engagement with histories of fan culture in Japan might be challenging for a reader without a basic knowledge of these histories, Miyadai uses a systems theory approach to understanding and describing fan activity that is far different from those commonly seen in English-language scholarship. This approach considers changes in how individuals understand the relationship between themselves and their media texts to cause major shifts in society as a whole. Miyadai takes seriously common paradoxes of fan stereotypes, such as the image of "sexual naïfs whose literacy lies in pornography," by connecting them to other social phenomena and arguing that fans evidence changes in Japanese society as a whole (231). He develops many useful conceptual frames in this endeavor, such as the distinction between living in fictional worlds as though they were reality and living in the real world as though it were a game, and ultimately argues that the physical and virtual worlds have become functionally indistinguishable.

[8] The essays in the "Commodity-Life" section, as well as other essays that engage in deep analysis of a particular work, develop the fascinating question of how to understand, as Lamarre explains it, "user-enhanced commodity-worlds from the angle

of the commodity itself" (xi). These include two new installments of work continuing from earlier Mechademia volumes, Thomas Lamarre's "Speciesism" and Livia Monnet's "Anatomy of Permutational Desire." Monnet offers a theoretically subtle reading of Mamoru Oshii's film *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* that might interest anyone working on fan doll practices or nontraditional methods of political engagement. By combining these two discourses, Monnet argues that permutational bodies, like dolls or cyborgs, are the building ground for a powerful in-between state of "complicit critique." Through inhabiting a technological doll body, one can critique contemporary political and technological systems while being embedded inside them. In "Speciesism," Lamarre analyzes the formal properties of animation in a way that links to critical animality theory. He particularly considers the emergence of cuteness as a phenomenon with sociomilitary reverberations. This emphasis on cuteness and the relation of animal characters to human viewers and societies continues with Emily Raine's "The Sacrificial Economy of Cuteness in *Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space*." Her close reading of the film considers the question of how to theorize affective relationships between viewers and texts in the contemporary information economy. Hirohito Miyamoto's essay "How Characters Stand Out" (translated by Lamarre) develops a way of formally understanding a text as a character rather than as a bounded narrative work that will be intriguing and helpful for fan studies, where fans often organize around a particular character more than around the work as a whole.

[9] Notable in this volume are the pieces of nontraditional academic work included in the "Photo Play" and "Torendo" (trend) sections that make great use of photographs and visual storytelling. Both of these pieces complement the themes of engagement with femininity seen elsewhere in the volume. Rio Saitō's photographs of "Fancy" fashion and cosplay events capture dramatically evocative and tender moments, although I wished for more contextualization and discussion than is possible in the short introductory segment by Lunning. Lisa Blauersouth's essay in the "Torendo" section, "Wherein the Author Documents Her Experience as a Porcelain Doll," is a personally inflected but broadly considered account of the author and her partner's experiences as Lolita. Yuka Kanno's essay "Implicational Spectatorship: Hara Setsuko and the Queer Joke" is grounded in visual studies and traditional academia but also connects well with these pieces by experimenting with writing about her own fannish subject position as an "Ozuphile" watching classic 1940s to 1960s Japanese cinema in a more contemporary moment. All of this work makes me excited about the future of nontraditional academic writing, and I am hopeful that later volumes will continue and expand on the cross-influences of and conversation between the traditional and nontraditional pieces seen here.

[10] *User Enhanced* provides a solid set of essays that raises provocative questions about and suggests subtle theoretical frameworks for fan engagement with Japanese

popular culture. This volume highlights the benefits of bringing diverse work together: excellent translations of Japanese-language scholarship, nontraditional academic writing, and the inclusion of pieces by scholars at various stages of their career. The remarkable incorporation of visual material into the volume (13 of 18 pieces include illustrations, charts, or graphs) not only helps orient readers unfamiliar with the Japanese primary texts discussed, but also allows writers to think outside the box in making their arguments. As just one example, Sell includes to-scale figures explaining her point about textual influence and anticipated audiences via the literal size of manga volumes and DVD cases.

[11] Although *User Enhanced* is not primarily focused on boys' love, the deep looks it takes at how fans engage with the whole spectrum of Japanese popular culture makes it relevant to the readers of this boys' love special issue, even beyond the essays by Saito and Welker on this topic. This is particularly true for the focus on shōjo fans, arguably the other best-known and most influential mode for female fans organizing around Japanese popular culture. Although the essays are not consistently strong and the critical viewpoint on its stated topic sometimes feels more rhetorical than analytical, *User Enhanced* is a valuable addition to the field of fan studies.

Book review

Writing the love of boys: Origins of bishōnen culture in modernist Japanese literature, by Jeffrey Angles

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[0.1] Keywords—BL; Boys' love

King, Emerald. 2013. *Writing the Love of Boys: Origins of Bishōnen Culture in Modernist Japanese Literature*, by Jeffrey Angles [book review]. In "Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies," edited by Kazumi Nagaike and Katsuhiko Suganuma, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 12.
[doi:10.3983/twc.2013.0483](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0483).

Jeffrey Angles. *Writing the Love of Boys: Origins of Bishōnen Culture in Modernist Japanese Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. \$25 (vii + 302p) ISBN 978-0-8166-6970-7.

[1] Fan studies scholars who examine manga (graphic novels or comics) fandoms, especially *shōjo* manga (girls' comics) fandoms, will likely be familiar with boys' love narratives of male-male desire. However, this is by no means a recent phenomenon. In *Writing the Love of Boys*, Jeffrey Angles turns to the literary precedent of *bishōnen* (beautiful boy) culture, which emerged during the tumultuous interwar years of the Taishō period (1912–26) and the first decade of the Shōwa period (1926–89). Angles focuses on the work of three writers of the period: poet and artist Kaita Murayama (1896–1919), mystery writer Ranpo Edogawa, and avant-garde innovator Taruho Inagaki (1900–1977), as well as two contemporaries, detective novelist Shirō Hamao (1896–1935) and anthropologist Jun'ichi Iwata (1900–1945). I was familiar with the work of Edogawa Edogawa, having read Angles's 2008 translation of "The Two-Sen Copper Coin" published in *Modanizumu: Modernist Fiction from Japan, 1913–1938*, edited by William J. Tyler. However, it was not until reading Angles's text that I became aware of the strong vein of boys' love that runs through Edogawa's body of work.

[2] *Writing the Love of Boys* is separated into five chapters, the first two of which are concerned with Murayama's prose and poetry. The next two chapters follow Edogawa's mystery fiction and his project to formulate a queer history. The final chapter concentrates on Inagaki's writing. Having five chapters thus split between three

authors might seem an unbalanced, even poorly thought out, structure, but the format holds. The first four chapters seem to work particularly well together. In each of these chapters, Angles references several short stories, essays, and poems written by each author, three of which will be examined later in this review. However, in his own words, Angles's "primary mode of analysis" is not wholly biographical, as "biographical factors do not fully explain the ways any particular writer engages with erotic desire in his or her work" (29–30). Rather, throughout *Writing the Love of Boys*, as in the works of the three main authors whom Angles examines, the love of (and between) boys is treated and represented as a different phenomenon to the adult love of (and between) men.

[3] Angles takes pains to distinguish the male-male desire showcased in the work he concentrates on from prior representations of homosexuality/sociality, such as the hard/soft factional narratives of homosexuality present in, for example, noted novelist and imperial army surgeon general Ōgai Mori's (1862–1922) 1909 novel *Wita sekusuarisu* (translated as *Vita Sexualis* by Kazuji Ninomiya and Sanford Goldstein, 1982). In this narrative, homosexuality/sociality is presented as occurring between two factions, hard and soft. Mori's narrative "describes adolescents of the 'hard faction' using their status as upper classmen to take advantage of attractive younger *bishōnen* [belonging to the 'soft faction'] and force them into a sexual relationship" (17). The almost militaristic institutional system in Mori's work is rejected by Murayama, Edogawa, and Inagaki, who favor a more egalitarian approach between *bishōnen*. During the Taishō period, narratives of male-male desire between schoolboys seem to have been widespread, as were narratives of same-sex desire between schoolgirls. Indeed, as Angles notes, there was a social expectation that male-male desire during youth was something that would give way to "love between a man and a woman" upon entrance into adulthood (34). However Murayama, Edogawa, and Inagaki resist, undermine, and warp this social expectation throughout their collective body of work.

[4] Key examples of this resistance can be seen in the discussion of Murayama's "Akuma no shita" (The diabolical tongue), Edogawa's *Kotō no oni* (The demon of the lonely isle), and Inagaki's "Hana-megane" (Pince-nez). The titles of these three works convey a sense of the sinister and the foreign that were part of the *ero, guro, nansensu* (erotic, grotesque, nonsense) movement found throughout the literature and popular culture of the Taishō era. Angles notes, "'Akuma no shita' may be read as an exploration of the complicated feelings of one person suffering from some form of prohibited desire—desires relegated to the periphery of society" (105). Indeed, this reading is applicable to the majority of the works examined in *Writing the Love of Boys*. Each writer seems painfully aware of the subversive nature of his subject matter, as can be seen from the use of words such as *akuma* and *oni* (both of which can be translated as "demon") in the titles.

[5] Throughout *Writing the Love of Boys*, Angles takes pains to establish his authors in a continuum of *bishōnen*, the seeds of which can be seen in Edo-period *nanshoku* and *shudō* homosexuality. However, whereas Angles extends this continuum to modern-day *shōjo* manga and other boys' love narratives, he differentiates between earlier forms of male-male desire, such as those in Mori's *Wita sekusuarisu* and earlier texts. Similarly, Angles avoids the use of terms such as *homosexuality*, given the cultural baggage that accompanies them in both English- and Japanese-language usage.

[6] *Writing the Love of Boys* is an engaging and challenging text that encourages readers to interrogate their understanding of boys' love narratives in Japan as more than just a current popular cultural trend. The book is of interest not only to scholars of boys' love narratives and associated *bishōnen* culture, but also to students of Taishō modernism and gender studies. Costume scholars who are interested in the current resurgence of *Taishō roman* (Taishō romance) aesthetic in, for example, kimono and design, will also find Angles's text a worthwhile read for the insights it provides into the artistic and literary movements of the period.

[7] Of particular interest to readers of *Transformative Works and Cultures* and scholars of fan studies in general is the background information to the continuing popularity of boys' love narratives that Angles presents. The text can be read as part of a trajectory of boys' love fandoms as they continue to grow and spread globally. This trajectory may well be a useful measure of the spread of other fandoms from Japan and other parts of East Asia to the rest of the world. For instance, it may well be possible to trace the popularity of Korean boy bands back to the boys' love narratives and culture examined by Angles.