

Theorizing comics/manga genre as a productive forum: yaoi and beyond

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It's not a "hobby"! To me, reading manga is a synonym for "living"! (Miura
2006: 13)

It's about being able to see how the other person's brain and her desire work.
We both develop fantasies based on just a little bit of information we gain from
observation. We'd say to each other something like, gee, your antennae are way
too sensitive! It's a pleasure to observe each other. The only word that can describe
what lies between such buddies and myself is "love", I think. (Miura 2007: 3)

The *yaoi* genre consists of male-male romance manga (narrative comics) and illustrated novels created by women for women. Its history spans 40 or 50 years, depending on whether we locate its origin at the "beautiful boy" manga within the *shōjo* manga genre of the 1970s, or at Mori Mari's 1961 novel, *Koibitotachi no mori* [The Lovers' Woods]. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to survey this history,¹ it is significant to note that today in early 2010 the wider yaoi genre mainly consists of the commercial "boys' love" genre, also called BL (pronounced *bii eru*, and hereafter written BL), and the fanzines, or *dōjinshi*. The commercial BL publications have been central in the

¹ For a survey of the history of the larger yaoi genre, see Mizoguchi (2003 a, b).

larger yaoi genre since 1991.² The first era of BL publications was largely defined by *June* (pronounced “juné,” close to the Japanized pronunciation of “Genet”) because this magazine led the larger yaoi genre as the only commercial publication during the 1980s until it was discontinued in 2004. The second era of BL publications emerges after 2004. While many of the changes were gradually occurring during the first era, we can list the following as the characteristics of the second era of the BL-centered period: (1) With the BL-focused labels starting in the U.S., globalization of yaoi becomes even more prominent than in the first era. (2) In addition to drama CDs and OVA, that is, original video animation (animation works designed for personal viewing at the consumers’ households and not to be broadcast or theatrically released) that were produced during the first era, BL content starts to be made into animation for television networks.³ Also, productions of live-action films based on or inspired by BL begin to appear.⁴ (3) The number and visibility of BL authors who branch into other genres or those who publish in both yaoi and other genres increase.⁵ (4) The publishers started to re-publish the past works that had been out of print either in the *bunko*, smaller and cheaper paperback formats, or hardcover, so-called *aizōban*, to-be-cherished-for-long formats. (5) The term *fujoshi*, literally meaning “rotten girl,” was coined by the mass media, and much reportage of yaoi women fans under this term increased their visibility.⁶ (7) Although many second-era yaoi continue to follow the first-era

2 For the reasons why the year 1991 is identified as the beginning of the BL era, see Mizoguchi (2003 a, b).

3 As an example, see the anime *Junjō romanchika* [Pure Heart Romantica] (dir. Kon Chiaki, 2008) based on the manga story of the same title by artist Nakamura Shungiku. This anime was broadcast on the AT-X network.

4 As an example of the former, see *Boys Love* (dir. Terauchi Kōtarō, 2007). As an example of the latter, see the film series based on the novel series “Takumi-kun Series” by Gotō Shinobu. The titles of the live-action films are as follows: *Takumi-kun shirīzu: Soshite harukazeni sasayate* [Takumi-kun Series: And Then, Whisper to the Spring Breeze], *Takumi-kun shirīzu: Nijiīro no garasu* [Takumi-kun Series: The Rainbow-Colored Glass], and *Takumi-kun shirīzu: Bibō no diteiru* [Takumi-kun Series: The Details of the Beautiful Countenance] (dir. Yokoyama Kazuhiro, 2007, 2009, 2010). The fans’ comments online and what my yaoi fan friends have told me both suggest that the audience for these so-called “BL movies” does not overlap with BL readership very much.

5 As examples of the former, see Nishi Keiko and Yoshinaga Fumi. For the latter, see Nakamura Asumiko, Aniya Yuiji, and basso who uses a different penname, Ono Natsume, for her non-BL works.

6 Initially, many yaoi fans openly resisted against the term *fujoshi* as a negative stereotype that was coined by the mass media. By today in 2010, however, many yaoi fans have come to use it

conventions, their styles and approaches are becoming more diverse. For example, most second-era yaoi stories continue to assign fixed gender roles to the aggressive character (*sémé*) and the passive one (*uké*) who play top and bottom in sex, and these stories continue to function on the level of both romantic and buddy narratives.⁷ Nevertheless, post 2004, the graphic styles, settings, and storylines have become more diversified and the presence of what I define as the fantasmatic “yaoi formula” such as “homophobic homo” characters and “rapes of love” have significantly decreased.⁸

Since late 1998 I have taken a dual approach to the field of BL publications as a researcher and fan of yaoi. My critical examination of yaoi begins with the premise that yaoi does not represent any person’s reality, but rather is a terrain where straight, lesbian, and other women’s desires and political stakes mingle and clash, and where representations are born. My research is informed by Teresa de Lauretis who has written in relation to her analysis of the feminist debates on pornography (produced for heterosexual men). “Feminist analysis and politics have always proceeded concurrently with—indeed have been prompted by—the social injury suffered by women, but the strength of feminism, or what social power it may have, does not disprove that injury” (de Lauretis 1994: 146). In other words, de Lauretis suggests that neither the pro-pornography position that pornographic representation occurs in the realm of fantasy, nor the anti-pornography position that pornography equals violence against women is entirely appropriate. By theorizing the female subject as a complex amalgam of conscious and political subjecthood and private and psychoanalytic subjectivity, she has shown that the seemingly contradictory double movement is inherently necessary in feminist work on representation (de Lauretis 1994: 147). As Judith Butler argues, theoretically a female subject is not restricted to identify with the female position in a fantasy scenario, but is also capable of identifying with the male position or the scenario as a whole. However, as the female subject always also functions at the level

as their own. For fans’ opinions on and discussions about fujoshi, see Natō (2007).

7 For a detailed analysis of the yaoi formula, see Mizoguchi (2000)

8 For analyses on the reasons why homophobia and rapes have come to appear less often, see Mizoguchi (2007). A detailed analysis of the recently diversified styles of BL fiction needs to wait for a future opportunity. As for recent examples of popular works and trends, guidebooks such as Next henshūbu ed. (2008, 2009) are useful.

of social subject, she—who de Lauretis calls “Dworkin”—may not be able to secure enough distance from the pornographic text, since such a text is a public representation that depicts women’s debasement. This double movement is clearly manifest in the context of the yaoi phenomenon. The fact that women have engaged in reading these male homoerotic representations as representing their fantasies for several decades attests to the efficacy of the theory of the psychoanalytic subject of fantasy; that is, the fact that the subject is not restricted to identifications with one position (usually equivalent to their own position in real life) in the fantasy scenario. At the same time, however, the fact that so many Japanese women continue to need male homoerotic representations that are significantly remote from their own reality also indicates the injury suffered by women.

Such a double movement has been criticized as an escapist trope and evaluated as a system of pleasure, as critics such as Kaneda Junko have surveyed (Kaneda 2007a, b). This paper will examine the way in which the discursive battlefield of yaoi functions as a forum or community of women through the representations of beautiful male characters. First, I will discuss the special sense of community yaoi has come to constitute. I will also discuss the way in which the yaoi genre operates as a “virtual lesbian” space. BL fictions are public representations since they are commercially produced and sold. At the same time, however, BL fictions nurture extremely private bonds among women fans. Nearly twenty years into the BL centered period of the larger yaoi genre, a few hundred women, many of them veterans with over a decade of experience, make their living as professional BL authors,⁹ while at the same time these professionals have functioned as fellow yaoi fans within the intimate “virtual lesbian” space inhabited by almost all women. In this paper, I will suggest that such a unique combination of public and private spheres has given birth to the possibilities

9 A recent guidebook on BL manga, Next henshūbu ed. (2009) lists 314 manga artists as the authors of major manga paperbacks (*tankōbon*) published between October 2008 and September 2009. A guidebook on BL novels, *BL shōsetsu pāfekuto gaido* [The Perfect Guide to Boys’ Love Novels] lists 151 BL authors. Both lists do not claim to be comprehensive. It is impossible to find out how many of the listed authors are full time professional writers and artists. However, it should be fairly reasonable to assume that these figures are close to BL authors who make their living at the profession.

of productive queer forum.¹⁰ The examples of feminist, lesbian and queer activist moments which this paper can only briefly touch upon will be further developed elsewhere in the near future.

As award-winning literary author Miura Shion,¹¹ who is arguably the most famous yaoi fan in Japan, has declared in the earlier quote, “reading” yaoi means “living” yaoi, that is, to live the life of a yaoi-community member. In addition, what Miura calls “love” between her fantasy buddies also exists among many yaoi women fans. This paper aims to explicate such “love” in the preparation of analyzing the possibilities of that “love.” By doing so, it also attempts to present a possibly new approach to genre studies of comics and manga from and beyond the realm of yaoi.

As I noted in the beginning, this paper defines male-male romantic manga and illustrated novels as the constituents of the larger yaoi genre. The reason why I include the illustrated novels even though the venue is specifically designed for comics and Manga Studies comes from the yaoi genre itself. Sagawa Toshihiko, while editor-in-chief of both the manga-centered and novel-centered volumes of *June* magazine, replied to the question why the novel-centered ones sold more copies as follows. He said that most of the novel authors who sent in their works to *June* had been raised on manga and when writing text-only stories, “they are merely creating manga with words” (Schodt 1996: 121). Sagawa’s theory applies to the contemporary BL novels as well. In fact, it seems fair to say that the BL novels are not complete until the seme (aggressive) and uke (passive) protagonists (sometimes along with other major subsidiary characters) are visualized in illustrations drawn by manga artists of the same genre (there are some illustration-only artists as well, but their drawing style is the same as the manga artists’) For example, author Sakiya Haruhi describes one of her

¹⁰ Kurihara (1993: 338) has suggested, as early as in 1993, that yaoi women fans resemble lesbian separatists and perhaps are spiritually lesbians. This paper is inspired by Kurihara, but is also motivated by my feminist awareness that economical independence and activities in the public sphere are crucial for women in capitalist society. This is the reason why this paper focuses on professional BL authors and their readership in contrast to Kurihara who observed amateur fanzine creators and readers. Of course, some professional BL authors do engage in the fanzine world and many readers of BL fiction participate in the fanzine world as well, including myself. Recent scholarship on yaoi fanzine (dōjinshi) practitioners, for example, Kaneda (2007), Natō (2007), Azuma (2010), does not seem to relate to Kurihara (1993).

¹¹ Miura Shion received the Naoki Award in 2006 for *Mahoro eki mae Tada benriken* [The Handyman Shop Tada in Front of the Mahoro Station].

passive characters as a 30-year old plain looking and very skinny man whose narrow eyes have eyelids that are only slightly double-edged. The image of this character that moves around in the minds of the readers is the guy on the left in this illustration (fig. 1). While admittedly he looks a little more plain and slimmer than the aggressive *sémé* character on the right, I suggest that he belongs to the category of “beauty” from the



Fig 1: Sakiya Haruhi, *Shinzô ga fukaku hazeteiru* (The Heart Is Deeply Bursting). Gentôsha ruchiru/Rutile bunko, 2010. Cover illustration by Shimizu Yuki.

general point of view. Author Sakiya writes in her postscript: “In fact, it occurred to me, ‘Ms. Shimizu would surely draw even the plain character nicely,’ and I created this character” (Sakiya 2010: 344). In other words, manga artist Shimizu Yuki’s style and skill spawned the creation of the “plain” passive character in question. In this sense, even though Shimizu and Sakiya may not have conferred, they can be said to have collaborated on this illustrated novel. In addition, since a BL manga artist tends to be assigned the job to draw illustrations for novels that share settings and subject matter with her own manga works, BL manga and literary works often organically interact with each other. For example, upon seeing the cover of Matsuoka Natsuki’s novel *Hanayakana meikyû* [Gorgeous Labyrinth] (fig. 2), drawn by artist Yoshinaga Fumi, many readers would correctly expect the story to be related with the French court as depicted in Yoshinaga’s period manga stories such as *Jerâru to Jakku* [Gerard and Jacques] (fig. 3). For those readers who have only been familiar with either the manga artist or the literary author, the new combination can and does introduce them to a formerly unknown artist or author.

In addition, there are always some fans of Yoshinaga who decide to read Matsuoka’s novel for the first time because of the illustration,

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Fig 2: Matsuoka Natsuki, *Hanayakana meikyû* (Gorgeous Labyrinth). Shinshokan diapurasu/Dear+ bunko, 2004. Cover illustration by Yoshinaga Fumi.

and some fans of Matsuoka who liked Yoshinaga's illustrations would purchase her manga books for the first time next time they shop. For these reasons, especially for the purposes of this paper that examines the community and forum of yaoi fans, it is not appropriate to only discuss BL manga.

1. The sense of community of yaoi fans

In order to show the special sense of the yaoi community, I will discuss the incident in which X, my co-worker at the time, contacted me via the author of the BL novel *Rimuresu no sora* [The Rimless Sky] after I was thanked in the postscript to that novel as follows: "Especially in the latter half of this series, I have received precious advice from Mizoguchi Akiko, Grass-Roots Cultural Lesbian Activist and my dear friend, about issues of sexuality" (Eda Yūri 2002: 306).¹² X emailed the author, Eda Yūri, to ask if the "Mizoguchi Akiko" in her postscript might be her own colleague by giving the name of the institution where she worked. Eda replied to X after she confirmed with me that it was okay to let X know. Thus I came to be re-introduced to X as a yaoi fan who liked the same novel I did. This episode suggests that yaoi women fans feel psychologically closer to another member of the yaoi community than to someone who she suspects to be an outsider. For X, it was easier to email Eda, the author of her favorite novel, whom she had never met in person, than to simply ask me with whom she shared the community of the workplace, because X was sure that Eda shared membership with herself, while she was not sure about me.

This sense of membership is strengthened by participation in fanzine (*dōjinshi*) conventions. As is well known, the fanzine conventions are conducted in a decidedly non-hierarchical manner in which all persons, whether professional or



Fig 3: Yoshinaga Fumi, *Jeraruto Jaku* (Gerard and Jacques). Biblos Super Be Boy comics, 2000. (The currently available version from Hakusensha in bunko format has a different illustration for the cover.)

¹² The story can be found in the currently available combined *aizōban* volume *Natsu no kodomo*, which does not contain the postscript. In her publications and website, Eda writes her first name as "Yuuri". In this paper, I employ a more usual spelling, "Yūri", in order to avoid confusions for English-language readers.

amateur, famous or obscure, are equally considered voluntary participants. Thus, at fanzine conventions one feels equal to one another in the yaoi community. It does not really matter if one is too shy to actually say hello to her favorite author and ends up wondering which person among those manning the author's booth might be the author herself. The fact that the famous author is basically indistinguishable from her friends and assistants actually enhances the sense of community to which all the yaoi fans, including the popular commercial authors, equally belong. Thus the fans come to feel psychologically closer to professional authors in general including those one has not actually "met" at the convention. It is this "feeling" that is extended to the authors who one only knows through their works.¹³

2. Mini-comments

What bridges the fans' experiences of sharing the same physical space with professional authors are the authors' personal mini-comments and postscripts.¹⁴ First, there are the mini-comments. When a reader picks up a BL paperback (*tankōbon*) edition, she sees a cover that usually portrays two male protagonists (sometimes one), and then, when she flips the book open, she sees the mini-comment on the flap on the right hand side, usually facing a color illustration on the left page.¹⁵ In other words, the mini-comment is the first textual information written by the author that the reader sees before reading the story itself, immediately after reading the title and the blurb on the cover that readers know is written by the editor. In the mini-comments on the flaps, most of the

¹³ This argument has been developed from Mizoguchi (2007: 60).

¹⁴ There are yaoi fans who never participate in fanzine conventions, but they extend their experiences of face-to-face communication with their fellow fans to their favorite professional authors. Most yaoi fans communicate with other fans online on a daily basis. While it is technically possible for some fans to "talk to" other fans solely online for a long period of time without seeing them in person, I have never met such a fan in my field work as a fan and researcher for longer than a decade.

¹⁵ Exceptions exist. For example, the paperbacks (*tankōbon*) published under the label "Bamboo Comics Reijin" from Take shobō print the plot summaries instead of the mini-comments. This does not necessarily mean that readers are less encouraged to form the sense of community with authors and other readers, because the volumes of this label often print the authors' comments and bonus manga episodes directly on the cover of the book itself, that is, beneath the "official" cover. The "official" cover is made of a sheet of paper that wraps the book. When the reader unwraps it, she finds the bonus comments or manga on the surface of the book itself. Many readers are aware of this and take the cover off before reading the story.

authors include chatty, trivial comments about such topics as diet, food, shopping, and even laundry from their everyday life as women, not as professional authors, usually under the profile section giving her name, date of birth, constellation, and blood type.

For example, on the cover of Takaido Akemi's manga story *Ren'ai no kamisama ni ie* [Tell It to the God of Love Affairs] two slim beautiful boys are portrayed with blue as the dominant color, befitting the story in which water plays the important role as the setting and the visual motif as the two boys fall in love with each other (fig. 4, right). When the cover is flipped open, we find an illustration in which the torso of an androgynously beautiful passive character is depicted. To its right, that is, what is inserted between the cover and the color illustration is Takaido's mini-comment. Accompanying a simplified self-portrait is Takaido's hand-written comment that reads: "There's something I remember when summer comes." It is followed by her name both in roman letters and Japanese, and the word "PROFILE" (in English capital letters) and her comment in printed types: "Summer is approaching again this year but I have not lost any weight. / I realize I am writing the same comment every year. / I'm in trouble" (Takaido 2007, the flipped side of the cover). Decidedly unrelated to the content of the story, Takaido here is chatting with her readers as if they were her girlfriends.



Fig 4. Takaido Akemi, *Renaino kamisama ni ie* [Tell It to the God of Love Affairs]. Hôbunsha hanaoto comics, 2007. Cover and flap.

When the story is gloomy, the gap between the author's comments and the content of the story may seem almost absurd. Konohara Narise's novel *Well* is a psycho-drama set in a futuristic world where only a few human beings, including the protagonists, have survived catastrophe that turned everything on the ground into white sand. Konohara's mini-comment reads:

I knew that jeans fade in the wash, so I always used a special detergent for delicate clothes to wash them. But recently I felt I could not bother any longer and used a regular detergent. And well, fine, they did fade. I've told this to my

mother and she said, “I’ll dye them for you.” But I have mixed feelings about it. (Konohara 2007, the flipped side of the cover)

Just before the story begins, the reader is assured that no matter what will follow in the fiction part of the book, the author is an ordinary Japanese woman next-door. In other words, even though the BL comics and illustrated novels all depict romance between impossibly beautiful male characters and sometimes even extreme situations in which they fight, through repeated reception of such fictions, what is cultivated among the fans is the sense of membership to the yaoi community, which is the community of their fellow women fans.

3. Postscripts

In addition to the mini-comments on the flaps, most of the BL paperbacks have postscripts that are usually two-to-four pages in length and much more substantial than the mini-comments on the flaps. Besides nearly obligatory phrases such as “Thanks for reading my story”, “Hope to see you again soon in a future volume”, and acknowledgments to the editors, assistants, friends, and family who helped, postscripts usually include two other elements. The first consists of discussions of the production of the story that often include how the story was conceived. The second element consists of the author’s reflection on what she has discerned about her own tastes in the story, characters, settings, and so forth. This shows BL creators as fans who are on a journey, as it were, of pursuing their pleasure by trying out the possibilities of male-male narrative fantasies.

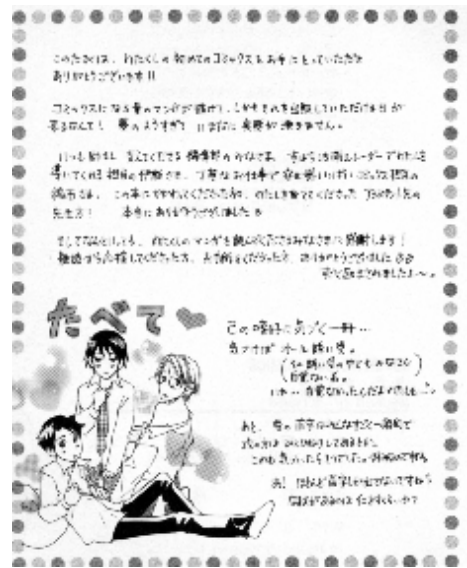


Fig 5: Machiya Hatoko, *Mata ashita* (See You Tomorrow). *Biblos Super Be Boy comics*, 2006, 201.

They make it a point of sharing that experience with other fans to show that they consider themselves fellow fans.

For example, manga artist Machiya Hatoko writes in the postscript of her first paperback *Mata ashita* [See You Tomorrow] (fig. 5):

I came to realize my own “taste” (*shikō*) through this volume. I noticed that all my passive characters are *sasoī uké* [literally meaning “inviting bottom”,] (and all of them are unaware of their making the initiative). Well, I myself had not been aware of my liking such characters before. [sweat mark] (Machiya 2007: 201)

On the left side of this comment, we find the three passive characters from the stories in the volume. Drawn in an extremely simplified and comical style, the three male characters look at the reader as they take off their shirts with flushed cheeks, with the line: “Eat me/us [heart mark].” While all forms of narrative fiction reflect the creator’s “taste/liking” in the characters, story lines, settings, and so forth, at least to some extent, it is significant that in BL fictions, such favorite elements are not only reflected in the representations but also being discovered by the creator herself during—or afterwards as in the case above—the process of creating these stories. While new artists tend to present such “discoveries” and “reporting/sharing” activities in succession, even the experienced authors continue to engage in an ongoing process of discovering her “taste/liking” throughout their career. And they share that discovery with their readers.

For example, artist Yorita Saemi whose first professional paperback volume was published in 1997, relates such a “discovery” in the postscript of her 2004 book *Buririanto burū* [Brilliant Blue]:

After an entire volume, all they have done is kiss on the forehead.../ In addition, this story/ must be like hell for those who hate stupid bottom (*aho uké*) characters.../ But then, before creating this work, I myself had not been aware that I had the attribute (*zokusei*) of liking the stupid bottom. / Since I started drawing Nanami, I have made a succession of discoveries. It was fun.

(Yorita 2004: 171-172)

Aho uké literally means a silly passive character, but in this story, Nanami is no simple ninny. An electric specialist, Nanami is a unique amalgam of extreme good looks like a pop idol, an exceptional ability to calculate numerical figures, and a simple-minded, innocent way of thinking and speaking like a small child, despite the fact that he is in his mid-twenties. It is artist Yorita herself who has created such a complicated character and has the power to move him around in the story. At the same time, however, through her creative process, Yorita loses some control of herself by making an unexpected discovery of her previously unconscious “self”. And once again, Yorita does not only disclose this personal discovery to her close friends but makes a point of sharing this discovery with her readers through her postscript. Because of that, a reader who has just finished reading Machiya’s and Yorita’s manga stories and is now reading the postscripts would feel as if she were participating in the moment of these artists’ discoveries for their formerly unrecognized tastes for “inviting bottom” and “stupid bottom” characters. If this reader herself has read the story with such characters for the first time and has just realized that she is fond of them, she would strongly sympathize with the artists. In this way, receiving the romantic narratives with male characters and communicating with female authors of such stories always happen simultaneously in the yaoi community. By repeating this process, veteran fans often come to build such relationships with many more authors as fellow fans.

4. Shikō/shikō (Taste/Orientation)

The concept of “taste” (*shikō*) is important in this context. Each fan is considered to possess a certain propensity towards favorite patterns, and such a propensity is called *shikō* which literally means “taste”. But what yaoi fans really mean by “shikō” is closer to the concept of “orientation”, as in “sexual orientation”. The Japanese words for “taste” and “orientation” are homonyms, “嗜好 taste (*shikō*)” and “指向 orientation (*shikō*)”. As a homosexual person recognizes his/her sexual orientation towards members of the same sex, yaoi fans recognize their orientation towards first, male-male narratives, and second, such types as the “inviting bottom”. Although, of course,

a fan might very well manifest various orientations, for example, liking the “inviting bottom” characters as well as regular “bottom” characters who never initiates sex and/or “feisty bottom (*yancha uké*)” characters who are full of childlike energy. Even so, many yaoi women fans generally share the understanding that serious fans should have, and be aware of, their own “orientations”.¹⁶

Such an idea about one’s “taste” as similar to “orientation” has an interesting parallel to the popular discourse surrounding women’s sexual orientations in Japan. Yaoi women fans call non-fans “general people” (*ippanjin*) and consider them “normal” in contrast to themselves. Yaoi fans consider themselves “abnormal” for two reasons that both deal with a sense of taboo. Firstly, yaoi fans regularly create and read pornography in a society in which women are not supposed to act as subjects of sexual desire. Secondly, yaoi fans like male-male romance even though they are themselves women. Even though most yaoi women fans are straight in their real-life sexuality, they consider themselves a sort of sexual minority.¹⁷ Just as non-heterosexual people in contemporary Japanese society are expected to be aware of and declare their non-normative sexual orientations, yaoi women fans expect to be able to determine and declare their own tastes/orientations. It is as if serious yaoi fans are supposed to “come out.” What is important is that yaoi fans have mixed feelings of pride and shame about being abnormal and special, as opposed to normal yet simply ordinary non-fans. In this sense, it should be fair to say that yaoi fans share the identity of the minority sexuality (sexual orientation) of yaoi.¹⁸

16 I thank Kakinuma Eiko for having suggested that the way yaoi fans tend to know and continue to pursue what they like is similar to many homosexual individuals. A detailed analysis of the similarities between the two needs to wait for a future opportunity.

17 One such example can be found in a yaoi fanzine practitioner’s comment as quoted by Natō (2007: 74): “I feel that to publicly declare that I am ‘fujoshi’ is a bit similar to publicly declare one’s sexuality”. The context of this quote makes it clear that what she means by “sexuality” here is the same as the “minority sexual orientation”.

18 Kaneda Junko states that for each practitioner of *ani-paro* yaoi fanzines (*dōjinshi*) to reveal her favorite coupling, that is, which of the two protagonists borrowed from the original non-yaoi fictions to be assigned the aggressive/passive roles in the fanzines, functions at two levels. At one level, it is to reveal one’s own code of interpretation. At the other, it is to “reveal what kind of sexual aspiration (*shikō* 志向) she has.” What Kaneda (2007a: 174) refers to by the term “sexual aspiration” seems to overlap the concept of sexual taste/orientation *shikō*: 嗜好 / 指向 in this paper.

5. Virtual lesbian

As a person of yaoi sexual orientation, yaoi women fans exchange their sexual fantasies. The reason yaoi fans can comfortably discuss their sexual desires in a society where women are conditioned not to behave as subjects of sexual desire is that, in the mind of the fan, she is merely talking about her favorite representation, not discussing her own sexuality. Because she can count on the fact that her fellow fans have read the same fictions, she usually does not even have to employ a sexual vocabulary to discuss her sexual fantasy. For example, a dialogue about Yamane Ayano's manga story *Faindā no hyōteki* [You're my love prize in my viewfinder] such as the following is very common among the fans: "Isn't it great how the uké (passive character) runs off with all that cheerful vigor the morning after?" "Yeah. A feisty bottom (*yancha uké*) is the best!" (Mizoguchi 2007: 59). This dialogue refers to a frame on the last page of the episode called "Fixer", which portrays the upper half of the passive character's body as he is running (fig. 6). No sexual vocabulary is used in this dialogue.¹⁹ However, as the fans talk, they surely have in mind the graphic sex scene on the previous pages as well. The fans share the assumption that of course they have enjoyed the entire story, including the sex scene. But especially notable, in a sense of being different from many other BL stories and of providing bonus surprise at the end of the episode, is that portrayal of a beautiful and slender passive character energetically running off.

The yaoi community is similar to other sexual subcultures in which the participants exchange sexual fantasies and that exchange itself is part of sex with other people. Sherry Turkle quotes a seventeen-year-old male high school student who engages in netsex on MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) as follows:

With netsex, it is fantasies. My MUD lover doesn't want to meet me in RL[real life]. With *Playboy*, it was fantasies, too, but in the MUD there is also the other person. So I don't think of what I do on the MUD as masturbation. Although, you might say that I'm the only one who's touching me. But in netsex, I have to think

¹⁹ The fact that the term uké refers to bottom in sex is only instantly clear to yaoi fans since uké primarily means a "receptor" or "receiving" in Japanese. Gay men use uké to refer to bottom, but the combination with the adjective *yancha* successfully makes the term *yancha uke* foreign enough to them.

of fantasies she will like too. So now, I see fantasies as something that's part of sex with two people, not just me in my room (Turkle 1997: 21).

The yaoi community, including the commercial BL industry, is the virtual space where all the participants, professionals and amateurs alike, must always function as fellow players of the game, as this young man and his MUD lover do. Unlike netsex in the MUDs, the yaoi community is fundamentally promiscuous, and the “lovers” do often meet each other in RL (real life). While the lovers of netsex can act raunchily with each other based in the safety of anonymity, yaoi women fans feel comfortable engaging in virtual sex with each other precisely because they know each other to be “fellow regular women next door” and “women who share the identity of the minority sexuality of yaoi” in an almost women-only space.

The majority of yaoi women fans are heterosexual. Some might argue that calling those fans who are in heterosexual relationships in real life “lesbian” is inaccurate. Of course, they are not generally considered lesbians nor are they lesbian-identified themselves. But, if their sexual fantasies are filled with male-male homosexual episodes, is it still accurate to call them completely heterosexual? A friend, a happily married woman in her 30s with two kids, told me, “Not so much these days, but until a few years ago, I could not really recognize sex with my husband as a male-female act. In my mind, I transformed what I was doing to the male-male act in the BL fictions”. Is it adequate to call her completely heterosexual?

From the point of view of defining sex as genital activity, the answer is yes. At the same time, however, we know that fantasies are deeply involved in human sexuality. My friend's male-male fantasy, which happens simultaneously with her heterosexual genital act, is as important as the act itself. In this sense, it is not accurate to consider her 100% heterosexual. In addition, I would argue that a person's sexual



Fig 6: Yamane Ayano, *Faindā no hyōteki* (You're my love prize in my viewfinder). Biblos Super Be Boy comics, 2002, 70. (The re-print is currently available from Libre shuppan.)

fantasies, accompanied by her genital act with another person, a masturbatory act, or no act at all, are equally significant for the subject of such fantasies to such an extent that calling such fantasies “virtual sex” is appropriate (Mizoguchi 2007: 56-62).

Of course, at the most overt level, my friend was engaging in sex with her husband as “virtual gay men”, just like the male characters in yaoi narratives in her mind, but at the same time she was aware that the characters were women fans’ agents and not really representations of real-life gay men. Thus she was psychologically in the company of her fellow female fans in the yaoi community while physically she was with her husband.

Kitahara Minori, who has run a retail business of sex toys for women for twelve years and who has sold a total of over 30,000 dildos and vibrators, has recently called many of her customers the “athletic types” (*tai’ikukai-kei*, literally meaning “the sports-oriented types”) and explained that they “do not feel that they need fantasies. What they need is the switch”, and “the batteries, not the erotic episodes”. She differentiates such “athletic types” from the “cultural types” (*bunka-kei*) who “can enjoy eroticism through fantasies” including yaoi manga and novels (Kitahara 2008). Within the yaoi community, sexual fantasies are created, provided, and exchanged among yaoi women fans. Therefore I should add the following to Kitahara’s explanation: Yaoi women fans need each other, not the switches and batteries. Just as the above-quoted male teenager can be called a “virtual heterosexual person” even though he never touches his sexual partner’s body, yaoi fans can be called “virtual lesbians”. Needless to say, being a “virtual lesbian” and being a heterosexual woman are completely compatible.²⁰

6. Towards the possibilities of activism

This community of women who are bonded through the pleasure of “virtual lesbian sex” has increasingly been functioning as a discursive space that points towards lesbian, feminist, and queer activism. While more detailed and comprehensive analyses need to wait for a future opportunity, let me briefly discuss two points.

First, the BL genre in recent years has constantly produced manga and

²⁰ Also, it is possible to praise “love” as a “virtual lesbian” simultaneously as one denounces lesbians/lesbianism. For an example, see Emikuri (1989: 40).

illustrated novels which portray characters who come out. In many of such works, the processes in which gay characters go through conflicts against and negotiations with their families, friends, colleagues and local community and are eventually accepted by them are depicted. Of course, the genre still produces stories in which the protagonists' homosexual orientation/taste is defined as "shameful disposition" (*ushirogurai seiheki*) which is used to make the story more dramatic. But at the same time, the genre also produces stories in which coming-out episodes and the ensuing events are portrayed in such a way that is a few steps ahead of reality in contemporary Japanese society, in the direction of equal rights for homosexual individuals. For example, I was recently surprised to read a story that was set in contemporary Japan where, if an employer terminates a contract with an employee because the latter is revealed as gay, such an employer would surely receive severe social sanctions (Akizuki 2006: 144). Also, BL produces such gay characters that are not really found in other genres. Here are two examples. One twenty-something character responds to his co-workers' teasing comment about his gay sexuality with humor (Yorita 2005: 176-177). (In this story, the protagonist works for his father's construction business in a rural city and many of his co-workers are middle-aged.) There is even a gay "parent" who raises "his" two children of his late lover, who had been married prior to engaging in a homosexual relationship (Takeuchi 2003). (His lover had adopted him. He is legally the older brother in law to the teenagers.) The fact that this protagonist is gay and a good "parent" is accepted not only by his "children" but also by his supportive neighbors. As I "meet" these gay characters almost every week, I cannot help but think that the BL genre today is constantly holding a workshop, as it were, that pursues and experiments with case studies on gay-friendly society and gay citizens, even though the genre is mostly populated by heterosexual women. These BL stories with gay characters are different from those fantastic ones in which the fact that the two male protagonists fall in love is not even recognized as homosexual by the other characters. Rather, these stories pursue and present the realistic strategies homosexual individuals can take in contemporary Japan in order to overcome the existing discrimination and negative stereotypes. Needless to say, representing the better future constitutes activism in itself even if only at the level of representation.

I do not mean to suggest that these gay characters are free of yaoi formulae. Rather, such formulae as top/bottom (*semé/uké*) roles in sex and straight male characters falling in love with the members of the same sex still persist in the majority of the stories. In addition, as the number of gay-identified characters has increased, the following strange episode is increasingly seen in many stories. “The protagonist finds out that his new business associate is his ex whom he dumped. As he is surprised at the coincidence, his ex goes ahead and outs him as gay to his colleagues.” (Does this mean that the protagonist’s ex has told his colleagues that he used to date the protagonist? How would he explain that he was able to penetrate the protagonist’s closet without coming out himself?) Such unrealistic yaoi formulae and the representations that reflect the authors’ activist imagination coexist within the BL genre today, and sometimes even within one story. The fact remains, however, that many BL authors have been seriously thinking of what might happen to gay (homosexual) people in contemporary Japanese society from the minority position of yaoi sexuality (though many of them would not be conscious of it). From this involved position, they have been coming up with possible scenarios in which the gay characters can live a better life in a society that seems slightly advanced than, but is feasibly extended from, the real one. The mixture of such an activist impulse and fantastic tropes is admittedly complicated. Nevertheless I suggest that the activist power of such representations does not disappear despite the yaoi formulae. Of course, the readers who are unfamiliar with such formulae might find it difficult to continue reading the stories and end up giving up before they get to the activist-oriented contents. For this reason, as an example I refer to a non-BL novel, *Yōkian yawa: sono tantei, hito ni arazu* [The Story of the Strange Ghosts: That Detective Is Not a Human]. Written by BL author Eda Yūri (榎田尤利) under her non-BL penname that is pronounced the same but is differentiated by the first name written with *kana* syllabary instead of Chinese characters (榎田ユウリ), the story is set in a fantastic world where human beings and various kinds of *yōjin* (subspecies of humans that are endowed with special abilities) coexist (Eda 2009). As far as the appearances go, *yōjin* can usually pass as humans. The way this story portrays discriminations against *yōjin* in a highly political manner resembles homophobia in reality so much that it enables the reader to interpret *yōjin* activism as a metaphor of

gay activism.

Secondly, the BL genre has increasingly been producing works that problematize or provoke examinations of the existing gender system and human sexuality more broadly, that is, marriage, reproduction, heterosexuality, the relationship between romantic love and the institution of marriage, and the traditional concept of family versus non-biological family. One recent powerful example is Kotobuki Tarako's manga story *Sex Pistols* (Kotobuki 2004 a, b, 2005 a, b, 2006).²¹ Set in a world where 30% of humans belong to the *madararui* (brindled kind), which evolved from various animals, while 70% belong to *enjin* (monkey people), which evolved from apes just as men in reality, the story is dramatic and unpredictable. Significantly, in this fantastic story's world, complex strategies are necessary for the "brindled" individual's effective reproduction, and a variety of reproductive technologies are available to make them reproductive regardless of their genders. The reproductive couples include five male-male ones, one female-female one, and a three-some heterosexual one.

Sex Pistols offers numerous topics for discussions among fans because it both subverts and enforces heteronormative assumptions concerning love, sex, reproduction, and family. On one level, the fact that male-male couples and even a female-female couple get married and have children seems to subvert the heteronormative system. It is simply refreshing to see, even in representation, a renowned male English architect of aristocratic origin clad in a perfect suit recounting his days of nursing his son as his "mother" (fig. 7). But at the same time, this is a world in which everyone lives to fall in love and reproduce. There is no question that through a complicated double movement, *Sex Pistols* manages pleasurable narratives that are appealing and provocative at the same time. And it generates lively conversations among fans.

A comment such as, "I so love that Norio is cute and Kunimasa manly", and "I think it's a great work. All the characters are so attractive. But, I just can't stand that everything resorts to making a child and a marriage", "Well, yeah, but isn't it natural?" are made freely among the fans. Discussing the characters' charms is common among fans of any genre. However, such fundamental discussions about reproduction, romantic relationships, marriage, and family are usually avoided as "too serious",

²¹ As of the summer of 2010, the story is serialized in *Magazine Be-Boy*.

especially among women of different marital status, sexual orientation, educational and political background. As we fellow fans share the minority “taste/orientation” of yaoi sexuality and primarily form bonds through pleasure as the subjects of sexual desire, or through “virtual lesbian sex” in the yaoi community, we are comfortable enough exchanging thoughts on numerous issues related to the broad concept of sexuality. In this sense, it seems reasonable to call the contemporary yaoi community an effective arena for feminist discourse even though only a small number of women have proclaimed themselves feminists.

Yoshinaga Fumi’s *Ōoku*, or *The Inner Chambers*, is arguably the most critically acclaimed manga work by an artist who started her career as a BL author. The story is still ongoing, but it has already won several prizes including the very prestigious 13th Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize Grand-Prix Award. In addition, it has been dramatized into a live-action film, which was theatrically released in Japan in October 2010. It is a Science Fiction period story set in the parallel world of Japan during the feudal Edo era, where the male population has diminished to one fourth of the female one due to a strange epidemic. Thus, the shōgun in this feudal Japan as well as the other lords

ruling the country are all women, while the inner chambers are populated by young and beautiful men whose job is to be the “stud” to the female shōgun. Artist Yoshinaga and aforementioned author/fan Miura Shion have agreed that this work is queer to an extent that has become possible only via shōjo manga (girls’ comics) and BL (Yoshinaga 2007: 86). If I may add an explanation to their comment, what they mean by “via BL” does not refer to the love scenes between beautiful male characters of the inner chambers. (Though some of my undergraduate students who are unfamiliar with BL tend to assume that the existence of male-male scenes automatically



Fig 7: Kotobuki Tarako, *Sex Pistols*. Libre shuppan Super Be Boy comics, 2006, 14.

gives the story the status of a BL work, as I have seen in their book reports.) Rather, examining the fundamental questions of sexuality, reproduction, and gender as shown above within the framework of entertaining fiction with sexual depictions itself is the practice cultivated within the BL genre in recent years. *Ōoku* is a shōjo manga work and as such, it does not include graphic sex scenes. However, it does convey the characters' sexuality. That is, the way they experience pleasure and pain by engaging in sexual acts involving membranes and bodily fluids is portrayed, through deft elliptical and symbolic techniques typical of shōjo manga, with a sense of physical immediacy. In addition, the extremely dynamic and intense female shōgun characters make a strong impression on the reader, because their emotional range greatly surpasses that of shōjo manga heroines. Yoshinaga has portrayed, in her BL stories, a number of male characters who are tossed around by and indulged in love and sex as both subject and object of sexuality, who suffer in the conflict between his identity as a male social subject and his newly assumed passive (uké) role (and thus a feminine position) in a romance with another man, and who put in all his energy for his profession which he feels is his vocation, all of them with an uncompromising vigor, sense of humor, and sometimes with splashes of bodily fluid. Through portraying such male characters for over a decade as a BL artist, Yoshinaga has undoubtedly gained such representational skills that I would liken to the well-trained musculature with a much wider mobility range than that of a regular woman. It is such a musculature that is mobilized in the creation of *Ōoku*. Once again, I have to stress that *Ōoku* is not a BL work. Judging from the magazine in which it is serialized, it is a shōjo manga work. Its story line suggests that it belongs to the context of feminist Science Fiction. Unlike Yoshinaga's BL stories, it is read by a cross-over readership of both genders. All this does not deny the fact, though, that *Ōoku* is an offspring of BL, or rather, the larger yaoi genre including the yaoi fanzine (dōjinshi) world, if we recall that Yoshinaga has been its active participant for many years.

7. The potential of the unconscious queer continuum

I have effectively claimed *Ōoku*, authored by the openly feminist artist Yoshinaga,²² as

22 Yoshinaga has “come out” as feminist in a published dialogue with Miura Shion (Yoshinaga

the fruit of yaoi as a feminist and queer forum. But I want to add that we should not be wrongly directed to the developmental schema in which yaoi women fans need to grow out of yaoi in order to become overt feminists. Rather, I repeat that the fact that many yaoi fans think that they are only having fun by reading, chatting, and enjoying their fantasies and not engaging in activism at all is exactly why the yaoi community has functioned and still functions as an unprecedented, effective political arena for women with the potential for activism. Some might criticize me for thinking too highly of a forum that after 20 years of commercialization has presented only such changes as I have described in this paper and only a few openly feminists. But I would argue that the quick, clear-cut feminist activism is an impossible dream to begin with.

Artist Watanabe Ajaia has published an essay comic in which she relates her experience of attending the Pride March in New York City (fig. 8). In the last frame, her monologue goes: “It does not matter whether one is homosexual (*homo*), lesbian (*rezu*), or heterosexual (*hetero*)./Gentle feelings./ Let’s live powerfully.” At one level, Watanabe identifies with the position of the heterosexual in this sentence. But if we remember how yaoi fans consider themselves as members of the minority sexuality of yaoi as I have shown, the sentence should be interpreted as referring to the queer continuum that consists of gay, lesbian and yaoi sexuality. The gentle feelings here should refer more to the gesture to affirm Watanabe herself as a member of the queer continuum than to tolerate gays and lesbians from the position of the majority. Significantly, I participate in this queer continuum both as an out lesbian and a person of yaoi sexuality. In effect we, fellow yaoi fans, say to each other “Let’s live powerfully”, everyday and exchange “love”.



Fig 8: Watanabe Ajaia, “Watanabe Ajiaga iku honba NY geiparêdo (Watanabe Ajaia Goes to the Gay Parade in NY, a Mecca [for Gays])” *Boy’s Piasu*/ Pierce, November 2008, 109.

2007a: 70).

It is then very unfortunate that this community of “love”, and by extension the possibility of productive queer activism involving over a million women, is in danger of diminishing today due to problems such as the so-called “new second-hand bookstores”,²³ “scanlations”,²⁴ and censorship. As a fan, researcher and educator, I have come to strongly feel the need to address these imminent problems. For example, I have started to lecture in class how buying used books contributes to the diminishing of the BL industry. I have seen many startled faces when I explain to the students that only when they buy new copies their favorite authors and their publishers can gain some part of the money they pay for the books. (In their minds, they were just engaging in the “virtuous acts of recycling and saving money.”) While my primary commitment lies with the larger yaoi genre which today mostly consists of the commercial BL industry and the fanzine world, I wish to start dialogues with the fans, researchers, educators, and industry representatives of other genres, as I am certain that many of us face similar problems regardless of genre. I hope that publishing this paper in the venue for global researches of comics and manga will encourage such conversations.

²³ This seemingly contradictory term, the “new second-hand bookstore”, was coined to refer to such second-hand bookstores as *Book Off* and *Amazon Marketplace* that emerged in recent years in order to differentiate them from the traditional second-hand bookstores that usually carry the titles after a significant duration has passed since their publication. On the contrary, “new second-hand bookstores” often carry the titles shortly after their publications, sometimes even on the same day, and in much larger quantities. Several people who work at the regular bookstores have informed me that the number of shoplifting cases had obviously increased after the “new second-hand bookstores” proliferated.

²⁴ “Scanlation” is an illegal act of scanning manga works, giving translations, and putting them on the web without permission. As for the “scanlation” in the English-language world, a number of participants including Nicole Nowlin gave me information at the Yaoi-Con 2009 (October 29–November 1, San Mateo, U.S.) I learned about the recent situation of the “scanlation” problem in South Korea from Yoshihara Yukari’s presentation whose title can be translated as “Report: About Copyright Problems in the Korean Comics Industry, Based on an Interview with Won Soo Yeon.” Yoshihara’s presentation was given at a mini-symposium in conjunction with the *She Draws Comics* exhibition (Kyoto International Manga Museum, 2010/02/14).

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*Label names are given for the BL (boys' love) books.

*Approximate meanings are given within brackets for the Japanese language books.

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