only to find the object of his desire, a young Thai princess, in the next room engaged in sex with another woman. Instead of admitting her otherness, he sees only what he wants to see: a mark on her body that she is the reincarnation of his first love, a beautiful young man who died at the age of twenty.

15. Ishida discusses this in *Hisoyaka na kyōiku*, 109–54. It is noteworthy that her discussion includes their different approaches to Luchino Visconti’s costume drama films, such as *The Damned* (1969), *Death in Venice* (1971), and *Ludwig* (1972).
21. See Tanaka Mitsu, *Inochi no onna tachi e: Torimidashi ūman ribu* [To the women of life: Tearing my hair out women’s liberation] (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 1992), 18, and also Mori, *Onna wa poruno o yomu*, 12. On 1970 as the originary year of the *shonenai* genre, see Weller’s chapter in this volume.
23. JUNE is discussed extensively in Fujimoto’s chapter in this volume.
24. My discussion here is focused on individual readers and differs from the relationships among reader-creators discussed by Patrick Galbraith in this volume.
25. On male fandom of BL and its relationship to dissatisfaction with the current gender and sexual order, see Kazumi Nagaika’s chapter in this volume.
27. Mishima had notified journalists before his final action including the foreign press. See Henry Scott-Stokes, *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965). The postscript to this book reveals a tabloid interest in the homosexuality that Mishima’s body may have, or may not have, given “proof” to by autopsy.

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**MOETALK**

Affective Communication among Female Fans of *Yaoi* in Japan

**PATRICK W. GALBRAITH**

*They say that the compulsion to consume certain kinds of manga is a sickness (byōki). But we all have our sicknesses. The question is what is your sickness? And what sickness can we live together with?*

—SAGAWA TOSHIHIKO, FOUNDER OF JUNE

**Introduction**

In the growing body of literature on boys love (BL) manga in Japan, more attention is paid to texts than readers. Where discussions of BL readers do appear, they tend to be autobiographical or abstract. This has led to much speculation about the identifications and orientations of BL readers—they are straight women, lesbians, men in women’s bodies, gay men, straight men—which is fascinating in its own right. However, at a time when erotic manga face public criticism for their possible deleterious effects, despite academic writing on the complexity of engagement with fiction, there is an urgent need for grounded discussion of what readers do with BL manga and with one another. This chapter explores how female fans of BL in Japan talk to one another about relationships between fictional male characters, which is not only pleasurable, but also productive of new ways of interacting with the world of everyday reality.4

Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Tokyo from 2006 to 2007, I focus primarily on three female university students and friends named Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo, who started reading BL in middle school and later became producers and consumers of *yaoi*. Distinct from BL, a genre of
commercial manga, *yaoi* is a form of fan-fiction and art that depicts romantic and/or sexual relationships between straight male characters from manga, anime, games, and other popular media, as well as media personalities and public figures. BL is a formula—a couple comprised of two male characters, where one is the top (seme) and the other is the bottom (uke)—and *yaoi* is reading this formula in unexpected places. One imagines that a relationship between men might be romantic or sexual, in other words a character “coupling” (*kappuringu*). At the time of our encounters, Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo no longer read BL manga because the relationship between the two original male characters was already apparent, so the space for imagining and producing the relationship was closed down. While BL manga (and its historical antecedent, *shōnen'ai*) can be serious in tone, *yaoi* fan-fiction and art tends to be playful and parodic. Indeed, the term “*yaoi*” is an acronym for “no climax, no punch line, no meaning” (*yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi*). If, as BL scholars have noted, relationships between male characters that neither look like men nor identify as homosexual opens up the possibility of “pervasive readings,” then this is amplified in *yaoi*, which is not burdened by expectations of “meaning” and “reality.” In *yaoi* fan-fiction and art, women can “play sexuality.”

The bulk of this chapter is devoted to unpacking what Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo called “*moe* talk” (*moe-banashī*), where they discussed affective relationships between not only fictional male characters, but also animate and inanimate objects. The goal is to show how *yaoi* fans use their imagination to interact differently with media, one another, and the world around them. I conclude that fans understand and negotiate their own relations far better than outside observers can, which should discourage hasty intervention by “authorities.” Indeed, the true authorities are not lawyers and researchers, but rather the fans themselves. I certainly learned from Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo, who graciously included me in sessions of *moe* talk. This chapter is an attempt to work through and convey, however imperfectly, the experience of hanging out with three *yaoi* fans in Japan, which changed my perspective on things.

*Moe*: Affective Response and Communication

The *moe* response is triggered first and foremost by personal interactions with a fictional character or characters interacting with one another. A character can be a written description or drawn image, an actual person reduced to a character (or one that is a “character” or known personality), or anthropomorphized animals, plants, machines, objects, concepts, and so on. The material that triggers a *moe* response can come from anywhere, if one is able to read for the signs of a BL relationship. As Megumi explained, “*Fujoshi* see *moe* in anything. [Fantasizing about *yaoi* narratives] changes one’s way of seeing things and imagining relationships between things.” In general, only fiction or what is associated with fiction can be *moe*; a physical object such as a figurine or a person in costume can be *moe*, but only to the extent that they are associated with a character or its world. The trigger of *moe* is made of the opposite sex. Two, *fujoshi* prefer male–male romance to male–female romance. This is taken to be abnormal, a perception reinforced by sometimes extreme depictions of sex in *yaoi* fan-fiction and art. Three, *fujoshi* have deviated from the social roles and responsibilities that define women. In homosocial and imaginary relations, *yaoi* fans do not have to face reality and grow up (they are “girls”) and fail to achieve reproductive maturity (they are “rotten”). Symbolically, the term “*fujoshi*” is a pun that transforms the Japanese term “women and girls” into a homonym meaning “rotten girls.”

While obviously an example of labeling and negative identity politics, we should not forget that the word “*fujoshi*” is used among *yaoi* fans themselves. This can be a form of self-deprecating humor, but also something more. Some women embrace being “rotten girls,” announcing themselves as *fujoshi* and performing this identification when among friends and fellow fans. Being a *fujoshi*—up to and including having “abnormal” fantasies—can be a source of pride. *Fujoshi* consider themselves to be different from “normals” (*ippanjin*), and even “normal” fans of manga, anime, and games (so-called *otaku*). Megumi made a distinction between normals, who are satisfied with things as they are, and *fujoshi*, who seek alternatives. From Megumi’s perspective, normals have no dreams and no imagination. In contrast, Hachi said that *fujoshi* have “abundant imagination” (*mōsōryoku yutaka*). They can “fantasize about anything” (*nan ni demo mōsō suru*). Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo all agreed that what makes a *fujoshi* different from others is her appreciation of *moe*, or an affective response to fictional characters. In pursuit of *moe*, the *fujoshi* interacts with fiction, other people, and the world differently.

*Fujoshi*: The Imagination of “Rotten Girls

Many *yaoi* fans that I encountered, including Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo, self-identified as “*fujoshi*,” literally meaning “rotten girls.” When I asked informants what makes *fujoshi* “rotten,” three explanations were recurrent. One, *fujoshi* are in relationships with fictional men rather than actual members...
distinct from reality. Fans of yaoi, for example, refer to relationships between male characters as “pure fantasy” (junsui na fantazii).\(^\text{14}\) Even though they are aware of the realities of relations between men and women, the fantasy is made pure by deliberately separating it from everyday life. In this way, Hachi argued that drawings of beautiful boys have nothing to do with “real gays” (リアルゲイ).\(^\text{9}\) Hachi described herself to me as a lesbian, with no interest in men, gay or straight, but she was attracted to the fictional characters of manga, anime, and games. Further, she explained, if a man is gay in reality, then it is not fun to imagine that he is—hence the separation of fictional characters from “real gays.” Similarly, Megumi imagined her boyfriend, who she later married, in romantic and sexual relationships with other men. Megumi’s partner was not homosexual, and she did not exactly want him to be. Rather, Megumi told me that she enjoyed playing with his “character” (karya), which she knew was surely a submissive bottom just waiting to be taken by the right man. Just as Hachi made drawings of beautiful boys distinct from real gay men, Megumi made her partner’s character distinct from him, which allowed her to interact with him in different ways.

Following Saitō Tamaki, one might say that fujoshi are attracted to “fictional contexts” (kyōkō no kontekusuto),\(^\text{16}\) specifically patterned relationships between men called “boys love.” Fujoshi enjoy “layering,” as Saitō puts it, contexts upon the other, and playfully putting fiction in relation with reality. In the specific case of Megumi, she layered a fictional context onto reality—BL character relations on top of actual male relations—which allowed her to be “multiply oriented” to her partner.\(^\text{7}\) To recap, Megumi was imaginatively producing yaoi fan-fiction using her partner’s character. Because the fictional character was “real” (embodied) and the real person was “fictional” (her partner as character), Megumi could interact with fiction and reality in different ways. Megumi was particularly attuned to this kind of layer play. For example, when watching anime, she would comment on an imagined relationship between an actor and the male character that he voiced. Saitō would explain this behavior not as confusion about what is real, but rather the pleasure of straddling layered contexts and crossing boundaries.

When an imagined character coupling proves affective, fujoshi call it “moe,” a term used widely among diverse fandoms of manga, anime, and games in Japan. Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo all insisted that what one does and does not find moe differs from person to person. Because they had grown up together reading and sharing BL and yaoi, the three women felt that they had developed into friends who could talk about moe, or “moe friends” (moe tomo).\(^\text{18}\) The pursuit of moe, shared among fujoshi, is key to understanding

the sociality of fujoshi. For example, yaoi fan-fiction and art is intended to convey what one responds to as moe. Fans are highlighting precisely what it is about the character, design, scene, interaction, or series that excites, and do this with the intention of sharing that affection. Yaoi has been called “pornography” and “masturbation fantasy,”\(^\text{19}\) but its pleasures are nevertheless meant to be shared. The exchange can be direct. At events to buy and sell yaoi fanzines (dōjinshi), fujoshi interact face to face. Hachi was a relatively well-known producer of fanzines, and I observed her at several events. As Hachi described it, sitting behind a table laden with fanzines is like advertising one’s fantasy. When someone stops at a table, picks up a fanzine, and flips through it, there is palpable tension; the creator waits in nervous anticipation of a response. Only if the prospective reader decides to buy the fanzine do the two women begin to engage in conversation, first confirming what the work is about and then discussing their shared interest. As a rule at many events, the personal website of the author/artist is printed inside her fanzine, so readers can connect with them online.\(^\text{20}\)

There are a variety of interactions that occur on the personal websites of fujoshi, but, due to issues of space, I will limit myself to an account of two types. The first is echa (“picture chat”), where participants gather on a designated website at a designated time to draw, upload and discuss images. If the fanzine is an expression of what one responds to as moe, then the echa is
an intimate association of imagination, where one is open to being affected by others in a real-time exchange of images and ideas. In one example, Hachi hosted an echa dedicated to generating moe for Pokémon creatures, which she and her friends anthropomorphized and put into character couplings. The drawings and discussion evolved collectively, as participants were excited and inspired by what others suggested as sexy interpretations of Pokémon creatures and relationships between them. Another example of online interaction among fujoshi is naricha (“become a character to chat”), where participants role-play yaoi narratives, which can include virtual sex between characters. The naricha might be seen as an example of what Uli Meyer calls “creative transvestism,” or a transgression of sexuality and gender that carries over from fiction into reality, “enabling its readers/creators to identify or feel with the male characters on a physical level.” Note, however, that not all of the fujoshi I spoke with who participated in naricha (and, by extension, virtual sex with one another) considered themselves to be lesbians. Even Hachi, who did identify this way, explained to me that naricha was a relationship between fictional male characters, a form of yaoi fan-fiction that has nothing to do with the producer’s sexual orientation. After all, yaoi is supposed to be meaningless. If the naricha is a form of fan-fiction, then participants “characterize” themselves to (role-)play sexuality in yaoi, much as Megumi “characterized” her male partner and played out relations between him and other men.

When together on- or offline, fujoshi friends engage in what Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo called “moe talk” (moe-banashi). As the name implies, moe talk entails talking about what one responds to as moe, which is usually a particular character coupling. Even as one gets carried away in the moment of moe talk, “enthusiasm is tempered by a kind of self-awareness that gives it a performed quality.” Morikawa Ka’ichirō notes that describing certain characters, relationships, or situations as moe is an intimate expression of taste, but at the same time talking about moe relationships with and between fictional characters allows for distance. For example, Sugiuira Yumiko observes that fujoshi talk about sex as if evaluating food or handbags, because they are not talking about themselves or real people but rather the moe points of sex between fictional characters. Though Morikawa and Sugiuira’s points may seem at odds, moe talk is both talking about personal taste and talking about things outside the self. The object of conversation is both distant and intensely personal. Take for example the single most common debate among fujoshi who recognize the same character coupling: Who is the top (seme) and who is the bottom (uke)? Just as there are cues that make certain relationships between men more likely to be reinterpreted as romantic or sexual, there are elements of character that fujoshi pick up on to make the distinction between top and bottom, but there are also disagreements. As Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo said, though moe is a response to things outside the self and can seem like detached observations, it differs from person to person, and hence talking (or arguing) about moe can get personal in a hurry. As Daisuke Okabe and Kimi Ishida note, “How fujoshi [sic] choose to categorize characters from the original work can energize or ruin their communication with one another.” Though fans do come together in more general ways, belonging to an abstract and homogenous community only lasts until one is confronted with internal difference. Moetalk is a concrete, joyful encounter, an intense form of communication among fans with similar tastes.

Though the moment of affective response to the fictional character has passed, moe talk affects in its own way. Not only are fictional characters summoned and relations with them enlivened by moe talk, but also one’s understanding of characters and relations expands. Hachi referred to moe talk as “sharing one big brain,” where she could gain access to a collective consciousness or shared imaginary concerning character coupling. (Recall the echa here.) The evolving relationship with and between characters can take an unexpected turn based on input from other fujoshi who participate in moe talk. For her part, Hachi sought out moe friends who had close enough interests to understand the character coupling, but also enough imagination to say something new and interesting that would inspire conversation. Moments of being taken by surprise were among the most intense in moe talk. Shrieks and squeals, shouting, thrashing arms, gnashing teeth, clapping hands—I observed all of these in moe talk among fujoshi.

The pursuit of moe and the interactions that it engenders with media, objects and others, both fictional and real, approaches what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a “plateau,” or a continuous “region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end.” Yaoi is a plateau, in that relations with and between characters are open-ended and ongoing. (There is “no climax.”) For example, when I met Hachi’s friend Kei in 2006, she was still actively producing yaoi fan-fiction about a character coupling from an anime series that aired on Japanese TV in the 1990s. She also gravitated toward new character couplings that reflect elements of this older one. Kei’s pursuit of moe is an example of what Dominic Pettman calls a “love vector,” where “distributed qualities are splashed across a multitude of people, characters, images and avatars,” and this vector is not oriented toward a point of culmination. The love vector also allows us to see what Megumi was talking about when she said that fujoshi imagine...
relationships between things in the world around them: a distribution of affective qualities and relations across a multitude of animate and inanimate objects. Brian Massumi notes of the plateau that “the heightening of energies is sustained long enough to leave a kind of afterimage of its dynamism that can be reactivated or injected into other activities, creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exist.” In the case of fujoshi, the intensity of interactions with and between fictional characters does not immediately dissipate in a climax and is instead injected into interactions among fujoshi. If, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, the intensive stabilization of the plateau can occur in “sexual games, and even quarrels,” then moe talk is certainly one example.11

Examples of Moe Talk

In this section, I offer some examples of moe talk from my fieldwork. To begin, Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo are all fans of Angelique, a series of games in which the player takes the role of a queen and simulates romance with a bevy of beautiful boy characters. As fujoshi, however, the three women preferred to imagine relationships between male characters. One evening, Hachi and Tomo came to visit Megumi, who lived in an apartment in central Tokyo while attending university and working part-time. Because Megumi lived on her own, she could have friends over without imposing on her family. This is a luxury in Tokyo, and Megumi’s apartment was the group’s unofficial spot to hang out. Sitting together in the living room, the three friends recalled their shared experiences playing Angelique, which inevitably led to a discussion of character coupling. Tomo asked, “How would you couple Randy?” All three took for granted that Randy was the bottom, and instead focused on who the top should be. Megumi responded bluntly, “He’s too damn sweet. It’s impossible.” Hachi chimed in, “Julius and Randy, like as big brother, little brother?” Not convinced, Megumi interjected, “Randy needs a firm hand, like a teacher, so it has to be Sei-Lan. He may be mean, but imagine him spoiling cute little Randy while bullying everyone else.” Megumi’s character coupling—older and younger, teacher and student, cruel and kind—struck a chord with Tomo, who blurted out, “Moe!” The discussion gained momentum as the three friends began to imagine romantic and sexual relations between the characters. Someone suggested that if Sei-Lan was mean to Randy most of the time, then the affect would be amplified when he was finally nice to him (a relational pattern called tsundere). A “hurt/comfort” scenario was suggested with Sei-Lan violently raping Randy then caring for him afterward; Randy’s vulnerability, even when caused by Sei-Lan’s abuse, was said to make him cuter. Though this may sound extreme, there are comparable scenarios in global fan-fiction and even canonical Japanese literature.12 The relationship between Randy and Sei-Lan referred to intertextual codes of fiction, not the reality of human relationships, where assault and battery is not “hot.” It is important to remember that Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo were talking about character couplings, which do not necessarily reflect their desires for what they called “real life.” Rather than trying to read possible identifications in the fantasy of male–male character relations, I instead would simply draw attention to how sharing the fantasy is productive of human relations among fujoshi.

One of the pleasures of moe talk is encountering unanticipated ideas that throw participants into upheaval. For example, Hachi and Tomo came to visit Megumi and, during a lull in the conversation, used her computer to surf the Internet. Sitting in front of the same screen, Hachi and Tomo viewed and read together, at times even verbalizing text and responding to it aloud. They settled on a particular webpage and began reading yaoi fan-fiction posted there. Hachi clicked on a link embedded in the text and she and Tomo were
suddenly exposed to a digitization of one of Hokusai’s woodblock prints, *The Great Wave at Kanagawa*. The image is iconic—a wave about to crash over a tiny boat with Mount Fuji in the background—and seemed terribly out of place. Both Hachi and Tomo dived into the accompanying text, giggling as they questioned the poster’s strange maneuver. Hachi read aloud: “The strong and confident boatman went too far and was caught up in the pounding surf.” After a moment of silence, the connection was made: wave as top and boatman as bottom. As in the *yaoi* fan-fiction they were reading, the top was a quiet and reserved man who was pushed too far by the bottom, and so responded with overwhelming force and power. *The Great Wave at Kanagawa* was a visualization of the concept of “assaulting bottom” (*osoi uke*), where the bottom attacks and provokes the top, instigating a sexual encounter. Hachi and Tomo started laughing uncontrollably. Hachi said, “This is so great! I’d have never thought of such a thing.” Tomo commented that the poster, like the boatman, had “gone too far” (*yarisugi*), but this was a positive assessment. Tomo said that she might “die from moe” (*moe shinu*). Play is often about getting out of hand and pushing limits, a phenomenon noted of *fujoshi,* who spend much of their time hiding interests from normals, but among friends and fellow *fans* relish losing control. (The intensity of *moe* talk, which includes loud voices and animated gestures, comes to mind.) Many *fujoshi* I met recounted stories of friends who “go wild” (*ara-buru*) or “go on a rampage” (*basso suru*). Again, this was not a bad thing. On the contrary, these people were some of the most fun to be around. Sharing wild fantasies and behavior bonds *fujoshi* together and encourages others to participate and go beyond limits. In the wave and boatman example, Hachi and Tomo were exposed to the thoughts of the poster, whose creativity shattered inhibitions and opened channels of creative expression.

In another example, Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo were walking home after buying *yaoi* fanzines at an event. Inspired by what they had seen, the three friends started debating whether or not a bottom acting in a self-destructive way out of love for a top might be *moe*. Tomo was at first skeptical. Hachi impulsively decided to use her surroundings as an illustration of the coupling: “Is this road *moe*? See, it’s virgin, freshly paved, but is doing its best with the cars on top. What if he was trying so hard to please his lover?” (figure 8.3). Despite the sudden turn in the *moe* talk, Megumi did not miss a beat: “The road is a loser bottom (*betae uke*) in love with one particular car, who is an insensitive pleasure seeker (*kichiiku seme*). In order to win his love, the road agreed to be his sex slave and is now being broken in by the top’s clients [that is, random cars pounding it on a daily basis].” Tomo joined Megumi and Hachi in laughter and a chorus of “*moe, moe, moe.*” In this communicative event, the interpretive game of *yaoi* effectively re-enchanted the world, making the very ground under the women’s feet part of a fantasy capable of affecting them. Inspired, the three friends discussed character couplings between other complementary objects such as knife and spoon, and shampoo and conditioner. It occurred to me that this is what Megumi meant by the pursuit of *moe* leading to a different way of seeing things and “imagining relationships between things.” Among *fujoshi*, the only limit to what could be included in imagined character couplings was the limit negotiated by friends. Among the right people, anything seemed possible, which was an exciting prospect indeed.

Concluding Remarks

Scholars have noted that BL manga allows readers to safely explore sex outside of themselves, and Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo, long-time BL readers, have internalized patterns of character coupling, which they utilize to imaginatively produce *yaoi* fan-fiction about the world around them. In other words, Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo use their imaginations to interact.
differently with media, one another, and the world around them. They share a space of imagination set apart from “meaning” and “reality,” allowing them to play sexuality. Spaces of shared imagination are an example of what Anita Harris calls “safe spaces” where women can express their desires in relative freedom and without fear of censure.40 Harris highlights the importance of these spaces at a time of mass surveillance, reactionary politics, and the inflation of norms. Amid struggles to delimit the “possible imaginary,”41 fanzines and websites allow women “to engage in unregulated dialogue and debate with one another” and “generate their own meanings and terminologies around sexual desire.”42 This is certainly on display among fujoshi, who generate their own meanings and terms around sexual desire in relation to imagined character couplings and engage in mae talk with one another.

Based on extended social contact with fujoshi, it is my position that the safe spaces of fan interaction and imagination are beneficial, and should not be legislated and policed due to fear of unknown possible risks of exposure to erotic manga such as BL.44 It is true that Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo were long-time BL readers, which changed their way of seeing things and relations between things, but this enhanced rather than detracted from their ability to interact with others. It is also true that these three women, who self-identified as fujoshi or “rotten girls,” embraced fantasies that they described as abnormal, but we must allow for safe spaces to desire outside of socially acceptable forms.44 Mark McLelland argues that yaoi is deliberately transgressive, and that fans organize into countercultures supportive of critical stances toward the mainstream.45 Such dissent must be allowed even if, or precisely because, it challenges norms. Further, in interaction with one another, fans negotiate their own community standards and values. They regulate themselves far more effectively than outside authorities can. I observed in my fieldwork that fujoshi follow their own “ethics of mae” (mae no rinri),46 whereby they pursue affective responses to fictional characters, but also set limits to avoid harming real people. The ethics of mae resonates with what Michael Warner calls the ethics of alternative life.47 Channelling Warner alongside Hachi, Megumi, and Tomo, one might say that the trouble with normals is that they do not have the imagination to understand and participate in the alternative social world of fujoshi.

Notes

1. Kakinuma Eiko and Sagawa Toshihiko, “Eien no rokagutsu (JUNE)” [Eternal JUNE/JUNE], talk given at the Yoshihiro Yonezawa Memorial Library of Manga and Subcultures, June 26, 2011. I chose this quote as the epigraph for this chapter not only because Sagawa

Toshihiko is a voice for tolerance and free imagination, but also because he anticipates the alternative ways of relating to others that I observed in my fieldwork.


6. I am inspired here by Constance Penley, who asks “what women do with popular culture, how it gives them pleasure, and how it can be consciously and unconsciously reworked to give them more pleasure, at both a social and psychic level.” See Constance Penley, “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture,” in Cultural Studies, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), 488.

7. I conducted participant observation and ethnographic interviews with twenty Japanese women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five encountered in Tokyo between April 2006 and March 2007. Informants were recruited using the snowballing technique, which allowed me to focus on overlapping networks of friends. Most were from middle-class families and were students at a prestigious women’s university (name withheld for issues of privacy). Living at home, they had money and time to indulge in hobbies. Most identified as heterosexual, and some had boyfriends. Interviews were conducted in Japanese; all translations of these women’s comments are my own. All informants were aware of my status as a researcher, and gave permission for me to include their words and stories in this write-up of my fieldwork. All their names are pseudonyms.
8. Sagawa Toshihiko speculates that the separation of male characters into top (seme) and bottom (uke) was not intentional in the shōnenai manga that was commercially published in the 1970s. Rather, he recalls that fans read this dynamic into the works, and then read it elsewhere in relationships between male characters in manga, anime, and so on. Kakinuma and Sagawa, "Eien no rokugatsu."


12. The fact that my informants identified as fujoshi is perhaps overdetermined, because our encounters in 2006 and 2007 coincided with a media boom concerning BL and yaoi fans, who were at times called fujoshi. See Hester, this volume.

13. In Japanese, fujoshi can mean both women and girls (嬢女子) and rotten girls (腐女子), depending on which Chinese character or kanji is used to express "fu."

14. Pure fantasy also indicates a fantasy about purity: The relationship between male characters in BL manga and yaoi fan-fiction is imagined to be about "pure love" (jun'ai). There are several reasons for this: one, the relationship is between individuals who love one another as individuals rather than members of a particular sex; two, the relationship is not oriented toward the goal of biological reproduction but rather the pleasure of the lovers; and three, the relationship endures in spite of numerous obstacles. For a complementary discussion of the pure relationship, see Anthony Giddens, The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 190.

15. While female readers of manga featuring male–male romance have in the past also been attracted to actual gay men—see Welker, "Flower Tribes," and Welker, in this volume—debates in the 1990s about BL fans appropriating and abusing the image of gay men encouraged separation of fantasy and reality. Hachi, who started reading BL in middle school in the 1990s and went on to produce her own yaoi fanzines, told me that she consciously approached characters as "fantasy," which she clearly distinguished from reality so as not to harm actual gay men. Some might call this separation of fiction and reality reactionary, if not also call into question the mantra of no harm to gay men (see Ishida, this volume), but my project does not include interrogating the truth of Hachi's claims.


18. Hachi used the phrase "moe friends," but some informants referred to other fujoshi with whom they were close as "friends" (furendo), where the first syllable—the fu—of the Japanese pronunciation of the English word friend is replaced with the Chinese character or kanji meaning "rotten." As used by fujoshi, one might translate "friends" as "rotten friends."

19. Sugiiro, Otaku Joshi, 144.

20. Not everyone I met was attracted to the prospect of opening up this way. For example, Hikaru, one of my youngest informants at eighteen years old, was adamant about not wanting to share her drawings. In her mind, they were simply too personal, and she was disturbed by the thought of others seeing them. In another example, Hachi was extremely upset when a man at a convention bought her fanzine, which was dedicated to a character coupling from the popular videogame franchise Dragon Quest. Hachi assumed, perhaps unfairly, that the man had bought the fanzine on a whim, would not understand the content, and would use the link printed inside the fanzine to visit her website, effectively destroying the in-group atmosphere. In fact, Hachi's friend Kei entirely avoided large conventions so as not to draw unwanted attention to her work. Kei preferred to limit her activity to the Internet because she could screen others in chats before inviting them to her personal website, which was made unreachable by standard web searches through clever coding, hidden links and intentional misspellings. This is a common practice among fujoshi called "avoiding search engines" (kensaku yoke).


22. Another Japanese term with the same meaning is moe-gatari. See Okabe and Ishida, "Making Fujoshi Identity Visible and Invisible," 213.


25. Sugiiro, Otaku Joshi, 156–57; see also Saitō Tamaki, "Moe no honshitsu to sono seisei ni tsuite" [The essence of moe and its genesis], Kokubungaku 53, no. 16 (2008): 12.

26. Okabe and Ishida, "Making Fujoshi Identity Visible and Invisible," 215. Much like Morikawa and myself, Okabe and Ishida note that genres and couplings (i.e., what one responds to as moe) "allow fujoshi [sic] to express their inclinations and interests to one another."


28. This resonates with what Alan Williams calls "minds and bodies in communication," see Alan Williams, Raping Apollo: Sexual Difference and the Yaoi Phenomenon, in Levi, McHarry, and Pagliassotti, 237.


FUJOSHI EMERGENT

Shifting Popular Representations of Yaoi/BL Fandom in Japan

JEFFRY T. HESTER

Introduction

The neologism *fujoshi* is playfully derived from a homophone in Japanese referring politely to “women” or “women and girls.” By a wry replacement of the Sino-Japanese character for “woman” with one used in compounds for “putrid,” “corrupt,” or “decayed,” this self-mocking appellation for “a rotten or depraved girl(s)” has been created as an inclusive term for the female fandom of yaoi/BL. The term is generally regarded as having arisen from the yaoi/BL community itself. It refers both to producers and consumers of amateur manga (dōjinshi) in which the characters are predominantly males poached from mainstream genres of commercial boys’ manga, anime, or the entertainment world, and placed in homoerotic situations, as well as to fans of a wide range of commercial “boys love” (BL) genres of manga, novels, games, and other narrative and graphic forms. Alongside the real girls and women who engage in a variety of consumptive and productive practices centering on images and narratives of male–male romantic and erotic relationships, the *fujoshi* as a gender-specific social type socially constructed through a variety of media representations has recently emerged as a new model of “bad girl” in the landscape of the Japanese social imaginary. It is *fujoshi* as an emergent, constructed social type with which this chapter is concerned.

There is no question that a fandom related to what is represented by the term “*fujoshi*” has been emerging, growing, and shifting now for some three decades, a fandom both self-aware and subject to scholarly, critical, and fan-based discursive representation. From around the middle of the first decade

37. In her early writing on *fujoshi*, Sugiuira also suggests this aspect of BL culture. On the cover of *Otaku Joshi kenkyū*, she writes, “Tell tales of the world in terms of moe and top/bottom relations” (uke urume moe de sekai o kataru).
38. This resonates with Marni Stanley, who notes BL authors/artists encouraging readers to see couplings in objects around them. See Marni Stanley, “101 Uses for Boys: Communing with the Reader in Yaoi and Slash,” in Levi, McHarry, and Pagliassotti, 101–103.
42. Harris, “Discourses of Desire,” 42.
44. It seems to me that the fictional male character in BL and yaoi offers a way out of “woman,” which in Japan is related to the “body politic centered by the reproduction of family.” See Anne Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 173. In embracing “rotten” fantasies and rejecting “normal” reality, *fujoshi* are redefining what it means to be a "woman," as in the word “*fujoshi*” itself, which twists “women and girls” into the homonymous “rotten girl.” See also Welker, “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent.”
relationships, has, through online and print media coverage, been given "a solid and accessible social presence without precedent."

Hester focuses his analysis on three popular multimedia narratives, Fantasizing Girl, Otaku-Style (Mōshō shōjo otaku-kei), My Neighbor Yaoi-chan (Tonari no 8or-chan), and Fujoshi Girlfriend (Fujoshi kanojo), two of which are authored by men and narrated from the perspective of male characters, and all three of which involve fuji-shi as their main protagonists.17 As Galbraith points out in his chapter, many fuji-shi are in their everyday lives involved in intimate relationships with ordinary men, and the three texts that Hester looks at each focus on the male partners of fuji-shi women who are bemused (and sometimes feel abused) by their partners' obsessive interest in male homoerotic possibilities. Once again, Hester's work highlights the agency that women readers and creators of BL products exercise, an agency that actually has transformative effects on material culture. He points to the way in which women's economic power has given rise to "female-dominated spaces" of consumption where "heterosexual men . . . are excluded or rendered uncomfortable or irrelevant." The male partners of the fuji-shi women in these narratives, rather than imagining themselves as the "central pillar" of familial relationships as has traditionally been their role, now feel themselves to be sidelined or marginal to this fantasy world of female desire. The male narrators are bewildered by their girlfriends' activities and interests and although they "may come to understand, to some degree, indulge, or accommodate" these desires, the fuji-shi community remains something they "can never call their own."

This last point—that heterosexual men are somehow necessarily excluded from the female-dominated economy of desire that circulates around the BL subculture—must, however, be reconsidered in relation to research highlighted by Kazumi Nagaiake's contribution to this volume. Nagaiake draws attention to how, in the past several years, a range of male viewers/readers has emerged who are not afraid to declare an interest in BL. The term "fu-danshi" (rotten men) has emerged to describe them. Although it might be assumed that it is primarily gay men who are interested in these homoerotic narratives, as Nagaiake points out, gay men have had a sometimes problematic relationship with these texts. As early as 1992 a "yaoi debate" (yaoi ronsō) emerged in feminist media wherein some gay spokesmen criticized women writers for appropriating and misrepresenting gay relationships and desire. However, as Nagaiake explains, fu-danshi does not clearly map onto any specific sexual orientation (just as fuji-shi does not). In fact, in questionnaire surveys, self-identified fu-danshi readers declare a range of sexual orientations, including gay, straight, bisexual, and even asexual.

Concerning the motivations of fu-danshi for engaging with BL texts, we can discern a curious return to early explanations for women's interest in the genre, to the extent that the escapist potential of the texts are emphasized. However, in the case of male readers, it is an escape from the bounds of conventional masculine identity and desire that are enabled through identification with the "feminized males" of the BL world. As Nagaiake shows, for many male readers what is enjoyable about BL characters is their freedom to express vulnerability and passivity. The beautiful boys of the BL world frequently "fail" to perform the tough image demanded by the codes of conventional masculinity. Hence, it is not so much the sexual orientation of the BL characters that is of interest to fu-danshi men, but rather their embodiment of characteristics that have traditionally been gendered feminine and thus undervalued when expressed by male bodies. As Nagaiake concludes, what BL offers to some men is "a subversive space, in which fu-danshi can re-view traditional Japanese images of masculinity and learn to acknowledge, accept, and ultimately love such elements of maleness as weakness, fragility, and passivity."

Given that BL deals in stories of male–male romance and sexuality, it might be supposed that gay men in Japan are also a key audience for these texts. As Ishida Hitoshi makes clear in his chapter, however, there has been a fraught relationship between BL creators and some spokesmen from the gay community. This dispute goes back to a 1992 article penned by gay critic Satō Masaki, who argued that BL represented a kind of misappropriation or distortion of gay life that impacted negatively upon Japanese gay men. Various BL fans and writers responded both that BL creations were pure fantasy and not meant to be about, or refer to, actual gay men or their lives and that fantasy should be unrestrained. In fact, as Ishida observes, the protagonists in male–male romance in many BL stories often deny or repudiate homosexuality since it is important for the female readership that these characters experience an exclusive attraction to each other (that is, they are not attracted to men in general). So, despite engaging in male–male romance, these characters still reject homosexuality and are often troubled by feelings of guilt or repulsion, as if same-sex love were a bad thing. In so doing, Ishida argues, the male characters in BL texts are actually repeating and reinforcing the prejudices against homosexuality that exist in Japan in real life. Hence, in BL texts, despite their core theme of male–male romance, gay men themselves are still repudiated and excluded from the narratives.

However, despite these criticisms, it can be argued that women's intensive engagement as both producers and consumers of male–male romance stories over the past four decades of BL culture has had a cumulative effect in transforming images of masculinity in Japanese popular culture more widely.
Indeed, these days, when thinking of representative masculine role models, it is not the “corporate warrior” salaryman (saraarimen) that first comes to mind. Rather, Japanese popular culture is dominated by images of “soft” masculinity as embodied in fabulously successful boy bands such as SMAP, and in particular, SMAP lead singer and actor Kimura Takuya, whose beautiful face and slender, defined torso have been ubiquitously displayed throughout Japanese media for over two decades. To this extent, mainstream representations of masculinity have begun to incorporate some of the characteristics that previously were associated with gay men.

Tomoko Aoyama, in her contribution to this volume, looks at three popular manga series by female artist Yoshinaga Fumi which are centered on such “soft” male characters. These stories all feature male characters somehow associated with the world of cooking—and it seems relevant here to note that SMAP also have had their own long-running TV cooking show. All the texts discussed by Aoyama began as manga, and some have gone on to become books, TV dramas, anime series, and even a film, suggesting their widespread appeal. As Aoyama notes, only the 1994 The Moon and the Sandals (Tsuki to sandaru) can be described as a BL work, the others—the 1999 Antique Bakery (Setō yōgashiten) and the 2007 What Did You Eat Yesterday? (Kinō nani tabe?)—are mainstream media products (the last being serialized in one of Japan’s best-selling men’s manga magazines, Morning). Yet, as Aoyama demonstrates, BL conventions play a strong part in the representation of masculinity in all these manga, rendering them transgressive spaces in which conventional masculinity is subjected to scrutiny and critique.

Although the association of men with cooking might seem feminizing (and arguably is so in the case of SMAP), as Aoyama notes, there is a long tradition in Japan (as in the Anglophone world) of representing “cooking men” as virile mavericks who reject “domestication and formality,” relying on their own intuition and skill as opposed to cookbooks. Cooking men have often been represented as promiscuous wanderers, not constrained by any cuisine or cooking style, but adventurously trailing all over the world in search of new culinary challenges. The cooking men in Yoshinaga’s manga, however, “transgress just about every characteristic of . . . male chefs and gourmet protagonists” represented elsewhere in Japanese culture. Yoshinaga’s cooking men are not maverick wanderers but focused on the domestic and use their culinary skills to express love and care for their (sometimes same-sex) partners. Through representing these BL-ized males in nurturing and caring roles, Yoshinaga is thus able to “convey feminist ideas and messages in the commercial media.”

In the final chapter in this collection, Mark McLelland addresses cultural responses to BL texts, including both manga and light novels, in the context of broader conservative critiques of manga, anime, and related popular culture. McLelland points out how manga have often been targeted by moral campaigners across the late twentieth century. Since the late 1980s, following on from a moral panic occasioned by the serial killing of four infant girls by avid manga collector Miyazaki Tsutomu, manga and anime content has increasingly been governed by a code of industry self-regulation, but this does not apply to the self-published dōjinshi scene, which includes many BL writers. Until recently most public debate has been over the sexual and violent content of boys’ manga but in recent years girls’ manga, too, have come under scrutiny. McLelland’s chapter focuses on two recent incidents in Japan: the 2008 furor over the large number of BL titles available for loan in a library district in Osaka, and the 2010 debate in Tokyo over the “Non-Existent Youth” Bill aimed at using zoning laws to restrict the sale of erotic manga. McLelland suggests that the enhanced scrutiny paid to girls’ popular culture, and BL specifically, by conservative commentators in Japan needs to be read in the context of an ongoing moral panic over “gender-free” education and social-inclusion policies. Some politicians, most notably former Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō, imply there is a connection between women’s reading habits and their increasing reluctance to marry. These conservative commentators also worry that the declining birthrate is also attributable to the “gender confusion” occasioned by the decline of traditional gender roles, in which BL plays a role.

McLelland also argues that until recently debate about manga content in Japan was largely about protecting children and young people from harmful adult themes. However, due to growing international pressure, the debate has now shifted to the supposedly harmful depictions of children and young people in manga themselves. Given that BL is a genre that specializes in the sexualization of its youthful characters, this chapter concludes with the prediction that BL is likely to come under increasing attack from conservative lobbyists in Japan and overseas.

In spite of such criticism and censure, male–male romantic and sexual narratives have been expressed in various ways and contexts in Japanese culture for centuries and are still very much alive in various popular cultural contexts today. This stands in stark contrast to the current situation in many Western cultures. As prominent feminist scholar Germaine Greer points out in her study of “the ‘boy’ in Western art, despite a long tradition of representing the charms of adolescent male beauty in classical and Renaissance art, in