Apologetic Gestures and Shielding

"I am sorry, but leave us alone..."

How are we to comprehend yaoi and BL? Yaoi and BL, in essence, represent a range of practices through which intimacies between men can be redrawn and redefined. How shall we interpret the meanings of love, romance, sex, marriage, and childbearing carried out by male couples? The debate over whether the relationships described in yaoi and BL represent either the subversion or reinforcement of gender norms is a familiar one in discourse about yaoi/BL. No definitive answer currently exists. Some argue that there is no point in generalizing about the genre, as each work of yaoi or BL needs to be dealt with individually. That is all well and good, but is it sufficient?

It seems to me that a number of critical insights and considerations are left unaddressed by each individual critique. In this chapter, I examine the patterns emerging in discussions among some "rotten girls," or fujoshi, which I term acts of "apology" as well as of "shielding." This is an important perspective which it seems has not received sufficient attention thus far.

There is a famous line spoken by the female character Ōno Kanako in the well-known manga series Genshiken: "There isn't a single girl who hates gay men!" (figure 11.1).1 Due to the line's strong impact, it has been quoted in various places, including fan fairs promoting BL products, as well as in My Neighbor Yaoi-chan (Tonari no 801-chan) (figure 11.2), a major meta yaoi/BL text. In the book entitled Indeed, We Do Love BL: A Complete Guide to BL Comics (Yappari bōizu rabu ga suki: Kanszen BL komikku gaido), Yamamoto

Fumiko praises the line as a "wise statement." As these instances might show, at first glance it would seem that yaoi/BL demonstrates a generous attitude toward "homosexuals."

However, we can also discern in some "meta yaoi/BL" an ambivalent feeling that cannot be contained by this generosity. Take for instance an introductory book on BL cultures called Love-tan: Basic Knowledge for Fujoshi (Rabu-tan: Fujoshi no tame no kiso chishiki). A line that appeared on the obi (promotional sash) on the book cover reads, "Please excuse us for being too rotten!!" This might be construed as a gesture of apology on the part of fujoshi. At the same time, we also find in the book a pattern of resentment against critiques from outsiders. The resentment often takes the form of protecting what is perceived to be their own yaoi/BL subcultural territory. This is evident in the phrase, "we would appreciate no entering into or messing with our territory from the outside..." This is similar to the case in the second volume of My Neighbor Yaoi-chan. In response to mockery for being a
Saitō applies the metaphor of "being rotten" to describe this topical rut which BL culture in general has fallen into. Things go "rotten" or become stagnant when they are enclosed in one place for too long, just as food goes bad in similar conditions. Saitō's interpretation of the word "rotten" in relation to fujoshi dissociates it from the implication of being dirty or foul-minded. However, these self-reflective interpretations are far from common.

There is another tendency that has become prominent in recent years—that is, a tendency to deny the connection between what fujoshi imagine in yaoi/BL materials and gay men in real life. This claim about a lack of a connection between them is often made when yaoi/BL are accused of containing homophobic discourse, or criticized for appropriating the representation of male homosexuals. According to Mizuma Midory, canonical BL writers such as Mori Mari and modern contemporaries alike have declared that male homosexuality in reality is in no way identical to the representations that they, as writers, create in their imaginations. And there has been no sign that this sentiment has diminished. Furthermore, recent BL writers go so far as to craft stories in which some main characters defensively dissociate their romance—and even make it distinct—from male homosexuality in reality.

Objectives

Before we turn to concrete discussions, I wish to address the objectives of this chapter in more academic as well as social terms. In the age of globalization, any studies that do not take into account the conditions of postcoloniality are considered suspect. Needless to say, analyses of appropriations of representations constitute one of the main objectives in those disciplines of the humanities and social sciences that maintain a close correlation with postcolonial conditions. However, it seems that critical insights into issues of representational appropriation are not altogether shared among fans or by critics of yaoi/BL. Even if some critical voices appear, they are often overlooked in the end.

For instance, although there is a humble recognition of the tremendous terror and violence born from nationalism and war, many fans of yaoi and BL are enthusiastic about Hetalia, a gag comic which anthropomorphizes the nations of the Axis powers, and puts those nations' characters into homoerotic relations. Some go so far, in some online forums, as to render the relationship between airplanes and tower buildings in a somewhat homoerotic and sexual way, through anthropomorphizing those objects. Needless to say, this is inspired by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, even though the writers well know the number of causalities and the grief caused by the attacks.
Further still, the popularity of one recent BL genre called *Arabu-mono*, meaning "things Arabic," is on the rise, although those fans can be assumed to be aware of the harsh conditions facing people with homosexual orientations in many Islamic countries. To be fair, it is true that there exists a gesture of apology for all this in meta *yaoi*/BL discourse. However, it seems to me that this apology is always just a formality without any sincerity. Worse still, some even appear to be adopting a "so-what" attitude when making apologies. I am not offended by the attitude; I am rather intrigued. I am most intrigued by the fact that their apologies are always accompanied by a discourse of shielding and self-protection.

In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which critical issues of representational appropriation are belittled by way of both apologetic gesture and shielding. This chapter's analysis is twofold. While critiquing the separation between fantasy and reality—"they do not represent gay men in reality"—my aim is not to merely attack the genre of *yaoi* and BL, but rather to critically reflect upon this perspective in order to better understand the elements intrinsic to the genre.

**Reality Versus Fantasy**

As previously mentioned, the discourse arguing that male homosexuality depicted in *yaoi*/BL needs to be distinguished from that in reality is now a familiar one. And yet this discourse perhaps requires further contextualization. Historically speaking, this particular separatist discourse became prevalent only after what is now called the "*yaoi* ronshō" (*yaoi* debate) that took place between 1992 and 1996. It finds its origin in an essay by Satō Masaki, published in the feminist coterie magazine *Choisir* in 1992. In the essay, Satō, a self-proclaimed gay man, expressed his indignation against female readers of *yaoi*, describing them dismissively as "those disgusting women who... have a perverse interest in sexual intercourse between men... I wish them all dead." Satō’s initial essay provoked responses from two women. In her response, Takamatsu Hisako stated that "as expected, the day when we finally receive this type of criticism from gay men has come." Yanagida Ryōko likewise confessed that "this is exactly the kind of criticism we imagined we’d receive from others, even if not from gay men." As is evident in these quotes, some female readers were well aware of the possibility of *yaoi* being linked to discrimination against gay men.

One of the most frequently cited essays in the *yaoi* debate was written by Yanagida, and from her essay onwards, it has often been assumed that the

*yaoi* debate has fallen into a polarization between *yaoi* women and Satō, a gay man. She writes that

what was most unexpected was the fact that you [Satō] considered *yaoi* to be something that had something to do with you... Gay people might feel their own turf being intruded upon when they have once read a *yaoi* book. But we also feel the same way when *yaoi* books are read and commented on by gay men (and others who may not appreciate *yaoi* in general).  

Another vocal participant in this debate was Kurihara Tomoyo, who was the co-editor of the *Guidebook to Aesthetic Fiction and Gay Literature* (Tanbi shibutsu, gei bunka bukkugaido), and was serving as a book review editor of the magazine *JUNE*. Kurihara states:

Imagine some American author dashes off some absurd adventure-romance novels about Japan like [James Clavell's] *Shogun*, and yet assumes a defiant attitude by insisting that what is described in his/her works is not representative of Japanese reality but simply his/her ideas and fantasies. How is it possible to come to terms with such nonalance?  

Despite the complexity of each critic’s opinion, there was a unified view within the *yaoi* debate that *yaoi* representations do entail elements which can be discriminatory to gay men. Irokawa Nao, the editor of *Choisir*, confirms this when she states that to insist on the idea that "*yaoi* representations are no more than simply imaginary works, whereby no discrimination against gay men is intended" is nothing but "mere vindication and self-protection." Given the zine *Choisir* was a "private magazine," as claimed by Irokawa, in which all editorial decisions on which articles to be included and so forth were single-handedly made by her, it is more precise to argue that the possibility that *yaoi* could damage the image of gay men was clearly recognized, at least within the discursive sphere of *Choisir*.

The discussion took a new turn shortly after the *yaoi* debate in *Choisir*, when a discourse arguing that the men appearing in *yaoi*/BL have nothing to do with gay men in reality became prominent in many meta *yaoi*/BL materials. There are several examples, and the first comes from Kotani Mari, a critic of SF fantasy novels. In her book, published in 1994, she makes the following point in reference to slash novels based on the American *Star Trek* series:

For one thing, they invited criticism from the gay community. In the US, a [slash] rewriting of the liaison between captain Kirk and Spock by women
was dismissed as "disrespectful of and discriminatory against homosexuality," no matter how subversive their relationship claims itself to be in terms of rethinking gender norms. . . . However, many critics who studied this phenomenon, both those in Japan and the US, support the idea that fictitious male characters cannot represent men in reality. . . . 9

Kotani goes on to describe the criticisms of yaoi by gay men as a "peculiar incident" which was tagged onto yaoi culture, and dismissed them as an "attack" and a "denunciation." 10 Similar counterarguments were put forth by Fujimoto Yukari, a critic of shojo manga (girls' comics), and Natsume Nariko (aka Nobi Nobita). In her book, published in 1998, Fujimoto insists that the boys in yaoi are not a reflection of men in reality. She writes:

In recent years, criticism against these [yaoi] girl readers has been raised by gay men. However, it can be said that the boys in question are alter egos of those girls rather than representing men in reality. This is obvious in part by realizing how identical those characters' lines and story settings are with those in girls' comics.11

In her book, Nobi similarly pointed out that there exists confusion between reality and fantasy among both the women who read and write yaoi, and the gay men who disapprove of them:

. . . there is also the problem of confusion between fantasy and reality among both constituents. It is perfectly clear that yaoi representations are fantasy creations shared among women, and thus there is no connection between these imaginary characters and gay men in reality. . . . [Having noted this] women who enjoy yaoi had better not impose their fantasies upon gay relationships in life, and there is, in return, no need for gay men to be offended by these female fantasies.12

Reviewing these responses, we can see a pattern here. While acknowledging yaoi's potential to be offensive to gay men, the acknowledgment only comes with an excuse saying that no confusion between imagination and reality is intended. This line of rhetoric still persists in more recent contexts.13 In a 2007 special issue of the literary magazine Eureka (Yuriika), featuring articles on BL studies, Kotani recalls the past debate over connections between yaoi representations and gay men. She maintains her past stance on this subject, which is to deny any implied link between them, and subsequently argues that it is nonsensical to simply apply "notions of justice and ethics" into the polemics over creative materials.14

But the question still remains: is it truly the case that yaoi/BL representations and gay men in reality are all that different? In the next section, we tackle this question by examining actual instances, such as lines and scripts provided for characters, in yaoi/BL materials.

"I know that you are not . . . /"disgusting"

Let us consider the following examples:

"Don't play the homo-game on me!"
"No way! Keep your mouth shut! I don't want to know about my old friend being homo, gay, and Sabu!"15

"Are you a homo by any chance?"
"No kidding! You know that's not possible. . . ."
"Thank goodness, I know you cannot be a homo."
". . .16"

The first quote is taken from a scene in which one of the characters was overwhelmed by a sudden fear when his longtime friend showed uncommon affection for him. It is interesting to note that in the line quoted above, the term "Sabu," the title of a major gay magazine in Japan, is deployed as a signifier for being gay and "homo." In the second quote, an exchange ends with one character left speechless, perplexed by a situation in which he does not have the means to express his affection for another character. In both situations, a sense of fear and confusion over the possibility of being gay in the male characters' minds is obvious. But how could these scenes be intelligible if there were no connections between yaoi/BL characters and gay men in reality? What is there to be afraid of if yaoi/BL has no clear reference to social reality?

One of the prevalent expressions seen in yaoi/BL texts is "kimochi warui," meaning "disgusting." Take the two following instances:

"This is how grownups would do it."
"Hey man . . . Two men together?! How disgusting. . . ."17

"I have feelings for someone . . . actually they are for Hamaya . . . I know two men together is . . . but . . ." (silence).
I am leaving.
“Oh hey, wait! . . .”
“That’s disgusting.”

Normally there are two patterns in which the word “kimochi warui” is deployed in yaoi/BL. One is a pattern seen in the first case above. Similar to the examples given in the previous paragraph, kimochi warui functions as a means to express a sense of fear and confusion. The third dialogue takes place in a scene where character A, unable to control his feelings, forces sex on B. Overwhelmed by the superior physique and strength of A, B can only utter “kimochi warui” in desperation to show his disapproval of the act forced upon him. What B is most disapproving of in this context is the idea of homosexuality rather than the act of sexual aggression itself.

The second pattern is the use of “kimochi warui” as an expression of jealousy, represented in the fourth dialogue. In this pattern, the dialogue often begins with reference to a third character, C, who is physically absent in the scene. Character A admits to B that he has feelings for C. However, B is unsettled by A’s confession since B is secretly fond of A. With no better word to describe his feelings, B helplessly utters “kimochi warui” to describe A’s feelings for C. This popular plot line often comes to an end when A, at first disturbed by B’s reaction, later realizes that it was jealousy, and not just a disgust about homosexuality itself, that B was struggling to come to terms with.

All in all, it seems evident that the term “kimochi warui” is deployed as a sign of ambivalence about homosexuality. While the first and second dialogues represent ambivalence about the idea of homosexuality itself, in the third case “kimochi warui” refers to a homoerotic act, and in the final case it indicates disappointment about homosexual romance. What is of utmost interest here, however, is why these dialogues can be interpreted as being about ambivalence. Put differently, would the feeling kimochi warui itself still function as an indication of confusion if the word “homo” in the first two cases was replaced by “hetero” or if “two men together” in the latter two examples was changed to “man and woman together”? If these changes were made, the revised dialogues would not be as intelligible as the originals.

As is obvious by now, the sense of confusion surrounding yaoi/BL characters indeed references and reflects the actual social conditions that homosexuality and gay men face. A certain set of common-sense ideas and social norms that tend to deny and discredit homosexuality make this particular use of kimochi warui in yaoi/BL all the more possible. In short, it can be said that “homosexual” characters in yaoi/BL are always already rendered intelligible with reference to gay men in reality, and, by extension, it is rather disingenuous to argue otherwise by emphasizing the fictitious nature of yaoi/BL works.

On Allocation

“Hetero that counts”

In the manga Happy Fujoshi (Happii fujoshi), there is a scene in which Chi-chan, a fujoshi, was asked by Haru, her gay online-chat friend, to teach him how to put on proper makeup. Chi-chan says to Haru in an unfriendly manner that he should “go on browsing on the Internet and find out by yourself. I cannot be bothered!” Standing by and observing the interaction was Chi-chan’s boyfriend, who remarked that he was rather surprised by her indifference to her gay friend’s concern. In response, Chi-chan replied, “It’s hetero (men) that really count, and real gay men don’t do it for me” (figure 11.3). It is a common practice in yaoi/BL for gay characters to be invoked in the plot only to be dismissed in the end. In this case, the figure of the gay friend appears as a representative of gay men with feminine qualities (who, for instance, want to apply makeup), but is soon disposed of. This exemplifies the familiar process of representational appropriation.

Some might counter that representational appropriation is common to all creative works, and thus is far from particular to yaoi/BL. In fact, signs and symbols are infinitely open to interpretation. Therein lies the possibility of representation. Some might go so far as to claim that creative works are, in essence, grounded in appropriation and borrowing from preexisting contexts.

Another opposing view takes the notion of “freedom of speech” as its basis. When I presented an earlier version of this chapter at one particular workshop, it met with criticism which assumed that my own sort of critique of yaoi/BL could lead to the censoring of expression, or pose a threat to the foundations of freedom of speech. Further still, some commentators attempted to discredit my argument by pointing out that biases in expression seen in manga and fiction are simply part of many other representational features, such as dramatization and characterization, all of which are fundamental to the genre.

These types of counterarguments seem to me to miss a fundamental point of this rebuke of yaoi/BL. If we concede that the arts in general afford infinite opportunities for expression and interpretation, then why in yaoi/BL do
we only see some particular patterns of representation incessantly repeated, whereby they are reproduced and reinforced. This is a question which merits thorough examination.

_Asymmetrical binary positioning_

In Japanese animation hero series for children, there is a prevalent pattern in which characters with regional dialects, such as that of the Kansai region (surrounding Osaka), normally assume supporting roles. According to this pattern, characters with Kansai dialects often represent someone with stranger-like qualities, such as villains or mysterious figures. Even if they are portrayed as friends, they still remain outcasts. The same can be applied to characters who use “_okama kotoba_,” a camp style of speech. It is almost customary in such series that characters with campy speech make frequent appearances, and assume similar roles to those with dialects. This asymmetrical binary, positioning those with standard Japanese as normal and those with either dialects or campy speech as abnormal, functions as a means through which the boundary between what constitutes the cultural as well as linguistic center and the periphery is marked.

In the context of _yaoi/BL_, most of the male protagonists represent persons of an innocent disposition who believe in pure love romance to such an extent that it is customary to say, without hesitation, words such as "I am not a homo! It’s not the case that I love men in general! I just love you!" Meanwhile, a number of gay characters appear in supporting roles (often as friends) and act as agents who violate the chasity of the allegedly “straight” protagonists. In such situations, as Mizoguchi Akiko points out, these gay characters are deemed "monstrous," and exist only as scapegoats to make the pure romance plots lines concerning the main “straight” protagonists even more sacred and spectacular. Emerging from this familiar pattern is the juxtaposition of "straights who are under threat" and "homos who threaten."

_in yaoi/BL_ the reverse never happens. Heterosexual supporting characters, who violently come on to gay protagonists, saying things like, “He is my type, so I will get him,” never appear. It is invariably the case that only the main male characters—in denial of their homosexual proclivities—are allowed to speak of “love.” This is not an option for the supporting gay characters, who can only speak, instead, of their "type.”

_A new tendency_

In recent years, critics have started to acknowledge that fewer and fewer characters in _yaoi/BL_ make explicit homophobic remarks. Even more, Mizoguchi states that "increasing numbers of characters who self-identify either as gay or bisexual have started to appear." Fujimoto Sumiko also confirms this tendency from her quantitative research.

Here are several instances of this new tendency. Printed on the _obi_ (promotional sash) of Awaji Nae’s 2009 comic book, _Kiss Me Chocolate_, is a strip in which two men can be seen kissing with the dialogue, “Are we alright?” and “No way. Two men together ain’t right.” The incongruence between their acts and words does not go unnoticed, and it even casts doubt on the genuineness of the main character’s dismissive tone towards male homoerotic acts. Since the latter half of the last decade, this once dominant _yaoi/BL_ grammar, which includes a denial of homosexual identity among characters, has started to be modified and restructured, however.
long as yaoi/BL continue to represent pure romance between men who dare to pursue their relations against struggle and hardship. In the yaoi debate, Nobi stated that the "stigma attached to homosexuality becomes irrelevant if all characters were non-human, such as aliens or ghostly apparitions." I question Nobi's contention, however. Even if a story is set in such a way that the stigma attached to homosexuality is overlooked, the very process of overlooking in turn necessarily recognizes the stigma as something in need of forgetting, hence the recognition of the stigma itself cannot be evaded. As a result, the stigma attached to homosexuality remains, and even incites the desire to recognize the very thing that is prohibited. For instance, Hoshino Lily is an acclaimed yaoi/BL writer whose work is known for its high sense of fantasy. In her 2006 Love Quest (Rabu kue), the following interaction takes place:

"I am not so sure if it is good to get used to kissing a man too much. I (for instance) no longer feel excited about kissing a man, you know..."
"..."²⁵

It is possible to interpret this silence—represented by the ellipses—between the two male characters as an unresolved sense of shame on acknowledging their desire for homoerotic romance, which still remains seductive, despite their claim to the contrary.

In Despair

Critiques from lesbian and gay studies

The problem of yaoi/BL lies in the process of reproducing the hierarchical relation between center and periphery, and almost always relegating representations of homosexuality to the realm of the latter. Such criticism has so far derived from lesbian and gay studies perspectives. For instance, Ogura Tô, who once worked for the Japanese gay magazine Badi, accused yaoi of forcing women's fantasies upon gay men.⁴ Keith Vincent, who co-authored a key Japanese gay studies text, Gay Studies, with Kazama Takashi and Kawaguchi Kazuya, remarked that "gay men appearing in yaoi works are not real people, but rather represent unicorn-like figures," and those representations bother many gay men.⁴¹ We have already looked at Satô's similar criticism made in Choisir. Satô repeats himself in Queer Studies '96 by insisting that yaoi representations of gay men leads not only to commodification but also
to stylization of gay men's sexualities in such a way that heterosexism prevails.\(^{42}\) Mizoguchi finds that the frequent deployment of rape scenes in *yaoi* is attributable to the fact that most of the male characters are forced to embody "normal," hence aggressively masculine, personalities.\(^{43}\)

*Feign ignorance, or break her writing brush*

How can one cope with issues of representational appropriation within *yaoi* /BL? Some might elect to feign ignorance, while others apologize to the gay men who claim to be affected. Some *yaoi* /BL writers might even decide not to write anymore. This is reminiscent of what Kurihara Chiyo demanded in the early stages of the *yaoi* debate:

I am not insisting that everyone [yaoi/BLeaders] should quit reading "romantic stories between men." I am simply asking them to make their choices. One thing they could do is to quit reading if they feel guilty. If they, instead, elect to cling on, then live your life with the shame of being a wrongdoer and beg no mercy from anyone. If you do not concede either position, then justify your actions to the world.\(^{44}\)

Towards the end of the *yaoi* debate, Kurihara even demanded that *yaoi* readers choose from the three options of "disent," "explanation," and "justification of their actions."\(^{45}\)

Many women who got involved in the *yaoi* debate in *Choisir* became the targets of severe critique. What made it so complex was that they were aware that a *pro forma* apology was not a solution for many vocal critics of *yaoi*, including Satô. *Yaoi* writers such as Takamatsu Hisako and Nomura Fumiko (aka Nakamura Fuyumi) were psychologically affected by the debate to such an extent that the latter broke her writing brush, professing "no more boys love for me."\(^{46}\)

"Mine is different"

While I wish to understand and respect the decisions that each participant of the debate made, there still remain concerns to be addressed. I would like to return to an example from *My Neighbor Yaa-chan*. In response to accusations of *fujoshi* being perverse, Yaa-chan, the leading character, apologizes but goes on to defend herself, stating, "mine is different... mine is just a fantasy..." (figure 11.5).\(^{47}\) The phrase "mine is different... mine is just a fantasy..." (*ore no wa chigau... ore no wa fantasijii na no ni...*) is easily recognized by many comics fans as a homage to a signature line from Araki Hirohiko's well-known *shônen* manga (boys' comics) series *The Bizarre Adventure of Jo Jo* (*Jo no kimyô na bôken*—hereafter *Jo Jo*).\(^{48}\) However, I am more interested in what is claimed to be the leading character's specific desire, which is emphasized by the repetitive use of the saying, "mine is" (*ore no wa*). In this comparison, what is the perverse object from which "mine is" claims to be different? Some might simply settle on the idea that after all it is homosexuality itself which is perverse, and it is this which Yaa-chan, and by extension all *fujoshi*, distance themselves from. However, this would inevitably make *fujoshi* appear homophobic, and would predispose them to become objects of critique.

It is possible that things could be much more complex and contextualized than the explanations above. It is possible to interpret the emphasis placed on "mine is," which is already a parody of an original (*Jo Jo*), as an attempt to camouflage the actual contour or original identity of *fujoshi*.\(^{49}\) Through this camouflaging effect, it makes it possible for Yaa-chan—and other *fujoshi*—to willfully efface and shift their subject position thereby enabling them to circumvent criticism directed at their assumed singular/original subject position. For instance, in the face of being accused of homophobia,
Yaoi-chan—and *fujoshi* in general—could possibly counterargue that it is *fujoshi* themselves, not homosexuals, who are perverse and rotten. They could use this counterargument as the grounds on which to claim that they are not discriminating against homosexuals. Even if they have conceded the idea that *fujoshi* are perverse and rotten, it could still leave room for *801-chan* to yet again distance herself from perversity itself through the demarcating effect of “mine is different...”. Of particular interest, however, is that all these different ways of representing their subject positions come down to one aim. The aim is to evade criticism directed at *fujoshi*, and in turn legitimize their claim of non-involvement—“leave us alone, because after all we are not that guilty.”

Anarchist writer Hakim Bey coined the term “temporary autonomous zone” (TAZ) to refer to a temporal space through which to elude attacks and control from outside. In a peculiar way, we may see the deployment of a TAZ in Yaoi-chan’s use of “mine is.” That is because Yaoi-chan’s use of “mine is” affords her a subjective elusiveness that is capable of relocating and effacing itself in such a way that criticism from outside never reaches in. In this way, a *fujoshi’s* desire forever retains its own territory. I call this *fujoshi* practice the “autonomy of desire.”

Earnest Desire

**Integrating the divided**

It is often pointed out that in pornography for heterosexual men women are portrayed as figures torn into two: the Madonna and the whore. In the context of *yaoi/BL*, ways of portraying gay men are not a simple inversion of those in heterosexual pornography. While there are two characters whose personalities are divided, *yaoi/BL* always requires them to integrate with each other through sexual acts.

It has been argued that readers of *yaoi/BL* possess eccentric ways of constituting sexual desire. Arimitsu Mamiko insists that sources of libidinal sensation for readers stem from relationality itself rather than visual components. According to Nobi, it is a trilogy of desire that matters in *yaoi/BL*. First, it is a desire to be loved as an uke (passive partner). Second, there is also a desire to love as a *seme* (active partner). Third, there arises a genuine attraction to the romantic idea of loving each other. In this *yaoi/BL* grammar, the relationship between two men is torn through being forced to assume “straight” roles, only to heighten the significance of pure romance when the two eventually embrace after many trials and errors. The more dramatic and complex the manner in which this plot of reconciliation is orchestrated, the more like “gay doll play” for girls *yaoi/BL* might appear to be. As a consequence, *fujoshi* become the target of critique from the perspective of representational appropriation.

Are the activities of *yaoi/BL* readers all that indecent? Some argue otherwise by insisting that the male characters appearing in *yaoi/BL* are in fact avatars of the female readers themselves, and thus have no associations with men in reality. As mentioned earlier, Kotani reasons that what is embodied in the male characters are the readers themselves:

"However, many critics who studied this phenomenon both in Japan and the US support the idea that fictitious male characters cannot represent men in reality, and instead embody women’s ideals. Therefore, I cannot be certain that those [*yaoi/BL*] representations necessarily lead to discrimination against or “commodification” of gay men’s sexuality. ... Worthy of attention is the “potential” arising from slippages between what is assumed as problematic in terms of representation and what is actually drawn in the works.”

The claim that both *seme* and *uke* in *yaoi/BL* are a “reflection of girls’ self images,” is nothing new, but rather shared among critics from the onset of *yaoi/BL* polemics. According to Nakano Fuyumi, many women invested in *yaoi* “see themselves both in a controlling male character and an oppressed boy character appearing in *yaoi.*” Fujimoto Yukari, too, perceives those male characters as female readers’ “alter egos.” Fujimoto also points out that in contrast to *shōnen* manga, the theme of “multiple personality” has never developed in *shōjo* manga. On the other hand, an alter ego as another self, most often symbolically represented by stories about twins or gender transgression, is a major theme in *girls* comics. The theme of split and discord between the ideal self that others expect of you and the ordinary self has been explored. Rather than “multiple selves,” what has been repetitively depicted is a story about two “I’s who are divided, and then reunited. According to science fiction writer Noa Azusa, the art of *yaoi* is “a means through which to express girls’ subconscious experience of repression,” and therefore in order to make the experiences surface, “there is a necessity of the art’s [*yaoi* stories] repeating and imitating.”

Equipped with *yaoi*, girls can at last establish their selves both by turning themselves into a *seme*, “a woman who obtains a penis,” and by simultaneously becoming a *uke*, “a man who has lost his penis.” It has been a real long journey to even come this far. 
Nobi further elaborates on the complex processes of simultaneously embodying *seme* and *uke*. In her short essay, “Anatomy of *yaoi* girls,” Nobi, relying on her own experience, points out that both *seme* and *uke* have dual meanings, which constitute the essence of *yaoi*. According to Nobi, *uke* represent men who have been ostracized by female *yaoi* readers, and who have been transformed from subjects of desire to objects. On the other hand, *seme* embody those women who have taken and applied men’s penises, and turned themselves into subjects of desire. Simultaneously while the *uke* also signifies her ideal self—not as socially constructed “woman”—who wishes to be blindly loved by someone, the *seme* appears as a prince charming who fulfills her unsatisfied desire. Moreover, women’s desire to be in a mutual relationship with men always remains unfulfilled as they are painfully aware that their bodies are incomplete, unlike those of men. It is this complex circuit of desire and disappointment through which *yaoi* culture is made possible. This is how Nobi herself became a *yaoi* girl.

It is easy to dismiss Nobi’s psychoanalytic explanation as too anecdotal and abstract. What is important, however, is to understand what kinds of *yaoi/BL* discourse this self-conscious line of explanation for autonomous female desire makes intelligible or unintelligible.

**Concluding Remarks**

To realize the autonomy of female desire among the practices and discourses of *yaoi/BL* inevitably leads to a “sympathetic” evaluation of gender constructions portrayed in this subculture. Nobi points out that “it is indeed permissible for one to take control of one’s love and desire. While this is often taken for granted for men, it appears to be a wholly new, joyous experience for many women.” Fujimoto once argued that *yaoi/BL* made it possible for female readers to obtain the “gaze of someone who rapes and looks” rather than “one who is raped.” She even wholeheartedly praises more recent situations in which many women go so far as to craft “a world of thorough gender blinding in which . . . combinations of any possible gender and power dynamics one can imagine are skillfully made, utilizing a space with no biological gender division—a world of two men.”

Commentaries and analyses put forth by several critics, such as Nobi, Fujimoto, and Kotani, all discussed above, have contributed to discursive shifts concerning the practices of *yaoi/BL*. Once perceived as a means for “escapism, misogyny, or retaliation,” their practices are now seen as ways of “overturning heterosexist norms, or obtaining pleasure specific to women.”

However, we need to ask the question, what makes this discursive change possible? As I have consistently argued in this chapter, in order to maintain a positive evaluation of *yaoi/BL* practices, it needs to be repeatedly emphasized that the men appearing in *yaoi/BL* have nothing to do with men in reality. In other words, for the autonomy of women’s pleasure to be materialized, they need to legitimate their behaviors by claiming innocence regarding representational appropriation—i.e., shielding, while at the same time to an extent acknowledging the problems for gay men that their desire may cause; i.e., apologetic gesture. This is evident in Kotani’s claim that it is an “invariable principle” that one should not “let anyone invade one’s own territory of pleasure” for the purpose of “serving as the autonomous pleasure of women” and of “immersing oneself in the world of no oppression and struggle.”

I still question this line of reasoning. Is this the only possible way to decipher the logic of *yaoi/BL* narratives? For us to carry out more productive discussions about *yaoi/BL*, there is a need to rethink things. One way to do this is not to keep repeating the discourse assuming that *yaoi/BL* representations contain no discrimination against gay men, because those “boys” are actually women themselves. Instead, we first need to accept that those “boys” are indeed gay and males on top of being female readers themselves.

In sum, my argument is simple. That is, the argument that both representational appropriation and self-projection (autonomy of desire) are indispensable elements of *yaoi/BL*. The two are mutually constitutive in the genre. It can be said that *yaoi/BL* is a reflection of these two elements. Any analyses that do not take the commingling of the two into consideration need to be considered suspect. Understanding the intersection of representational appropriation and self-projection will help us see why *yaoi/BL* endlessly demands the reinsertion of gender power dynamics via the roles of *uke* and *seme* to a world where the gender binary is deconstructed through featuring two characters of the same sex.

**Notes**

3. Yamamoto Fumiko and BL Supporters, *Yappuri bōitsu rabu ga suki: Kanzen BL komikku gaido* [ Indeed, we do love BL: A complete guide to BL comics] (Tokyo: Ota shuppan, 2005), 204.
4. In this chapter, I use the term “meta *yaoi/BL*” to refer to discourse about the lives of *fujoshi* and their practices.
6. Ibid., 60.
10. Mizuma Midory, Inyu to shokushu no shōnenai: Josei no shōnenai shikō to iu genshō [Shōnenai as metaphor: The phenomenon of women’s inclination for shōnenai] (Osaka: Sōgensha, 2005), 18.
12. Takanuma Hisako, “Kekkō miru ron no kanata e: Miyuu to suru koto, mitekuru koto” [Thinking through a perspective of friend or foe: Things that we attempt to see and that come into view], in Choisir yaoi rōsō gappō I, ed. Irokawa Nao (Japan: Self-published, 1994), 3.
17. Irokawa Nao, “Byōki o idaki tsumuketa onna ni ‘kagaisu’ wa jikkai dekina!” [Women who wish to maintain their propensity are incapable of realizing their “malicious intents”], in Irokawa, Choisir yaoi rōsō gappō II, 30.
20. Ibid., 249.
23. The term “homo” in the Japanese hiragana script is often used to refer to male–male intimacy described in yaoi/BL, which may reflect an attempt on the part of yaoi/BL fans to dissociate this kind of intimacy from that described by “homo” within the katakana script—more commonly recognized as a discriminatory term against male homosexuals.
24. Kotani Mari, “Fujoshi dōshi no kizuna: C-bunguka to yaoi-teki na yokobō” [Bonding among Fujoshi: C-literature and yaoi-like desire], Yuriika 39, no. 16 (December 2007): 35.
QUEERING THE COOKING MAN

Food and Gender in Yoshinaga Fumi’s (BL) Manga

TOMOKO AOYAMA

Introduction

No one is perhaps more gender-conscious, and more widely acclaimed as such, among leading contemporary manga artists than Yoshinaga Fumi (1971—). Her ongoing work The Inner Chambers (Ôoku) has been awarded not only major manga awards but also the Sense of Gender Award (2005) and the James Tiptree, Jr, Award (2009), both of which are given to “science fiction or fantasy that expands or explores our understanding of gender.” Ôoku is not a BL work but a historical fantasy, set in the Tokugawa period (1603–1688), and because it is serialized in a shôjo (girls) magazine, it is classified as a shôjo manga. However, as Mizoguchi Akiko notes, it is “arguably the most critically acclaimed manga work by an artist who started her career as a BL author.”2 Yoshinaga wrote a number of BL works for both amateur dôjinshi and commercial outlets from the late 1980s.3 Mizoguchi believes that Yoshinaga’s examination of “the fundamental questions of sexuality, reproduction, and gender … within the framework of entertaining fiction with sexual depictions … is the practice cultivated within the BL genre.”4 Yoshinaga, unusually, if not uniquely, among successful commercial manga artists, is “openly feminist,” both in her manga works and in other genres and activities such as essays and interviews.5 Thus, her work exemplifies the cutting edge of what BL can contribute to gender awareness, and vice versa, both within and outside the genre. With her continuous innovation the BL genre has widened in scope and attracted new audiences.

Besides being a feminist, Yoshinaga is also well-known for her special interest in food. Cooking and eating are not only ubiquitous in her manga