

No Climax, No Point, No Meaning? Japanese Women's Boy-Love Sites on the Internet

Boy love (shoonen'ai) in Japanese does not refer to the love many young Japanese women feel for male teen idols, but instead refers to the homoerotic attraction the male heroes in a genre of Japanese women's manga (comics) feel for each other. Commencing in the early 1970s, women's manga began to describe love stories between "beautiful boys," culminating in the mid-1980s in a genre termed YAOI (an acronym meaning "no climax, no point, no meaning") which, dispensing with the elaborate plots of the earlier comics, focused instead on sexual interactions between boys and young men. The advent of the Internet has provided a new forum for women interested in boy-love fiction to publish their own and read each others' work. This article briefly outlines the history of boy love in Japanese women's comics and attempts to describe and account for the recent expansion of this genre onto the Internet, where young Japanese women have produced a huge number of Web sites extolling the virtues of homosexual love between beautiful boys.

Boy love (*shoonen'ai*) in Japanese does not, as one might expect, refer to the love many young Japanese women feel for male teen idols, but instead refers to the homoerotic attraction the male heroes in a genre of Japanese women's *manga* (comics) feel for each other. There has been extensive research in English concerning the important role manga play in Japanese popular culture, with the emphasis being placed on their more peculiar (from a western viewpoint) aspects (Kinsella 1998; Allison 1996; Matsui 1993; Adams and Hill 1991; Buckley 1991; Aoyama 1988; Buruma 1984). Much attention has been paid to the graphic sexual situations depicted in men's manga, as well as the common representation of male homosexual love in women's comics. However, so far, the large number of Internet sites created by Japanese women that are dedicated to boy love have attracted little notice.¹ This article briefly outlines the history of boy love in Japanese women's comics, and attempts to describe and account for the recent expansion of this genre onto the Internet where young Japanese women have produced a huge number of Web sites

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consisting of illustrations, short stories, poems, and letters extolling the virtues of homosexual love between "beautiful boys" (*bishoonen*).

The History of Boy Love in Women's Manga

Japan's manga industry is enormous, and every year as many as 470 million comic books are printed.² These manga cater to niche markets, and a huge variety of titles appeal to schoolboys, schoolgirls, university students, businessmen, working women, and housewives. Adult comics, which are directed primarily at men (although there are also titles for women), feature sex scenes which, because genitalia are censored, create interest in other ways, such as through extreme violence and sadism. Article 175 of Japan's penal code makes it illegal to distribute, sell, or display "obscene printed matter," but this tends to be rather narrowly interpreted by the police. For instance, although graphic depictions of adult genitalia, pubic hair, or sexual intercourse are banned (Schodt 1983, 132-33), it is possible to show children's genitalia or caricatured depictions of adult genitalia (turtle heads and clam shells are common symbols for the penis and the vagina). In fact, despite the official ban, sexual scenes and sexual allusions are even common in manga directed at young people: a survey by Tokyo's city authority in 1991 discovered representations of sex in more than half of the 330 titles examined. As Schodt comments, "horribly well-behaved Japanese children are reading stories with scenes that make adult visitors from other, more 'liberal' cultures blanch" (p. 126).

Japan's manga boom started in the postwar period. At first, the primary market for manga was teenage males. Among the manga directed at boys was *Shoonen Magazine*, launched in 1959, which had already reached weekly sales of more than one million by the mid-1960s (Buckley 1991, 169). Publishers soon turned their attention to teenage girls, and the 1960s saw the launch of a number of titles directed at this market. However, at this time most of the writers were men (Buckley 1991, 169), and the stories in the magazines tended to follow the familiar tropes of heterosexual romantic love. It was not until women manga fans who had grown up reading these stories began to enter the manga market as writers themselves that homoerotic stories about young boys began to take shape as a specific genre. The pioneer in this field was Ikeda, whose *Rose of Versailles*, first published in 1972, was the first manga to replace heterosexual with homosexual love (although the hero of the story was actually a cross-dressed girl). Ikeda was not shy about alluding to sex, and her work contains a number of bed scenes (*beddo shiin*). These scenes became increasingly explicit in other women's manga throughout the 1970s. Surprisingly, it was not male artists writing for a heterosexual male audience who tested the censorship laws on representations of sex, but women authors writing for a

female audience—and the sex they represented was not heterosexual, but homosexual (Buckley 1991, 173).

At first, the sex scenes were extremely romantic and showed demure couples primly covered by bed sheets. Although the representation of homosexual love may have been sensational at the time, the way in which these relationships were handled by the largely female authors was relatively restrained. Homosexuality in 1970s women's manga was largely incidental to their plots, which concerned their heroes' search for love, acceptance, and identity. Matsui (1993, 180) aptly describes these early manga as *bildungsroman*, an entirely appropriate term given the moral seriousness with which both writer and readers approached them. The doyenne of the manga *bildungsroman* is undoubtedly Hagio, whose homoerotic manga *November Gymnasium* (1971) and *Thomas' Heart* (1972-1973), about life in a vaguely European public school set at the beginning of the twentieth century, remain favorites today. The first volume of Hagio's most recent work, *A Cruel God Reigns* (1997, which is about a beautiful adolescent boy who is abused by his evil stepfather), was published in 1993. It has gone through ten reprints, and the entire series has stretched to nine volumes.

In the 1980s, huge comic markets (*komiketto*), which had been held all over Japan since the 1970s, became venues for amateur manga artists to sell and circulate their work. The majority of these amateur artists were young women. At their peak in 1990 to 1992, up to a quarter of a million people attended each *komiketto*, and of these attendees, only 35 percent were male (Kinsella 1998, 300). Among the amateur women artists, many continued to represent homosexual love, producing parodies (*parodi*) of existing manga titles and a few original works. Kinsella points out that in 1989, 45.9 percent of comics sold at *komiketto* were parodies, whereas only 12.1 percent were original (p. 301). It became popular among women fans at this time to represent a homosexual subplot between male characters in mainstream boys manga, one of the most popular choices being the football team in the popular boys' comic series *Captain Tsubasa*. These manga were drawn, photocopied, bound, and circulated by women artists individually or in groups as *minikomi* (i.e., *mini* as opposed to *mass* communications), and Kinsella points out that they clearly anticipated the use of the Internet as a means of publishing and circulating amateur work (p. 294), although print versions still remain a vibrant and important genre in their own right. These parodies of existing manga are known in Japanese as *doojinshi* (same-character publications), and clearly parallel the slash fiction stories that were pioneered in the 1970s by western (primarily Anglo-American) female fans of cult television series such as *Star Trek* who, at science fiction conventions, circulated their own imagined stories about the homosexual relationships they envisaged taking place between the series' male heroes (Penley 1992). Like Japanese boy-love stories, which have now

found their way onto the Internet, there are also innumerable western slash fiction sites, and there is a certain crossover readership between the two genres.

Responding to the popularity of these explicit homosexual comics created by amateur female manga fans, some commercial women's comics began to dispense with complex psychological plots and unabashedly showed boys' naked torsos and buttocks. These manga, which emphasized the sex scenes between beautiful boys, came to be termed *YAOI*, an acronym of the first letters of the Japanese words *yama nashi* (no climax), *ochinashi* (no point), and *imi nashi* (no meaning). However, an alternative source for the acronym sometimes offered by fans of the genre—*yamete, oshiri ga itai* (Stop! My ass hurts!)—better indicates the kind of lighthearted attitude toward sex displayed by many YAOI writers. The girls' magazine *June* pioneered this genre, and now the term *June* (first published in the early 1980s) is used synonymously with YAOI to mean a boy-love story that emphasizes sex and has a relatively undeveloped plot, whereas shounen'ai refers to the more extensive, bildungsroman type of fiction.³ Western slash fiction, too, has developed a parallel genre known as *PWP* (Plot? What Plot?) stories, which provide the slenderest of pretexts for getting the male stars of popular television dramas into bed together.

By the 1990s, the sexual freedom exhibited in much privately produced YAOI fiction had influenced commercial YAOI magazines such as *June* and *B-boy*, which now routinely include illustrations of fellatio and anal sex, although erect penises are shaded out of the picture. For instance, the manga story "I Want to Loosen Up in a Rude Kiss," which appeared in a *B-boy* special anthology about high school boys (1994), shows a high school boy being fellated by his art teacher, although the boy's penis is shaded out. A 1997 *June* special collection entitled *Last Zone* (Akizuki and Nakata 1997) is a sci-fi fantasy in which beautiful warrior youth are at first fellated and then graphically dildoeed by their older lovers. The characters in these stories are drawn in a style typical of women's comics: they are androgynous, tall, slim, elfin figures with big eyes, long hair, high cheekbones, and pointed chins. They make love in a manner that is luxurious, slow, and aesthetically crafted, which sets them apart from the characters in manga written for men (whether straight or gay) where the masculinity of the male figures is emphasized by drawing attention to body hair and bulging muscles and groins.

Unlike western slash fiction, which has remained a marginal genre produced by amateurs (when slash fiction writers go mainstream, so do their themes), many amateur YAOI writers have gone mainstream and continue to produce original works in specialty boy-love comics such as *June* and *B-boy*, which are also sometimes serialized in nonspecialty manga. A recent example of such a YAOI comic is Nitta's (1997) "*Okama in the Office: Umi-chan, His Life as a Woman*," which was first serialized in the popular monthly *Manga*

Time Family that is read by both men and women. This series is about the son of a company director who insists on coming to the office dressed as a woman and working with the other women as an office lady (OL), much to his father's chagrin. (*Okama* is a common slang term for a homosexual man with strong overtones of effeminacy/transvestitism, rather like the English term *queen*.)

There is no sign that women's interest in producing and consuming boy-love comics is on the decline—old favorites continue to be reprinted, and the number of new titles continues to grow. These comics are extremely large (referred to as telephone books by English-speaking fans), quite cheap, and easily available at mainstream bookstores. For instance, the summer 1998 edition of the girls' comic *BEAST*, which describes itself as a "Men's love novel so good you can feel it," is 387 pages long and sells for \$7. However, although I have described these boy-love comics as being written primarily by and for women, it is sometimes difficult to ascribe a definite gender to the artists and writers who produce boy love stories and comics. Just as the narratives they create play with gender and sexual identity, representing a world in which the normally constricting regime of compulsory heterosexuality is overturned, they also play with their own gender identities in their pen names. Adopting a pen name is very common among Japanese writers and artists, but the adoption of a name that plays with or obscures the artist's gender identity is a recent trend, most prominent among manga writers. This is aided by the unusual writing style of the Japanese language, which employs Chinese characters and two indigenous syllabic scripts as well as Roman letters. A name written in Chinese characters will suggest a certain meaning based on the meaning of the characters chosen, but as Japanese contains many homophones, the name, when spoken, may signify a different meaning or several contrasting meanings (see McLelland 2000a). However, although there are undoubtedly male authors who create boy-love comics for women, they follow both the illustrative style and the narrative tropes pioneered by women writers, and are very different from boy-love stories created by gay men and published in gay magazines and on the Internet. Men who wish to publish boy-love stories that will be appreciated by women fans must therefore conform to the style developed by women writers and artists.

The Depiction of Homosexual Sex in Gay and Women's Manga

To understand how distinctive the representations of boy love are in Japanese women's manga and stories, it is necessary to briefly look at how homosexual sex is treated in media directed at a gay male audience. Japan currently has six nationally distributed gay men's magazines that feature a large number of erotic manga, as well as photos and short stories. The first of these to be pub-

lished, *Barazoku*, began in 1972 and is still in print. Along with women's manga in the early 1970s, it was an important testing ground for Japan's censorship laws. Elsewhere (McLelland 2000b), I have argued that gay men's comics have more in common with straight men's comics than they do with the boy-love genre created by Japanese women. Despite the fact that boy-love comics and gay comics both represent sex between men, the way in which the sex scenes are handled is completely different. Gay male comics, like their straight counterparts, tend to emphasize scenes of sadism and violence.⁴ Adams and Hill characterize men's comics generally as obsessed with "brutal fantasies depicting rape, torture, bondage, male dominance and a misogynous *zeitgeist*" (1991, 123); in these comics, men are dangerous. In gay comics, the female victims of mainstream men's manga are replaced by junior men who are used and abused by their seniors (and shown loving it) in much the same way as women in straight comics are represented as both deserving and desiring the abuse they receive. Just like women, sex for these junior men is "typically something that is done to them" (Allison 1996, 62).

Another important difference between the depiction of homosexual love in women's boy-love and gay comics is the age of the characters. Women's comics depict love between shoonen or, more specifically, bishoonen. The actual age of the boys can range from the prepubescent stage, say ten years old or even younger, to about twenty-five. Technically, adult men are beautiful young men (*biseinen*), but the way in which they are drawn makes them look like teenagers. Depiction of facial hair, for instance, is rare. Generally, when women's comics depict shoonen'ai, they are interested in homoerotic relationships between youth of approximately the same age as in Ragawa's *New York New York* (1996-1998), which is about the love between Kain, a twenty-four-year-old New York cop, and his boyfriend Mel, who is twenty-two (although they both look like they are about sixteen). When the boys are involved with much older men the relationships are frequently depicted as abusive, as in Hagio's *A Cruel God Reigns* (1997) where the fourteen-year-old hero, Jeremy, is raped and abused by his stepfather in scenes of escalating sadism and violence.

Despite the attempt in women's boy-love stories to depict equal relationships, this is a complex issue in Japanese society because the Japanese language is very sensitive to status differentials based on age and gender. Older people, or those who have been in a situation like a club, school, or company longer (referred to as seniors or *sempai*), are accorded respect signified by their subordinates' use of polite language, whereas those younger or more junior (*koohai*) can be spoken down to in plain forms. Where there is little distinction in the status difference between a man and a woman, the woman will generally use polite language to the man, whereas he is free to talk down to her in plain form. So, even though women's comics attempt to depict sex between equals

and therefore choose to depict homoerotic relationships between boys of approximately the same age, the structure of Japanese society makes this difficult. The characters in YAOI fiction, too, cannot be said to be exactly equal, even when they are very close in age. The elder partner is referred to as *seme* (from *semeru*, to attack), whereas the younger partner is labeled *uke* (from *ukeru*, to receive). Thus, the idea that sex is necessarily something that the dominant partner “does” to the submissive partner is carried over from depictions of sex between men and women or senior and junior men in mainstream and gay media. Significantly, when characters taken from mainstream manga and animations are slashed by YAOI artists, the *seme* partner is still generally depicted as taller than the *uke* partner, even though this may not accurately reflect the size of the original characters. Thus, although women’s boy-love stories manage to sidestep the power differentials inherent in all cross-gender relationships in Japan, they are (to a certain extent) still bound up with notions of power based on age.

Gay comics also feature a genre known as shounen’ ai. Some of these comics and stories show boys of approximately the same age, but more attention is given to the age difference than in women’s comics. The elder boy is always *sempai* and is addressed as such by the younger boy, and the theme is usually one of initiation. These stories are often set in school, with a common theme being an older boy who initiates a younger boy into masturbation. In “Uncertainty and That Indistinct Age” (*Barazoku* 1994, vol. 6), although the two boys are classmates, the writer emphasizes how one of them is more sexually mature. Describing itself as “an erotic memory of boy love,” this story describes how a fifteen-year-old schoolboy was seduced by his classmate and initiated into masturbation. The seduction scene goes like this: “He embraced me from behind and grabbed my penis. His hand was big, like an adult’s. ‘It’s small’ he said ‘so cute.’”

More common, however, are stories about adult men who seek out boys as sexual partners. Although the boys in these stories are seldom depicted as being forced to participate in sexual acts, as is common in the stories featuring adult partners, they are represented as being bewildered and confused by the adult man’s attentions. The theme in these stories is the loss of innocence: they are initiation rites whereby the boy is precipitated into a new awareness of his body and its potential for pleasure through the attentions of an adult initiator. The assumption in these stories is that sexual pleasure is a good thing and that a boy, once he has overcome his initial reluctance and embarrassment, will benefit from the instruction. One example is “Cute Lollypop” (*Barazoku* 1994, vol. 6), where an older man (*ojisan* or uncle) seduces a young boy, whose short pants (which are much fetishized) identify him as a primary school student. The schoolboy says, “Ojisan, don’t undo my buttons it looks rude,” to which the man replies, “OK, how about a kiss then?” Although the boy does not like

kissing the man because his breath smells of tobacco, the man persists, telling him, "you are so cute." Eventually the boy gives in, thinking to himself, "if it's you, ojisan, then anything is OK. Do as you like, I'll give you anything." Here the boy is clearly marked as feminine; he is represented as completely passive, yielding his body to the power-possessing adult man, much as women are expected to do in mainstream manga.

Although the seduction of young boys by adult men is a very common story line in gay stories and manga, I have never seen a women's boy-love story in which a young boy is seduced by a much older man (as mentioned above, when the age difference is very great, the sex is represented as abusive). This is partly to do with the familiar tropes of the boy-love genre, which demand that both participants must be bishoonen (or at least biseinen). However, I would suggest that for many women, the invasion of the boy-love world by a sexually aggressive adult male would seriously undermine the fantasy element of the story by introducing an all-too-familiar power dynamic from the real world.

Another difference between women's boy-love comics and gay comics and stories is that the actors in men's comics tend to drop their pants in the first few frames or lines of a story and rush to have as many orgasms as possible in the remaining pages. In contrast, the boys in women's comics take time to establish an emotional relationship and, although sex scenes are featured, they are seldom shown attaining orgasm; the penetration scene is frequently followed by a scene in the shower, or at the breakfast table. One example would be the *B-boy* (1994) comic "I Want to Lose Myself in a Rude Kiss," which depicts both fellatio and anal penetration but there are no "money shots" (ejaculation scenes)—the penetration scene is followed by a postcoital scene in the shower.

Gay comics also tend to obsess about penis size, and although the penis cannot be graphically depicted, the orifices it penetrates can and they are shown to be distended, invaded, and dripping with effluvia. At times, the artist depicts a kind of X ray shot that shows the shadowy penis and its movements inside a partner's mouth or anus. Although the penis cannot be drawn, there seems to be no restriction on representing bodily fluids, and floods of sperm are shown flying out of the white or shaded space where the penis should be and covering the body of the partner or, alternatively, oozing out of the partner's invaded orifices. Japanese censorship laws can seem bewildering to foreign observers. For instance, in the manga "Lynch" (*Sabu* 1998, vol. 4), a boy who wants to leave his university's rugby team is gang raped by his teammates. The first man to rape him is the team's coach, who first penetrates the boy's anus with a stick (this is clearly depicted) before inserting his penis (which is whitened out). After he has finished, the boy's violated anus is graphically depicted with semen seeping out, although his own genitalia are whitened out. Later in the story, he is forced to first urinate and then defecate in front of his teammates; again this is graphically depicted, the feces actually being shown emerging

from his anus. Women's boy-love manga (even the more erotic YAOI), however, seldom dwell on the mechanics of penetration, and the junior partner is usually shown convulsed with pleasure, not pain. Not surprisingly, YAOI also seldom represent fantasies of gang rape.

In gay comics, the penis is a fetish, and the bearer of a particularly large or well-shaped penis is to be worshipped. To a certain extent, the fact that the penis cannot be depicted makes it a more mysterious and therefore more potent symbol. For instance, in the manga "I Love Your Mouth" (*Barazoku* 1994, vol. 5), Tome, the fat ugly boy who acts as caretaker for the university football team, is forced to perform fellatio on the entire team when he is discovered masturbating with their underwear. As he kneels to uncover the team captain's penis, he says "Oh, the shape and size are superb! It's number one!" As Tome kneels, he says with almost religious fervor, "This is like a dream come true, I must commit myself heart and soul, having received this favour." In manga directed at straight men, too, the penis is a ubiquitous presence, or rather, absence. Since strict censorship requires that the penis cannot be realistically represented, men's genitalia tend to morph into a surprising array of objects including knives, swords, guns, beer bottles, baseball bats, and even trains. Significantly, the penis is often represented as a weapon with a will of its own. As Allison says of male figures in men's comics, they are "nasty" and "their bodies are laden (and interfused with) machinery and object parts . . . most important, they attack, expressing their desires through aggression" (1996, 73). These violent representations are not limited to adult comics, but as Adams and Hill point out, even in boys comics "the penis is likened to a train, a baseball bat or a person named 'Penis' . . . [and] can, of course, be utilized as a weapon" (1991, 121).

Women's boy-love comics, however, do not focus on penis size, nor do they show orifices overflowing with effluvia. Unlike boys' comics where "the story may emphasize the enormous size or power of the phallus" (Adams and Hill 1991, 122), in women's comics, the penis is not depicted as a weapon and it does not morph with surrounding objects, nor does the penis have a will or an identity independent of its owner. The penis is not represented as a stand-in for the male character as a whole, which is a common occurrence in men's manga. In women's comics, the penis is depicted as a means to bring together and unite two bodies, to make them one flesh during the act of love. Fellatio is sometimes described using metaphors of suckling, and there are long descriptions of the sensations experienced by the fellating partner as he suckles from his lover. The penis is not a weapon (as it is often depicted as in men's comics) that is used to penetrate, humiliate, and defeat an opponent; nor is it an object of worship, for women's comics detail relationships between bishoonen in which both partners are equally beautiful and therefore equally desirable. Bishoonen are not simply defined by their androgynous beauty but, like the Greek

eromenos, are also characterized by their modest genitalia and the absence of body hair. The bishoonen, although sexually active, tend not to display characteristically male sexual characteristics, but are much more like women are supposed to be: emotional, nurturing, and nice.

Women's Boy-Love Sites on the Internet

Having described women's boy-love comics and contrasted them with representations of homosexual sex in men's comics, I will now look at how this genre has expanded onto the Internet. A search on Yahoo Japan in October 1999 revealed 45 categories for YAOI and 65 for *June*. Each of these categories contains links to many related Web sites, and (even taking into account that many of these overlap) the number is in excess of several thousand. The number of sites dedicated to boy love by Japanese women is therefore comparable to the number of sites created by Japanese gay men for a gay audience (McLelland forthcoming). One Web site alone, a links page called *YAOI Webring for Girls*, has 275 sites listed and is updated daily. Another links site called *YAOI Intelligence Agency* contains 21 categories including original (263 sites), parody (357 sites), and games (95 sites).

All these sites are in Japanese, although a few do include English pages that invite comments from foreigners. YAOI fiction does, in fact, have a large following among non-Japanese.⁵ I have found Internet sites dedicated to Japanese YAOI fiction in Chinese, Portuguese, French, Italian, and Spanish, although they are vastly outnumbered by those in English. These sites include both translations of YAOI stories, YAOI images scanned from magazines and downloaded from Japanese sites, synopses of both YAOI and shoonen'ai stories, and original stories and art based on Japanese YAOI texts and dojinshi or slashed versions of mainstream Japanese manga and animations. Like Japanese YAOI fan sites, most of these foreign-language sites are created by women (or by individuals who, adopting obscure pen names, seek to leave the question of their gender open).

Many of the YAOI sites do include warnings in English (and Japanese) on their entrance pages. It is easy to understand why some non-Japanese Web surfers, in particular, would react negatively to these sites. For instance, "Black Princess Gallery" in *Saki's Room* includes a number of illustrations depicting cute, preadolescent boys exposing themselves, masturbating each other, or urinating, each accompanied by a poem or a comment. "Senior, I'm Embarrassed" shows two naked preteen boys emerging from the shower. The older boy holds the younger boy's penis as he urinates. This is just one of a number of similar illustrations entitled "pee-pee play" (*oshikko purei*). Such scatological references may appear obscene to a western audience, but they are in fact com-

monplace in Japanese media. In boys' comics, the male characters frequently fart, moon each other, or take a dump (Adams and Hill 1991, 121).

Perhaps the most troubling illustration for a western viewer is, however, a scene depicting two near-naked preteen boys. They seem identical and could even be twins, except the seme (or dominant) partner is drawn larger. The larger boy has pulled down the smaller boy's underwear and is masturbating him. The illustrator comments that "He's about to have his first ejaculation . . . for a boy to be in this situation is surely delightful [*bimi*] isn't it?" These characters are drawn as animation (*anime*) figures, and are depicted with the big wide eyes common in that genre. They are not drawn with lascivious intent, but the overall effect is one of cuteness (*kawai rashisa*). Indeed, a similar dojinshi illustration of the male characters Ash and Brock from the children's animation classic *Pokemon*, which shows them naked and embracing each other with erect (albeit hairless) penises, is commented on by a female character standing in the background who says (in English), "Aren't they cute!" Ash, the older character who looks about fifteen, has closed eyes and a look of extreme tenderness on his face, whereas Brock (who looks about ten and is sitting astride him) has his face turned to the viewer and is winking with his mouth open. Both characters are overwhelmingly cute, and their very stylized representation works against a pornographic reading of this image. It is an image of tenderness and not sexual excess. This illustration should be compared with similar illustrations from gay magazines also depicting older and younger boys locked in sexual embraces, where the depictions are more realistic and the expressions more sexual. Different cultures obviously have different ways of structuring sexuality, and what is considered unremarkable in one society may generate great offense in another. Japanese society has not traditionally made as severe a distinction between adult and child sexuality as has the west. That Japanese men have a Lolita complex (*rori-kon*) has been endlessly commented on by foreign observers of Japan's sexual culture. In fact, Japan's rather narrowly interpreted obscenity laws have encouraged the development of this genre: as Schodt states, "since the law tends to overlook nude scenes of children, several artists have pioneered the *rori-kon* genre, drawing little girls as sex partners for grown men" (1983, 136). However, that some Japanese women also have a Shootaroo complex (*shoota-kon*) is less often noted. Shootaroo is a common boy's name, and the term *shoota-kon* was developed by YAOI writers to describe women's stories featuring homoerotic interest between young boys as a parallel term for the *rori-kon* stories common in men's manga that describe adult men's infatuation with young girls. One editor of women's comics has commented that the attraction of boy-love stories lies in their nonthreatening story lines: "Love between boys in another country is so completely distant from their own reality that it's not threatening, yet it

still gives them a vicarious experience. They also think it's pretty" (cited in Schodt 1983, 137).

Women's shoota-kon illustrations, both original artwork and doojinshi creations, are rather different from boy-love stories written for gay men. Although the characters are shown clinging together in a sexual interaction, the viewer is not so much invited to develop her (for a female gaze is anticipated) own masturbatory fantasy around the scene depicted, but to enjoy (and endorse) the emotional and sexual intimacy between the characters. In the real world of television and mainstream (read male) culture, despite the fact that homoerotic subplots may be hinted at (or barely repressed), the actual depiction of sex between men is problematic. Were it to be depicted (as it sometimes is in male mainstream media and frequently is in gay media), it would be subject either to ridicule or subsumed under the same power relations that structure the depiction of sex between men and women. In women's spaces on the Internet, however, the implied female gaze of artist and viewer is able to create a scenario in which the homophobia and violence characteristic of male desire is overthrown. In these women's spaces, sex between boys, which in male representations would necessarily be scripted in terms of coercion and power, is instead scripted in terms of nurture and love. The female gaze recognizes a scene different from that of the male gaze. This is why many of these sites emphasize on their entrance pages that they are restricted to women and that men (even gay men) are not welcome as visitors.⁶

Japanese women's depiction of love between boys should be located in the overall "cute culture" phenomenon characteristic of young women's culture in Japan (Kinsella 1995). Cuteness has been read (quite rightly) by a number of western academics not as an infantile capitulation, but as a means of resistance to the sexist stereotypes and narrow life paths that come with the status of adult woman in Japan. One of the things that Japanese women are said to be resisting through their participation in cute culture is sexuality, which in patriarchal terms requires adopting either the role of commercial sex worker or wife, as few positive role models exist in Japanese culture for the single yet sexually active young woman. However, Japanese girls' manga, both in print and on the Internet, are cute and undeniably sexual. So what, if anything, are the representations of sex between beautiful boys resisting?

In a patriarchal system where men's authority over women is understood to be taken for granted and natural, the most potent symbol of men's power over women is the sex scene where the male body, which is bigger and stronger, penetrates and controls the female body. As discussed above, in men's manga, the penis morphs into a variety of objects (often weapons) that are used to penetrate and thereby subdue women's bodies. The representation of sex between men is therefore very troubling to this system, for it exposes the male Achilles' heel: the anus or the mouth, which, like the female vagina, can also be pene-

trated by another man. Mainstream (read male) media get around this problem by representing men who want to be penetrated as ridiculous women *manqué*. (The most common indigenous Japanese term for the male homosexual is *okama*, which is literally a pot but is also used as a slang term for the buttocks). A man who wants to be penetrated is, by definition, a nonman. Gay media, too, manage to sidestep the problems inherent in representing men who are penetrated by other men by focusing on senior/junior relationships, where the senior penetrates the junior and sexual roles therefore mirror the power differentials at work in all relationships between men. This is why much gay male pornography takes place in homosocial environments where women, unavailable as sexual partners, are replaced by junior men. In male depictions of sexual interaction, one partner has always to come out on top. In cross-gender relationships it is always the male character, and in male homosexual relationships it is the senior man. Women's boy-love stories and illustrations, however, seek to avoid these male-defined power relations by removing gender-related power differentials (by making both lovers the same sex), limiting age-related power differences (by representing characters of similar age), and eliminating power differentials based on desirability (by representing both characters as *bishoonen*, i.e., equally beautiful and therefore equally desirable). Women's boy-love stories come as close as is possible in status-conscious Japan to representing love between equals.⁷

I have suggested that a main attraction of boy-love stories for Japanese women is that they represent love between equals, in which neither partner is disadvantaged by the cultural evaluation of biological factors such as gender or age. At this point it may be useful to outline some other theories that have been offered to account for Japanese women's interest in (male) homosexual love. Among academics, Kinsella suggests that it "expresses [Japanese young women's] ambiguous preoccupation with, and a deep uncertainty about, masculine gender stereotypes" (1998, 305). Matsui argues that girls' obsession with boy-love comics is a case of penis envy (1993, 179). Aoyama claims that some women enjoy placing boys in sexually explicit and at times violent scenes as a form of revenge, where "women . . . become a spectator rather than a prey" (1988, 196). Buckley regards boy-love stories as "a rare respite . . . from the dominant cultural production . . . where difference—male/female—exists only as the guarantee of the continued privileging of a phallogentric construct of normative heterosexuality" (1991, 177). *Bishoonen* stories were popular with women because "the beautiful boy embodies all the most attractive features of female gender, while able to move through the world unencumbered by the burdens of female sex" (McLelland 2000a, 24-25). Popular writers on Japanese culture have also tried to analyze this phenomenon. Buruma reads the boy-love genre as a rejection by young women of adult female sexuality because "becoming an adult woman means playing a subservient role in life"

(1984, 118), while McGregor suggests that the bishoonen who fall in love with each other represent ideal men from a woman's perspective because in real life "even wimpy men are threats" (1996, 229). Japanese women's interest in male homosexual love can clearly be made to mean many different things, but in forcing this product of women's popular culture into a variety of analytical straitjackets—whether they be academic, psychological, psychoanalytical, feminist, or whatever—the views and opinions of the Japanese women who produce and consume this material tend to be overlooked.

None of the women who write in to boy-love sites refer to Freud or western feminist texts when describing their attraction to this literature, nor do they mention imported western terminology such as *patriarchy* or *homophobia*. To this extent, the fans of YAOI texts are similar to fans of western slash fiction. As Jenkins (1992) found in his interactions with female slash fans, texts that were most amenable to feminist readings were seldom written by women expressing feminist identities. Most Japanese women confess that they simply enjoy YAOI stories—they find the characters cute, sympathetic, and endearing. For example, one twenty-seven-year-old Japanese housewife writes on her YAOI Web site that "for me, *June* is just entertainment!" She says it is like a breath of fresh air that allows her to forget the pressures of the moment. She adds that for her, "*June* comics are like a Spielberg movie, they are an imaginary playground in which I can flee the realities of everyday life." This is an interesting analogy, for just as American teenage girls might enjoy the movie *E.T.*, many Japanese girls get their kicks reading stories about teenage boys making out together. Male homosexuality in Japanese women's comics, because it is represented in such a fantastic and idealized manner, does not have the same moral valence as it would in the west. Beautiful young boys making out together do not signify pathology (as they might to an American audience), but cuteness and romance. Schodt argues that stories of male homosexual love are "the best illustration of the Japanese tolerance of fantasy, and of the unique dichotomy between fantasy and reality" (1983, 137). Indeed, a high school girl writes into a boy-love BBS that she likes homosexual love stories because they are more pure, since the partners must risk everything by rejecting society's definition of normality. Another female boy-love fan notes that years ago, when *June* (here a generic for boy love) comics were first published, she used to carry them to the register hidden under a pile of other "ordinary books," but that now (whether because she is older or society is more tolerant) she has no qualms about buying them. Although Japanese society is no more tolerant of men or women expressing a gay or lesbian identity in real life than many western societies (McLelland 2000b), as a fantasy trope for women, male homosexuality is understood to be a beautiful and pure form of romance. Hence, it is possible in Japan for mainstream bookstores to carry many boy-love manga titles (among them classics such as *June* and *B-boy*) that depict sto-

ries about love between teenage boys often featuring illustrations of anal sex and fellatio, which can be purchased freely by anyone, including their intended audience of high school girls. Japanese society clearly responds to depictions of male homosexuality in ways very different from societies in the west. Toto, I don't think we are in Kansas anymore.

I would like to problematize those academic analyses of the boy-love genre that are underwritten by the assumption that homosexuality is such a bizarre, disturbing, or unusual occurrence that women who interest themselves in it must have some extremely compelling (and largely subconscious) reason to do so. Attempts which read this attraction in pathological terms (or explain it with reference to the deficiencies of Japan's patriarchal society) would seem to want to limit Japanese women in imagination in much the same way as they are limited in actual life. This approach seems to say that just as you choose an opposite-sex mate as your lifetime partner in real life, you must also pattern your fantasies on the heterosexual scripts offered to you by the dominant culture. If you do not, then there is either something wrong with you or something wrong with the system you inhabit. Although there is a tradition of phenomenological analysis of women's slash fiction in Anglo-American societies that attempts to discover why many women who in practice are committed to heterosexual relationships should seek to produce and consume fantasies about homosexual relationships between men, research by western writers on the YAOI phenomenon in Japan has so far tended to marginalize and pathologize those women who enjoy this genre, suggesting that their interest in homosexual love arises from their failure to satisfactorily engage with romantic relationships between men and women.⁸ After all, since heterosexual attraction is natural, taken for granted, and thereby transparent, it needs no justification. Homosexual attraction, however, when it trespasses beyond the shrink-wrapped covers of the gay press and becomes a fantasy for heterosexual women, is a perverse puzzle just waiting for western academics to solve. If YAOI stories (like Hollywood movies) were about heterosexual romance, would they still prove such an interesting topic of investigation for the academic gaze?

Conclusion

YAOI fiction is an important product of women's culture that is totally removed from male supervision and control. Despite the fact that commercially published women's manga may be subject to male censorship and editing, those manga, illustrations, and stories produced by women on the Internet or privately produced and distributed at komiketto escape such male control. That Japanese women, free of male interference and influence, should seek to create a fantasy world populated by beautiful boys who fall in love not with

beautiful girls but with each other is certainly interesting. However, the expectation that in an ideal world women would prefer to fantasize about love between men and women is itself a patriarchal or at least a heterosexist assumption.

In boy-love fiction, women get the last laugh. They create beautiful male characters whom they, as voyeurs, are free to love themselves. Yet by having these beautiful boys fall in love with each other, they subtly subvert the ubiquitous male gaze. Men cannot enter these sites or read these comics and appreciate the stories in the way that women readers do without undermining the very basis of their masculinity. Paradoxically, then, the world of boy-love fiction on the Internet is very much a woman's world.

Notes

1. An exception is Matthew Thorn, a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University, whose Internet site dedicated to Japanese women's comics is an invaluable resource for non-Japanese speaking scholars interested in the genre. I am indebted to this site for much of the background information on the development of YAOI in this article. The address is: http://www.ky.xaxon.ne.jp/~matt/what_are_shoujo_manga.html

2. The figures in this paragraph come from a report in *The Guardian* newspaper on 8 October 1991 (p. 12), and are the most up-to-date I have been able to find.

3. Schodt (1983, 137) describes the contents of the January 1982 edition of *June* as follows: "Its 150 pages . . . contained the following: pin-up color photographs of androgynous foreign rock stars and scantily clad teenage boys, with poems; eleven comic stories and short strips about gay men; a short, illustrated prose story of gay interracial love in prewar Japan; . . . lessons on how to draw the 'beautiful boy'; drawings by readers of young boys embracing."

4. The distinction I make here between women's comics (which stress romance and emotion) and men's comics (which highlight sex and violence) is blurred by a genre of erotic comics termed *ladies comics* written by and for women, which reproduce many of the violent and sadistic situations common in men's manga. As Allison (1996, 155) points out, in ladies comics "the pages are filled with stories and images of sadomasochism." However, the scenarios in ladies comics are predominantly heterosexual. Likewise, women's boy-love manga are not entirely without representations of violence and sadism, but such scenes are minimal when compared with the overwhelming prevalence of violence in men's comics.

5. For readers interested in YAOI material in English on the Internet, a good place to start is the aptly named *Aestheticism* Web page: <http://www.aestheticism.net>

6. Japanese gay Web sites also often stress that women are not welcome visitors, and sometimes try to protect their contents by granting access only to those who can successfully answer the questions in a gay quiz that tests browsers' knowledge of Japanese gay slang (McLelland forthcoming). Many Japanese women, whether fans of YAOI or not, express great interest in Japan's (male) gay subculture. For an analysis of why this is so, see "Gay Men as Women's Ideal Partners in Japanese Popular Culture: Are Gay Men Really a Girl's Best Friends?" (McLelland 1999).

7. However, Veruska Sabucco (personal communication) reads the *uke/semi* relationship as reduplicating the same unequal dynamic that characterizes heterosexual relationships, but in a homosexual medium. I would argue that although the uke partner is pictured as sexually subservient, he still has the freedom to live and act as a male in a man's world, and his sexuality is

independent of the reproductive family system within which women's bodies are inscribed, thus making him more equal to his uke lover than a female partner could be.

8. Discussions of western slash "fandom" tend to be much more nuanced than those discussing YAOI, and are less likely to explain away these very complex and multivalent texts by referring to the inherently sexist nature of America in quite the same way that some writers account for Japanese women's interest in male homosexuality by stressing their marginalized position in the supposed patriarchal superstate known as Japan. For a discussion of Anglo-American slash fandom, see the chapters by Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins (1998) and Cicioni (1998) in Harris and Alexander (1998).

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