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## "STRAIGHT" WOMEN, QUEER TEXTS: BOY-LOVE MANGA AND THE RISE OF A GLOBAL COUNTERPUBLIC

ANDREA WOOD

In recent years Japanese manga (comics) have exploded onto the North American comics market, rapidly taking over the graphic novel sections of book and comic stores and generating fans among adolescent audiences.<sup>1</sup> Most comics being translated and published in the United States are aimed at this age group and along clear gender lines. *Shonen* comics are considered to be primarily for boys and tend to focus on action and adventure narratives, while *shojo* comics for girls typically present more romantically oriented stories. More than a passing fad, manga have become a firmly established segment of the U.S. publishing industry, and in 2004 total manga sales for the United States and Canada were up to \$207 million (Memmott 2005, 4d). The manga industry in Japan is even larger, with "gross revenues totaling 531 billion yen (\$5 billion)" in 2001 (Thorn 2004, 169).

Japanese manga are flourishing in North America, but the majority of texts translated and sold are heterosexually oriented despite the fact that there is a wide array of more sexually transgressive manga being published in Japan. Therefore, when Tokyopop, a U.S. publisher of Japanese manga, released several new queer series in the fall of 2003 they took a brave leap in introducing what I will be referring to as "boy-love manga" to the U.S. comics market. As the name suggests, boy-love manga present romantic narratives that visually depict homoerotic love between male protagonists. By and large, these comics are created by and for women. They have a well-established history in Japan and have generated a huge following of female readers, particularly teenage girls. It is their recent emergence on the North American manga market that raises several interesting questions. In particular, how does the transnational circulation of these comics require us to consider their popularity in new ways? And how do boy-love manga, by virtue of their queer content, work subversively within a more global context?

To clarify my terms, in this paper I will be using *boy-love manga* as a

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larger all-encompassing genre term, while distinguishing between the two separate categories of *shonen-ai* and *yaoi* that fall under it.<sup>2</sup> *Shonen-ai* manga tend to emphasize elaborate romances that contain imagery more suggestive than sexually explicit. A palpable thread of erotic tension is, however, present and maintained, predominantly through visual cues such as sudden longing looks, unexpected caresses, suggestive body language, and intimate kissing scenes. Typical panels are often erotically charged as readers catch a glimpse of a tongue here and a wandering hand there, ultimately leaving more to the imagination than meets the eye. In contrast, the often pornographically explicit boy-love manga known as *yaoi* generally forgo coherent plot development in favor of using every available opportunity to get the beautiful male characters in bed together. In fact, *yaoi* is an acronym in Japanese that ironically translates as “no climax, no punchline [*sic*], no meaning” (Schodt 1996, 37).

Despite the steadily growing publishing market for boy-love manga outside Japan, current scholarship has not focused at great length on the increasingly global nature of the readership or the function and effect of such widespread textual circulation. Mark McLelland (2000a) argues that there is a clear distinction between how Japanese and Western audiences receive homosexual texts, which necessitates a restricted cultural analysis:

Although Japanese society is no more tolerant of men or women expressing a gay or lesbian identity in real life than many western [*sic*] societies, 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 stories 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 [*sic*]. (287–88)

While McLelland is right to point out the fact that Japan has a long artistic tradition of aestheticizing certain male homoerotic relationships as representative of a “beautiful and pure form of romance,”<sup>3</sup> it is also per-

tinient to consider the ways in which different cultural contexts may actually provide new readings of texts. Indeed, the growing popularity of boy-love manga in the United States suggests that the differences between Japanese and Western readers are not prohibitive to enjoying these comics.

Our current moment, therefore, seems ripe for a new assessment of boy-love manga and the increasingly global nature of their circulation and readership for several reasons. On the one hand, assessments of the genre have frequently invoked as a key factor in female readers' interest in these texts the patriarchally oppressive environment in which Japanese women live, and the ways in which female sexuality in Japanese culture is confined to the reproductive function within the sanctioned space of marriage (Aoyama 1988; Behr 2003; Kinsella 2000; McLelland 2000b). While this information offers insight into the culturally specific context of Japanese female readers, it can also risk oversimplifying the situation and Japanese women's responses to it. Nor does this cultural information provide an equally accessible frame of reference when considering other readers and other contexts. I would argue, therefore, that the transnational readership of boy-love manga requires new ways of thinking about this phenomenon beyond the confines of Japan. The Internet is already facilitating discourse and textual circulation among fans in different countries, generating what I perceive to be a global counterpublic that is both subversive and fundamentally queer in nature. I will show how this queerness both demonstrates that the readership is not coherent, monolithic, or singular and opens a discursive space for multiple and fluid readings of boy-love manga to be circulated and shared among an intimate network of strangers around the world.

Despite what I perceive to be the markedly queer content of these comics, U.S. publishers of boy-love manga, like their Japanese counterparts, market and advertise to an audience that is generally characterized as both female and straight. Consequently, when popular media critics investigate this new publishing trend they reach very normative conclusions about boy-love manga. Such is the case with a recent *Los Angeles Times* article (Solomon 2004) that concludes with the very safe assurance that these comics, because they are romantic narratives aimed at women, must "portray relationships that are heterosexual at their foundation." Not surprisingly, therefore, most considerations of the phenomenon continue to categorize readers of boy-love manga as a

group of “straight” women. While some scholars have been quick to point out that readers’ sexual orientation is difficult if not impossible to accurately ascertain, and undoubtedly more complex than publishers believe, there is still a general tendency to refer to the readership as heterosexual (Behr 2003, 25; Kinsella 2000, 117; Mizoguchi 2003, 56; Thorn 2004, 172). Although some have acknowledged the limitations of assessing these texts and their popularity within heterosexual paradigms (Behr 2003; Mizoguchi 2003; McLelland 2000a; Nagaïke 2003) there has not been a sustained discussion of how concepts of queerness might help us to begin thinking about how these manga function in a global context. I would like to consider this idea in more detail, by first assessing some of the visual characteristics of boy-love manga and questions of identification and interpretation they necessarily raise.

The gender representations and sexuality visualized in boy-love manga challenge and trouble the belief that these categories are ontologically coherent, contained, and one dimensional—something that is at the very heart of queerness. For as Eve Sedgwick argues, “queer” involves “the open mess of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning [that occur] when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (1993, 8). In other words, boy-love manga are not simply queer because they depict homoerotic love stories between men, but rather because they ultimately reject any kind of monolithic understanding of gendered or sexual identity. At the same time, erotic fantasies about love between beautiful and often androgynous young men, as depicted in these comics, transgress and queer *how* and *what* their supposedly “straight” female readers are expected to fantasize about sexually.

Indeed, the very fact that characters’ gender and sexual ambiguities are encoded visually allows for myriad shifting and fluid identifications and interpretations among readers. Lead characters are often highly stylized and drawn to emphasize their beauty and sensuality, which departs from more traditional romance narratives that tend to focus on describing the uber-macho and phallic masculinity of male heroes. While I do acknowledge that this tendency is more particularly a Western one, it is relevant to note that many Japanese manga by and for men reinforce the notion of an idealized man being ultramasculine and phallic in nature. Female manga artists have been characterized as reacting

against this by producing more androgynous and aesthetically beautiful men (Allison, 1996; McLelland 2000b). Thus, one might see a *bishonen* (beautiful boy) in a typical boy-love manga with long flowing hair and rather androgynous facial features, wearing stylish clothing that can best be described by contemporary Western standards as "metrosexual." As McLelland notes, "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" (2000a, 277). For example, in Fig. 1 we see the protagonist (Shuichi Shindo) of Maki Murakami's *Gravitation* (2003) meeting the man he will fall in love with (Yuki Eiri) for the first time. Two entire pages are devoted to this moment, highlighting its significance to the narrative, and the perspective from which the scenes are viewed is predominantly Shuichi's as he gazes at Yuki. Both characters have delicate facial features that emphasize their large eyes and artfully coiffed hair. No language is necessary here as the images are left to convey the eroticized nature of the



Fig. 1. Shuichi sees Yuki for the first time. Credit: Image provided courtesy of TOKYOPOP Inc. © 2002 MAKI MURAKAMI. All Rights Reserved. First published in Japan in 1996 by GENTOSHA COMICS INC. TOKYO. English translation rights arranged with GENTOSHA COMICS INC. TOKYO through TOHAN CORPORATION, TOKYO.

moment by themselves. Yuki is highlighted as the central object of desire and we see Shuichi gazing on him with open awe. Indeed, *bishonen* are often posed in a deliberate manner to engage the viewer's gaze. This is frequently achieved by taking up an entire page to draw a character in a very carefully staged manner that maximizes his sex appeal. Often flower imagery is drawn in the background or around the border surrounding the framed *bishonen* to emphasize his beauty. Consequently, although bishonen are superficially gendered male, their very androgynous appearance allows for them to be read inside a variety of different gender and sexual paradigms.

Most notably, there is the very obvious possibility of lesbian desire being encoded within these characters.<sup>4</sup> In Fig. 2, we see the lead characters of Sanami Matoh's series *Fake* standing in front of a fictionalized New York City backdrop. Dee, the dark-haired character, almost appears to be wearing lipstick and has a feminine profile coupled with a more butch haircut. His light-haired partner, Ryo, shares a

similar melding of butch-femme/femme-butch physiognomy that upon closer inspection gives the impression that their faces mirror one another's. At the same time, the bodies of both characters are obscured by the bulky clothing that they wear and by the segmentation of panels that focus in on their androgynous faces and leave the view-

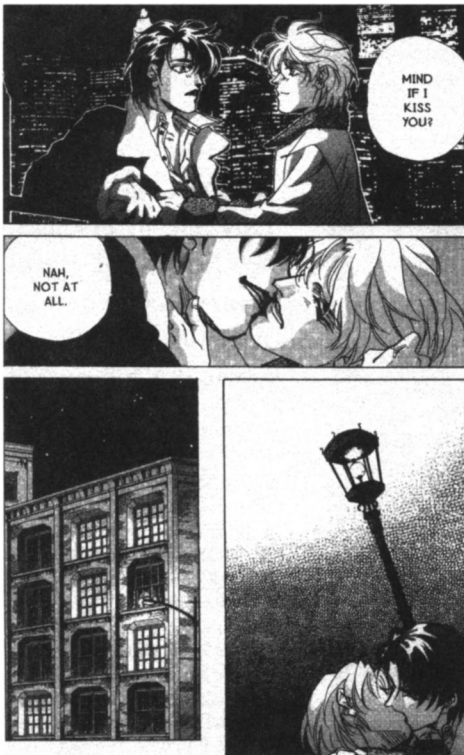


Fig. 2. Dee and Ryo Kissing.  
Credit: Image provided courtesy of TOKYOPOP Inc. © 2000 SANAMI MATOH. All Rights Reserved. First published in Japan in 2000 by BIBLOS Co., Ltd. Tokyo. English publication rights arranged through BIBLOS Co., Ltd.



er with great latitude for somatic interpretation. This kind of gender indeterminacy opens up ample space for "perverse" readings (Sedgwick 1993) of these characters that speak not only to possible lesbian desires and fantasies, but also other queer, transgender, and transsexual ones. *Shonen-ai* manga showcase these possibilities most powerfully, because they do not reveal genital imagery.

Although most *shonen-ai* manga are more focused on the development of a romantic plot line between male protagonists, sexual desire is not simply "slight or incidental" (Thompson 2003, 43) as some popular critics suggest. A successful series such as *Gravitation* relies on sexual innuendo, comedic double entendres, and coded visual references in order to maintain an erotic undercurrent that is not sexually explicit in nature. Such strategies can often be found in traditional romance fiction as well, and readers become familiar with these kinds of tropes and are able to read beyond the surface in order to glean the sexually charged interactions between characters that might otherwise seem innocent.

Part of the pleasure in this kind of reading is based precisely on the fact that sex is *not* in plain view. The visual nature of manga makes this even more powerfully felt, by establishing heightened sexual tension between characters imagistically. As shown in the images of



Fig. 3. Shuichi and Yuki kissing. Credit: Image provided courtesy of TOKYOPOP Inc. © 2002 MAKI MURAKAMI. All Rights Reserved. First published in Japan in 1996 by GENTOSHA COMICS INC. TOKYO. English translation rights arranged with GENTOSHA COMICS INC. TOKYO through TOHAN CORPORATION, TOKYO.



Shuichi and Yuki kissing (Fig. 3), bodies are fragmented in each panel, deliberately concealing the entirety of what is happening. We do momentarily catch a glimpse of Yuki's wandering hand, but in other panels we are only privy to the sight of their faces as they're kissing while the rest of their bodies remain obscured or hidden. This tantalizing and suggestive imagery leaves a lot to the reader's imagination, allowing for many different readings, identifications, and stimuli for fantasies.

In contrast, *yaoi* manga have no qualms about depicting hard-core sex between *bishonen* that reveal genitalia in often explicit detail. These comics raise different questions about the fantasies presented therein and issues of reader identification. On the one hand, the possibility that female readers find voyeuristic pleasure in scenes of anal sex and fellatio between beautiful men challenges the desirability of heteronormative constructs of masculinity, which negatively perceive a male desire to be sexually penetrated, as "a voluntary abandonment of the culturally constructed masculine identity in favor of the culturally constructed feminine one" (Halperin 1993, 422). Consequently, sex scenes in *yaoi* manga have the potential to catalyze certain homophobic fears. Heterosexual understandings of gender generally affirm that being penetrated is de facto disempowering and ultimately feminizing, and that as a result penetration must be performed as an act that asserts power and masculine primacy. Boy-love manga, however, tend to argue visually for the pleasure of both penetrating and being penetrated, and relationships between male characters display equality and mutuality on an emotional level, especially in their erotic moments together.<sup>5</sup>

Although the narratives emphasize the need for lovers to develop an equal romantic partnership, they do tend to clearly position characters in roles of sexual "top" and "bottom." The older male character is usually the sexual instigator and "top," known as the *seme*, while his often younger partner is the "bottom, or *uke*" (McLelland 2000a, 279–80). What I find particularly interesting about the *seme-uke* dichotomy in boy-love manga is the fact that the *possibility* of changing roles often serves as a point of teasing humor and even sexual excitement between partners, suggesting that these comics are much more cognizant of the performative nature of such roles than one might first imagine. For instance, in the third volume of Kazuma Kodaka's *Kizuna* series (2004), which is being published in North America by Be Beautiful, there is a comical erotic moment when Ranmaru initiates sex with his partner, Kei, who is the

*seme*. The visually comedic nature of this moment is reflected in the fact that Kei has been unwittingly forced into the position of *uke* (Fig. 4). As Ranmaru (the light-haired character) becomes more sexually aggressive, the panels humorously focus on Kei's facial expressions, which range from confusion, mock fear, and disbelief as he mentally questions what is happening with increasing anxiety. Just when it appears that Ranmaru is going to reverse the roles for real, he instead enacts his own penetration and the two exchange teasing banter before proceeding to make love. This particular scenario highlights the culturally constructed nature of sex roles, managing to find humor in them while questioning them at the same time. While *Kizuna* merely plays with the notion of switching sex roles, there is a subgenre of *yaoi* in Japan categorized as "reversible" that actually presents reversible couples "who never draw borders between *uke* and *seme* sexualities" (Nagaike 2003, 88). But as of yet, only one reversible series, Youka Nitta's *Embracing Love* (*Haru wo Daiteita*) (2005), is being published in the United States.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 4. Kei finding himself on the "bottom." Credit: Original Japanese version "Kizuna Vol. 3" © 1996 Kazuma Kodaka. Originally published in Japan in 1996 by BIBLOS Co., Ltd. English version © 2004 A18 Corporation.

Despite the fact that the more rigidly upheld *seme-uke* dichotomy tends to reinforce notions of active/passive sex roles, it is important to emphasize that in general these comics do not *visually* infuse the role of *uke* with negative or disempowering connotations. Instead, the *uke* is often depicted in a state of ecstasy, while his partner is more focused on *giving* him pleasure than on simply taking it for himself. In Fig. 5, from You Asagiri's *Golden Cain*, the *uke* Shun's pleasure is highlighted, as we see his head thrown back, eyes closed, and mouth open in a moment of ecstasy. His partner, Cain, the *seme* in the relationship, is revealed in profile only. We cannot see his facial response, only that his eyes are focused on gazing at Shun, watching his pleasure and thus implying that this is important and perhaps necessary for his own sexual gratification. Therefore, in opposition to a one-sided visualization of pleasure that emphasizes the importance of the penetrating partner's orgasm, a mainstay of heterosexual pornography, *yaoi* manga are more interested in illustrating both partners' erotic fulfillment and gratification.

There have been a wide array of approaches to and conclusions about reader/viewer identification with boy-love manga, but they have nonetheless remained focused primarily within a Japanese context. One of my aims here, in contrast, is to suggest that the increasingly transnational readership for boy-love manga stymies efforts to make universalizing claims about processes of identification. More particularly, I would argue that one of the fundamentally queer facets of boy-love manga is that they can be read quite differently depending on the subjective lens through which they are viewed. The gender ambiguity and sexual fluidity that I have located at the heart of the visual aesthetics of



Fig. 5. Uke partner in ecstasy. Credit: Original Japanese version "Kin no Cain" © 2003 You Asagiri. Originally published in Japan in 2003 by BIBLOS Co., Ltd. English version © 2004) A-18 Corporation. English translation rights arranged through TRANNET. All rights reserved.

these comics express a queerness that refuses complete coherence. While these images may be read or perceived quite differently in diverse cultural and artistic contexts, the erotic nature of their content seems to speak intimately to the many desires and fantasies of different women on an increasingly global scale.<sup>7</sup> For as Akiko Mizoguchi has noted, "fantasies, realities, and representations are always related in *yaoi* texts, but their relationships are never transparent" (2003, 65).

At the same time, transnational readers' shared investment in queer subcultural texts establishes them as part of a resistant counterpublic, and one that subverts the accustomed expectation of a "romance reading" public of women as only being interested in heterosexist narratives deemed acceptable because they are believed to reinforce the gender status quo.<sup>8</sup> As Michael Warner argues, the discursive exchange of a counterpublic is "structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying" (2002, 56–7). The engagement with boy-love manga on the part of female readers, who are perceived by and large as "straight" women, and thus coded as part of a larger "mass" normative public, concurrently positions them as part of a counterpublic resistant to blithely consuming idealized heteronormative media. Referring to the complex and transnational network of readers of boy-love manga as part of a public or, in my view, counterpublic is more efficacious than describing them as an audience. My reasoning here stems in part from the fact that readers often lack the clear specificity of a concrete audience, especially now that these comics are being read across different countries, genders, sexualities, and age groups. Indeed, "a public is always in excess of its known social basis" because the self-organization of a public is "as a body of strangers united through the circulation of their discourse" (Warner 2002, 74, 86). This of course makes it difficult to then quantify and assess a public as social scientists would like to.

Because boy-love manga are erotic in content, they necessarily speak to intimate desires and fantasies, both conscious and unconscious, among readers. How does one quantitatively assess individuals' sexual desires and fantasies? The very intangible and often unconscious nature of such things makes this nigh on impossible, most especially because researchers' interpretations of such information often affect how it is presented or read. In her book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam elucidates this point when she paraphrases R. C. Lewontin's suggestion that

“people tend not to be truthful when it comes to reporting on their own sexual behavior (men exaggerate and women downplay, for example), and there are no ways to make allowances for personal distortion within social science methods” (1998, 11). While surveys can provide important insight on small groups of individuals, they can never adequately represent the entirety of a large and nebulous public; nor can they ascertain definitive or collective truths about fluid and indistinct fantasies and desires, especially across multiple cultural, linguistic, and national divides. It is my contention, therefore, that a more productive methodological avenue lies in considering the growing global readership for boy-love manga as a counterpublic that establishes discursive connections between strangers, reflecting their intimate engagements with texts and their differing subjective and cultural contexts for reading boy-love manga. Indeed, not everyone has to read boy-love manga in the same way in order to be part of this counterpublic.

Publics come into being “only in relation to texts and their circulation” (Warner 2002, 66), which is the foundation of boy-love manga readership and fandom. Those who read boy-love manga do not remain passive receivers of the texts. Instead, these comics often act as a gateway to a “concatenation of texts” (90). Fans begin to create their own *doujinshi* (fan manga), write their own fiction stories, participate in related areas like slash fandom,<sup>9</sup> establish their own Web sites, begin their own translation and scanlation projects,<sup>10</sup> attend anime and manga conventions, chat in online forums, and so on. The discourse of this rather varied and increasingly Web-based counterpublic relies on shared circuits of textual circulation that often transcend even the rather obvious constraints of language barriers. Because so much of boy-love manga requires imagistic reading practices, discourse often happens at the level of shared images that do not require words. At the same time, the concatenation of texts has also established a certain degree of shared terminology among all language groups. Words like *yaoi*, *shonen-ai*, *doujinshi*, *uke*, *seme*, and *bishonen* become part of the collective jargon of this particular counterpublic discourse, regardless of an individual’s native language.

A great deal of boy-love manga, especially *doujinshi* created by amateur fans, focuses on parody—frequently taking prominent male characters from other manga or anime and developing romantic and sexual relationships between them. This is very similar to the practice of slash writing, a crossover area of fandom for many Western readers,

although more emphasis is placed on the visual images than on the written content. In boy-love manga, the love between male characters often transcends concerns about gender and sexuality, which tend to be seen as irrelevant or beside the point. Some critics have noted similar tendencies in slash fiction, or more particularly the propensity to leave the sexuality of characters open or unresolved and thus allow for "a much greater range of identification and desire" for readers (Penley 1992, 488). Although I see boy-love manga narratives as containing radical queer potential, I do not want to universalize them or suggest that they are queerly or otherwise utopian and free of problems in their articulations of same-sex desire. Most stories contain moments in which lead characters express fears or concerns about revealing their relationships, and being labeled as gay and thus socially perceived as feminine in negative ways. What I do want to emphasize here is that characters generally overcome these fears and embrace their love for one another despite what society may think of them, which in my mind is a significant fantasy of resistance.

Unlike slash fiction, a great deal of boy-love manga is commercially published.<sup>11</sup> Many prominent *yaoi mangaka* (professional manga artists) began their careers as amateur doujinshi artists who gained enough popularity to begin producing and commercially distributing their own original manga.<sup>12</sup> It is also worth noting here that independently produced doujinshi is frequently sold noncommercially at fan conventions in Japan such as the annual Comiket, and that the Internet has provided a space for amateur artists in Japan and other countries to share their work with other fans often free of charge. Similarly, "the activity/productivity of *dōjinshi* groups occurs *outside* the mainstream of Japanese society and economy, rendering it invisible to those studying more conventional forms of production" (Orbaugh 2003, 112). Therefore, although the publishing industry for boy-love manga flourishes in Japan and is growing in the United States, noncommercial production and circulation of texts still plays a predominant role in the development of this counterpublic discourse. The Internet has become an incredibly valuable tool for sharing, sometimes illegally, scanlations and images from both published and fan-produced manga. This then allows for a greater concatenation of texts across cultural boundaries so that, for instance, Western fans are now producing their own *doujinshi* narratives in English, some of which are being published by the very newly established Yaoi Press.<sup>13</sup> Similarly,



Japanese *doujinshi* artists are creating boy-love manga for popular English texts such as those of the Harry Potter franchise, demonstrating the artistic and textual appropriations and fusions occurring cross culturally among fans. These connections also reinforce the crucial importance of technology in broadening the network of fans and their discourse.

Without a doubt, publishers are already aware of this fact. For instance, Tokyopop makes many of its publication decisions based on the desires of the English-speaking fan community. They conduct online surveys regularly on their Web site to allow fans to vote for and offer suggestions for titles they want published.<sup>14</sup> This requires that fans already be aware of titles currently circulating in Japan, but not yet translated and commercially sold in North America—something they can usually best achieve via Internet communication and file sharing. In fact, there are numerous Web sites in which fans offer up amateur translations, and even scanlations, of texts not yet available in English. Outside the World Wide Web, fans may also participate in various anime and manga conventions, many of which are now organizing special sessions and panels on boy-love themes as the popularity of these texts increases. And even more particularly, there is now an established Yaoi-Con devoted exclusively to *yaoi* and *shonen-ai* anime and manga that takes place each year in San Francisco.<sup>15</sup> This convention also works to foster international relations between fans by welcoming attendees from all over the world and by inviting a different boy-love manga artist as their special guest each year.

At present, many of the bigger U.S. publishers such as Tokyopop have been aggressively marketing all their manga, *shonen-ai* titles included, at major bookstores, including Barnes and Noble, Borders, and Waldenbooks, bringing these comics out of the realm of the Internet underground and into the mainstream.<sup>16</sup> Even the more sexually explicit *yaoi* titles are becoming more widely published and readily available in mainstream bookstores. Central Park Media has launched its very own *yaoi* publishing line of manga for those eighteen and over called Be Beautiful Manga.<sup>17</sup> Other publishers, among them Digital Manga, Kitty Media, Viz, and Dark Horse, are quickly leaping on the bandwagon as they become more attuned to the demand among readers.<sup>18</sup> U.S. consumers are evidently buying these texts and in a quantity sufficient to propel other publishers into the foray of boy-love manga at an increasingly rapid rate.<sup>19</sup>

Tokyopop claims that their overall manga readership is about 60 percent female and, as in Japan, this percentage for their *shonen-ai* readership is presumably higher given that they are being marketed primarily toward teenage girls (Reid 2003, par. 7).<sup>20</sup> However, in the United States, strong efforts have been made to restrict teenagers from being able to purchase the more explicit *yaoi* texts.<sup>21</sup> Publishers have not only been shrink-wrapping these graphic novels, but also putting clear warnings on the covers that indicate they are "for adults only" and adding disclaimers emphasizing that none of the characters depicted are under the age of eighteen. This is particularly interesting because many characters, in keeping with the androgynous aesthetic of boy-love manga, often appear to be rather young, rendering the distinction between adolescent and adult murky at best save for the reassurance of the publisher's note. As numerous English-language fan-based *yaoi* Web sites and conventions attest, teens are still a large part of this market although they often have to employ covert means of getting copies of more racy texts. As a result, many of them are downloading free boy-love manga scanlations from the Internet. The fact that young girls as well as women are reading boy-love manga challenges Western efforts to maintain a rigid distinction between adult and child sexuality, the latter of which is often denied or strictly policed in order to protect a mythologized ideal of erotic innocence (Kincaid 1998). In contrast, I find it somewhat ironic that teenage girls in Japan can readily buy *yaoi* manga without the same kind of social constraint. Indeed, "Japanese society has not traditionally made as severe a distinction between adult and child sexuality as has the west [*sic*]" (McLelland 2000a, 284).

Precisely because the targeted readership for these comics, especially *shonen-ai* titles, consists largely of girls who are at a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood, they powerfully showcase certain cultural anxieties about sexual control surrounding bodies, and specifically female ones, that do not satisfactorily fit into the child or adult category. Indeed, the counterpublic itself queers such understandings, troubling the lines between adolescent and adult in much the same way that it complicates gender and sexual identity among readers and characters in the texts themselves. This in itself is what is presumably so worrying to those who want to enforce these distinctions in order to restrict access to erotic media. As Gayle Rubin (1992) has argued, "rather than recognizing the sexuality of the young and attempting to provide for it in a caring and

responsible manner, our [American] culture denies and punishes erotic interest and activity by anyone under the local age of consent . . . [minors] are forbidden to see books, movies, or television in which sexuality is 'too' graphically portrayed" (20). In light of such attitudes, technology can become a gateway for shared communication between teens who are part of the boy-love manga counterpublic, while at the same time serving as a restrictive barrier to their parents and other adults, who are often unfamiliar with such methods of textual circulation and networking and who seemingly remain largely unaware of the phenomenon itself. The Internet not only provides the means for teens to access such erotic media but also offers them the opportunity to create their own erotic fan fiction and art and distribute them to others. It also allows them the freedom of anonymity and the potential to construct or present an online identity resistant to social constraints surrounding age, gender, race, class, and sexuality. It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that important shifts in how these readers conceptualize and fantasize about love and sex can be observed through their participation in Internet communication, discourse, and textual circulation that mark them as part of a global counterpublic.

While U.S. media has begun to take more notice of the popularity of manga among children and teenagers, those texts that belong to the boy-love genre have largely remained below the radar of the more conservative mainstream as yet. Women's investment in boy-love manga, both here and in other countries, already suggests certain dissatisfactions with the fantasies offered by mainstream media and traditional heteronormative romance. Instead, these comics and the circulation of fan discourse surrounding them seem to project a more promising queer vision of love and desire. For as Judith Butler makes clear in *Undoing Gender*, "in the same way that queer theory opposes those who would regulate identities or establish epistemological claims of priority for those who make claims to certain kinds of identities, it seeks not only to expand the community base of antihomophobic activism, but, rather, to insist that sexuality is not easily summarized or unified through categorization" (2004, 7). I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this essay that the cross-cultural and global intersections of the boy-love manga counterpublic make it problematic to theorize about the popularity of these texts by segregating communities of readers along cultural lines. When this occurs, we run the risk of falling into troubling universalizations of

those communities of readers that not only ignore their differences within those cultural contexts, but also attempt to explain their individual desires and fantasies in totalizing ways. Examining this phenomenon at the level of counterpublic discourse can offer us new perspective into how boy-love manga has become a compelling site for transnational readership and communication in a growing network of intimate and diverse strangers. It is my contention that the global nature of this counterpublic in fact facilitates subversive queer identifications and desires by generating productive tensions between heterogeneous and incoherent transcultural contexts and the intimate fantasies and engagements of readers that are never fully explicit, accessible, or quantifiable.

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#### NOTES

1. Manga are also being published widely in Western Europe, but for the sake of scope I am confining my discussion to North America only.

2. One of the difficulties with terminology lies in the fact that these words are constantly changing signification in Japan, and new terms are rapidly being coined to replace old ones. In point of fact, the term *shonen-ai* has apparently become obsolete in Japan, while *yaoi* has been replaced by *Boys' Love*, also referred to as *BL*. Internet fan communities appear to be more up-to-date on these changes than the academic print world, and Aestheticism.com provides one of the more detailed breakdowns of terms at <http://www.aestheticism.com>. For the purposes of this essay, I will refer to the texts currently published by Tokyopop and their competitors as *shonen-ai*, in line with their own advertisement of them as such, and retain *yaoi* as a contrasting term for more sexually explicit manga that such presses as CPM, Digital Manga, and Kitty Media are all using. This is partly necessary as well because of the time gap in publication of titles in English-speaking countries versus those in Japan, as ours are generally several years behind. Various English spellings of the term *shonen-ai* exist, but I have chosen to use the version employed by Tokyopop.

3. Although I would note here that Joshua Mostow (2003) suggests that male sexual behavior in earlier periods of Japanese history and artistic production cannot be properly contained within the binary of heterosexual and homosexual, and that we "need studies that look critically at the whole range of sexual activity and desire" (70) in previous time periods.

4. There is a corresponding genre of girl-love manga in Japan that is often

referred to as *shojo-ai* or, for more sexually explicit texts, *yuri*. However, the genre is much smaller and has fewer publications in Japan. Interest in these texts is growing though and in the United States AniLesboCon (ALC) Publishing is currently releasing some *yuri* anthologies with manga from Japanese artists as well as other Western amateur manga artists.

5. While some sexual power play occurs in certain boy-love manga, it is generally playful, and erotic encounters between the main characters are still overwhelmingly marked by tenderness and a mutuality that emphasize the equal importance of both characters' sexual and emotional needs. However, I must note here that there is a subgenre of BDSM *yaoi* for women in Japan (BDSM is a common abbreviation used to refer to anything dealing with bondage, domination, submission, sadism, and/or masochism). CPM recently brought out the first *yaoi* manga containing BDSM tendencies in North America when it released Ayano Yamane's *Finder Series 1: Target in the Finder* in September 2005.

6. The first volume in this series was very recently released by Be Beautiful, in September 2005.

7. McLelland has noted that there are already numerous *yaoi* Web sites "in Chinese, Portuguese, French, Italian, and Spanish, although they are vastly outnumbered by those in English" (2000a, 283). This is one compelling example of the increasing transnational popularity of these comics.

8. As Janice Radway notes in her revised introduction to *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*: "Even the most progressive of recent romance continues to bind female desire to a heterosexuality constructed as the only natural sexual alliance, and thus continues to prescribe patriarchal marriage as the ultimate route to the realization of a mature female subjectivity" (16).

9. Slash fiction is a form of fan fiction writing that originated in the 1970s among female *Star Trek* fans who began writing homoerotic love stories about Kirk and Spock. The term *slash* itself was coined in relation to the tendency to refer to pairings between male characters with a stroke or slash, as in, for example, *Kirk/Spock* or *K/S*.

10. *Scanlation* refers to the fan-based practice of translating manga texts into another language (in this case English) and scanning them online with the translations inserted into the necessary frames and dialogue bubbles of the comic.

11. As explained in "Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking" (1998): "Slash stories circulate within the private realm of fandom, are published in zines, distributed through the mails, through e-mail, or passed hand to hand among enthusiasts. The noncommercial nature of slash publishing is necessitated by the fact that these stories make unauthorized use of media characters" (10).

12. There are many examples of this, but one of the more popular figures is Ayano Yamane, whose work is currently under license to CPM for U.S. publication.

13. For more information, visit their Web site at <http://www.yaoipress.com>

14. Other publishers are following Tokyopop's lead, and most of their Web sites now have surveys and forms for visitors to fill out that usually ask about what titles they would like to see in future.

15. Yaoi-Con is a fan-based convention centered on *yaoi* and *shonen-ai* themed anime and manga. It was founded in 2001 and occurs annually in San Francisco. Attendees come from all over the world to participate in this weekend long event. There are many activities for fans to participate in such as: games, video screenings, discussion panels, amateur karaoke, costume competitions, and shopping in the dealer's room. However, due to legal restrictions in the state of California that do not allow minors entrance where adult materials are being sold, only those eighteen and older can attend. The fan organizers of Yaoi-Con keep everyone updated on future conventions and archive information and pictures from previous years at <http://www.yaoicon.com>

16. It is significant to note that thus far, the *shonen-ai* titles have not been separated from other titles, but rather integrated with them. Bookstores are organizing all manga titles together alphabetically in their graphic novels sections.

17. Be Beautiful's main advertising tagline is "Romantic graphic novels by women . . . for women." Information about this line is available at their Web site: <http://www.bebeautifulmanga.com>

18. At the time that this essay was being prepared for publication, several new companies, DramaQueen and Blu Manga, emerged online indicating that they are planning to release a slew of *yaoi* titles in late fall 2005.

19. According to a recent article in *Publishers Weekly*, boy-love manga titles are indeed selling well. The most recent volume in Viz's *shonen-ai* series, *Descendants of Darkness*, by Yoko Matsushita, sold ten thousand copies a few months after its publication. Digital Manga's *yaoi* graphic novel *Only the Ring Finger Knows* (2004), by Satoru Kannagi and Hotaru Odagiri, is now in its third printing and has sold more than twelve thousand copies. Other Digital Manga titles are also selling in the thousands, according to this report, and more titles are set to be released soon (Cha 2005).

20. It is important to note here that Tokyopop also publishes heterosexual manga. Therefore, the overall readership is somewhat more divided. As of yet, the company has not released any statistics specifically about their boy-love manga readership.

21. Not surprisingly, heterosexual romance novels are not policed in the same manner, even though they often contain explicit descriptions of sexual acts.

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