

Referencia bibliográfica:

Saito, K. (2011). Desire in Subtext: Gender, Fandom, and Women's Male-Male Homoerotic Parodies in Contemporary Japan. *Mechademia*, 6, 171–191. Disponible en <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/454422>

ISSN: -



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Mechademia, Volume 6, 2011, pp. 171-191 (Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press
DOI: [10.1353/mec.2011.0000](https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.2011.0000)



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KUMIKO SAITO



Desire in Subtext: Gender, Fandom, and Women's Male–Male Homoerotic Parodies in Contemporary Japan

Manga and anime fan cultures in postwar Japan have expanded rapidly in a manner similar to British and American science fiction fandoms that developed through conventions. From the 1970s to the present, the Comic Market (hereafter Comiket) has been a leading venue for manga and anime fan activities in Japan. Over the three days of the convention, more than thirty-seven thousand groups participate, and their *dōjinshi* (self-published fan fiction) and character goods generate ¥10 billion in sales.¹ Contrary to the common stereotype of anime/manga cult fans—the so-called otaku—who are males in their twenties and thirties, more than 70 percent of the participants in this fan fiction market are reported to be women in their twenties and thirties.² *Dōjinshi* have created a locus where female fans vigorously explore identities and desires that are usually not expressed openly in public. The overwhelming majority of women's fan fiction consists of stories that adapt characters from official media to portray male–male homosexual romance and/or erotica. This particular trend of fan fiction writing is known as *slash* in English-speaking countries, and as *yaoi* (also transcribed as *801*) or *BL* (boys' love) in Japan. Women's exploration of male homoerotic subtexts in mass media makes fan fiction a rich and vital vehicle for reframing female fans' gendered identities and sexual desires.

The prominence of this fan fiction genre by women for women—in Japan and increasingly in global fan markets as well—poses several critical questions surrounding fan culture and gender. First, the male homosexual parody is an intriguing case that embodies the complex relationships fans have with the mainstream media. These *dōjinshi* represent the conflict between fans' love for and critique of the sources that are being parodied. I will analyze some BL parody manga based on the assumption that slash parody is one form of women's reaction to the male-centered mainstream media. Second, gender seems to impact fans' relationship to the mass media, thereby forming fundamental connections between being a woman and writing fan fiction. The gender distinctions in society seem to extend to values concerning media production and distribution, thereby questioning women's role in domestic consumption and reproduction. I will examine how male characters in fan fiction reflect gender norms for women in social contexts, especially ideas surrounding family and marriage.

Before any discussion, however, it seems necessary to explain the Japanese terms used to signify the genre. Whereas *slash* is often used as a convenient replacement, this English term blurs many of the fundamental conditions presumed in the common usage of Japanese genre names. Western scholars have defined *slash* as a “subset of fan-fiction which eroticises the homosexual bonds depicted between media heroes” and “a form of fan fiction (i.e. fiction written by and for fans on a not-for-profit basis) that centers around romantic and/or sexual encounters and relationships between same-sex characters drawn from the mass media.”³ The Japanese terminology for male homosexual fiction targeting female readers ranges from *shōnen'ai* (boys' love), *bishōnen* (beautiful boy), *tanbi* (aestheticism), and *bara* (rose) to *Juné* (the title of a magazine in this genre), *yaoi*, boys' love (*bōizu rabu*), and *fujoshi*.⁴ While slash and these Japanese terms may appear similar, three fundamental differences divide English and Japanese understandings of this genre. First, these Japanese terms do not reflect the West's standardized distinction between original fiction and secondary fiction (fan fiction, parody), although different terms carry different connotations. For example, the term *yaoi* (an abbreviation for “no climax, no ending, no meaning”), reflects tendencies common in *dōjinshi* such as incoherent plots and the absence of a climax or resolution, whereas the “boys' love” label originates from the publishing industry, which used it for commercial purposes. This parallels the historical shift in terminology from *yaoi*, a term associated with the rise of fan fiction in the mid-1980s, to “boys' love,” which stemmed from commercial investments starting in the 90s.⁵ The interchangeability of these words in

common use indicates that Japanese slash includes a wide range of fiction, from original texts by mainstream writers to parodies by cult fans, thereby lacking a clear distinction between primary and secondary writings, or commercial fiction and not-for-profit fan fiction. Second, whereas in the West “many science fiction and fantasy sources have proved popular with slash fiction writers,” including *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Japanese slash embraces a wide variety of genres from sports and school romance to samurai and robots.⁶ Slash in English may connote certain generic classifications, but the Japanese terms do not designate any particular genre of the parodied text. Third, the majority of Japanese slash parodies manga and anime, which usually results in manga narratives. This enables the writers and fans to explore graphic aspects of romance far more extensively than English slash, which is mostly written as prose fiction. These characteristics in Japanese slash generally point to the blurring of various boundaries assumed in English fan fiction, especially between original and parody, fantastic and realistic settings, or graphic and nongraphic texts. Due to this variety, Japanese fans have found it difficult to use a single term to refer to the entirety of the culture. For this essay, I will employ the abbreviation *BL* to signify Japanese male–male romance for women.

The genealogical background of BL is another factor essential for understanding the genre. The broad spectrum of BL fiction owes much to the prevalence of manga for female readers, especially girls’ romance manga (*shōjo manga*) in the early 1970s. The emergence of *shōnen’ai* is usually ascribed to two writers, Hagio Moto and Takemiya Keiko, whose incipient works in this genre are respectively *Tōma no shinzō* (1974, *The heart of Thomas*) and *Kaze to ki no uta* (1976–84, *The song of wind and trees*). This generic mutation of *shōjo manga* is considered a reaction to preceding trends in *shōjo manga* or, more precisely, a solution to the limits of the genre.⁷ In contrast to the 1960s *romakome*, light-hearted romantic comedies modeled after American TV dramas, the early ’70s mainstream *shōjo manga* were serious and melodramatic models of romance, heavily superimposed with the supposedly Western concept of love as tragic self-sacrifice and emotional expressivism.⁸ Sex, for the heroine, is often the ultimate form of self-sacrifice where she must prove the truthfulness of her love by “overcoming” the fear and pain associated with the act, rather than accepting or even enjoying it. The shift from *shōjo* romance to BL signals changes in the conceptualization of love, from the surrender of the female body for the sake of love to the mutual exploration of love, sexuality, and erotic desire between two protagonists. The late-’70s development of the fan fiction market further confirms the impact of this new

trend in shōjo manga. Aside from the fact that the emergence of BL coincides with the first phase of the fan fiction market, almost 90 percent of the attendees at the first Comiket in 1975 were reported to be female, and most of them were fans of Hagio and Takemiya.⁹ This organic connection between shōjo manga and BL fan fiction indicates the closeness of fan fiction culture and women's romance genres.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO STUDIES OF SLASH

Academic studies have assigned a relatively minor role to gender in exploring the nature of fan cultures. For example, gender may not predetermine fundamental differences in fan activities, as “the cult fan–text attachment is far from being gender-specific”; gender differences surface in the contents and the degree of fan activities but not in the forms of fan culture itself.¹⁰ For this reason, the question of how gender impacts the structure of fan culture is easily neglected, even though a number of studies reflect on gender differences in fans' reactions and tastes. A significant portion of scholarship on the subject stems from the field known as reception studies, in which gender differences in reader/viewer responses are analyzed. One of the most influential works is Henry Jenkins's comparison of female fans of *Star Trek* to male fans of *Twin Peaks*, which argues that men and women have different reading strategies.¹¹ Drawing upon David Bleich's reader response theory, Jenkins observes that female fans of *Star Trek* tend to be concerned with emotional realism and focus their interests on “the elaboration of paradigmatic relationships” and “character psychology,” whereas male fans of *Twin Peaks* tend to acknowledge the powerful presence of the author and focus on their “textual mastery” of narrative enigmas.¹² This gender division is further maintained in his study of *Star Trek* slash, a category of “the female fan culture”¹³ that treats psychological aspects of the relationship and sexual intimacy between Kirk and Spock.

Even though his examination of female fans employs a more sociological approach than Bleich's psycholinguistic determination of gender-specific reading practices, Jenkins's study sustains the idea that female viewers tend to be easily immersed in the emotional reality of characters, often ignoring the plausibility of settings or plots. He ascribes these gendered divisions to the viewers' socially differentiated backgrounds: women are forced to read male-centered texts and eventually learn to appropriate them into feminine paradigms of emotional realism. This standpoint provides an optimistically

monolithic model where female fans' reading practices naturally defy the male-centered ideologies inscribed in the original media. Recent studies, perhaps in reaction to Jenkins, typically question the view that women take the position of resistance or opposition to mainstream media. They present slash as a more complex process of discourse reception,¹⁴ or as an interpretive activity that partly reflects dominant ideologies in popular media, especially in parodied sources¹⁵ or mainstream heterosexual romances for women like *Harlequin*.¹⁶ Ien Ang's study of the soap opera *Dallas* also suggests that *Dallas* lovers are clearly aware of the "ideology of mass culture," i.e., the common idea that "mass culture is bad," yet show careful and complex negotiations with the mainstream ideologies expressed in *Dallas*, through irony and acceptance.¹⁷ It seems that fans' reactions are not based on meanings that can be clearly separated through established lenses of resistance to or compliance with the mass media: rather, fans' relationship to the media is often described as a series of careful negotiations among contesting opinions.

IT SEEMS THAT FANS' REACTIONS ARE NOT BASED ON MEANINGS THAT CAN BE CLEARLY SEPARATED THROUGH ESTABLISHED LENSES OF RESISTANCE TO OR COMPLIANCE WITH THE MASS MEDIA: RATHER, FANS' RELATIONSHIP TO THE MEDIA IS OFTEN DESCRIBED AS A SERIES OF CAREFUL NEGOTIATIONS AMONG CONTESTING OPINIONS.

Another strand of theories that address fans' contradictory reactions to mainstream media stems from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural economy and its application by John Fiske. Bourdieu's cultural economy model employs the metaphor of economy to examine culture, arguing that "cultural tastes can be mapped onto economic status within the social space."¹⁸ In this theory the top layer of society (the tasteful and rich, like doctors, lawyers, and so on) owns both cultural and economic capital, while the subordinate layer does not have either. Between these extremes exist those with more cultural than economic capital (for example, academics) and those with more economic than cultural capital (for example, business people). Fiske argues that, although fan culture centers on popular culture (low culture for the subordinates), fans' discourses and activities often employ the authoritarian discourses of the upper class and, more importantly, that fans collect commodities that supposedly possess high cultural capital but little economic value. Accordingly, fandom invests in popular culture in opposition to official culture, and simultaneously reworks values in it.¹⁹

The case of Japan poses several problems with Bourdieu's proposition. The myth that Japan is a homogeneous society without class difference may

affect the way Japanese fans perceive and express tastes for high or low culture. Furthermore, as Fiske himself admits, gender is not taken into account in Bourdieu's model, whereas Japan's fan fiction market largely depends on gender distinctions. In terms of cultural taste's adherence to class difference, Kenji Hashimoto argues that "the relationship between Japanese classes and culture" reveals "many of the characteristics that Bourdieu ascribes to 'cultural capital,'"²⁰ and it seems safe to apply the same model to contemporary Japan, although to a limited extent. A far more serious Japan–West discordance can be found, however, in women's intragenerational class mobility. Since women's employment opportunities are highly limited in Japan, more than 70 percent of Japanese women start their careers in the working class only to attain a dramatic income increase later, despite being unemployed (i.e. upon marriage).²¹ Hypothetically, women do not have a class location of their own, and therefore it is likely that class is an irrelevant factor for determining Japanese women's cultural activity. Although possibly mediated by their husbands' or fathers' class location, women's location in the class structure tends to be either highly fluid (if married) or consistently low (if single). Given that BL fandom is dominated by women in the age range that roughly corresponds to the average age of a woman's first marriage, it is possible that women's culture expresses the highly incoherent and mobile quality of their economic positions, due to marriage and childbearing.²² Thus what we should take into account in the study of women's fan fiction culture is their gender-specific socioeconomic experience rather than their vague class location.

BL AS A MARKET

Users on the 801 board of the vastly popular Internet forum 2channel say that only 10 percent of the BL fans they know "come out" in public.²³ While 2channel is in no way a reliable source of data, this common statement faithfully designates the way female fans regard BL as a "triple stigma": it is not simply pornographic and homosexual, but it also concerns women loving male–male homosexuality.²⁴ The BL market has thus grown in relatively hidden lines of commerce—in the *dōjinshi* market since the 1970s and in the Internet and cell phone networks from the 1990s to present. Due to the fans' deliberate secrecy, the market size is difficult to measure, yet researchers' recent attention to the cross-media industry surrounding anime, manga, games, and so on has succeeded in shedding some light on female consumers active in this genre. The BL market covers a rather diverse range of media formats and distribution

channels, including novels, manga, anime, PC/video games, *dōjinshi* (manga and novels), parody videos at video-sharing Web sites, voice-only drama CDs, blogs, and so on. Today, novels and manga in the genre can be easily obtained at most bookstores. The major manga magazines now exceed fifteen titles, including *Comic Juné*, *BOY'S Piasu*, *BOY's LOVE* (all published by Junet), *CIEL* (Kadokawa Publishing), *Magazine BExBOY* (Libre), *Hanaoto* (Hōbunsha), and *Drap* (Core Magazine). Many of the popular stories, short or serialized, are then reprinted in paperbacks (called *komikkusu*, or “comics”). About twenty publishers have BL brands in their paperback novel businesses, which results in thirty labels today, such as Kadokawa's Ruby paperbacks, Libre's b-Boy Novels, and Ōkura Shuppan's Aqua Novels. Aside from these commercial businesses, fans write and publish *dōjinshi*, which are sold at conventions and at some bookstores as thin booklets or anthologies. Research conducted in 2004 by the Nomura Research Institute (NRI) shows that women active in writing fan fiction constitute 12 percent of the entire “maniac consumer” population, which equates to approximately 200,000 people.²⁵ This survey may not include nonmaniac consumers who spend, say, “only” \$300 per year to read BL manga and novels and do not write fan fiction.

The financial scale of the market poses yet another challenge for both academic and business researchers. In the NRI research results cited above, the category of “women active in fan fiction writing” spends approximately ¥15 billion annually for manga, anime, and games alone, which equals an average of ¥75,000 per person (US\$680 2005 dollars). The TV documentary program *NONFIX* featured a special focus on *fujoshi*, which estimated the BL market size as approximately ¥12 billion.²⁶ Increws, a company that runs a search engine for cell phone manga in the BL genre, states that women in their twenties and thirties who read BL manga are leading the cell phone electronic text market.²⁷ It is clear that more companies are investing capital to promote economic growth in this genre, yet the BL market seems highly unpredictable. BiBLOS, one of the largest and oldest publishers in the BL genre (original publisher of the b-Boy brand magazines and paperbacks currently released by Libre), went bankrupt in 2006; and in 2007, a popular BL parody writer was prosecuted for evading taxes on her ¥200 million income generated from three years of writing fan fiction.²⁸

Despite market volatility, the *dōjinshi* culture in Japan embraces a surprisingly wide variety of parodied sources, unlike English-language slash, which tends to focus on a relatively small number of mainstream texts. Figures 1 and 2 list the most popular titles parodied in BL fan fiction. Figure 1 shows when these titles were popular enough to exist as independent subgenres

GENRE NAMES AT COMIKET (magazine title and period in which the original was serialized, and period of TV broadcast)	CATEGORICAL SECTION GIVEN AT COMIKET	PERIOD WHEN THE GENRE CODE EXISTED IN COMIKET
Captain Tsubasa (Kyaputen Tsubasa) (<i>Shonen Jump</i> 1981–88; TV anime 1983–86)	anime	1987–1999
Saint Seiya (Seinto Seiya) (<i>Shonen Jump</i> 1985–1990; TV anime 1986–89)	anime	1987–1995
Samurai Trooper (Yoroiden samurai torūpā) (TV anime 1988–89)	anime	1989–1999
Takahashi Rumiko	for men	1987–1994
Tanaka Yoshiki, Kikuchi Hideyuki	novel	1988–1997
Yu Yu Hakusho and other Togashi Yoshihiro manga (Yu Yu Hakusho, <i>Shonen Jump</i> 1990–94; TV anime 1992–95)	manga	1993–2002
Slam Dunk (Suramu danku) (<i>Shonen Jump</i> 1990–96; TV anime 1993–96)	manga	1994–2002
Sailor Moon (Bishōjo senshi Sērāmūn) (<i>Nakayoshi</i> 1991–96; TV anime 1992–97)	for men	1995–1998
Gundam Series (<i>Gundam Wing</i> , 1995; <i>Gundam Seed</i> , 2002–3; <i>Gundam Seed Destiny</i> , 2004–5, <i>Gundam 00</i> , 2007–9)	anime	1995–
One Piece (<i>Shonen Jump</i> 1997–present; TV anime 1999–present)	manga	2000–
Naruto (<i>Shonen Jump</i> 1999–present; TV anime 2002–present)	manga	2001–
Prince of Tennis (Tenu no ōjisama) (<i>Shonen Jump</i> 1999–2008; TV anime 2001–05)	manga	2002–
Full Metal Alchemist (Hagane no renkinjutsushi) (<i>Shonen Gangan</i> 2001–present; TV anime 2003–04)	manga	2004–

FIGURE 1. Some of the media texts that gained their own genre names at Comiket due to their popularity in the *dōjinshi* market.

GENRE = TITLE OF THE ORIGINAL MEDIA PARODIED IN DŌJINSHI (Source and period of the original's serialization)	# OF TITLES
Reborn! (<i>Shonen Jump</i> 2004–present; TV anime 2006–present)	493
Gundam 00 (TV anime 2007–8, 08–09)	358
Big Windup! (<i>Afternoon</i> 2003–present; TV anime 2007)	129
Gin Tama (<i>Shonen Jump</i> 2003–present; TV anime 2006–present)	125
Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya (Suzumiya Haruhi no yūtsu) and its sequels (novels 2003–present; TV anime 2006)	106
Code Geass (TV anime 2006–7, 2008)	89

FIGURE 2. The popular *dōjinshi* genres in the “for women” category at Toranoana, a major *dōjinshi* store chain (online listing as of November 2008).

at Comiket. At Comiket, *dōjinshi* are divided into several generic sections, which are original fiction, manga parody, anime parody, game parody, novel parody, *dansei muke* (for men), music/variety (real people), and others. This classification presupposes that almost all *dōjinshi* outside the “for men” category are for women and general readers. Figure 2 shows some of the popular BL parody *dōjinshi* at a bookstore. These tables prove that the works most frequently parodied in BL *dōjinshi* predominantly come from boys’ media, especially manga serialized in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* (*Shūkan shōnen janpu*) and their adaptations into TV animation series. The contents of *dōjinshi* range from comedies punctuated with erotic jokes to short nonerotic anecdotes that could be inserted in the original. Overall, as the term *yaoi* (“no climax, no ending, no meaning”) implies, the plot elements are weak and dependent on the originals, although the semantic depth of images and fragmented episodes can create lasting impressions.

In the following section I will examine the conventions in boys’ fiction that are frequently applied and transformed in BL parody. By applying the theoretical model of fans’ relationship to official media discussed earlier, I intend to explore the interface between what female fans seek and what

mainstream discourses in boys' popular media provide, especially around the issue of family and social bonding. What is called the "official media" here is thus mostly shōnen manga and anime, especially popular series from *Shōnen Jump* that feature physical/psychic battles and sports. Whereas many titles with BL tendencies and some anthologies of BL parodies are also official publications and TV productions, I will follow this narrow definition of the official media to mean the original sources parodied in fan fiction.

BL PARODIES AND SHŌNEN MANGA

The fundamentals of Japanese boys' comics, known as *shōnen manga*, are largely represented by the best-selling manga magazine *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, which publishes more than two million copies every week. Its readership consists of 90 percent male readers and 80 percent teenagers, with the greatest percentage around age fourteen.²⁹ Manga texts in this magazine vary, but the values most appealing to female fans include the main characters' willingness to work hard and overcome obstacles, and an equal relationship between the hero and his opponent, which develops into a mutual sympathy as each tries to achieve the same goal by different means.³⁰ This last theme is clearly attractive to female fans, judging from *Shōnen Jump* manga as well as other popular non-*Jump* texts such as Studio Sunrise's Gundam anime series.³¹ This phenomenon in Japan seems to share much in common with the popular pairing of Harry and his "perpetual foil" Draco in *Harry Potter* slash.³² What composes the central theme in many BL parodies is the bond between two (or more) male characters primarily built on their equal relationship; here "equal" is measured in battles and competitions based on matchable natures and degrees of ability. The often action-centered depiction of the original relationship transforms into parodies that emphasize interactive psychological tactics to overcome and surpass each other, which further matures into mutual affinity as equal partners. In a scene from a BL parody of the popular manga *Reborn!* two characters fight each other to prove their dominance and battle technique, a direct continuation from the original.³³ The monologue, however, compares the rival with a puppy who is afraid to be cared for and touched, which then suggests this character's subconscious need to be embraced and the other's desire to embrace (Figure 3).

The general emphasis on equal relationships and gender ambiguities is something BL parodies share with English slash, which Western scholars have described as including "androgynous qualities of each [character]," a



FIGURE 3. A scene from slash fiction of *Reborn!* by Aoi Rebin, entitled *Aoi Rebin—Ban'yu* (Tokyo: Pict Press, 2008).

IT SEEMS MOST APPROPRIATE TO HYPOTHEZIZE THAT BL CHARACTERS ARE SELF-PROJECTIONS OF FEMALE WRITERS/ READERS LIVING IN THE HETERONORMATIVE WORLD AND THEREFORE THAT HOMOPHOBIA AND MISOGYNY ARE ALMOST ESSENTIAL NARRATIVE DEVICES FOR CONSTRUCTING IDEAL ROMANCES AS ENVISIONED BY WOMEN.

“diversity of identifications and object relations,” and “the political implications of textual poaching.”³⁴ While these mark some of the most significant aspects of slash, BL parodies—and fan responses in a wider context—present a more complicated mix of conflicting ideas that simultaneously oppose and sustain the values expressed in the official media. Drawing on Ien Ang’s theory discussed above, fans who are critical of the narrative conventions of slash do not necessarily intend to attack or extinguish them. Fans may be fully aware of its “bad taste,” as exemplified by the pejorative terms like “rotten girls” (*fujoshi*) that they voluntarily apply to themselves. It seems that fans are actively reworking the contradictory values at the intersection of different social discourses and that they still continue to love this “bad practice”

because—to quote the title of a popular BL cross-media product—“I can’t help it because I like what I like.”³⁵ In order to clarify the contradictory relationship of fan fiction to the original media, I will discuss two paradoxes particularly prominent in BL parodies: homophobia and misogyny in male-male homosexual pairing, and an equal relationship based on conservative gender roles. Instead of stating that these “negative” traits are shortcomings to be improved upon by future fans, I consider contradictions as necessary components of BL.

A certain degree of homophobia has been identified in English slash, which scholars address as a defect that both fans and scholars hope to improve.³⁶ Many BL texts, parody or original, similarly make male characters express homophobia.³⁷ It is not uncommon in BL that a character confesses his love with the cliché “I’m not gay; I just love [fill in the blank].”³⁸ If characters do not make this statement, they live as if women were either extinct or entirely excluded from society. This general tendency of disparaging gay men and women in BL explicitly mirrors wider social stereotypes, especially those concerning gay men’s promiscuity and perversion and women’s impurity.³⁹ The difficulty of understanding the homophobic tendency in BL equally signifies the difficulty of judging the gender of these male characters—why do gay characters, created by women, hate or exclude gay men and women, and should they be even considered gay? Japanese critics and fans alike have widely acknowledged that these characters are not really gay men, or even

men: they are just agencies for ideal romance in some imaginary communal space.⁴⁰ This viewpoint resembles Joanna Russ's early account of *Star Trek* Kirk/Spock slash, in which she argues that Spock is a kind of "code" for the love and sex women want, and thus his sexuality is "only nominally male."⁴¹ Russ's argument has not been actively supported by scholars, perhaps because it is inconsistent with current queer scholarship. However, it seems most appropriate to hypothesize that BL characters are self-projections of female writers/readers living in the heteronormative world and therefore that homophobia and misogyny are almost essential narrative devices for constructing ideal romances as envisioned by women.

Several important narrative functions of BL are contingent on homophobic and/or misogynist settings. In the universe of ideal romance, characters overcome the taboo of homosexuality, thereby proving that their love is truer and purer than that of heterosexual couples and "real" gay men.⁴² This superior love is also endorsed by the sexual continence of the original fictional characters, who work hard but show no or little interest in romance. Shōnen manga characters tend to have strong passion for martial art battles or sports, the mastery of which is measured not by technique but by teamwork and by how they save their *nakama* or members of their virtual family. Extrapolating from this concept of male friendship, the ideal romantic love in BL is a clean and honest relationship of mutual caring, in contrast to the "corrupt" relationship that starts from romantic or erotic motivations, commonly represented by "real" gay men and women. For example, Ozaki Minami's *Zetsuai 1989*, a direct spinoff of her own *Captain Tsubasa dōjinshi*, narrates the depth and seriousness of the love between the two male protagonists using the visual language of their artistry in playing soccer (Figure 4).⁴³ The illusion of an equal relationship in male–male romance necessitates the exclusion of the people whom public society considers to be morally degraded and inferior. In this milieu, female fans of male–male romance do not try to overturn the gender norms; they attempt to reconstruct respectable forms of love using existing materials from their heteronormative society. In other words, if the main characters were lesbians, the plot would constantly have to deal with their fight against social stigmas imposed on their female bodies *and* their sexual orientation, which (for these readers) could no longer be enjoyable as romance.⁴⁴

This argument leads to the next point, which is the equal relationship on the basis of conventional gender roles. Most BL parodies translate the relationship of two male characters, originally depicted in a rivalry or power battle, into a romantic relationship that is built solely on their abilities and



FIGURE 4. A scene from Ozaki Minami's *Zetsuai 1989*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2002).

honest competition, thereby creating the impression of equality and sympathy. But their sexual and domestic roles are often constructed as masculine and feminine, and these roles are usually irreversible within the same story world—although different writers may choose different pairings. BL parody *dōjinshi* denote their featured couples using “x,” as in “Ken x Koji” (a pairing of Ken and Kojirō from *Captain Tsubasa*): the former is *seme* (the aggressive, masculine role) and the latter *uke* (the passive, feminine role). This terminology apparently differs from gay slang terms for sexual roles, such as *tachi* (literally “to stand,” “erection”) and *neko* (literally “cat”), which in itself evinces BL fans’ distinction between BL gay men and actual gay men. Rapes are also popular plot devices to the degree that the *uke* is unaware of, or unprepared for, consenting to the sexual act. The power difference is explicitly depicted in manga’s graphic representation as well, often exemplified by the *uke*’s visible nipples and by his anus, which resembles a vagina.⁴⁵ Sex scenes in BL also rarely depict what would be considered by society deviant sexual acts and instead sustain the top/bottom power relation—the *seme* and the *uke* closely mirror publicly standardized gender roles. This fact contradicts the equal relationship implied in both the original and parody. Consider an

example taken from the sequel to the text discussed above, the BL parody of *Reborn!*⁴⁶ Whereas the characters' mutual caring and competitive attitudes continue, their roles are fixed to the masculine and the feminine in the sex scene (Figure 5). If BL pairings are based on the equal and reflexive qualities of the two characters, the clear passive/aggressive divide in their sexuality is paradoxical.

One answer to this “homosexual’s heterosexual” paradox is the identificatory positions held by the two characters; the clear role division formulates two different viewpoints of the subject and object of love. Unlike the male aggressive / female passive relationship typical in men’s heterosexual pornography, however, BL emphasizes the pleasure felt by both the *seme* and the *uke*, juxtaposing panels of each face in a shot–reverse shot style (Figure 5).⁴⁷ Men’s pornographic manga usually attempt to neutralize the male character’s facial traits or emphasize only his hands and penis so that pleasure is visually represented by the female body as an object, but BL invites the reader’s identification with both partners.⁴⁸ This resembles Constance Penley’s observation that slash “allows a much greater range of identification and desire for the women.”⁴⁹ This close-up, reverse-shot style in BL suggests that the relationship is not between the

subject and object of love, but the subject of love and the subject of being loved, each embodying a subject position for female readers. But while they may be only nominally male, the male representation of the characters further distances the female reader, which constitutes another layer between objects of love (male bodies) and the female viewer. The pleasure of viewing is almost purely scopophilic due to the gender gap between the characters in male form and the reader. The shifting perspective constitutes a “triangle structure of viewpoints” among the two male protagonists and the female reader, thereby enabling the reader to find pleasure in detecting agency in multiple positions that respectively fulfill different functions.⁵⁰ Nobi Nobita’s parody of *Yu Yu Hakusho*, for example, visualizes this structure by contrasting the two male protagonists with the female characters who become intimate



FIGURE 5. A scene from slash fiction of *Reborn!* by Aoi Rebin, entitled *Aoi Rebin—Ban'yu* (Tokyo: Pict Press, 2008).

with, but excluded from, the male homosexual couple.⁵¹ In one scene the two male characters exchange gazes with the monologue, “you are the essence of my forgotten past,” suggesting they are doubles (Figure 6). The female character supposedly standing next to one of the characters is not shown in this emotionally intense moment, but her absence provides a perspective for the woman who watches but is excluded from the relationship. In the BL triple-perspective model, what drives the reader’s pleasure is the fluid oscillation of viewpoint between multiple subject positions marked by the act of loving / being loved and the act of looking / being looked at, which requires self-conscious critical distance from each identity locus. This argument further questions the idea that female readers tend to be more emotional and easily immersed in character psychology. On the contrary, the focus on characters’ internal psyche may force female readers of BL to constantly alienate each perspectival point from the rest in order to facilitate the fluid slippage of subject position.



FIGURE 6. A scene from Enomoto Nariko's *Enomoto Nariko + Nobi Nobita* vol. 2 (Tokyo: Futabasha, 2002).

CONCLUSION

English slash and Japanese BL parody show a number of similarities as forms of fan fiction: women's reconfiguration of male relationships into a form of ideal love; the emphasis on equal relationships; the self-projection of female readers/writers onto male characters as a potential political commentary on patriarchal society or heterosexuality; and the reworking of gender attributes. My analysis of BL parodies has argued that these "positive" traits of slash that scholars appreciate are closely connected to their opposite characteristics, such as their homophobic and misogynic tendencies, their stereotypical power relationships, and their reappropriation of heterosexual roles. Even though slash cultures are increasingly diversifying and expanding, I suggest that scholars consider the dynamics of the conflicting meanings fans explore in response to the mass media, whether those meanings appear adverse or favorable in the context of existing theories of cultural studies.

In this study, gender proved to be a key component of fandom. Given the nature of women's fan fiction as a reaction to sociocultural norms, BL parodies are more likely to be the social minority's counternarrative to the mainstream. It is misleading, however, to assume that this counternarrative simply challenges official discourses. These characteristics are closely tied to narrative and graphical devices that simultaneously reaffirm the conservative gender system, which evinces fans' contradictory ways of appreciating and resisting the official media. Seen in light of Bourdieu's cultural economy model, female fans' active reorganization of cultural values in BL parodies suggests that opposite values increase through the process of fan activity: female fans seem to question and thereby challenge their positions of being socially and economically subordinate while sustaining, and further adapting to, existing gender discourses promoted in society. Because female fans embrace these contradictions in their cultural production, I consider fan fiction to be an important nexus between men's society and women's ideals, or between the actual female body strictly regulated in society and the virtual body of desire that takes the form of the male homosexual. This may explain hypothetically why the BL culture has expanded in Japan on a scale unseen in other countries. The process of assimilation to and divergence from the patriarchal standards envisioned in BL delineates the contours of a society where strict gender norms exist in actual life right alongside a well-developed education system that equips women with ideas of equal opportunities (that is, the pairing of capitalism x democracy). The affluence of women's image-consumption culture in Japan, from shōjo manga to cute character

merchandise, further helps to explain women's role as domestic consumers, even as they are systematically excluded from production and ownership of cultural/economic capital. Women's fan fiction seems to rest upon their frustrated realization of the paradox between patriarchy and equality.

While the present study relies almost solely on general genre conventions of BL, some emergent trends today clearly dispute the relationship observed between female parodies and male originals. Some mainstream entertainment media for boys, such as relatively high-budget anime by Sunrise Studio, use BL clichés to secure female fans' interest and promote secondary writing.⁵² BL fan activity is already seen as an essential condition for business promotion and financial success, which alters the relationship between fans and official media I have been discussing. Popular manga for adult women, on the other hand, are increasingly adapting what BL fans consider to be “yaoi-like relationships” in heterosexual romance, i.e., the potentially romantic friendship based on matching abilities and competition.⁵³ Some prime examples include Ninomiya Tomoko's *Nodame Cantabile* (2001–2010) and Umino Chika's *Honey and Clover* (2000–2006, *Hachimitsu to kurōbaa*), both of which proved enormously successful. Yet another innovative change is emerging from a few manga that portray male homosocial relationships so intricately that they seem no longer to need romantic or erotic secondary fiction beyond supplementary episodes provided by faithful fans. One example is *Big Windup!* (2003–present, *Ōkiku furikabutte*), which presents a symbiosis of boys' sports manga and “yaoi-like” relationships by illustrating psychological growth and communication among members of baseball teams. The elements of human relationships in BL are quickly translating into nonerotic, often nonhomosexual stories that are widely enjoyed by readers beyond female BL fans. All these contemporary shifts imply that fan fiction and official media are interactively corroding the border between women's fantasies and mainstream ideologies—which makes us wonder if BL will disappear when the two grow close enough.

Notes

1. As of 2005. Komiketto Junbikai, *Komikku maaketto 30's fairu: 1975–2005 komikku maaketto sanjū shūnen kinen shiryōshū taisei* (Comiket 30's file: Commemorative collection of documents for Comiket's thirtieth anniversary, 1975–2005) (Tokyo: Komiketto, 2005).

2. *Ibid.*, 290; Yonezawa Yoshihiro, “Dōjinshi & Komike: Hisutorii zadankai,” *Juné Chronicle*, ed. Sun-Magazine Mook, 524–29 (Tokyo: Magazine Magazine, 2001), 525. The gender ratio of attendees is estimated as 43 percent male, 57 percent female; general

impressions reported by the mass media and participants agree that half of attendees are women.

3. Elizabeth Woledge, "From Slash to the Mainstream: Female Writers and Gender Blending Men," *Extrapolation* 46, no. 1 (2005): 50–65 at 50; Daniel Allington, "'How Come Most People Don't See it?' Slashing *The Lord of the Rings*," *Social Semiotics* 17, no. 1 (2007): 43–62 at 43.

4. "Fujoshi," literally "rotten girls," generally signifies female fans of male–male romance. Like *bara*, which originated from *barazoku* (slang for gay men), the use of this term is diversifying, with emerging variations like *fu* as a prefix or *fumuke* (i.e., aimed at *fujoshi*) to mean the genre. *Fujoshi* is the first and only term so far that attempts to define the genre by defining the reader/viewer. This term reflects the idea that texts have nothing in common to form a genre, while readers allegedly share common fantasies.

5. Yonezawa, "Dōjinshi & Komike," 525.

6. Woledge, "From Slash to Mainstream," 50.

7. Fusami Ōgi, "Gender Insubordination in Japanese Comics (*Manga*) for Girls," in *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humor Magazines, and Picture Books*, ed. John A. Lent, 171–86 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 180; Miura Shion and Kaneda Junko, "'Seme x uke' no mekurumeku sekai: danseishintai no miryoku o motomete" (The dazzling world of *seme x uke*: Searching for the charm of boys' movements), *Eureka* 39, no. 7 (June 2007): 15.

8. The "mainstream" largely consisted of texts by two prolific auteurs, Satonaka Machiko and Ichijō Yukari. Futagami Hirokazu, *Shōjo manga no keifu* (Genealogy of shōjo manga) (Tokyo: Pengu Shobō, 2005), 99.

9. Yonezawa, "Dōjinshi & Komike," 524.

10. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 162.

11. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 112.

12. *Ibid.*, 109, 111.

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

14. Allington, "'How Come Most People Don't See it?'"

15. Woledge, "From Slash to the Mainstream."

16. Catherine Salmon and Don Symons, "Slash Fiction and Human Mating Psychology," *Journal of Sex Research* 41, no. 1 (2004): 94–100.

17. Ien Ang, *Watching "Dallas": Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985), 105–7.

18. John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa Lewis, 30–49 (London: Routledge, 1992), 31.

19. *Ibid.*, 34.

20. Kenji Hashimoto, *Class Structure in Contemporary Japan* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2005), 108.

21. *Ibid.*, 127.

22. The average age of women participants at Comiket is 28.3 (Komiketto Junbikai, *Komikku maaketto 30's fairu*, 290) and the average age for women's first marriage is 28.2 (Ministry of Welfare). Both figures come from 2005 surveys.

23. "801" forum, 2channel Web site, www.2ch.net (accessed November 15, 2008).

24. Sakakibara Shihomi, *Yaoi genron: Yaoi kara mieta mono* (An illusory theory of yaoi: What yaoi shows) (Tokyo: Natsume Shobō, 1998), 105.
25. Nomura Research Institute (NRI), "News Release," 2005, http://www.nri.co.jp/news/2005/051006_1.html (accessed 15 November 2008). In response to past research that failed to present meaningful data by classifying consumers based on their gender, age, income, etc., NRI presented a new survey model that divides fan consumers into five types based on six factors in the degrees of creative activity, collection, and community. The five types are (1) married men who hide their otaku taste and manage a limited monthly allowance to purchase fan-oriented merchandise: 25 percent; (2) single men in their twenties and thirties who love mecha and pop music idols: 23 percent; (3) light users of 2channel and other online community sites: 22 percent; (4) mostly men in their thirties and forties who have strong values influenced by 1970s and '80s anime: 18 percent; and (5) women in their twenties and thirties who have strong attachments to characters and are active in fan fiction writing communities: 12 percent. These categories are archetypes, so to speak, and each group includes a minority of the opposite gender.
26. NONFIX, Fuji TV, November 21, 2007.
27. IT Media News, "Bōizu rabu ni tokkashita 'Otome saachi' keitai denshi shoseki" ("Otome search" site for finding boys' love cell phone books), October 19, 2007, <http://www.itmedia.co.jp/news/articles/0710/19/news117.html> (accessed 15 November 2008).
28. Yomiuri Online, February 21, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/news/20070221i513.htm> (accessed 21 February 2007).
29. All data about *Weekly Shōnen Jump* are provided by JMPA (Japan Magazine Publishers Association), "JMPA magajin deeta" (JMPA magazine data) and "JMPA dokusha kōsei deeta" (JMPA readers' demographic data), 2008, http://www.j-magazine.or.jp/data_001/index.html (accessed November 15, 2008).
30. Watanabe Yumiko, "Seishōnen manga kara miru yaoi" (Looking at yaoi from the perspective of boys' and young men's manga), *Eureka* 39, no. 7 (June 2007): 69–76 at 73–74.
31. I.e. *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979–80, *Kidō senshi Gandamu*) and other anime series under the Gundam label. The titles most popular in BL are *Gundam Wing* (1995–96, *Shin kidō senki Gandamu wingu*), *Gundam Seed* (2002–3, *Kidō senshi Gandamu SEED*), its sequel *Gundam Seed Destiny* (2004–5, *Kidō senshi Gandamu SEED DESTINY*), and *Gundam 00* (2007–9, *Kidō senshi Gandamu 00*).
32. Marianne MacDonald, "Harry Potter and the Fan Fiction Phenom," *Gay & Lesbian Review* 13, no. 1 (2006): 28–30 at 29.
33. Amano Akira, *Katekyō hittoman REBORN!* Amano's manga has been serialized in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* since 2004 and was adapted into a TV anime (2006–2010). The fan fiction cited is the *dōjinshi* circle Ban'yū's *Aozora sankā* (Paean to the blue sky) (2006).
34. Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith, "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek Zines," in *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature*, ed. Donald Palumbo, 235–56 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 242; Constance Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Trechler, 479–500 (New York: Routledge, 1992), 488; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 221.
35. *Suki na mono wa suki dakara shōganai!!* abbreviated as *Sukisho*, the first commercial

pornographic BL computer game by SOFTPAL Inc. (2000), adapted into novels (2000–2005), a nonpornographic PlayStation game (2004) and a TV anime series (2005).

36. E.g. Penley, “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture,” 487; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 220.

37. Mizoguchi Akiko, “Homofobikku na homo, ai yue no reipu, soshite kuia na rezubian” (Homophobic men, love rape, and queer lesbians), *Queer Japan*, vol. 2, 193–211 (Tokyo: Keiso Shobō, 2000), 194–55.

38. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 220.

39. Mizoguchi, “Homofobikku na homo,” 196–97; Ueno Chizuko, *Hatsujō sōchi: Erosu no shinario* (The erotic apparatus) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1998), 134.

40. Nakajima Azusa, *Tanatosu no kodomotachi: Kajō hannō no seitaigaku* (Children of Thanatos: The ecology of hyperconformity) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1998), 30; Mizoguchi, “Homofobikku na homo,” 197.

41. Joanna Russ, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans, and Perverts: Feminist Essays* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1985), 83.

42. Nakajima, *Tanatosu no kodomotachi*, 51.

43. The manga *Zetsuai* was serialized until 1989 and followed by its sequel, *Bronze Zetsuai*, after 1989; the series remains unfinished. Takahashi Yōichi’s manga about young soccer players. *Captain Tsubasa* (1981–88) greatly contributed to the popularity of soccer in Japan. Its sequels include stories about Tsubasa in the World Youth League (1994–97) and in the Spanish League (2001–4).

44. Fujimoto Yukari, *Watashi no ibasho wa doko ni aru no? Shōjo manga ga utsusu kokoro no katachi* (Where do I belong? The shape of the heart reflected in shōjo manga) (Tokyo: Gakuyō Shobō, 1998), 189.

45. Miura and Kaneda, “Seme x uke,” 8–29, 18; Mizoguchi, “Homofobikku na homo,” 200.

46. The example is taken from Ban’yū, *Saa koi o shiyōka* (Now then, shall we love?) (2007).

47. Mori Naoko, “Haado na BL: Sono kanōsei” (The possibilities of hard BL), *Eureka* 39, no. 7 (June 2007): 77–83 at 78.

48. *Ibid.*, 79–80.

49. Penley, “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture,” 488.

50. Mizoguchi, “Homofobikku na homo,” 203–4.

51. *Yu Yu Hakusho* (*Yū yū hakusho*) is a manga by Togashi Yoshihiro serialized in *Shōnen Jump* (1990–94) and adapted into a TV anime series (1992–95). Nobi Nobita is a penname Enomoto uses for *dōjinshi*.

52. Prime examples include the Gundam series and *Fullmetal Alchemist*.

53. Watanabe, “Seishōnen manga,” 72.