Why Here? Why Now? Why JAMS?

Billy Tringali

The goal of the *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies* is to provide a space for academics, students, and independent researchers examining the field of anime, manga, cosplay, and fandom studies to access high-quality research about these topics and share their research with others. But how did this journal come to be? Why make this journal open-access?

As this is the first volume and the first issue of the *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies*, I feel that answering these questions will make for a perfect introduction to this journal.

What sparked JAMS?

In April of 2017, I was fortunate enough to visit the Kyoto International Manga Museum. I had been a fan of anime since I was a child and had built some of the most wonderful friendships of my life through cosplay and conventions in the New England area.

Wandering the museum, surrounded by shelves upon shelves of manga, I came across a message from the museum's Executive Director, Aramata Hiroshi. In concluding his message, Aramata noted "It is our ultimate goal to be a place that protects the neglected, vanishing manga, and revives them as cultural properties. I too am also imbued with this sense of 'burning' and will endeavor to do all I can."[i] Perhaps it is dramatic to say, but reading this quote, surrounded on all sides by manga, I too wanted to do all I could for anime and manga as an art form.

I wasn't an artist, and I didn't know what I could do to support this art form in that moment, but a 'burning' was imbued in me that day, a burning I carried with me into my graduate program.

Why is JAMS open-access?

In August of 2017, I started a Master's of Science in Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The UIUC library is one of the largest in the United States, so I had millions of resources at my fingertips; that turned out to be a very fortunate thing. Anime and manga studies is a rich, interdisciplinary subject, meaning papers that analyze anime and manga are published across a variety of subjects, and in a variety of monographs and journals. In the midst of taking courses on open-access and academic librarianship, it dawned on me that researchers outside of higher education or at smaller universities may not have access to the incredible scholarship so many anime and manga studies' researchers are creating.

I felt that 'burning' in me rise in a way I knew I could act on.

I want scholarship about anime and manga to be accessible to everyone, regardless of university affiliation. JAMS is the action taken to help achieve this goal.

How did JAMS come to be published through the Illinois Open Publishing Network?

The Illinois Open Publishing Network (IOPN) is "a set of digital publishing initiatives that are hosted and coordinated at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library."[ii] After learning that IOPN was accepting proposals for projects, I approached Dr. Maria Bonn at the University of Illinois' iSchool.

"I'd like to start an open-access journal focused on anime and manga."

Maria was silent for a moment, then reached into her purse. Taking out a Studio Ghibli-themed wallet, she said, "This project is important and worthwhile." Since these starting words, Maria has continued to be an invaluable resource to the journal as a member of the Editorial Board. This conversation launched a year-long notes process, during which time I collaborated with and owe thanks to Maria Bonn, Harriet Green, Merinda Hensley, and Janet Swatscheno for their feedback and guidance. Guidelines for the journal were written, edited, and finalized over the course of this year, all based on suggestions from the Committee on Publication Ethics.[iii] These guidelines can be read in [JAMS "About the Journal" page](). I also presented at two, national conferences with the hope of sparking interest in this project, building an Editorial Board, and receiving feedback from popular culture scholars about the need for this type of journal. The proposal for JAMS to be published through IOPN was approved in the summer of 2019.

Getting JAMS published through IOPN was an amazing accomplishment, and the University of Illinois' Library's Scholarly Communication & Publishing Unit has my endless thanks for their consistent help in getting this first issue of JAMS published.

Who else needs to be thanked?

My extreme gratitude must again be given to the entirety of the University of Illinois' Library's Scholarly Communication & Publishing Unit, with specific thanks to Dan Tracy and Sara Benson.

I must also thank the incredible members of JAMS' Editorial Board, whose guidance has been essential in planning out this first issue. Thank you to Brent Allison,

Maria Bonn, Kay K. Clopton, Mark Gellis, Andrea Horbinski, Frenchy Lunning, and Elizabeth Wickes. Special thanks must also be extended to JAMS' Copy Editor, Jessica Parent, whose time and effort during the publication process is so very appreciated.

Thank you to all the authors who submitted to JAMS, and all that are considering submission to this journal. Thanks must also be extended to the amazing peer reviewers who volunteered their time for JAMS. Without all their help, this journal never would have come together.

Finally, I must thank Leora Lev, the professor that first sparked my passion for popular culture scholarship.

I hope the *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies* can exist as a space that publishes high-quality scholarship about anime, manga, cosplay, and their fandoms. I hope that JAMS can bring visibility to the deeper meanings, understandings, and cultural significance of anime, manga, cosplay, and their fandoms. I hope that, in making JAMS open-access scholarship about anime and manga can be accessible to everyone, regardless of university affiliation. As Aramata Hiroshi and the Kyoto International Museum of Manga imbued a burning desire in me, I hope that the papers you will read in this journal imbue the same sense in you to do all you can for this fantastic art form.

Thank you for reading the first issue of the *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies*.

With warmth,
Billy Tringali
Editor-In-Chief

[i] Hiroshi Aramata, "Message from the Executive Director," Kyoto Internationa Manga Museum, Accessed September 5, 2020, https://www.kyotomm.jp/en/about/greeting/
[ii] Illinois Open Publishing Network, "About IOPN,"IOPN, Accessed September 5, 2020, https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/iopn-mission/
[iii] COPE Council, OASPA, DOAJ, and WAME, Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing. Version 3 January 2018, https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.1.12

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Dedication

Billy Tringali

I would like to dedicate this first issue of JAMS is dedicated to the three women, without whom, JAMS would not exist.

Dr. Leora Lev. As the professor who first sparked my interest in popular culture studies, I owe you so much. Without your guidance through all my research projects at Bridgewater State University, I never would have considered a career in higher education. Your encouragement and friendship mean the world to me.

Dr. Maria Bonn. The moment in which you took out your Studio Ghibli wallet and told me JAMs was an important and worthwhile endeavor will forever live in my memory. Thank you for your countless hours of work in helping bring JAMS into existence and making me a better scholar and librarian.

Dr. Frenchy Lunning. Your endless support of JAMS from the moment we first spoke at PCA National has been a boon and a source of endless inspiration to keep this project moving forward. I cannot thank you enough for paving the way for this type of journal with *Mechademia* and having your enthusiastic support for me and this project has been invaluable.

'Wolves or People?': Lupine Loss and the Liquidation of the Nuclear Family in Mamoru Hosoda's *Wolf Children* (2012)

Dr. David John Boyd

Abstract: This essay examines an alternative eco-familial reading of Mamoru Hosoda's manga film, *Wolf Children* (2012) through an analysis of Japanese extinction anxieties further exacerbated by 3/11. By reading the film through a minor history of the extinction of the Honshu wolf as a metaphor for 3/11, I argue that an examination of the degradation of Japanese preindustrial "stem family" and the fabulative expression of species cooperation and hybridity can more effectively be framed by the popular Japanese imaginary as a lupine apocalypse. In a reading of Deleuze and Guattari on becoming-animal, the omnipresence of lupine loss in the institutions of the home, work, and schools of contemporary Japan, interrogated in many manga, anime, and video game series like *Wolf Children*, further reveals the ambivalence of post-3/11 artists as they approach family and the State in seeking out more nonhuman depictions of Japan. In this reading of becoming-wolf, Hosoda's resituates the family/fairy-tale film as a complex critique of the millennial revival of a nuclear Japan in the age of economic and environmental precarity and collapse. I hope to explore the nuances and contradictions of Hosoda's recapitulation of family through a celebration of Deleuzo-Guattarian pack affects and an introduction of the possibilities of "making kin," as Donna Haraway explains, at the ends of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: 3/11 manga, becoming-wolf, Mamoru Hosoda, *Wolf Children*, making kin

Author Bio: David John Boyd (PhD) is the Assistant Director of the Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association (PAMLA), and he is a recent doctoral graduate from the University of Glasgow in Comparative Literature (Text-Image Studies). David's primary academic interests are in the theoretical works of Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze regarding discourses on world visual culture and media philosophies of temporality, modernity, and history, specifically in the scope of fan studies and global media exchanges. David has published on manga, anime, and Korean cinema, and he continues to write and research as an independent scholar in Bordeaux, France.

Introduction: Lupine Loss as the Foreclosure of Renewal

In 1999, the villagers of a sleepy timber town called Higashi Yoshino, located in the mountainous prefecture of Nara, erected a monument of a wolf on the side of the road next to the Takami River where logging operations continue to this day. Below the wolf statue, howling stiffly in memorium, is a haiku by Toshio Mihashi: "I walk / With that wolf / That is no more".[1] This statue memorializes the 1905 extinction of the Japanese Honshu wolf in Higashi Yoshino. In 2002, Brett Walker, an American environmental historian, visited the statue seeking information about the wolf's extinction. Through local interviews conducted in the town and journalistic accounts of the event, Walker laments the loss of the last Japanese wolf, detailing the event:

> the hapless wolf had strayed near a log pile while chasing deer, where hunters had promptly killed it. Initially, they had thrown the carcass away; but after hearing that [an antiquarian] had come to the village to buy dead animals, they decided to bring it to the Hōgetsurō Inn to see if it might fetch a price […] The Japanese wolf proved to be the last of its kind.[2]

Walker, however, was disappointed with the statue, remarking that it was a forgotten historical site, noting that even locals seemed surprised when he arrived to see it.[3] The statue, sitting on the outskirts of town, is a forgotten site, a minor historical marker, "hardly alluring enough to attract motorists and logging trucks as they speed by on the narrow roads that wind precariously around Yoshino's partially denuded mountainsides."[4] Walker expected a more culturally impactful memorial, because prior to the 1870s, wolves were celebrated and worshipped by Japan's rural ancestors "as powerful Shinto messengers, as loyal Buddhist guardian kings, and as faithful Confucian protectors of grain fields."[5] As Walker contemplated "the cruel fate of the Japanese wolf and the landscape where it once lived," he imagined the extinct wolves still there, hearing the wails of the pack on their twilight hunt.[6] As the imagined howls grow louder

and closer, they are quickly replaced by the intrusive and nagging "sound of heavy machinery in the adjacent lumberyard," supplementing the cacophony and cadence of cruising canines with "the rhythmic metallic chopping of a helicopter lifting cedar logs off a nearby steep mountainside."[7] Walker juxtaposes the ghostly memory of the wolf, a figure tied metaphorically to Japan's premodern identity, with disturbing images of modernization and environmental destruction, creating, as a result, an eco-elegy to the majestic Japanese Honshu wolf and all it symbolizes.

While Walker mourns a Japan that he fears is forgetting its lupine loss, John Knight observes that the memory of the wolf lives on in the imagination of communities facing their own versions of loss and extinction. Twenty-six reported sightings of the Japanese wolf have been recorded between 1908-1978 throughout Nara, and these sightings even persisted up into the 1990s, as Knight writes: "At a 1994 conference in Nara, it was reported that no less than seventy people had recently either seen a wolf themselves or heard wolf-howls."[8] Knight deduces that these sightings and reports of howls are imagined, primarily because there is no material evidence that indicates the wolves' existence. Knight is not dismissive of the claims, but he does see them as psychic, metaphorical, and expressive responses to the structural reality of cultural and environmental erasure, whereby the fear of loss looms in rural communities threatened by deforestation, depopulation, and corporate land development. For rural Japanese experiencing anxieties of their own extinction, the Honshu wolf becomes a spiritual trace, a ghostly haunting of their psycho-social imaginations.

Both anecdotes of the trauma and loss of the Honshu wolf reveal that the elusive specter of the Japanese wolf in the contemporary imaginary evokes intense anxieties of cultural, environmental, and psychic loss. More recently, in post-war and contemporary

Japanese visual culture, the wolf can be read as a cipher through which we can read, in its absence, a multiplicity of parallel existential losses that threaten the future of Japan. Throughout Japanese manga and anime, the spectral loss and reemergence of the Japanese wolf can signify many narratively different yet structurally similar fears of trauma, loss, or extinction threatening the environment, nation-state, culture, and identity of Japan. These fears of lupine loss blend with numerous anxieties, including the fear of losing clan community (*Lone Wolf and Cub*, Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima, 1970), historical memory (*Phoenix: Sun*, Osamu Tezuka, 1980), a military honor economy (*King of Wolves,* Buronson and Miura Kentarō, 1989), patrilineal tribalism (*Inuyasha*, Rumiko Takahashi, 1996)*,* maternal visions of the natural world (*Princess Mononoke*, Hayao Miyazaki, 1997), the idyllic pastoral or wilderness (*Wolf's Rain*, Keiko Nobumoto, Bones Studio, 2003), religious and spiritual identity (*Ōkami*, Capcom, Clover Studio, 2006), and finally, the institution of the family (*Wolf Children*, Hosoda Mamoru, Studio Chizu, 2012). Additionally, all the examples introduced above are manga series or anime films that not only review the extinction of the Honshu wolf, but do so in an apocalyptic mode, making the spectral wolf an eschatological messenger who enunciates latent Japanese anxieties and nightmares of precarity, loss, alienation, and extinction.

When one thinks of Japanese apocalypticism in contemporary visual culture, it is often articulated in allegorical figures of nuclearized beasts and mutated monsters, as Yoke-Sum Wong reminds us: "Beasts run rampant in the allegories of destruction in Japanese history, [...] beasts are interpretative tools speaking to a moment, a time and a place enabling public discourse and changes – the passing of an era and the birth of another. Disorder solidifies meaning."[9] Even so, it is hard to imagine how the figure of a

wolf or werewolf can compare in scope to current atomic or disaster metaphors, such as Honda Ishiro's *Godzilla* (Tōho, 1954), Japan's most popular *hibakusha* ('atomic bombing') allegory. While the wolf might represent the slow destruction of ecologies and a meandering sense of nostalgic mourning, Godzilla enunciates the immediate post-war traumas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, exploring fears of atomic, cataclysmic apocalypse as well as expressing anxieties concerning the growing reliance of nuclear energy in post-war Japan.

Even though the Honshu wolf and Godzilla are both beastly traces of Japan's fear of chaos, it is often difficult to associate the two. This is perhaps because the 1905 extinction of the Honshu wolf seems to be such a quiet, unremarkable loss when compared to Japan's long history of dramatic cataclysms. Over a three-hundred-year history, "Edo/Tokyo and the cities of Japan have repeatedly been ravaged by natural and man-made/induced disasters of fires, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, wars, mercury poisoning – and the atomic bombs."[10] While the wolf represents an intense mourning, an expression of *mono no aware* ('the pain of time passing'), the catfish represents the renewal inherent in the disasters of Japan's past.[11] Onamazu, a god of earthquakes, is depicted as a giant catfish pinned down by the god Kashima. Wong notes that if Kashima is neglectful in his duties (often because he is distracted by the greed of men), Onamazu upends the terrestrial landscapes with his seismic flopping, which eventually rebalances the world of man and nature, bringing "renewal and retributive justice" to an ossified, corrupt world.[12]

While Godzilla (nuclear) and Onamazu (nature) are apocalyptically destructive, they promise a return to balance. Hence, Godzilla and Onamazu are parts of a historic fabric that represent the necessity for phoenix-like renewal that usher in eras of what

Jordan Sand calls "disaster utopia," or the Shinto-Buddhist visions of world regeneration through divine destruction.[13] The silent, naturalistic, disappearance of the Honshu wolf, however, only offers questions and whispers rather than promises of social change or spiritual/ecological realignment, transforming the wolf into a swarming, spectral, flickering image within the cultural imaginary. In the absence of the once revered and worshipped Honshu wolf – a nature-symbol of balance and a mythic messenger from the gods to mortals – the metaphorical representation of lupine loss can be viewed as an excommunication from the world of the gods and of the natural world, an existential damning of Japan. Therefore, the species extinction of the wolf follows the evaporation of its mythic counterpart, the *ōkami* ('great spirit', 'wolf'). This equally biological and metaphysical loss of the material and abstraction of the wolf manifests as a rip in the fabric of Japan that signifies a psychic and historic break from the possibilities of renewal and cyclicality, or the Shinto-Buddhist "theory of cycles in nature, of destruction followed by renewal," where the mass species extinction of lifeforms cannot be "understood as corrections of temporary imbalances in the vital force perpetually flowing through the world (known in Japanese as *ki* and in Chinese as *qi*)" like the way cataclysmic disasters including "typhoon-season floods and dry-season fires, earthquakes and tsunamis" were conceptualized in spiritual, existential, or environmental terms.[14]

In this context, the specter of the wolf is far more prevalent in current manga and anime series compared to the image of the catfish or its nuclear monster progeny because it articulates a more urgent, realistic, naturalistic, and ecocritical crisis of pollution, overpopulation, food shortages, the ever-present climate crisis, and nuclear meltdowns, primarily by equating the Meiji mechanized extinction narrative of the

Honshu wolf (1870 – 1905) to the current Heisei period of nuclear (economic and ecological) precarity (1989 – now). As Roman Rosenbaum confirms, Japan recently faced an "extended period of economic downturn, beginning after the end of the *babaru keiki* (bubble economy), roughly about 1991 and lasting into the new millennium."[15] During this economic freefall, more apocalyptic events, including the Tokyo sarin gas attack of 1994 and the Kobe earthquake of 1995, continually shook the confidence of politicians, industry leaders, intellectuals, and artists, who viewed themselves as members of a lost generation, as internationally renowned novelist Haruki Murakami told journalist Michael Zielenziger in an interview: "We lost our own narrative […] Once the Cold War ended, everything changed. We couldn't adjust to the new situation. It was a kind of chaos and we lost our sense of direction."[16] Even by 2010, even as the economy began to find some signs of life and the hope that "things were getting better and better, year by year, day by day" as Murakami states, Japan was struck violently "by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami, Fukushima nuclear disaster," on 11 March 2011, which was one of the most devastating nuclear energy crises since the meltdown of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in 1986.[17]

The aftermath of 3/11 would produce an even more precarious economic and ecological climate that was "arguably even worse, [in] "the post-3/11 era."[18] Anne Allison recounts how the Heisei recession and the disasters of 3/11 signified a new age of a hopeless, futureless Japan, especially in an era threatened by staggering low fertility rates, as *BBC News* reports: "as of [2017], just 941,000 children were born in Japan, the lowest number since records began in 1899."[19] The social, geopolitical, economic, and environmental crises following 3/11 was not perceived as yet another set of disasters in a long history of cataclysms; 3/11 seemed to have no end in sight. The ramifications of the

nuclear meltdown, the tsunami, and earthquake are still felt today all across the country,

ranging from the latent radioactive effects of mass contaminated farmland, livestock,

and fresh water sources, the destruction of more than a million homes, the mass

displacement of estimated 350,000 citizens across the country, and the loss of 18,000

Japanese men, women, and children.[20] Furthermore, most of the refugees from the

disaster are still suffering, often unemployed, underemployed in flexible or temporary

work, or homeless or in-between public housing. A significant number of those placed in

the isolated temporary shelters offered to traumatized and lonely refugees have

committed suicide.[21] While previous disasters like the earthquakes of 1923 and 1995

produced a communal sense of suffering and cooperation, which as Sand writes

"instigated a healthy social renewal" by addressing the inequities of that historically

preindustrial agrarian and mercantile society, 3/11 illuminated the stark alienation and

hopelessness of its victims.[22] In many respects, 3/11 is one of many recent reminders

that recovery seems impossible and that renewal is an illusion in a nuclear Japan.

Muddying the Waters: The Historico-Semiotic Conflations of the Nuclear in 3/11 Japan

In the wake of the mass precarity brought on by decades of unregulated capitalism, an

almost nonexistent social welfare system, corrupt corporate-conservative policies, a

zealous adherence to nuclear power, the cultural dependence on commodity

consumption, and the numbing realities of technological alienation, 3/11 exposed the

everyday suffering of Japan in very real environmental, socio-economic, and

humanitarian terms. Most importantly, the event revealed to the world that Japan is no

longer a steely, streamlined, industrial leviathan of technological advancement and stoic

corporatism. Rather, as Allison writes, post-3/11 Japan is now a "Liquified Japan," a disconnected, alienated, fluidly toxic society that is characterized by two historical symbols: "Nuclear radiation and mud. A strange combination that mixes histories as well as metaphors."[23] Thus, Allison claims that a liquified (and liquidating) Japan, lacking cohesive communitarian links that once bound society, is symbolized by images of water and mud; like the flotsam and debris that crashes against the shore or breaks through the cracks, Japan's own citizens are lost the torrent of late capital.

In the Japanese imaginary, then, the year 2011, like 1905, is an emblematic event of Anthropocenic rupture that foresees the end of Japan without renewal in its current liquified, liquidated nuclear iteration. In post-3/11 Japan, the end will not be marked by a nuclear detonation or a divine earthquake. Rather, as the painful recovery of 3/11 indicates, a Japanese extinction event will be a slow, miry, self-destructive process of a socio-economic and ecological poisoning that drags out until the very, anticlimactic end, where the carcass of Japan, like that of the last Honshu wolf, is tossed into the garbage bin of History. Furthermore, this is evidenced in the way that young people – the supposed future of Japan – face what Italian philosopher Franco 'Bifo' Berardi calls "the slow cancellation of the future" in widespread critiques of the nuclear family, the emblem of a prosperous, reproductive future in post-war and millennial Japanese society.[24] Allison claims that 3/11 was an equally metaphorical and literal reminder of what a Liquid Japan looks like after, or how a liquified (and liquidating) Japan lacks cohesive communitarian links and solidified institutions (work, school, and the family) to aid citizens adrift in the torrent of late capital, especially as traditional ties of kinship and community dissolve in the deluge. Hence, while the recovery of post-war Tokyo leaned on the collectivist values and labor of the extended family, 3/11 highlighted the

erosion of the nuclear family, a byproduct of American occupation and consumer
capitalism.

As Allison illustrates, in post-3/11 Japanese culture, the nuclear family is the site
for critique leveled against the metaphor of the *nuclear* family as exposed after disaster.
Primarily in Japanese visual culture, Jaqueline Berndt writes that while it took
politicians and industry leaders two years to address changes in nuclear policy, by April
of 2011 popular artists, filmmakers, writers, and comedians confronted the post-3/11
moment in Japan by emphasizing the dangers of Japanese nuclearism in all its risky and
precarious forms: first, as a literal energy source; second, as a symbol of post-war
industrialism; and third, as a metaphor for the toxic, radioactive, modern Japanese
nuclear family.[25]

In her essay cataloging post-3/11 manga series, Berndt points to manga artists
like Kotobuki Shiriagari, who immediately began exploring the sublime terrors and
posthuman possibilities of the world-shattering event a month after the initial
earthquake. Shiriagari's collection *Manga after 3/11* illustrates a posthuman tableau of
a sinking, empty, ruinous Japan in 2061. In the second comic of the series "titled with
the crossed-out word 'Hope,'" Shiriagari depicts "the accident of the Fukushima plant
from the perspective of the cesium and iodine particles inside, some of which start to
press outward once they find a 'hopeful' crack in the wall."[26] Ironically commenting on
Tezuka Osamu's ambivalently pro-nuclear postwar manga *Astro Boy* (1952), Shiriagari
undermines the hope for a human-focused, family-focused post-3/11 future. He does so
by creating a personified nuclear atom's family of cesium and iodine, which
simultaneously mocks the human hopes for a reconstituted family and reveals the
difficulty of removing these familial desires altogether, as documented through the birth

and transformation of sentient, anthropomorphic atoms into posthuman hybrids. Berndt continues, writing that as the atoms burst through the seams of the cement birth canal, "Hope manifests itself in grandson Mirai (literally, 'future'), a posthuman winged child," who is later described as fleeing from his contained nuclear home. In seeking lines of flight from the nuclear bounds of family, Mirai, "[d]isobeying his parent's ban, flies with others of his kind to the ruin of the Fukushima power plant, now overgrown with vegetation, and on closer inspection, surrounded by dozens of wind wheels."[27] Mirai and his friends fly together over the nuclear ruins, the comic ends with "an impressive aerial view of the angelic children almost merging with nature," further likening the atomic children "to lotus flowers ascending from mud to console the ghosts of the dead" in the next chapter.[28] As this example indicates, Shiriagari's manga is undoubtedly a template for post-3/11 Japanese visual culture because it constructs an expansive critique of Liquid Japan by exploring the symbols of radiation and mud as ways of expressing the antipodal construction of Japanese modern history and State ideologies. Thus, in Allison's deft metaphor, the radiated muck of a post-3/11 Japan recalls the negotiations of tense relations of the industrial/the preindustrial, the futuristic/the naturalistic, the sterile/the fertile, the synthetic/the organic, and the atomic/the chthonic to find alternative futures outside of anthropocentrism. Accordingly, post-3/11 Japanese visual culture therefore seeks to transform these binaries into hybrids, binding these opposites together in the radiated mud, further giving life to mutated, rather than purified or idealized, allegorical organisms of renewal, regeneration, and reproduction outside of the filiated project of family, or in the production of what Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod refer to as "a

metafamily," in between the institutional bounds of family and its reproduction in the State.[29]

Unlike Shiriagari's metafamilial or pseudo-filial fantasies of the potentialities of Liquid Japan, contemporary artist and avant-garde filmmaker Tomoyasu Murata showcased five post-3/11 short films in Tokyo that explored the alienation and isolation brought on by the lived trauma and loss brought on by of 3/11. Murata's stop-motion animated film *Forest This Flower Blooms* (2015) which, as Atsushi Ohara summarizes, "centers around a human-like figure with an animal face named 'Wolf,' who wanders through a wasteland in search of its lost memories."[30] Murata, in the animation, claims that the "white land through which Wolf goes can be interpreted as a world of fallout, a world where memories are completely whitened or a world where history is going to be made in the days ahead." In the work, Murata tells the story as such: "A wolf tries to trace his lost past. Hunters try to obliterate the past. The distant memories when the wolf was human motivate him to travel. He goes back to the past again and again. Being the sport of the past and plagued with the past, he sees the present." Moreover, in this assessment of a minor eco-cultural memory and an inversion of lupine loss – whereby Wolf, who was once a human, loses his humanity in the Calamity and wakes up a wolf-headed beast – Murata resituates the 3/11 crisis as the liquefying event that recapitulates the Japanese wolf extinction to articulate the rising tides of urgency of Japan's own muddy, flooded, radioactive era of economic and ecological meltdown.

In the post-3/11 catalog of anime films, Mamoru Hosoda's animal fantasy films *Wolf Children* (2012) and *The Boy and the Beast* (2015) reflect similar social and ecocritical concerns by challenging anthropocentric thought and the institution of the Japanese nuclear family through allegorical experiments of nonhuman becomings and

familial unbecomings, once again conflating ecological and familial semiotics. *Wolf Children* depicts a nuclear Japan as an everyday experience of domestic disappointment and disaster, rather than the brutal wolf apocalypse of Nobumoto's *Wolf's Rain* or Murata's *Forest This Flower Blooms*. *Wolf Children*, more accurately, is an uncannily quotidian depiction of millennial Japan, tasked with exploring how economic and ecological devastation are not only transcendent externalities that produce spiritual or cultural rejuvenation. According to Hosoda, apocalypse is a social experience that pushes the metaphor of a nuclearized Japan to its limits, affecting the everyday life of its victims. Thus, *Wolf Children* interrogates a nuclear Japan and ideological and institutional extensions, namely the post-war Americanized, patriarchal, capitalist formulation of the nuclear family. Hosoda examines the formations and limitations of the Japanese nuclear family and considers how the nuclearized family can adapt to the current strains of economic and ecological pressures, or if the family will simply mutate into something queer, nonhuman, and revolutionary, or simply melt away entirely.

Mamoru Hosoda's Everyday Apocalypse: Precarity and the Liquidated Nuclear Family

Wolf Children opens telling the story of a college student named Hana ('flower') who falls in love with a werewolf, and subsequently has two shapeshifting children named Ame and Yuki. The film is narrated by Yuki as a young adult, and she recounts the family's struggles in three parts: first, Hana raising her young children alone in the city after the death of her werewolf mate; second, Hana moving to a rural home on an abandoned farm; and third, Ame and Yuki growing up and adjusting to their uncontrollable hybridity. In part one, we see Hana desperately try to learn how to be a

young mother without any help in the isolating and hostile environment of Tokyo. In part two, we see Hana learn to farm her own food and take care of her children with the help of a kind, rural community. She allows her children to decide which path to take in their maturation: wolf or human. Hence, in the third part of the film, the focal point moves away from Hana's struggles to the diverging lives of the two children as they settle into the country and begin attending school. Yuki, while adept at hunting and playing as a wolf pup, decides to become a regular girl and works hard to fit in. Ame, on the other hand, who was too sickly and frail to enjoy his youth as a pup, remains unhappy with school, and rather, spends his free time in the forests and fields learning how to live as a wolf with the help of many species, including an aged, sensei-like fox. Furthermore, Yuki falls in love with her human friend Sōhei, and she follows her mother's footsteps by leaving for college on a scholarship and trying to control her shapeshifting powers. Ame, on the other hand, decides to live in the wild entirely, leaving his mother and sister behind to become the guardian of the mountains. In this role, Ame also protects his family's farming community in the shadows of the woods. While Yuki seemingly seeks to hybridize the family in the body of the werewolf, interweaving her extinct wolf heritage with flows of desire in becoming-wolf, Ame abandons humanity as the lone wolf archetype (like Wolf in *Forest*, Kiba in *Wolf's Rain*) to fully immerse himself in the pastoral wild, all in order understand a naturalistic (not spiritual) process of assessing order and balance. Hosoda thereby offers two interventions into the millennial Japanese nuclear family: (1) Yuki's path of hybridizing the family, offering possibilities for change, flux, and integration (2) and Ame's refusal of the family altogether for the endangered environment.

Wolf Children responds to the anxieties of lupine loss and of a Liquid Japan by examining the structural failure of the nuclear family. *Wolf Children* initially appears as a nostalgic return to three nationalist-industrialist-capitalist roles of the family drama (Father-Mother-Child) that organized the State "around the three pillars of family, corporation, and school (which echoed the three sacred imperial regalia of mirror, sword, and jewel), a structure that was rewarded and enforced by the mass-consumer culture emerging at the same time."[31] For example, in the relatively new post-war Japanese nuclear family, Japanese women internalized domestic roles of child-rearing and homemaking, thus accepting their roles as a practical extension of the family-corporate model, and further striking what Heidi Gottfried refers to as the "reproductive bargain," a socio-economic contract that exchanged the female-gendered labor of child rearing and domestic management for economic security.[32] Fathers, on the other hand, absent from the domestic sphere almost entirely, committed to a labor bargain with their employers to retain healthcare and social benefits for their families.[33] While mothers and fathers found themselves locked into private and public realms of domestic-corporate labor – of the reproductive bargain – Allison contends that the child in this nuclear family functioned as the vessel that fulfilled the accelerating dreams of modernity, futurity, prosperity, and advancement: "In postwar Japan this was corporate familism operating as blueprint for the nation-state – economic productivity driving and driven by (re)productivity at home, futures made for children, and the child as familial and national investment."[34] All three blended together into the production of the seemingly impervious Japanese nuclear family, which followed the same path of American nuclearism, defined by what Tomiko Yoda calls "*Mai hōmu shugi*" ('my-homism'), which was "a Japanese-English neologism" that as Yoda remarks, "can be

translated as the 'ideology of home ownership' (owning a home, of course, was the ultimate status symbol for postwar urban and suburban families)".[35] My-homism, an American ideological counterpart to the extended "stem family" of premodern Japan,[36] synchronized with the affordability of homes in reconstructed cities and newly built suburbs, helped to solidify the nuclear ideal as a social reality like in post-war America.

In the first portion of *Wolf Children*, Hosoda seems nostalgic for my-homism, especially as the precarious future of Japan looms in the distance and 3/11 haunts the everyday lives of shattered families without homes. At the beginning of the film, when Hana meets her werewolf mate in college, the couple falls in love. Yuki, as the narrator, explains that her father was the last of his line of the Honshu wolves, and struggled to find a place to call home after the destruction of his pack:

> Dad's parents died when he was just a boy, but before they did, they taught him the history of their kind, and implored him never to reveal his true nature to anyone. After that, he lived with relatives who never would have accepted him if they knew his secret. When he was old enough to get a driver's license, he left for the city and never looked back. He found a job, and he kept to himself. Dad had kept his peace with a life spent alone until he met…her.

The opening of the film frames the endangered patrilineal line, allegorized in the extinction of the Honshu wolf as well as in the taming of the wandering, itinerant wolf. Immediately, a reproductive bargain is established so that the Honshu wolf – a signifier for not only the Japanese patriarch, but his legacy of *Nihonjinron* ('Japanese exceptionalism) – can continue into the future. This metaphor highlights how the transversality of the pack and the hybridity of becoming-wolf that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari celebrate in *A Thousand Plateaus* may be too disruptive in the age of Japanese precarity, and that the domestication of the wolf is necessary in the wake of the precarization of labor and the fear of the crumbling patriarchal hold on family.

Therefore, to reestablish order in a precarious, nuclearized Japan, Hosoda tells a fairy-tale romance that originally appears nostalgic of the post-war era, marked by a speech from Yuki and Ame's father, who describes his my-homist desire for domestic, financial, and bourgeois stability: "It'd be nice to have a home. A place where I belong. I'd kick off my shoes, give my face a good washing, sit back in a comfy chair. It must be nice. I could build a bookshelf, and once I filled it with books, what's to keep me from building another? You just can't put a price on freedom like that." This scene is framed sympathetically as he expresses the anxieties and desires of young people (especially unemployed, underemployed, or homeless young men) in a precarious Japan that forecloses any cultural, financial, or reproductive future.

This stable, conservative, my-homist position, however, is thrown into stark contrast as Hosoda strings together an ironic montage that reflexively undermines any passive ideological recuperation of the nuclear family in uncertain times. After Hana and her mate become a romantic couple, Hosoda begins to explore the subtle psychic ramifications of this reproductive bargain, especially when the bargain does not entirely work out, as we see when it is nullified by the death of the husband, another metaphor for the regular experience of paternal absence. In the montage, Hosoda depicts Hana and her nameless mate living their newly domestic lives together: cooking, cleaning, working, reading, and spending time building a home together. The couple share the domestic space, promoting a version of millennial my-homism, a seemingly more progressive bourgeois assemblage that reflects the state of young couples today: the labor and accumulated capital is egalitarian because both partners divide labor in non-gendered ways, and both financially contribute to a shared home. Deep within the montage, Hana vomits in bed, signaling an unexpected pregnancy. Hana gives birth to

Yuki in the couple's small urban apartment at the end of the montage, which is then followed up with a quick cut to the birth of Ame a year later.

The revived nuclear family, endangered by a precarious Japan, barely has enough time to enjoy itself though; recently after Ame's birth, Hana's husband disappears, drowning in a city canal after trying to hunt down water fowl. To her horror, she must raise both her children alone, without any guidance on how to raise human children from family or community members. Nor does she know how to train wolf pups. Additionally, while many manga and anime series often explore the Japanese salaryman as either a joke or a bygone ideal, *Wolf Children* directly addresses it, blending the metaphor of paternal absence with the trauma of lupine loss and the corrosion of institutional ideals in a nuclear Japan. As the narrator explains, it was a mystery why Ame and Yuki's father went out one day and never came back. Yuki speculates it was because her father felt the instinctual call of the wild, to provide for his mate and pups as a wolf, rather than as a part-time, flexible manual laborer. In the scene, Hana sits with her two children in a living room. The shot is framed in a window covered in rain drops, the symbolic threat of Liquid Japan throughout the film. In the monsoon, Hana worries nervously, checking outside to look for her partner. The camera pans left from the window to an image of grocery bags at the step of the door. In this era of rampant divorce rates and absentee fathers,[37] the scene elicits tension and terror, drawing the viewer to the conclusion that yet another father has abandoned his precarious family. However, viewers learn that in his attempt to escape the cage of the domestic home, the loop of labor, and the instinctually need to provide for his family, the wolf-father is lost to the precarity of breadwinning, represented by the hostility of the liquified, fluid urban territory of Tokyo. This scene effectively exposes two figurative readings of Japanese

extinction: the disposability of Japan's patrilineal past and the liquidation of familial stability. Note that in the scene where Hana runs to the canal to see her dead partner's body, she witnesses her mate's drenched carcass thrown unceremoniously into a garbage truck, semiotically and historically paralleling the extinction tale of the last male Honshu wolf in 1905, whereby hunters tossed the body in the garbage before a buyer sought the body out to sell to a museum.[38] Additionally, the wolf's death-by-water is prophetic and apocalyptic, cloaking the filmic semiotic structure in 3/11 imagery that signals the literal and metaphorical threats of the liquidation of Japan. In this way, Hosoda describes the Honshu wolf as an eschatological interlocutor for the watery apocalypse to come, enunciating the mournful end of the Japanese nuclear family through economic and ecological dissolution.

Escaping the Nuclear: Hosoda's Eco-Filial Pastoral and the Rise of the Wolfing

While initially mournful of the symbolic liquidation of Japan's patriarchal, wolfish past, Hosoda redirects the camera's focus on those who suffer the most from the failure of the reproductive bargain: women and children. Throughout the rest of the first act, the nuclear family's survival is increasingly threatened in the hostile urban environment of Tokyo, where Hana begins to formulate a plan to depart from the city, civilization, and capitalism altogether. As a montage of Hana's struggling single mothering ends, the camera cuts to a scene of Yuki vomiting on the kitchen floor in her wolf form, seemingly poisoned by a cleaning product. Running wildly through the rainy, flooding Tokyo streets, Hana arrives at the local pediatrician practice which is wonderfully shot symmetrically in opposition to an animal clinic. In the middle of the wide shot stands a

payphone where Hana calls for help. While Yuki survives unscathed, the stakes of motherhood are established in this bifurcated shot: if Hana were to take Yuki to the pediatrician or the animal clinic, her daughter would clearly appear as an anomaly either as a wolf pup or a human child. We see this choice appear in every single conflict that arises throughout the film: wolf or human?

This binary of wolf/human, nature/culture, is once again echoed after this traumatic event, as Hana's wolf family is attacked by urban threats from all sides, including the invasive introduction of social service officials, a furious neighbor, and a landlord seeking an eviction. As Hana witnesses Ame and Yuki, the last Honshu wolves in captivity, she decides to ask one profound question to her children at a park one gloomy winter day: "If you could choose to live as a human or a wolf, which one would you choose?" After posing this question to her children, Hana decides to move to the country, claiming emphatically that she would want her children to choose to mature as a wolf or a human, to grow into both and live as they wish outside of the nuclear family, outside of the urban centers, and outside of the postmodern wasteland of Tokyo. Hosoda importantly ties the failure of the reproductive bargain to the nuclear family, a vehicle for consumption, urbanization, and industrialization, and contrasts that with the Japanese countryside, where remnants of the preindustrial stem family remain, complicating the Japanese shift in familial structures as an escape from the nuclear family. In leaving the city behind, Hana rejects the post-war reproductive bargain and the capitalist, nuclear family behind.

As the family moves into the country in the second act, the nuclear family transforms into a schematic for the roving wolf pack – what Deleuze and Guattari call the "wolfing" – which is structurally and ideologically radicalized by the absence of a

patriarchal alpha, as well as Ame and Yuki's inability to solidify their representative

identities through a becoming-wolf, as Deleuze and Guattari affirm: "Lines of flight or of

deterritorialization, becoming-wolf, becoming-inhuman, deterritorialized intensities;

that is what multiplicity is. To become wolf […] is to deterritorialize oneself following

distinct but entangled lines."[39] Feeling as though they must decide either wolf or human,

Yuki reminds the viewers at the end of the first act that growing up as a hybrid in Tokyo

was hard enough because subjectivities were blurred and imperceptible: "Wolves or

people: we didn't know how to be either yet and us switching back and forth didn't make

it any easier for us or for mom." As the second act continues, Hosoda explores

becoming-wolf as not a binary choice, but a fluid form of liberatory, naturalistic, bestial,

and transformative expression against the protocols of a nuclear Japan. Ame and Yuki

learn how becoming-wolf is essential in their understanding of their environment,

which keeps the urges of the nuclear family at bay as the roving wolfing is mobilized in

the pastoral return.

Furthermore, the semiotics of becoming-wolf is expressed in an impressionistic

scene of Yuki, Ame, and Hana running through the idyllic snowy landscape of the

mountains, resembling the foothills of Mount Fuji. Hosoda utilizes a flurry of first

person perspective shots to simulate Yuki's vision that captures her darting, winding,

and jolting through the forest trees and boulders, which encapsulates the intense effects

of the pack, as Deleuze and Guattari write: "The wolf, as the instantaneous

apprehension of a multiplicity in a given region, is not a representative, a substitute, but

an *I feel*. I feel myself becoming a wolf, one wolf among others, on the edge of the

pack."[40] As the orchestral soundtrack rises and the action-images bound and leap across

the screen, it would be difficult for any viewer to hold back enthusiastic tears. The

intense energies and animal effects of the pack's freedom from the city and the conventions of modern, nuclear life is celebrated in a naturalistic tableau. Even if viewers may interpret the scene as a romanticized ideal, we see that to run with the wolves is a difficult venture for Hana, which is expressed in her desperate attempt to keep up with her pups. Figuratively expressing the messy, difficult act of staying with the trouble of a precarious Japan and a dying planet, Hana, in her own charming way, bumbles, trips, and crashes into the wild terrain as Yuki and Ame blend into the crisp, white frames and painterly illustrations of the wild highlands. As the music rises and crashes with each image, snow explodes on the screen like fireworks, and the family transforms rapidly into a pack, fulfilling the Deleuzo-Guattarian manifesto of becoming-animal: "You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects. You have the individuality of a day, a season, a year, a life (regardless of its duration) – a climate, a wind, a fog, a swarm, a pack (regardless of its regularity) [...] a werewolf at full moon."[41]

In Mamoru's pastoral return, the nomadic wolf pack does not remain a deterritorialized assemblage as this scene of wolfish *jouissance* indicates. As the children learn the process of becoming-wolf, the nomadic wolf pack returns to the pastoral ideal in a colonial mode of *reterritorialization*, in which the children reinscribe lupine loss with the recuperation of the ancient territories of the Honshu wolves from the rural mountain peoples living in the Nara uplands. Just as Hosoda establishes a nostalgic framework in the first act for a post-war Japan, so too does he establish a nostalgic desire for a preindustrial Japan in the country. Hosoda's alternative to the failure of a Liquid Japan is a fantastic, utopian, liberatory, preindustrial way of life that celebrates the pastoral, romantic, and harmonious, maternal past. By moving out of the

nuclear family and modern city to reterritorialize the ancient territories of the Honshu wolves, Hosoda resettles the wolf pack into a new abode: an abandoned farm. In a montage, Hana learns how to plant her own food on abandoned land, as well as clean up and fix the broken-down home, establishing a new my-homism in the country. Throughout the second act, Hana and her children find a place in this rural community. Her neighbors are distrustful of her at first, remaining distant and skeptical of her bourgeois relocation into the uplands. This sentiment changes when the community faces a boar invasion, yet Hana does not. The villagers are impressed, thinking that Hana has excelled quickly in her agrarian acumen, earning her spot in the community. However, only the viewers of the film are privy to Hana's secret weapon: Yuki. Like her wolf ancestors, Yuki protects the fields from the boars, badgers, and bunnies, yielding an untouched potato harvest. With the sedentary establishment of pastoral living, we see the roving pack melt away, situating the necessity of becoming-wolf more urgent for Ame and Yuki.

In this way, Hosoda seems ambivalent about Hana's pastoral return primarily because it too is ideologically and historical fraught with the patriarchal, Confucian trace of Japan's past that abstracted maternal labor into a symbol for preindustrial, communal, naturalistic, nativist desires, as Yoda writes about the maternal myth in Japanese culture:

> The story can be summarized as follows: At the beginning, in premodern Japan, there was a society equipped with both the maternal principle of earth (rooted in a native agrarian community) and the paternal principle of heaven (derived from the nomadic culture of Eurasia that entered Japan through the importation of continental culture.[42]

In abandoning the traditional nuclear family, however, this nomadic pack flees the city in the shadows of the sedentary Confucian stem family, rather conservatively replacing

the roving wolfing with guard dogs and good kids, complicating Hosoda's original salvo against the problems of the Japanese nuclear family in the first act. In this way, the replacement of the postwar nuclear family with an idyllic Confucian stem family is, perhaps, too idealistic, too impossible to maintain as the children grow and must make their choices beyond the recovery of the family in the timeless, pastoral milieu.

Lessons in Unbecoming: *Wolf Children* and the Limitation of Filiation

Hosoda, however, again avoids committing to a binary choice between both formulations: nuclear family or feral pack. Hosoda undercuts this pastoral nostalgia as the second act ends, illustrating how the family is doomed to be obliterated by a Liquid Japan, making even the mountainous pastoral a hostile environment. The dialectic conflict of the film between wolf and human, pack and family, city and country, modernity (post-nuclear) and premodernity (pre-nuclear), sister and brother, strikes at the heart of the end of the nuclear family as the second act fades, marked by a stunning lateral tracking shot of the children in school, indicating the imminent divergence. This tracking shot is a painful reminder of the fluidity of a wolfing, of a quasi-familial swarm that incorporates different beings into the pack, and moves on from others, which in this case, are the two siblings.

As the lateral tracking shot begins, an image of Ame sitting in first grade appears. The shot tracks to the left to see Yuki in second grade, raising her hand enthusiastically, and tracks further to the right with Ame being bullied a year later. Luckily, his guardian Yuki runs in to scare off the boys, but instead of the two children hugging or celebrating the victory, Ame and Yuki go their separate ways. Tracking further left, Ame is seen in third grade, this time in the back of a dark classroom alone staring outside of the

window, and in the next movement left, we see Yuki in fourth grade reciting a passage from a book in front of class, seemingly integrating well into structured, institutional school life. Moving right, the camera captures an image of Ame's third grade classroom, but this time, without Ame in his seat, insinuating that he is off skipping class to run wild through the woods. This figurative shot diegetically indicates the growth and divergence of both children; figuratively, however, the shot signals the breaking point of both the Japanese nuclear family and the recapitulated stem family.

After this expressive shot, Hosoda constructs a dialectical showdown between Ame and Yuki. By the end of sixth grade, a reversal of roles takes place. Yuki gives up her wolfish guardianship of the farm and chooses to become more human, so she can fit in at school. Ame, who was afraid of becoming-wolf due to his sickly nature, now seeks to leave society entirely to become a guardian of the mountains, filling the absence of Yuki, his father, and his extinct species. After a brief argument between the two, the children quickly descend into a maddened, bloody fight in the house. The shot of the fight is long and drawn out, significantly devoid of the ever-present sentimental string orchestra. Hosoda directs the scene starkly, juxtaposing the warmth of the family's farmhouse with the feral fury of the two (now adult) wolves. The camera shakes and quivers as it attempts to track the inhuman intensities of Ame and Yuki as they upend and destroy the farmhouse that Hana rectified as her new home through my-homist ideals. The horror of the scene is not simply marked in the filial fight; a familiar tension soars as viewers anticipate the destruction of the nuclear home just as they may have felt in the first act when Hosoda reveals the death of the wolf-father. This same terror is signaled by the final shot of the scene, in which the wolves recklessly knock over the shrine of their father on a bookstand, upending the home physically and spiritually. The

scene ends with Yuki escaping Ame's jaws, fleeing into the bathroom, naked, scarred, and dripping in blood. What started out as teething canines chewing on chairs and late-night howling manifested into a wholly wild experience of pack intensities, ravaging the family's home from the inside out. After this scene, Ame runs away into the mountains and returns briefly in the next scene while Yuki is at school. From this point forward, this nuclear family is surely shattered and stained with estrangement. There is no attempt at healing the sibling rivalry, nor do the two ever speak with each other on good terms for the rest of the film. Instead, Yuki spends the rest of the time in the school, and Ame escapes into the wilderness to protect the forest that is under attack by an extreme monsoon and mudslides that threatens to wipe out all life on the mountain.

Hosoda's Animetic 'Death by Water' as Disaster Utopia: Making Kin After 3/11

Wolf Children ends, just as it began, with an ecological and filial crisis, harboring 3/11 imagery that offers differing responses to the end of Japan: first in the monsoon that liquidates the pastoral setting and kills his animal friends that Ame seeks to protect, or at least, learn from (including his fox-sensei), and second, in the way it frames a natural disaster panic of displacement, where the flooding hits the local town, leaving the children at school stranded in the school gym, separating the nuclear family, and producing temporary refugees like Yuki and her friend/love interest Sōhei.

These two experiences of 3/11 are separately experienced by Ame and Yuki. While Yuki is stranded at school during the flood, she accepts the post-familial possibility of being separated from her family (by both the monsoon and the fight with Ame) in celebrating becoming-wolf, as is represented by the scene in which Yuki is shown

revealing her werewolf form to Sōhei. While we know very little about Yuki's future with Sōhei after this event, the possibility of her following her mother's footsteps in producing more wolf children is an allegorical solution to the failure of Japanese fertility rates and the sense of cultural and ecological disconnection. As Yuki makes her decision to continue her "transfigurative alternation between wolf and human," as Toshiya Ueno writes, where she feels that with Sōhei, she "can keep a stable relationship and peaceful communication with the human world," Ame seeks to protect the entire ecosystem that is under assault by the modern, nuclear Japanese State and its institutional extensions: family, school, and work.[43]

Unlike Yuki, Ame rejects his call to extend his patrilineal line by channeling an ascetic, asexual, sterile force into the wild, exuding a monkish, stoic messianism that forecloses the memory of his father's mythic past. Intercutting between Yuki and Ame's experiences of the flood, Hosoda explores Ame's environmentalist project "to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth," as Donna Haraway writes.[44] Before the 3/11-like disaster that strikes the town, Ame departs the farmhouse to find answers to the problems he anticipates in the forest's fragile ecosystem. He learns that his sensei, an old *kitsune* ('fox') has died, and with the guardian of the mountain gone, many other species remain at risk. Once again, in the absence of the lupine and now, the vulpine, Ame fears the worst, finding many other species dead, including a nest of once lively baby birds. Ironically, in facing the extinction of an entire ecology and the city below, Ame's retreat from the pastoral home and into the wild signals a retreat from a reproductive future, cutting off his patrilineal line for the sake of protecting the environment. Furthermore, as a protector of the forest, Ame reinscribes the pastoral nostalgic return as a futuristic negotiation of a post-

family, posthuman concept of *making kin* as Haraway calls it, a species-queered future that relies on the strange, messy, communitarian relations made with a multiplicity of other critters and lifeforms, not just the hybridizing of human and animal affects: "Making kin is something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy. The gently defamiliarizing move might seem for a while to be just a mistake, but then (with luck) appear as correct all along. Kin making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans."[45] Ame's revival of the Honshu wolf is a reminder of the necessity of making kin, an anti-humanist, non-anthropocentric position that is taught to Ame by his fox guru in a montage before the monsoon strikes. In this previous montage, Ame is encouraged by the fox to learn from all the different species in the forest, including those Yuki would guard against, including bears, boars, birds, and badgers. Hosoda's montage of making kin is an inversion of an early montage of becoming-wolf, echoing Hana's warning that wolves should "not be so bossy to other animals," which Yuki struggles to understand as we see in her new role as the Confucian guard dog of the farm. In this way, Ame's attempt at multispecies cooperation and disregard of filiated relations produces an expansive discourse of hybridity that simulates the experience of bodies in intensely affective flux, bodies that are overdetermined by their relationships with "a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity" and "modes of expansion, propagation, occupation, contagion, peopling."[46] In a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, Ame resembles Murata's symbol of the lone wolf at the edges of a sunken Japan, destined to wander without family, bound by his natural duties of becoming-wolf, and making kin in roving ways as each countless disaster strikes.

It is fitting then that the film ends with Hana searching for her son throughout the muddy, dangerous mountain, attempting to reclaim a family that is long lost to a Liquid Japan. In the final minutes of the film, Hana searches for Ame for hours in the monsoon, finally falling over the side of a cliff, fainting in the rain, seemingly on the verge of death. After briefly reuniting with her husband in a dream, Hana is rescued by Ame who found her in the mud, leaving her in a parking lot at the base of the mountain. Hana pleads with him to stay, and without the tense possibility of the reunion of the family, Ame leaps into the brush, only to be heard by one commanding howl. Hana smiles, and the film ends with the howls of the guardian of the mountain, the wayward Honshu son, Ame. Hosoda ends the film by revealing the possibility of renewal after the end of the nuclear family, marked by Ame's return, which in quintessential premodern fashion, restores order and balance to the highlands of Japan after 3/11, which is finally resignified as a utopia-bringing disaster.

Conclusion: Staying With the Troubles of a Nuclear Japan

The ending appears, on the outset, as a tragic end of the nuclear family: Ame leaves the home for good, abandoning his mother and sister; Yuki seems to grow up and go off to college, and Hana seems to be left without the family she attempted to recreate as a roving pack. However, if reading through the rooted and complex semiotics of extinction and environmental loss, the ending of the film is naturalistic and ultimately hopeful, like the 3/11 manga Berndt describes earlier in the essay. Unlike other examples of Japanese animated films that often end with familial cohesiveness and reunion, marked by the consummation of a romance and the reproductive bargain, and unlike other apocalyptic films that as Haraway writes, oscillate between "between awful or edenic pasts and

apocalyptic or salvific futures," *Wolf Children* creates a world for and about the many

"mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters,

meanings."[47] From the film's first act of filial nostalgia, to the film's second act of

pastoral rejection, to the final act of staying with the trouble of environmental collapse

and filial driftings, Hosoda complicates the disaster utopia framework as a non-

dialectical response to the here-and-now trials and tribulations of loss and extinction.

     Rather, Hosoda ends the film with a very abrupt reminder of the price of

nuclearity in all of its forms in Japan and across the world: (1) as a traumatic historical

memory, (2) as an energy source that produces endless environmental risks, and (3) as a

problematized social institution in the corrosive, radioactive, nuclear family, and yet

leaves the possibilities for a future-to-come in the hands of both wolf children: Yuki and

Ame. Hosoda ends the film offering two false choices: wolves or people? And yet, in the

complexity of staying with the trouble, of making kin, as Haraway reminds us, Hosoda

also reveals a paradoxical position that offers a nonhuman reading of precarity and the

end of the nuclear family, one that is entirely hybridic, expressive, and at times,

alienating to a human audience. Perhaps what makes Hosoda's eco-filial animetic

meditations so compelling is that in its most simplistic reading, *Wolf Children* leaves the

viewers wondering if the binaries established (nature/culture, human/animal,

family/pack) are feeble, brittle, and flimsy representations that reflect the State

ideologies and institutions that are integral in maintaining a diffuse aura of order in a

decentralized nuclear Japan. Hence, instead of choosing wolf or person (i.e., the Honshu

wolf of yore or the hybrid of the future), Hosoda empathizes with precarious figures like

Hana who are victims of austerity, displacement, and extinction, and yet, inevitably

continue to find a vitalistic resistance against precarity by living through the furor of

nonhuman becomings to offer new lines of flight beyond of the rotting, sinking nuclear structures of a post-3/11 Japan. From family to pack, from apocalypse to utopia, Hosoda's animated film effectively reveals the necessity of staying with the troubles of making kin in the disappearing ecologies of the overdeveloped world.

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[1] The translation of the poem is courtesy of an English version of an article from *The Asahi Shimbun* newspaper published in June 20, 2004 titled (in translation): "Extinct Wolf a Symbol of What Japan Has Lost." See the digital version here: http://www.asahi.com/english/vox/TKY200406300120.html. This translation can also be found in "Wolves of the World: Asia-Japan." *Wolf Print: The Magazine of The UK Conservation Trust*, ed. Denise Taylor, Special Portugal Volume, Issue 20, 2004, p. 19. For more on the Higashi Yoshino wolf memorial, Brett Walker further translates the remainder of the sign on p. 235, n2.

[2] Brett Walker, *Lost Wolves of Japan*. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009). p. 2.

[3] Walker, p. 3.

[4] Walker, p. 6.

[5] Walker, p. 82.

[6] Walker, p. 6.

[7] Ibid.

[8] John Knight, "On the Extinction of the Japanese Wolf," *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1 (1997). p. 144.

[9] Yoke-Sum Wong, 'A Presence of a Constant End: Contemporary Art and Popular Culture in Japan', *The Ends of History: Questioning the Stakes of Historical Reason*, ed. by Amy Swiffen and Joshua Nichols (New York: Routledge, 2013). p. 97.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Jordan Sand, "Diary: In Tokyo." *London Review of Books*, (28 April 2011). p. 31.

[12] Wong, p. 98.

[13] Sand, p. 35.

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"I Hear You Just Fine"": Disability and Queer Identity in Yuki Fumino's *I Hear the Sunspot*

Corinna Barrett Percy

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Abstract: Yuki Fumino's currently ongoing series, *I Hear the Sunspot,* is a manga that provides a voice for those on the "outside" of society as it examines Japanese cultural attitudes toward both disability and homosexuality. Employing a range of characters, the manga confronts the problem of compulsory able-bodiedness and the need for disabled persons to fill prescribed roles, the process of moving away from self-isolation to self-acceptance, and the debate between living insularly within a disabled community or community building between disabled and nondisabled communities. Fumino uses the figure of Kohei to represent the struggles of self-acceptance as it relates to intersectional queer and disabled identities, and the figure of Taichi to represent the 'bridge' of community building as a catalyst to this self-acceptance in a society where both disabled and queer communities are seen as outsiders.

Keywords: Disability, Queer Identity, Discrimination, Cultural Attitudes, Social

Interaction, Compulsory Able-Bodiedness

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In a study done about individualism and collectivism in the United States and Japan, Takeshi Hamamura notes that it is a common belief that "cultures are becoming more individualistic over time, especially in those parts of the world where the economy is growing."[1] However, his findings indicate that this is not true for Japan. Hamamura writes:

> Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this research is the persistence of collectivism in Japan: In several indices, there were signs of persisting, even rising, collectivism. One commonality in these indices is that they assessed the importance of collectivistic living (increased importance in social obligation, social harmony, and social contribution and decreased importance in individual rights). In fact, these findings confirm prior cross-temporal analyses of Japanese society that reported continuing emphasis on group orientation, social harmony, and obligation.[2]

Because of the increased importance of group orientation, this collectivist attitude tends to silence those who are outside the norm or urges them to fit in with what is expected from society, so as not to disrupt social harmony. To be unique is not necessarily seen as a strength. However, because manga is so widely popular in Japan and read by all ages, it provides a voice for people and groups outside of the norm and can be utilized "as a social acculturation and teaching tool."[3] This visual mode of communication conveys cultural ideas, societal perceptions, and the interpersonal interactions of those on the periphery of society, bringing to light issues or groups that might otherwise be ignored.

Yuki Fumino's currently ongoing series, *I Hear the Sunspot*, is one manga that provides a voice for those on the "outside" of society as it examines cultural attitudes toward both disability and homosexuality. It does this through one of the main characters, Kohei Sugihara, by showing his struggles in dealing with his hearing impairment, his interactions with other university students, and his relationship with

Taichi Sagawa, a fellow male student. Kohei is isolated from the hearing community due to his hearing impairment and is also cut off from the deaf community because of the late onset of his disability. He started losing his hearing in the third year of middle school, and though he can partially hear and read lips, he does not know how to sign at the beginning of the manga. Kohei faces difficulties as a student and in social situations as he tries to navigate new relationships with others and with his changing sense of a disabled identity due to his increasing loss of hearing. He also deals with a changing awareness of his own sexual identity, as his friendship with Taichi evolves into attraction and he begins to recognize his own sexual preferences. Employing a range of characters, the manga confronts the problem of compulsory able-bodiedness and the need for disabled persons to fill prescribed roles, the process of moving away from self-isolation to self-acceptance, and the debate between living insularly within a disabled community or community building between disabled and nondisabled communities. Fumino uses the figure of Kohei to represent the struggles of self-acceptance as it relates to intersectional queer and disabled identities, and the figure of Taichi to represent the 'bridge' of community building as a catalyst to this self-acceptance in a society where both disabled and queer communities are seen as outsiders.

This article will open with a brief overview of discrimination and marginalization against disabled and LGBTQ+ persons in Japan, followed by a discussion of the evolution of Kohei and Taichi's relationship and how it affects Kohei's self-acceptance in terms of his hearing impairment. It will then discuss interactions between disabled and nondisabled communities within the manga and the problem with compulsory able-bodiedness, the difficulties in navigating the intersectionality of a queer and disabled

identity, and the battle between self-acceptance and self-isolation as demonstrated through the character of Maya. The final section will discuss the character of Ryu and how he represents the idea of complete community isolation for deaf individuals.

Discrimination and Marginalization Against Disabled and LGBTQ+ Persons in Japan

In the onset of the manga, Fumino portrays relationships between people with and without disabilities and later in the manga also includes the tentative beginnings of a homosexual relationship, illustrating different kinds of isolation and prejudices in Japanese society. Nanette Gottlieb explains that:

> Japanese disability law emphasiz[es] special needs over equal rights and mandating quotas. . . . Despite some progress in recent years, full participation in education and employment in Japan remain out of reach regardless of government quotas. . . . The medical model, to which…Japan subscribes, constructs disability in terms of individual flaws which prevent people from living a 'normal' life and require medical intervention and rehabilitation.[4]

In other words, people with disabilities are on the periphery of Japanese society because they are seen as abnormal, and their "special needs" prevent them from claiming equal rights.

Similarly, those in the LGBTQ+ community in Japan are also seen as abnormal. Some people point to male-male relationships that were common among the samurai and Buddhist priests in medieval and early modern Japan as evidence that homosexuality has traditionally been tolerated. Donald Richie even notes that in Japan, "homosexuality has never, strictly speaking, been criminalized."[5] It appears that there is wide acceptance of homosexual identity based on the upsurge

in the popularity of "Boy's Love" manga and novels and increased production of gay

movies and television shows. Yet, this perceived tolerance of homosexuality in

Japan's past and the present popularity of gay-themed media belies the reality of the

acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in present day Japan. Kazuyoshi Kawasaka

explains:

> the method of exclusion is not to produce homosexual subjects within the
> society and culture and then violently deny them, but to construct the
> 'outside' of the society. . . and project same-sex sexuality onto the outside,
> and then to erase same-sex sexuality within the normativity of Japanese
> society or within the present. . . . '[R]epression' of gender and sexual
> minorities in Japan is achieved through projection towards the outside of
> present-day Japan, treating the minority people as 'foreign' or
> anachronistic/futuristic objects rather than directly rejecting them within the
> culture and society: *repression through denial rather than through
> violence*.[6]

Despite the lack of criminalization of homosexual activities or publicized

discrimination, homosexual individuals themselves are perceived as on the outside

of Japanese society. Nagayasu Shibun notes that people in the LGBTQ+ community

in Japan "will have to get used to being regarded as 'weird' or deviant, laughed at,

avoided, or outright ignored. In some cases, they may even face violence."[7] He goes

on to state, "Whenever a phenomenon or person identified in any way with sexual

minorities is mentioned in Japan, you can almost guarantee that the immediate

result will be mockery and uneasy laughter. Presumably by joining in the laughter

people hope to prove to themselves and others that they are 'not like that.'"[8]

Therefore, in a largely collectivist society, individuals tend to keep with the norm,

and most LGBTQ+ people tend to keep their identities hidden because they realize

that they would most likely be ostracized.[9] They are also ignored in the country's

legal systems, as same-sex marriage is not legal in Japan and same-sex couples are

ineligible for the same legal protections available to heterosexual couples.

Kohei and Taichi's Friendship: Building Bridges Between Disabled and Nondisabled Communities

Kohei, who has a hearing impairment and is attracted to a man, must contend with these aspects of societal acceptance, or marginalization. It is in meeting Taichi that Kohei is able to navigate these aspects of his identity that he had previously been handicapped by, because Taichi becomes his friend and avoids typical "normate" behavior by not reducing Kohei to the single aspect of his disability. Not all the characters in the manga interact with Kohei as Taichi does, with many of them only seeing Kohei as his disability or expecting him to behave in a certain way and cater to them because he is disabled. Therefore, Taichi and Kohei's friendship is important as it represents effective communication between disabled and nondisabled persons, without expecting the disabled individual to fit into a prescribed role.

In the first pages of *I Hear the Sunspot*, readers are introduced to Taichi as he is trying to find a job and discover that he was fired from his previous job because his voice is too loud. Taichi does not have a disability but is looked down on because of his overly loud voice and is unable to be gainfully employed because of it. He is a child of divorce who lives with his grandfather and is also poor, blunt, clumsy, a bad student, and perpetually hungry – further facets of his identity that make him a type of outcast. He meets Kohei because he literally falls over a wall onto a roof where Kohei is eating lunch. When Taichi comments how delicious Kohei's lunch looks, Kohei gives it to him and then leaves even as Taichi is still talking to him. Taichi is the

only one who speaks during their first encounter, demonstrating their opposite

personalities; Taichi is loud and overly excitable, while Kohei is quiet and used to

isolation. The manga medium also literally illustrates the difference in their

personalities – in the first few pages Taichi's face conveys a range of emotions, from

drooling over food, to shock and excitement, while Kohei's face remains passive, sad,

and

Figure 1: I Hear the Sunspot, pp. 2-3

almost expressionless (Fig. 1).

Later, Taichi learns that Kohei is a freshman like him, and a law student. His

friend tells him that Kohei is "kind of famous"[10] because he stands out in a crowd (i.e.

he is handsome) and is popular with the girls. Despite these advantages to his social

status, Kohei is placed in the periphery. Though neither Taichi nor his friend know

much of anything about him, they assume he is deaf when they see a notice

advertising his need for a note taker.[11] When Taichi sees Kohei again and starts to

follow him to return his bento box, Taichi's friend tells him, "You probably should keep your distance from him. I told you. He stands out... He's antisocial and not a good friend to people. I never hear anything good about him. The senpai say he's bad news. Probably best not to get mixed up with him."[12] Although Taichi's friend does not know Kohei, he has made assumptions about him based on other people's perceptions and rumors, and those rumors are caused by a misunderstanding of Kohei's disability and situation. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains:

> Besides the discomforting dissonance between experienced and expressed reaction, a nondisabled person often does not know how to act toward a disabled person: how or whether to offer assistance; whether to acknowledge the disability; what words, gestures, or expectations to use or avoid. Perhaps most destructive to the potential for continuing relations is the normate's frequent assumption that a disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute.[13]

Similar to the behaviors Garland-Thomson observes, nondisabled students around Kohei do not know how act toward him and therefore reduce him to the "single attribute" of his disability. Though he is a complex individual, they only view him as cold and antisocial because they have not taken the time to get to know him or understand what his disabled identity means for him. Taichi, never one to conform to societal expectations, chooses to ignore his friend and others' perception of Kohei, returning the bento box, and candidly telling him, "I heard that you have a bad reputation. But I figured only nice people give their food away! So I knew that you had to be a good person!"[14] As repayment for the lunch, Taichi offers to be Kohei's note taker, learning that he has some hearing and can understand if he speaks slowly. Because of his upbringing and socioeconomic status, Taichi is a type of outcast in Japanese society, but he further pushes against the idea of conformity

with his personality by not subscribing to typical Japanese "polite behavior."[15] He does not hesitate to acknowledge Kohei's disability or offer assistance, but he also does not reduce him to the single attribute of his disability by assuming that he is helpless or antisocial because of his hearing impairment. Instead, he ploughs headfirst into a friendship with Kohei.

Taichi and Kohei's friendship becomes one of reciprocal giving – Taichi takes notes for Kohei (although rather poorly) and Kohei provides lunch for Taichi (heaven for one who is perpetually hungry) – and through their friendship, readers learn more of Kohei's disability. When they are eating lunch together and see a girl using sign language, Kohei tells Taichi that she invited him to join her sign language group, but explains that people with hearing disabilities differ because they have different

Figure 2: I Hear the Sunspot, pp. 16-17

levels of impairment and different levels of signing knowledge (Fig. 2).

Kohei does not know sign language and prefers to lip read. Ellen Samuels, in her article "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming Out," posits that "people with nonvisible disabilities not only are marginalized in disability communities but walk an uneasy line between those communities and the dominant culture, often facing significant discrimination because our identities are unrecognized or disbelieved."[16] Kohei has a type of nonvisible disability because people cannot physically see that he has trouble hearing, only learning about it from others or figuring it out once they speak with him. He is also marginalized in the deaf community for not knowing sign language but feels out of place in the hearing community as well. He walks an uneasy line between the two. However, Taichi represents a kind of bridge for Kohei, one because he immediately becomes his friend, and two because of his loud voice. When Taichi complains that people call him a loudmouth all the time, Kohei responds, "That's a good thing. It means people can actually hear what you are trying to say. That's why you're easy to talk to. I don't have to ask you to repeat yourself."[17] Their friendship of giving and receiving notes and lunch moves into giving and receiving of emotional support. Kohei, who constantly cannot understand what people are saying around him, can hear Taichi and, therefore, be understood himself, and Taichi, who is constantly told he is too loud, is complimented on his clear, distinct voice. Again, because Taichi does not reduce Kohei to the single entity of his disability, they are able to form a friendship that symbolizes effective communication between their two groups.

"Supplicants and Minstrels": How the Nondisabled Majority Expects Disabled Individuals to Act and the Problem of Compulsory Able-Bodiedness

Because of the late onset of his disability, Kohei often does not know how to interact socially, and, therefore, nondisabled characters feel that Kohei does not behave in a way that is societally acceptable as a disable person. But Taichi allows him to embrace his identity through community building. In flashbacks, readers learn that his sudden hearing loss was most likely caused by a high fever when he was in the third year of middle school, and he has a hard time adjusting. In high school, he feels embarrassed when teachers announce his disability to the whole class, his fellow students get annoyed when he asks them to repeat themselves, one girl acts like he is helpless (offering to help him take out the trash because "it must be so hard when you can't hear"[18]), another girl asks if he has a cold because his voice sounds weird, and former friends tell him that he is now boring. Because nondisabled people do not know how to interact with him and become annoyed, Kohei also struggles to familiarize himself with his new disabled identity. Garland-Thomson explains:

> To be granted fully human status by normates, disabled people must learn to manage relationships from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort. Those of us with disabilities are supplicants and minstrels, striving to create valued representations of ourselves in our relations with the nondisabled majority. This is precisely what many newly disabled people can neither do nor accept; it is a subtle part of adjustment and often the most difficult.[19]

Because Kohei is newly disabled in high school, he has not learned how to manage relationships with nondisabled people. Instead of using the aspects that

Garland-Thomson lists (charm, intimidation, humor, etc.), he merely tells people he cannot hear them. "Normates" then become annoyed because Kohei is not fulfilling his prescribed role as a disabled person who accommodates them so that they are not uncomfortable, and they in turn do not grant him fully human status. This causes Kohei to withdraw from society, finding it easier to be alone. By the time he is in college, he has still not learned how to manage relationships and interact with the fully hearing world; therefore, others label him as antisocial, bad news, and not a good friend.

However, Taichi is an instigator in pushing Kohei from isolation into a community (notably a hearing community because Taichi is nondisabled) because he does not assume Kohei needs to accommodate him; Taichi is fundamental in helping Kohei have pride in his identity because he is unafraid to be his friend and tells him his hearing impairment is not his fault. Garland-Thomson explains, "Becoming disabled demands learning how to live effectively as a person with disabilities...[i]t means moving from isolation to community, from ignorance to knowledge about who we are, from exclusion to access, and from shame to pride."[20] Kohei begins to move away from ignorance into knowledge of who he is and from shame to pride, in large part because Taichi befriends, accepts, and pushes him out of his comfort zone. Additionally, Taichi breaks down the barriers around Kohei because he does not expect him to fulfill a prescribed role that the dominant society has established and sticks up for him when other normates deride him because of his disability. For instance, when they go to the university cafeteria together, Kohei is bombarded with fast talking girls who flirt and invite him to a party. In one of the panels during this

exchange, half of Kohei's face is drawn in shadow and his mouth is set in a straight line. When another young man enters the conversation saying he wants to go to the party too, a panel illustrates Kohei's face fully in shadow, his eyes looking away, and his mouth turned downward. The increasing amount of shadow on Kohei's face depicts his increasing amount of confusion. He cannot hear them, they are talking too fast for him to lip read, and too many voices have entered the conversation (Fig. 3). Rather than engage with them, Kohei merely leaves.

Figure 3: I Hear the Sunspot, pp. 22-23

The other young man exclaims, "Who does he think he is? He didn't even say hello,"[21] accusing him of being rude and snobbish. When the girls tell him that Kohei

can't hear and that he "should feel bad for him,"[22] the young man claims that Kohei is "just looking for your sympathy!"[23]

Robert McRuer notes that "compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there is actually no choice."[24] The young man, even if it is unintentionally so, caters to compulsory able-bodiedness, assuming that Kohei has a choice in the matter of his hearing loss, or how much he understands, accusing him of using his disability for sympathy. Taichi immediately punches the young man, but later Kohei tells him that he should not have bothered because, "I can't even hear them."[25] However, Taichi yells at Kohei, telling him, "You think they can say whatever they want just because you can't hear them? Do you always act like this? If you can't hear, then say something. Ask them to repeat it again and again! Why do you have to hold back for people like that? It's not your fault you can't hear!"[26] Taichi does not want Kohei to feel isolated and always be by himself, nor does he expect him to use charm, ardor, or humor to build relationships with "normates" to be seen as fully human. Taichi already sees Kohei as fully human and encourages him to interact with others, not to accommodate them but to stick up for himself. He does not cater to compulsory able-bodiedness, knowing that Kohei does not have a choice regarding his disability. Koehi cries after Taichi tells him it is not his fault he cannot hear, most likely because it is the first time someone has made the effort to acknowledge that fact, or the first time a nondisabled person has not assumed able-bodiedness was a choice.

Just as Taichi does not expect Kohei to pander to normates, he also does not assume Kohei is limited by his disability. For example, when Miho, a girl who is

interested in Kohei, expresses how their situation is like a novel she loves where the girl falls in love with a deaf man, she exclaims, "I love how the main character does all she can for the helpless man!"[27] Taichi instantly becomes angry, telling her, "He can take care of himself just fine! Don't turn him into a character from some book! And … this all might be some kind of fun story for you, but for him, it's reality!"[28] Fiona Kumari Campbell defines ableism as "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human."[29] Because Miho's body meets the corporeal standard, she views herself as fully human while interpreting Kohei's disability as a "diminished state of being human," therefore calling him helpless without knowing anything about him. She thinks that he is handsome and "cool" and because of these superficial aspects casts herself as a type of heroine who can navigate his life for him. Taichi, as someone who has taken the time to get to know him, becomes angry because Miho has reduced him to the single aspect of his disability. Though Taichi helps Kohei by taking notes, he never thinks he is better than him, and again, theirs is one of reciprocal friendship. And though Taichi does not view Kohei as limited by his disability, he also never succumbs to labeling him what Eli Clare calls a "supercrip." Clare explains that supercrip stories "focus on disabled people 'overcoming' our disabilities. They reinforce the superiority of the nondisabled body and mind. They turn individual disabled people, who are simply leading their lives, into symbols of inspiration."[30] Taichi treats Kohei as a friend, not an inspirational story, and because of this, Kohei starts coming out of his shell when

he is around Taichi – he eats lunch in different (more visible) places, he goes with Taichi to play baseball, he learns how to make the meatballs that Taichi loves, etc. Their relationship allows Kohei to gradually come to terms with his disabled identity, and his self-acceptance evolves throughout the manga series.

Disabled and Queer: The Difficulties in Navigating an Intersectional Identity Outside the "Norm"

The manga uses the figure of Kohei to describe the difficulties in navigating the intersectional identity of both disabled and queer, identities which are often seen as "abnormal." This is important representation as it illustrates the differences in lived experiences for different communities and how self-acceptance in one area can lead to self-acceptance in another. For instance, as Kohei comes to terms with his disabled identity, he must readapt to his level of disability, which is changing. When he learns that his hearing may be getting worse, he thinks, "Someday... I'll lose even the things I can hear now."[31] The next page is split into three panels, one with a close-up of Taichi's laughing face, one with a close-up of Kohei's face in shadow, his expression distraught, and one of almost complete blackness (Fig. 4). The drawings indicate that the first thing Kohei thinks about losing is the ability to hear Taichi's voice, something that has brought a type of light into his life – he is the sunspot of the title that Kohei can hear. The thought of not being able to hear Taichi's voice distresses him, which leads into the almost entirely black panel, symbolizing the kind of aural darkness Kohei is afraid of slipping into. John Swain and Colin Cameron write:

> Coming out . . . for disabled people, is a process of redefinition of one's personal identity through rejecting the tyranny of the *normate*, positive recognition of

impairment and embracing disability as a valid social identity. Having come
out, the disabled person no longer regards disability as a reason for self-disgust,
or as something to be denied or hidden, but rather as an imposed oppressive
social category to be challenged and broken down.[32]

Because of his friendship with Taichi, Kohei has slowly been redefining his personal

identity and forming a positive recognition of impairment. There are still some

hiccups along the way – some misunderstandings and miscommunications, some self-

pitying – but, as a whole, Kohei learns to be more self-accepting of his disabled

identity. And because he is more easily able to "come out" as disabled because of

Taichi, he is then able to come out as queer because of Taichi as well. His realization

that the thing he fears losing the most is Taichi's voice makes him realize that Taichi

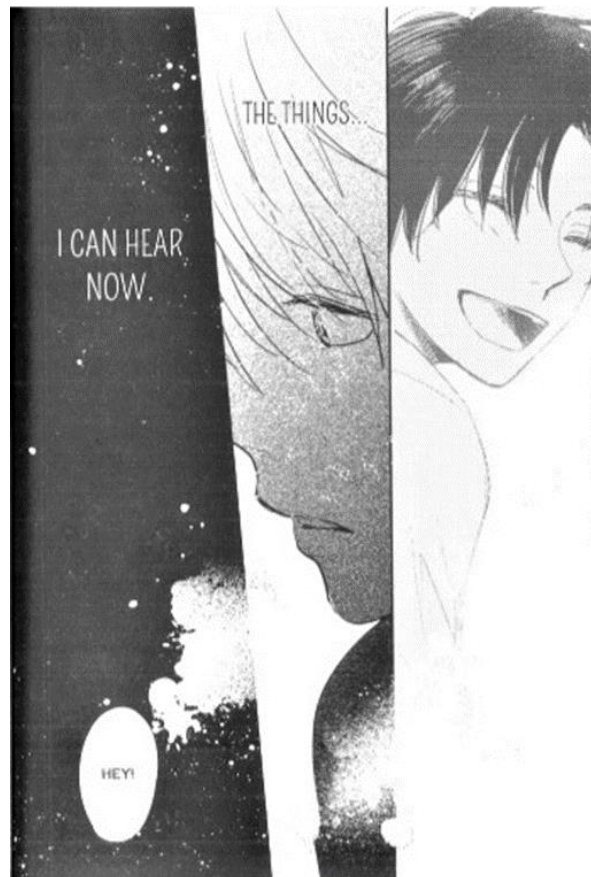means more to him than just a friend. Before this point in the manga, readers are not

Figure 4: I Hear the Sunspot, p. 112

aware of Kohei's sexual orientation, most likely because he is not aware of it either.

His disability kept him in isolation throughout his teenage years, which would generally be the time when people begin to understand their sexual identity and preferences through finding targets of their romantic desires and forming relationships. However, Kohei does not find targets of his romantic desire because of his social isolation, and, therefore, is not fully aware of his preferences. It is only once he learns to take pride in his disabled identity, largely in part because of Taichi, that he begins to be aware of and accept his queerness. Again, Kohei's character represents the evolution of self-acceptance and acknowledgement of intersectional identities for communities outside the "norm."

Disability scholars including Swain and Cameron, McRuer, Samuels, and Clare discuss disability in connection with queer identity, because queerness, like disability, is seen as outside the norm. McRuer notes, "Compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality. But precisely because these systems depend on a queer/disabled existence that can never quite be contained, able-bodied heterosexuality's hegemony is always in danger of being disrupted."[33] Kohei's character disrupts "able-bodied heterosexuality's hegemony" because he is hearing impaired and because he is attracted to another man; his existence cannot be contained within the hegemony of a collectivist Japanese society. These two prevalent aspects of his identity label him as outside the norm, and, therefore, he disrupts the idea that there is a norm in a collectivist society.

Taichi's straightforwardness and his accepting without hesitation of Kohei's

disability and without demeaning him because of it, propel Kohei to come out to Taichi. He overhears Taichi speaking with his friend, Yoko, about him. When Yoko asks why Taichi cares so much about Kohei, Taichi shares that he is smart, cool, nice, and handsome. He explains, "But no one cares enough to get to know him. They just made up their minds about him and left him all alone. So I … I just don't think he should be alone."[34] Kohei is confused, flustered, and touched and at first tries to pretend that he did not hear anything that Taichi has said because his hearing is getting worse. But he finally admits that is a lie, saying, "I can't hear so many things…but… for some reason, I can always hear your voice."[35] This is a recurring motif in the manga – even when his ears start ringing, other sounds are fading, or he can hear nothing else, Kohei can always hear Taichi's voice. It speaks to the connection between them. Yes, Taichi's voice is overly loud, but what this motif signifies is not just hearing but understanding. Kohei can hear Taichi's voice because Taichi sees him as a person, not just as a handsome face or a disability. This connection, and attraction for Kohei, drives him to kiss Taichi and confess his feelings ("I like you that way"[36]). Kohei admits, "Even more than losing my hearing, I was more afraid that you would hate me. I'm sorry. But I'm glad I said it."[37]

The way Kohei phrases his confession illustrates the degree to which same sex attraction is seen as abnormal in society. McRuer notes that "the ongoing subordination of homosexuality (and bisexuality) to heterosexuality allows for heterosexuality to be institutionalized as 'the normal relations of the sexes,' while the institutionalization of heterosexuality as the 'normal relations of the sexes' allows for homosexuality (and bisexuality) to be subordinated."[38] This

subordination of homosexuality leads Kohei to assume the Taichi would hate him for being attracted to him because it is not seen as "normal." The way he confesses also illustrates the lack of actual acceptance of homosexuality in Japan. As Shibun explains, those in the LGBTQ+ community in Japan must become accustomed to being mocked, avoided, and seen as deviant. So when Kohei expresses his feelings to Taichi, he fears this reaction.

In *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Michael Warner maintains, "Nearly everyone wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn't seem to be a choice at all."[39] Before it is even revealed that Kohei is queer, he is seen as abnormal because of his disability, which distances him from able-bodied individuals and the corporeal standard society has set. Others view him has abnormal, and he feels that way himself, uncomfortable in other people's company. Kohei feels more "normal" around Taichi 1) because he can hear Taichi's voice without asking him to repeat things, and 2) because, again, Taichi does not reduce him to the single characteristic of his disability and becomes his friend. Interestingly, this feeling of normalcy for Kohei leads to his queer attraction, something that is most often seen as outside the norm. This is why he is at first afraid to confess his feelings to Taichi, but ultimately his feelings are too strong and what feels right (or normal) for him overrides his fear. These two aspects of Kohei's identity intersect as his disability was the instigator in his friendship with Taichi, which leads to him understanding his sexual orientation.

Though Taichi is surprised by the kiss and confession, admits that he didn't

know what to do, and thought so much about it that he could not eat, he tells Kohei, that "no matter how much I thought about it…I couldn't find any reason to hate you."[40] Once again, Taichi does not conform to expected, typical responses of society. He is not disgusted that Kohei kissed him or by the fact that Kohei likes him; he is merely shocked. And that shock most likely stems from Taichi's own self-deprecating image of himself, believing that no one thinks about him in *that* way. Just as Taichi does not reduce Kohei to the single entity of his disability, he also does not reduce him to the single entity of his sexuality. His friendship is not contingent on Kohei separating aspects of himself, but rather on a desire to understand the intersectionality of his identity. He even tells Kohei, "Even if I don't understand everything…can't you tell that I want to?"[41] Taichi's desire to understand Kohei is what helps Kohei embrace the different aspects of his identity and become more comfortable with himself, which leads him to becoming more active in university – joining the sign language club, going to group activities, and making new friends. The art of the manga also highlights the physical changes that Kohei goes through after his dual "coming out" – he smiles and laughs more often, his body language becomes more open (not just in respect to using sign language but to posture as well), and he gets a new, shorter haircut that reveals more of his face and facial expressions. He becomes more comfortable with people seeing more of him.

Maya and the Battle Between Self-Acceptance and Self-Isolation

Yet even as Kohei becomes more comfortable and begins to find a place within different communities, there are characters who push against the idea of relationships

between hearing and hearing-impaired individuals. In the second volume of the manga, *Theory of Happiness*, Kohei and Taichi, now sophomores, become acquainted with Maya, a freshman who has partial hearing loss. Maya is an important figure in the manga as she represents how societal expectations on proper disabled/abled person interactions lead to the isolation of disabled individuals and lack of meaningful relationship building between these communities. Her failure in communicating with nondisabled communities is partially due to her failure at self-acceptance and illustrates how she plays into the idea of disabled people needing to accommodate the nondisabled majority.

Because of shared experiences, she and Kohei become friends, but she views Taichi as a nuisance and an outsider. She assumes that those without disabilities "breeze through life without any trouble at all,"[42] so when Taichi contradicts her, saying she cannot know what trouble people have had in life and that she "shouldn't judge peoples' lives by [her] own standards," she straightaway takes a dislike to him. She reacts, yelling that he's awful and that "People like you – people who think they understand – you're the worst kind!"[43] She then accuses him of sponging lunches off of Kohei when other more qualified note takers would volunteer for free. Maya represents the type of person Kohei was before he met Taichi, wishing to seclude herself from able-bodied individuals because she thinks they can never relate. On a larger scale, Maya signifies how a lack of self-acceptance can get in the way of communication, relationships, and community building between abled and disabled persons, even with nondisabled individuals who do not expect disabled persons to fit into prescribed roles or cater to them. She is comfortable with Kohei because she feels

they can understand each other, and she wishes to protect him from the likes of Taichi whom she views as an invader into, and even a detriment to, their hearing-impaired community. She tells Taichi that he is "no help to anyone,"[44] and expresses a kind of anger at non-disabled individuals, most likely because she has not yet formed a positive recognition of her own impairment and mirrors her self-disgust into disgust of others.

Maya is consistently rude to Taichi and complains to Kohei that he is noisy, but instead of agreeing with her, he comments that Taichi's voice is easy to hear. The illustrated panel that accompanies this conversation is one of few that show a close-up of Kohei's laughing face – he's thinking about Taichi's antics (Fig. 5). The change of Kohei's facial expressions from the beginning of the manga to the second volume

Figure 5: Theory of Happiness, p. 90

is drastic, transitioning from sullenness, confusion, and expressionlessness to laughter and contentment. Kohei tells Maya, "He's like a wild boar, isn't he? Always rushing straight ahead. He can't turn. He can't get out of the way. He just rushes straight ahead until he slams into something. That's what I've… always liked about him."[45] Kohei is not only talking about Taichi's literal physical clumsiness, but also his personality. Perhaps Kohei is tired of people tiptoeing around him, being polite and concerned without really knowing how to interact with him. He appreciates Taichi's straightforward and bumbling ways, and these characteristics that Maya finds annoying and even damaging, Kohei finds refreshing. While Maya's character represents someone who has not yet fully accepted her disability as a vital part of her identity and, therefore, hinders communication and relationships with abled-bodied individuals, Kohei represents someone who has made that transition into self-acceptance and can, therefore, effectively communicate with able-bodied individuals and build communities between the two groups.

Despite their differing feelings about Taichi, Maya is the second person Kohei comes out to about his sexuality. Though she is perceptive enough to ask if Kohei likes Taichi, he does not shy away from the question or deny his feelings. Maya posits, "There are better people for you out there! He's so stupid and violent and simple! He can't help you. He can only hurt you."[46] However, he explains that before he met Taichi, he often thought about what life would be like if he could hear, imagining it would be prettier and more comfortable, and he forgot about smiling or getting angry: "I didn't think about anything. I was just breathing and staying alive."[47] When he shares his feelings about Taichi to Maya, Kohei's dialogue is central in highlighting

his evolving acceptance of his disability and himself. He explains:

> But when I'm with Taichi…I start to remember all those things. He runs around and wears himself out. He gets so upset for other people, more than for himself. He forgets about the lecture and tells me all the professor's jokes. Before I knew it, I was laughing too. I'm glad I met him. It's because of him…that even if I can't hear I think I can be happy, as I am. There's been so many awful things. So many times I've hated this life, this disability. But since I met Taichi, it feels like it's all worth it. Even if I had to do it all over again, I'd still…I think I'd still choose this life. Because since I met him…I've been so happy.[48]

Here, Kohei comes out to Maya, not only as queer, but as disabled too. Even though Maya was already aware of Kohei's disability, his speech indicates him coming out as accepting of his disability, again emphasizing his move from isolation to community, from exclusion to access. Not only is he accessing social relationships but also happiness, which he had, in part, been denying himself.

Maya's character is important because she embodies another lived experience for disabled individuals – those who are still adjusting to their disability, struggling with self-acceptance, and succumbing to the idea of compulsory able-bodiedness. Maya has not moved from exclusion to access in the same way Kohei has, and notwithstanding her desire to distance herself from those in the hearing community, she also caters to compulsory able-bodiedness by pretending to understand others by using context clues. This occurs several times throughout the manga, and in thinking of her past she divulges, "I didn't want anyone to know my weakness. I didn't want their pity. I was so set on catching up with everyone else. I didn't want to depend on anyone. I wanted to do everything on my own."[49] This dialogue reveals, again, how Maya has not yet embraced disability as part of a valid social identity, seeing it as a weakness or as something she can merely overcome.

She is still at the point of denying and hiding her disability. And because she does not want others to see her "weakness", she pretends to be able to hear more than she actually does, not asking people to speak louder, slow down, or repeat themselves, with the exception of Taichi. Early on in *Theory of Happiness*, Maya frankly tells Taichi, "What? I can't hear anything you're saying."[50] She most likely says this because she doesn't like him, and he is trying to talk to Kohei, which she doesn't want. It is a ploy to get him to go away. However, it also reveals that Maya is unconcerned about showing her "weakness" to Taichi – again Taichi acts as a sort of bridge to help someone "come out" as disabled.

It is also significant because he is the one who calls her out for catering to able-bodiedness. He tells her, "You can't hear nearly as well as you pretend to, can you? . . . But what does that do for us? People think they're having a conversation. But you're forcing them to talk to themselves. How is anyone supposed to have a conversation like that? You think that's okay?" When Maya responds, "I know... You're going to say I don't try hard enough! That I need to try harder!," Taichi completely disagrees with her. He counters, "How could you try any harder than you already are? I can tell you're reading lips and trying to fill in the blanks. Don't you get tired? If you keep that up, you'll always be exhausted. So why not just tell the truth up front? Why should you have to take all the responsibility?"[51] Just as he had with Kohei, Taichi doesn't expect Maya to humor normates in order to build relationships with them. Rather, he wants her to become comfortable enough with her disability that she is not afraid to ask for assistance when she needs it; he never believes that she is less than human because of her disability. During the scene where Taichi berates Maya, an image of Kohei is

inserted within the panels, saying, "There are people who understand,"[52] because

Maya is recalling what Kohei has said about Taichi. After Taichi's exclamation, Maya

cries, just as Kohei had when Taichi told him it is not his fault that he cannot hear, and

she yells, "You don't... know anything...so why...how can you...say that?" (Fig. 6). The

parallel between Maya and Kohei both crying after Taichi speaks with them, illustrates

the similarities in their situations – trying to cater to or humor the hearing

community, feeling isolated, and believing that no one truly understands. But Taichi

stands apart from other hearing people because he never assumes that they just need

to try harder or that they need to overcome a weakness.

Figure 6: Theory of Happiness, pp. 179-180

Even when he doesn't understand, he wants to. Kohei cries because it is the first

time someone has tried to understand him and he feels relieved, while Maya cries for

much the same reason, but responds with shock because she can't quite comprehend how a hearing person, let alone Taichi who she views as simple and stupid, can speak what she is feeling. Taichi represents nondisabled individuals in society who want to understand, effectively communicate, and build relationships with disabled people without stereotyping them, expecting them to accommodate the nondisabled community, or believing they should fit into prescribed roles.

It is important to note that Kohei tells Maya about his feelings toward Taichi when he believes that his attraction is still one sided. He and Taichi are still friends, but they have not discussed their relationship further, and Kohei has even promised that he will not do anything Taichi will hate (i.e. kiss him). But despite not having his feelings returned, Kohei still feels the most comfortable around Taichi. Ann Pointon and Chris Davies, the editors of *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media,* explain:

> In the social model the impairment is seen as much less important. Instead it is a disabling environment, the attitudes of others (not the disabled person), and institutional structures that are the problems requiring solution. Disability is thus not a fixed condition but a social construct and open to action and modification. One may have an impairment (or "condition") but in the right setting and with the right aids and attitudes one may not be disabled by it.[53]

Prior to meeting Taichi, the attitudes of others hinder Kohei, but his character development illustrates how his disability is a social construct that is open to modification. Taichi's treatment of him affects how others treat him, creating change in social attitudes, and he becomes less disabled by his disability. Therefore, he still feels comfortable around Taichi even after he confesses his feelings.

Moreover, Taichi gradually comes to comprehend his reactions to Kohei throughout *Theory of Happiness* – his heart pounds loudly when they hug, he gets

jealous when he hears Kohei has a girlfriend (a false rumor), and he greatly misses

him when they cannot see each other for long periods of time. He thinks, "I wanted

him to smile all the time. But I don't want to imagine him smiling with a stranger,"[54]

realizing that he too likes Kohei "that way." When Taichi confesses his feelings to

Kohei, in fact telling him, "I love you," Kohei is concerned he is not hearing him

correctly. Taichi repeats it over and over, thinking, "I'll say it twice. Ten times. A

hundred times. That's it. I'll say it until you believe it. Until you know it's the truth."[55]

(Fig. 7). Taichi, once he recognizes his own feelings, does not hesitate to express

Figure 7: Theory of Happiness, pp. 268-269

them. He, who desires to understand the intersectionalites of Kohei's identity, also

comes to understand Kohei's feelings toward him and reciprocates them. This adds

another layer onto Kohei's re-adaptation of his identity and to his happiness. Just has

Taichi's friendship helped him to open up and express more sides of himself, their romantic relationship continues to push Kohei to open up. He becomes even more comfortable around Taichi (no longer afraid he will do something Taichi hates), so he is more affectionate and willing to express his desires.

The Character of Ryu and the Idea of Complete Community Isolation

However, as the manga progresses, Kohei encounters another hearing disabled character who does not see the value in hearing/deaf relationships. Ryu, who is introduced in the third volume of the manga, *Limit Vol. 1,* is a character that pushes against the idea of disabled persons needing to accommodate normates, by not even associating with them. The figure of Ryu represents the debate between self-acceptance and self-isolation, because his version of self-acceptance revolves solely around the deaf community while pushing away anyone in the hearing community. Ryu is "almost completely deaf"[56] and chooses to live insularly within the deaf community, believing that other hearing-impaired and deaf individuals should also. Kohei meets Ryu after attending a deaf "futsal" group, and when the group goes for drinks afterward, Ryu learns that Kohei is studying law and is interested in labor regulations. Ryu, who works for a gaming company with all deaf employees, asks Kohei to look at a document about corporate regulations to check if "everything's aboveboard."[57] Kohei explains that he is not a lawyer and is not certified, so Ryu should have a real legal advisor look at it. Ryu explains that they tried to find one, but it did not work out because none of them could sign. He then tells Kohei, "We don't need anyone who can hear at our company."[58] The panels illustrate Ryu vehemently

signing these words, while Kohei's face registers shock (Fig. 8). Ryu provides an

interesting foil to Kohei in several respects. First, Ryu, who was born with his

disability, has had longer to navigate the relationship between disabled and

nondisabled communities and chooses to isolate himself within his deaf community.

He works with all deaf people and sees no reason to bring hearing people into the mix.

Kohei, who at this point of the manga has been disabled for about six years, is still

adjusting to these relationships. He is technically in between the hearing and deaf

communities because he has partial hearing and also because he is recently disabled,

and, therefore, was once part of the nondisabled community. Secondly, Ryu uses sign

Figure 8: Limit Vol. 1, p. 111

language as his medium of communication, while Kohei (by the third volume of manga) is still learning how to sign and uses speaking as his main form of communication. Though he increasingly uses sign when he speaks, he has trouble following Ryu when he signs too fast. The dynamic between these two characters is significant because it shows the variations of people within disabled communities and represents the differences in disabled experiences and views on acceptance and inclusion.

For Ryu, his move from isolation to community is specifically into a deaf community, which for him is living effectively; he finds pride in that identity and he tries to force other hearing-impaired and deaf people into this way of thinking. For example, when he finds a pamphlet about cochlear implants in Kohei's bag, Ryu rips it in half and tells Kohei, "You don't need it. Life's just fine without ears."[59] (Fig. 9). Cochlear implants have caused significant controversy in the deaf community, and Anelise Farris explains that because of the nature of the device, which transfers sound signals to the brain, "effectively avoiding the damaged part of the ear altogether . . . this surgery raises a contentious question: When a deaf person receives a cochlear implant, are they no longer in the deaf community? Are they forever in a limbo between hearing and deaf?"[60] Perhaps Ryu rips the pamphlet because he understands the difficulty in answering these questions and views it as easier for those with hearing disabilities to move completely into the deaf community. His comment that life is just fine without ears, expresses the important idea that deafness does not need to be fixed and that deaf (or hearing impaired) identity is valid and valuable. However, what Ryu represents as a character is the failure of some within

the deaf community to understand that others with hearing disabilities may wish to associate with both deaf and hearing communities, that just because one is hearing impaired doesn't mean they cannot have valuable relationships with nondisabled individuals, and there is no right or wrong side of the cochlear device debate.

Figure 9: Limit Vol. 1, p. 117

Just as Kohei stated earlier that "everyone has hearing disabilities to a different extent,"[61] those individuals also have different social needs and may wish to move from isolation into multiple communities, from exclusion into multiple modes of access.

Additionally, both Maya and Ryu are concerned by Kohei and Taichi's relationship, even though they are technically outsiders from it. Maya worries because

she thinks Taichi is "stupid and violent and simple," and he will not be of any help to

Kohei. However, as she gets to know Taichi better and sees how he makes Kohei

happy, she becomes more open to trying to understand. She represents disabled

individuals who take steps into self-acceptance and community building with non-

disabled persons. Ryu, on the other hand, instantly condemns the relationship

because it is between a hearing and hearing-impaired person. He does not know

Taichi or that he is a man; he only knows that Kohei is in a relationship with a hearing

person, and tells him, "Then break up. It's gonna happen eventually anyway. You live

in different worlds. . . . You're never going to hear, so you should just come be on our

Figure 10: Limit Vol. 1, p. 231

side."[62] Ryu represents disabled communities who view self-isolation as superior to

any sort of relationships with able-bodied individuals. The panels that accompany

these words show the back of Ryu's head and an image of him stretching out his hand, his face ominously obscured by shadow (Fig. 10). It symbolizes, perhaps, the fear Kohei has at going completely deaf, a dark figure trying to pull him to "their side," but it also symbolizes the lack of understanding Ryu has about Kohei. Kohei's and Ryu's characters are also being used to represent larger, community struggles – the debate between insular living in a deaf community or community building between deaf and hearing groups.

Ryu has only met Kohei a couple of times, and when they have talked, it is mostly Ryu trying to convince Kohei to exist in an insular deaf community and push him to think the same way he does. When Ryu tells him to come to their side, it is not a friendly face welcoming him, but a dark stranger endeavoring to force him over. In contrast, whenever Kohei imagines Taichi, he thinks of him fondly, usually with a laughing face. The difference is striking. Ryu assumes that Kohei and Taichi can never truly understand each other because of the differences in their experiences, but what he fails to understand about their disabled/nondisabled relationship is "that in fact there are multiple ways of communicating and connecting, and that preconceived notions and black and white thinking do not hold up in a gray world."[63] Ryu also doesn't seem to understand that each disabled person must form their own identity and embrace their disability in different ways and by different means. Forcing his mindset on others does not work. Kohei formed a positive understanding of his disabled identity with the help of Taichi, so simply telling him to give up that relationship is like telling him to give up a part of himself. Kohei wants to embrace the intersectionalities of his disabled and queer identities that Taichi helped uncover.

Conclusion

I Hear the Sunspot is still an ongoing manga series, and Yuki Fumino has only begun to address the complex intersections of disabled and queer identity and convey cultural ideas, societal perception, and interpersonal interaction of those within these groups. Using a range of characters, the manga confronts the problem of compulsory able-bodiedness, the process of moving away from isolation, and the debate about cochlear implants and Deaf culture,[64] while at the same time illustrating the process of coming out as disabled and queer in a society where both of these communities are seen as outsiders. Fumino uses the character of Kohei to demonstrate that coming out as disabled, or forming a positive recognition of disability, can occur after a disabled person no longer feels isolated. For Kohei, his accepting of his disabled identity allows him to accept his queer identity as well. Julia Carpenter notes that "coming out usually isn't a singular pronouncement — an Ellen DeGeneres moment or a '*Glee'* moment. Instead, it's a series of moments."[65] Ellen Samuels also explains that the "analogies between queerness and disability" suggest that for some people "the specifics of coming out in each context as a person whose bodily appearance does not immediately signal one's own sense of identity."[66] Both of these statements apply to Kohei, whose body does not immediately signal his disabled identity or his queer identity, contributing to the fact that coming out for him is not one moment, but many. He must continue to come out as disabled to people who do not know him, and though Kohei and Taichi have come out to each other about their sexuality, as the manga progresses, they will, most likely, have to continue to come out to others.

The characters around Kohei represent many different ideas about self-

acceptance, the intersectionality of identity, and relationships between disabled and nondisabled communities. Taichi's character acts a bridge between these two communities, specifically because he wants to build relationships without stereotyping disabled individual or expecting them to accommodate the nondisabled community. Therefore, his friendship with Kohei leads to Kohei's self-acceptance in terms of his hearing impairment and later his sexuality. Maya's character symbolizes disabled individuals who are still trying to negotiate the meaning of their disability, while gradually moving toward self-acceptance and away from compulsory able-bodiedness. And Ryu's character represents disabled individuals who have moved into self-acceptance in the form of community isolation. Each of these characters illustrate the variations of disabled identity and the differences of lived experience for those with hearing impairments. As these characters continue to interact and evolve throughout the manga, this opens the door for further discussions about societal perceptions of disabled lived experiences, compulsory able-bodiedness, same-sex relationships, the queering of norms, and the intersections of queer and disabled identity.

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40 Fumino, *I Hear,* 165.

41 Ibid., 156

42 Fumino, *Theory of Happiness*, 33.

43 Ibid., 34.

44 Ibid., 37.

45 Ibid., 90-91.

[46] Ibid., 144.
[47] Ibid., 147.
[48] Ibid., 148-152.
[49] Ibid., 167-168
[50] Ibid., 44.
[51] Ibid, 177-179.
[52] Ibid., 179.
[53] Ann Pointon and Chris Davies, introduction to *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media*, ed. Ann Pointon and Chris Davies (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 2.
[54] Fumino, *Theory of Happiness*, 254.
[55] Ibid., 268-270.
[56] Fumino, *Limit Vol. 1*, 108
[57] Ibid., 110.
[58] Ibid., 111.
[59] Fumino, *Limit Vol. 1*, 117.
[60] Anelise Farris, "'Deaf is Not a Bad Word': The Positive Construction of Disability in *Switched at Birth*," in *ABC Family to Freeform TV: Essays on the Millennial-Focused Network and Its Programs*, ed. Emily L. Newman and Emily Witsell (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 240.
[61] Fumino, *I Hear,* 16.
[62] Fumino, *Limit Vol. 1*, 228-231
[63] Farris, "Deaf is not a Bad Word," 239.
[64] Writing about deafness often configures the term deaf in various ways. Sometimes the d is lowercased when discussing hearing loss and capitalized when discussing deaf culture. I have followed this tendency throughout this article. See Jamie Berke, "Deaf Culture – Big D Small D," *Very Well*, June 28, 2016. https://www.verywell.com/deaf-culture-big-d-small-d-1046233.
[65] Julia Carpenter, "Coming out as LGBTQ: It's not one moment, but several," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2016.
[66] Samuels, 316.

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Embedded Niche Overlap: A Media Industry History of Yaoi Anime's

American Distribution from 1996 to 2009

Finley Freibert

Abstract: This article offers an industrial history of yaoi anime's distribution in the United States by companies that acquired official distribution licenses. During the course of this history, the term "yaoi" was not always dominant in American anime vernacular; rather, it only ascended to widespread American usage after it was adopted by American distributors as an industry term. Yaoi anime's complex distribution history reveals that, unlike yaoi manga, yaoi anime began and continues to be industrially situated at the overlap of seemingly disparate niche categories.

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Reporting on international film markets in 1983, American media industry news source *Variety* announced that the major Japanese studio Toei was producing an animated feature *Patalliro! Stardust Project* (1983, *Patariro! Sutādasuto keikaku*), an extension of Toei's television series *I, Patalliro!* (1982-83, *Boku patariro!*).[1] Printed in a section covering foreign media productions, this announcement would have been directed towards potential American licensees because it served to advertise *Patalliro!* as a media property soon to be available for American distribution. To a British journalist, *Patalliro!* epitomized the contemporaneous shocking revelation that some types of Japanese girls' media were saturated with sensual encounters between "homosexual boys and bisexual princes,"[2] as described by a sensationalist *Guardian* exposé on shōjo manga from the same year. Unremarked in the *Variety* report, *Patalliro!* was among the first Japanese animations to feature bishōnen (beautiful young men) with homoerotic implications, a category later understood in an American context via the term "yaoi." The term "yaoi" originally emerged in Japan out of the specific subcultural context of dōjinshi independent production and reception, whereas the terms "shōnen-ai" and "bishōnen" were more commonly employed to describe the diffusion of homoerotic elements within mainstream commercial sectors. In an American context, yaoi became a multipurpose term to describe both independently produced fan works and commercially oriented media products, like *Patalliro!*, that appeal to yaoi fans. At present, there continues to be an industrial distinction between yaoi products that overtly address the genre's fans, and more mainstream products that attempt to exploit yaoi fans as one of many potential markets by only suggesting male-male eroticism as a subtext. The current categorization of *Patalliro!* as yaoi on some

English language websites instantiates yaoi's additional slippery status as a retrospective term of reclamation.[3]

Although Toei had previously forged relationships with American distributors and television networks for the American release of its products, including *Alakazam the Great* (1960, *Saiyūki*) and *The Magic Serpent* (1966, *Kairyū daikessen*), the studio more aggressively pursued the international market in the 1980s. Referred to as a "giant" by the industry press, in 1984, Toei became the first Japanese company to participate in the American Film Market, a distribution-focused event organized by a trade organization of production and distribution companies.[4] After the decade's close, Toei offered the *Patalliro!* series at the 1990 and 1991 annual international television industry conference hosted by the National Association of Television Program Executives.[5] The show was not picked up. The original 1983 *Variety* announcement of Toei's *Patalliro!* was perhaps the first yaoi anime advertisement in any American publication, yet as of this writing, no components of the franchise have been officially released in the United States. Following Toei's promotion of *Patalliro!*, *Variety* would not mention the word yaoi until mid-2006, defining the category as erotica "for women about pretty gay men."[6]

The non-release of the *Patalliro!* media products in the United States instantiates the main argument of this article that, despite yaoi's existence in Japanese markets and the term's use by some fan constituents in North America, yaoi did not become a visible or viable component of the American anime niche market until the term solidified into a distribution category. By "distribution category", I mean a classification term that a distributor understands to have a market significance, as indicated by either the distributor's explicit usage of the term in its industry materials or the distributor's

implicit usage of the term through the development of a product line or marketing campaign associated with media grouped under that term. As is reflected in the case of yaoi anime's distribution in the United States, both cultural and economic factors affect yaoi media's circulation—as Sean Cubitt asserts about the covert power of distribution generally—"sometimes amplifying class, race and gender segmentation, sometimes muting them."[7] Critical inquiries into distribution within media industry studies have interrogated the arbitrary and profit-oriented origins of distribution categories. For example, Bryan Wuest has investigated the invention of the LGBT distribution category, which targeted LGBT niche audiences during the home video boom, and Ron Becker has traced the development of gay television that addressed socially liberal classes in the late 20th century.[8]

In mapping yaoi's emergence as a distribution category in the United States, this article places anime studies in conversation with critical media industry history. The distributor focus of this article follows recent industrial approaches in anime studies, such as Rayna Denison's innovative analysis of the global distribution of officially licensed anime.[9] This focus also follows seminal anime and manga studies that underscore how shōjo and shōnen media shifted from their initial gender and age demographic origins to become primarily associated with generic and stylistic conventions by the 1980s.[10] Yet it is uncommon for yaoi media studies to take an industry approach. Instead, scholars in the field of yaoi manga or anime studies tend to focus on content, cultural interpretations of content, and fan production practices.[11] Because of its strong association with unofficial fan distribution models, such as peer-sharing and fansubbing, the history of yaoi anime's official distribution is an important industrial case study that reveals the stakes, investments, and failures of corporate

endeavors to adapt a category of previously fan circulated products to the American retail marketplace. As we will see, American anime distributors became invested in yaoi as a product category once market data was available to these distributors through their involvement with the Yaoi-Con. At stake for these distributors in the development of yaoi as an industry term was the maximizing of profit, yet yaoi's unique market positioning in Japan—professionally produced homoerotica largely consumed by young, heterosexual women—was without an obvious American analog.[12] Distributors experimented with branding yaoi products to align with at least three different existing niches: LGBT media, general audience anime, and adults-only anime. While the comparative effectiveness of these strategies is unknown, they all continue to be deployed by existing distributors. In sum, yaoi exists as a sub-niche within multiple market alcoves, simultaneously embedded within the broader anime category and overlapping with other niche markets such as that of LGBT consumers.

In this article, I map the materialization of the yaoi anime market in the United States through an industry history of official distributors. Ultimately, the market formed via distribution decisions, and supply chain hurdles specific to distribution led to the demise of one of the major players in that market. The history of the American distribution of yaoi anime can be divided into three distinct phases: pre-2001, 2001-2009, post-2009. The inflection years of 2001 and 2009 are chosen here because they mark events that shifted the landscape of the yaoi distribution. Specifically, 2001 marks the year of the first Yaoi-Con. The convention's promotional tactics, engagement with official distributors, and its reporting in anime fan and press outlets solidified "yaoi"—as opposed to "shōnen-ai," "BL," or "boy's love"—as the dominant term for homoerotic Japanese animation in the United States. In turn, 2009 is the year when Central Park

Media—one of the two major 'official' yaoi media outlets in the United States during this decade—declared bankruptcy. That same year, the streaming platform Crunchyroll shifted to a policy of hosting only officially licensed content and began cracking down on unlicensed uploads. This study examines the early years of yaoi anime distribution that preceded the implementation of streaming platforms, and therefore will primarily focus on the 1996-2001 and 2001-2009 phases of yaoi anime's distribution history.

Official Distribution of Ambiguous "Gay" Anime as Embedded Niches: 1996-2001

Anime now understood as yaoi were initially distributed ambiguously within at least two existing niche markets, the anime market and the LGBT media market. The term "yaoi" was already in use in the 1990s among subcultural slash fandoms (women writers who explore male homoerotic fiction) and diasporic anime-manga consumers. However, the term did not ascend to popular American vernacular, even within general anime fandom, until the widespread coverage and promotion of the first Yaoi-Con in 2001. Before 2001, "yaoi" was only used sporadically within American anime culture. For example, Helen McCarthy's *Anime Movie Guide* (1997) describes *Zetsuai 1989* (1992) as yaoi, while her *Erotic Anime Movie Guide* (1998)—written in collaboration with Jonathan Clements—does not contain a single mention of the term "yaoi" despite further discussion of *Zetsuai 1989* and an entire chapter on shōnen-ai.[13] Even the popular North American anime industry press, *Anime News Network*, did not list yaoi in its lexicon of terms until mid-2003, a year after the terms "bishōnen" and "shōnen-ai" were added to the lexicon.[14]

Within niche anime and LGBT media markets, yaoi existed as an embedded niche, or a subcategory that emerged within an already established niche category. An embedded niche category like yaoi, in this case, produces a secondary market segmentation; after an initial niche audience is designated, that audience is further segmented into subgroups. Specifically, this embedded niche category of yaoi reveals itself as a subgenre of ambiguous shōjo anime in its first demographic segmentation, and in the second, at the intersection of "gay animation" and "international gay" media categories.[15] While yaoi has previously been described as a "niche within a niche,"[16] here I additionally assert that yaoi's embedded niche positioning predated the popular emergence of the term "yaoi" in the United States. The earliest stage of official American yaoi media distribution commenced with the Culture Q Connection—an LGBT imprint of Phoenix Distributors, later operating as Ariztical Entertainment—release of *Kizuna* (1994) on VHS in October 1996, and Viz Communications' publishing of the manga Moto Hagio's *A, A'* in 1998 and Akimi Yoshida's *Banana Fish* (*Banana Fisshu*) in 1999.

Phoenix Distributor's 1996 *Kizuna* release under their Culture Q Connection label was the first American home video release of an anime containing overt male homosexual content. It proved to be a dual-intervention in existing anime and LGBT markets in the United States. *Kizuna*'s release represented a convergence of the popularity of anime home video in the United States and the parallel development of an LGBT home video market. Originally specializing in low-budget horror releases, the gay owners of Phoenix Distributors decided to shift their company to an LGBT market following their move from Los Angeles to Phoenix in 1994. *Kizuna* was the company's first LGBT acquisition. Given that several LGBT distributors had already established home video libraries, *Kizuna* was designed as a flagship release for the distributor's

LGBT imprint that provided a strategy to differentiate their product. Not only was

Kizuna a gay animation and a gay Japanese release, but it also represented a noticeable

intervention in the hetero-masculinist anime market. Up and to this point, American

home video anime skewed towards science fiction releases marketed to male audiences

and often with content warnings to differentiate anime from children's animation by

underscoring violent or sexual content.[17] By directly catering to an LGBT audience with

an anime product, the distributor attempted to ride the increasingly lucrative anime

home video wave with a crossover release in order to position the imprint as an

innovative player in the LGBT niche market. However, *Kizuna* was not marketed as

"yaoi" at this stage, but only as either a gay Japanese animation or a gay foreign product.

Other than the release of *Kizuna* for the LGBT niche market, yaoi anime's

American distribution was also facilitated by the distribution of shōjo manga and anime.

However, similar to the delayed usage of the term yaoi, the earliest official distribution

of shōjo did not define this media as shōjo or specify that in Japan this media targeted

the female sector of a gender differentiated market. Rather, anime adapted from shōjo

manga were distributed in the United States as general anime products with the

expectation that they would find their own market through anime fans' impulse buying

practices. Undoubtedly, diasporic audiences and some anime fans would have

understood these products as shōjo. However, the general sense from emergent anime

fans in the United States was that anime and manga preferences were a trial and error

process dependent on the fan's "blind buy," the purchasing of a product without being

significantly informed of what the product is or what kind of content it contains.[18]

This ambiguous distribution and its trial and error form of consumption were

evident in earlier American releases of shōjo manga and anime that included bishōnen

elements. American manga publisher Viz released Moto Hagio's *A, A'* in January 1998, and Akimi Yoshida's *Banana Fish* the following year—in a compilation book entitled *PULP* and as a standalone release.[19] Both *A, A'* and *Banana Fish* contain shōnen-ai elements and would subsequently be understood as shōnen-ai or yaoi by their American fans in later years. However, both the homosexual content and the female audiences for these manga were all but disavowed in their initial American distribution. While both of these manga releases were framed as shōjo by their American publisher Viz, what is striking is that links to female audiences of shōjo go either unspoken or are immediately contradicted to underscore a crossover male reception. Specifically, the back cover of *A, A'* defines shōjo without any mention of gender as "a uniquely literary genre of Japanese comics in which the relationships between characters are as meticulously crafted as the story's action."[20] Likewise, initial online advertising for *Banana Fish* defined the manga as an exceptional crossover release despite its shōjo association: "The only shōjo (girls' comics) title currently in *PULP*, *BANANA FISH* broke out of the shōjo mold and won a huge male crossover audience due to its realistic Katushiro Otomo (*AKIRA*)-like character designs."[21] These techniques of eliding the gender specificities of shōjo worked to frame products like *A, A'* and *Banana Fish* within a general American manga market that was imagined to be heterosexual men by the emergent industry.

Early officially distributed yaoi videos were marketed with even more ambiguity. Some of the earliest shōjo anime releases that included bishōnen elements were Viz Video's *Please Save My Earth* (1993-94, *Boku no Chikyū o Mamotte*) series that commenced in early 1996, Manga Video's *Tokyo Revelation* (1995, *Tokyo Mokushiroku*) released in 1997, and Anime Works' *Earthian* (1989-96, *Āshian*) videos with releases starting in late 1998. None of these releases were specifically marked as shōjo, bishōnen,

or yaoi; instead, their genre elements—specifically science fiction—were emphasized. Recalling the male-oriented targeting of U.S. shōjo manga releases, anime consumers were thought to be exclusively male and heteronormative, therefore, distributors emphasized genre elements associated with those consumers.[22]

One exceptional case was industry and fan discussions of the release of *Fake* (1996, *Feiku*) on VHS. These discussions and the anime's marketing reveal that it circulated at a transitional moment before the adoption of the term "yaoi" in American anime circles by 2001. *Fake* was released in May 1999 by the Anime Works label of Media Blasters. Whereas *Kizuna* was licensed by a distributor that specialized in non-anime products, *Fake* was the first anime released by an official anime distributor that explicitly featured same-gender desire between men. At this time *Kizuna* was the only other anime in U.S. release with overt homosexuality as a main plot feature, although there were previous official releases with bishōnen.[23] The distributor's text for the release situated *Fake* as an action-filled anime, and only hinted at its homosexual content with tongue-in-cheek copy like, "Not only does this pair of crime-fighting crusaders chase down criminals, but Dee can't stop chasing Ryo either."[24] Before the VHS' release, the distributor's pre-order announcement closeted the homosexual content of *Fake* more firmly by excising all gender-specific nouns and pronouns from the synopsis, and by watering down the gendered and sexual implications of the words "crusaders" and "chasing" with the more neutral terms "duo" and "crazy about." Out of ten total releases in the announcement, *Fake* is the only one with a synopsis absent of gender-associated nouns and pronouns making this elision stand out as awkward and likely a deliberate masking of the anime's content.[25]

Yet the retail circulation and reception of Anime Works' release suggest that it was understood to contain homosexual content despite the distributor's evasive marketing. Anime retailer Right Stuf International recognized the ambiguous nature of *Fake*'s distribution and included copy in their May 1999 release announcement that coded *Fake* as gay-associated anime for those familiar with Culture Q's previous *Kizuna* release, "If you're looking for something a little different (and you enjoyed *Kizuna*), you might want to give *Fake* a try!"[26] While not specifically referencing *Fake*'s homosexual content or its later categorization as yaoi, this retailer plays on the trial and error nature of anime consumption—the "give *Fake* a try"—while also referencing the only existing U.S. anime release previous to *Fake* that contained homosexual content. *Anime News Network*'s review of the *Fake* VHS underscores not only how heteronormative and male-centric North American anime culture imagined itself to be, but also how "yaoi" was not yet an established term in American anime culture. Written by a self-described straight man, the review repeatedly circles between a description of the plot and speculation on whether anime with gay content could possibly appeal to other straight men. The review is filled with phrases that centralize straight male reception, such as "us straight men can probably get into it if we're liberal enough" and the rhetorical question "but is it something straight guys will like?"[27] Although the reviewer does acknowledge a possible straight female and gay male audience for *Fake*, phrases that centralize the straight male reception once again imagine the anime niche market is a straight male market, and in doing so, argue that a release unaccepted by that market is doomed to failure. This perhaps explains the fact that the reviewer rated *Fake* with a B+ when the only negative aspect of the review was that the anime would not appeal to homophobic straight men. Furthermore, the review describes *Fake* as "shonen ai" rather

than yaoi, which also supports the observation above that yaoi was not yet a dominant term in American anime culture.

The reception of *Fake*'s official DVD release on December 19, 2000 anticipated the emergence of the term "yaoi" in the vernacular of American anime culture. Whereas the official packaging and marketing of Anime Works' VHS release all but disavowed the show's homosexual content, the DVD release materials included explicit references to its homoerotic elements including a screenshot on the back cover of two men with eyes locked about to kiss and an awkward content warning stating "contains dipictions (sic) of alternative lifestyles."[28] The majority of reviews for the DVD release invoke the term "yaoi," with all but one review on Amazon designating *Fake* as yaoi by August 2001. The review on the website *Anime on DVD* categorized *Fake* as "soft yaoi/hard shounenai" and described its official American distribution by Media Blasters as "a rarity in the domestic licensing scene."[29] Notably, all of these reviews were posted online in 2001, the year of the first Yaoi-Con held on September 1 and 2 in San Francisco.

The Yaoi Anime Distribution Landscape from 2001 to 2009

I argue that the occurrence of the Yaoi-Con in 2001 coincided with a shift in official yaoi media distribution in the United States. It marked the moment when "yaoi" emerged as a distribution term, indelibly affecting American anime subcultural vernacular. The Yaoi-Con generated a promotional buzz within the larger anime niche market, and critical coverage of the convention emerged in the anime news press. Due to this proliferation of promotional and critical discourse, American manga publishers and anime distributors began to perceive yaoi media as a commercial product that could be adapted for the American market. Subsequently, "yaoi" became a widespread reception,

marketing, and distribution term within North American anime cultures, outstripping the popularity of related terms like shōnen-ai. Ultimately, the convention provided an experimental setting for emergent and established North American anime distributors to test the market for yaoi media.

The Yaoi-Con was founded by Susan Chen, a major figure in the United States yaoi fandom who launched one of the first and most functional American yaoi fan networks *Aestheticism.com*.[30] The online network was run by fans and kept afloat by the Aestheticism Cybershoppe that stocked manga, dōjinshi, and other yaoi related merchandise. *Aestheticism.com* publicized the Yaoi-Con as early as October 2000, jump-starting widespread promotion through Yahoo message groups, cross-linking on yaoi fan and artist sites, and eventual coverage by *Anime News Network*, the primary anime industry publication for North America. In early 2001, an *Anime News Network* commentator objected to the event due to the lack of a congruent heterosexual-oriented convention, complaining "we don't have a Hentai con," and asserting that yaoi is "gay porn, flat out. Please stop fooling yourselves."[31] Some of *Anime News Network*'s readers demanded the press apologize to the convention's organizers for the comments. Ultimately, the antagonistic Yaoi-Con coverage sparked controversy and generated more publicity for the convention.

The Yaoi-Con was a key moment for the history of yaoi distribution because it solidified yaoi as an industry term for distributors while simultaneously inducting the term into general U.S. anime fan vernacular. Many of the distributors that had yet to enter the yaoi media market (and those that were beginning to dabble in it) were present as vendors and sometimes sponsors for this first annual convention. Sponsors and vendors at the first Yaoi-Con also included an eclectic mix of mainstream North

American anime distributors, retailers, graphic designers and artists.³² Culture Q

Connection was present as a dealer as were Media Blasters and Central Park Media

(CPM), which would become the two most prolific distributors of yaoi anime until 2009.

Media Blasters and CPM had not yet released products more explicitly associated with

yaoi and had yet to invoke "yaoi" in their promotional materials. It is conceivable that

distributors perceived the convention as an opportunity to test the market and promote

their quasi-yaoi and bishōnen products, such as *Fake* and *Earthian* from Media

Blasters' Anime Works line, and *Darkside Blues* (1994, *Dākusaido Burūsu*),

NightWalker (1998, *Naitouōkā Mayonaka no tantei*), and *Angel Sanctuary* (2000,

Tenshi Kinryōku) from CPM's library.

Anime distributors were given particular incentives to participate in the

convention. Firstly, distributors or fan dealers without official licenses were forbidden

from selling fansubs or bootlegs, which cleared the dealer room for official distributors

only. This allowed official anime distributors to set their prices in relation to one

another without the possibility of being undercut by unlicensed distributors. The ban on

unofficial distribution was enforced with a zero-tolerance policy, which threatened

prosecution and blacklisting from conventions beyond the Yaoi-Con. The convention's

policy stated, "Bootlegs will be confiscated on sight and police presence will be used.

Dealers who sell bootlegs will have their actions publicized through our website,

warning other conventions about the Dealer's infraction."³³

Beyond buying dealer tables, distributors could also sponsor the event. Sponsors

were recognized with additional advertising space in the program, on the website, and in

signage throughout the convention space. Distributor sponsors were also enticed by

intangible benefits such as "building long-term relationships with an exclusive

audience" and "creating and/or renewing brand awareness."34 To support these intangibles, demographic data was collected from registered attendees and compiled into a concise market analysis. The Yaoi-Con's corporate sponsor promotion framed sponsorship as a key way for distributors to reach a new ideal market of diverse, tech-savvy, collectors looking for new products to buy and new favorite distributors to promote.35 The ad calling for corporate sponsorship provided the following demographic breakdown: "Average Attendee Age = 28; Attendee Locations: United States, England, Germany, Canada and Japan; Attendee Gender: 81% Female, 19% Male."36 These distributor incentives proved attractive as the Yaoi-Con gained sponsorship from major distributors like Animeigo and ADV Films, as well as the previously mentioned LGBT media distributor Culture Q Connection.

The participation of Media Blasters and CPM at the first Yaoi-Con is significant because these companies became the two largest yaoi anime distributors in the period from 2001 to 2009. As competitors in both the yaoi niche and the large anime market, Media Blasters and CPM engaged in distribution tactics that mirrored one another. Both specialized in distributing print and video media often with the intention of providing tie-in products for fans of a franchise. For example, CPM distributed both the *Geobreeders* OVA and five volumes of the manga. Media Blasters similarly distributed DVD and manga from the *Apocalypse Zero* franchise. By 2001, both companies had already developed bifurcated product lines to differentiate general release titles from adult-oriented titles. CPM branded its general audience anime with the product line US Manga Corps, while its hentai (usually understood as heterosexual-oriented and "adults only") products were branded Anime 18. Similarly, Media Blasters used the name Anime Works for its general release anime, and Kitty for its adult anime. Notably, both CPM

and Media Blasters yaoi libraries were often branded within their established hentai lines. In 2004, CPM's initial announcement for their *Kizuna* DVD and manga releases occurred in their age-segregated Anime 18 catalog suggesting that these products would be released as part of the hentai imprint.[37] Eventually, CPM would rebrand its *Kizuna* products within a third distinct product line called Be Beautiful exclusively reserved for its yaoi releases. On the other hand, Media Blasters released several of its yaoi anime, including the *Kizuna* redux *Kizuna: Much Ado About Nothing* (2001, *Kizuna: Koi no Kara Sawagi*), via its Kitty hentai brand. However, Media Blasters did acquire several less explicit yaoi that were distributed as general release products through its Anime Works line.

From 2001 to 2009, the American yaoi anime distribution market began to develop as yaoi physical media releases began to increase substantially with the new focus on DVD distribution. During that period, the competitive formation of this niche industry reached a tiered structure, rather than a micro-oligopolistic structure like the larger anime industry where a few key distributors held comparable sway. The yaoi anime industry's tiered structure can be observed with respect to acquisition and release frequency: Media Blasters dominated release prevalence with the highest number and frequency of releases, CPM experienced a brief yaoi boom, and Ariztical's Culture Q Connection remained stagnant with no new acquisitions or releases after 2001. One-off releases by other companies occurred as well (see Appendix for a list of releases up to 2009). At this time, Media Blasters was by far the most prolific distributor of yaoi anime. Per year, the company averaged 4 releases, which it branded through two of its established lines. Its adult-oriented Kitty line released a total of 10 yaoi DVDs from 2002 to 2008, averaging approximately 1.67 yaoi releases each year. Its general

audience line, Anime Works, released a total of 26 less explicit yaoi DVDs from 2001 to 2009, averaging approximately 2.89 yaoi releases each year. On the other hand, the bulk of CPM's yaoi DVDs were released in the window from 2003 to 2006; if *Descendants of Darkness* (2000, *Yami no Matsuei*) is included in this count then the company distributed nine yaoi titles, averaging 2.25 DVDs per year during this brief boom period. As we will see, due to financial difficulties at CPM, mid-decade appears to be the point when Media Blasters began to overtake CPM's position in the anime (and yaoi) market, leading one industry source to observe, "Media Blasters is picking up the slack of releasing Central Park Media's backlist on DVD, it seems."[38]

The American yaoi anime distribution market's tiered structure shifted notably by mid-decade as the second-tier distributor, CPM, sustained significant financial hardship and a new distributor emerged from the retailer Right Stuf. As early as 2005, CPM began layoffs. The downsize was attributed to a DVD warehousing mistake and increasing product returns from customers who were reportedly "much more selective" than in the past.[39] CPM took a major financial blow following the January 2006 bankruptcy of retail conglomerate Musicland, CPM's "largest customer."[40] Later that year, CPM's other primary retailer, Tower Records, filed for bankruptcy. Finally, in mid-2006 a Japanese company called Biblos, which was the major licenser of yaoi manga to American distributors, folded and was acquired by one of Japan's major vertically integrated anime conglomerates, Animate, which rebranded Biblos as Libre Publishing. CPM and its yaoi manga competitors—Media Blasters, Tokyopop, and Digital Manga Publishing—all expressed uncertainty about the new owner's renewal of their licenses.[41] Following these three significant impediments to CPM's operations, the company restructured its distribution arrangements by contracting with other distributors rather

than dealing directly with retailers like Musicland and Tower. Shortly thereafter in October 2006, the company was reportedly on a "rebound" according to a *Publishers Weekly* interview with CPM managing director John O'Donnell.[42]

In the DVD realm, CPM had initially worked directly with retailers, so-called "one-step distribution," and in some cases wholesalers, "two-step distribution," but by mid-decade it began implementing arrangements where larger distributors interfaced with retailers and wholesalers on behalf of CPM. Late in 2004, CPM began a partnership with the conglomerate Warner-Elekra-Atlantic Corporation (WEA), which became the exclusive distributor of CPM products in the United States.[43] This was a surprising development not only because WEA was a conglomerate specializing in music distribution, but also because it was perhaps the first instance of a corporation linked to a major Hollywood studio, Warner Bros., involved in the distribution of both yaoi and hentai. Specifically, the Warner-Elekra-Atlantic name appeared on the back cover of CPM's DVD release of *Kizuna*. WEA had previously distributed anime DVDs put out by Manga Entertainment until that company was bought by the media division of the telecommunications conglomerate International Discount Telecommunications Corporation. According to John O'Donnell, WEA sought another anime distribution venture following the loss of its relationship with Manga Entertainment.[44]

During this period, Media Blasters established a substantially different set of distribution relationships with licensors, retailers, and streaming services than CPM. Media Blasters licensed product from a broader array of industries including American independent companies, television networks, Italian distributors, as well as Japanese companies. Whereas CPM relied heavily on the Trans World/Musicland conglomerate as a primary retail customer, Media Blasters had relationships with Trans World as well

as Best Buy and Walmart. CPM eventually shifted toward soliciting sub-distributors to release product to retailers, but Media Blasters continued a focus on one-step distribution until 2010 when it contracted with Allegro Media Group for subdistribution in the United States.[45]

While both Media Blasters and CPM operated from an assumption that television programming of their content could facilitate consumer buying, CPM primarily sought relationships with North American networks to license their existing media properties while Media Blasters tended to seek distribution rights from shows already scheduled for North American television. By the year 2000, television anime such as *Dragonball Z*, *Pokemon*, and *Sailor Moon* had made their way onto American television networks, popularizing these franchises among American audiences and leading to the success of tie-in merchandise. CPM aimed to replicate this phenomenon with its anime library, and in early 2002, CPM shows were being broadcast on Cartoon Network, Encore, and the International Channel.[46] CPM continued to license its anime for television with the International Channel acquiring new shows for its on-demand service and FUNimation licensing CPM shows for syndicated programming on the Colours TV network.[47] On the other hand, Media Blasters gained industry prominence through a reverse strategy of licensing shows already programmed for North American television. According to *Video Store Magazine*, it was Media Blasters' measured distribution decisions, such as the combination of the company's acquisition of *Invader Zim* and a successful run of its *Rurōni Kenshin* (1996-99) on Cartoon Network, that led to the company's expansion in the American anime market.[48]

Throughout its existence, CPM was at the forefront of online distribution, forging strategic partnerships with numerous online platforms. In 1997, CPM developed a

subsidiary called Binary Media Works that hosted content on AOL's International

Channel and designed an online storefront on AOL that was reported as the first such

partnership.[49] Throughout the 2000s CPM continued to partner with digital platforms

to release content. By 2005, CPM offered over 100 trailer downloads compatible with

Sony's PlayStation Portable, became the first anime distributor to provide full-length

anime content for the Apple Ipod, and contracted with online VOD services Movielink,

OnAir and TotalVid to offer full episode and OVA downloads.[50] In 2006, CPM had

expanded to additional VOD platforms CinemaNow, GreenCine, and Direct2Drive, and

became the first anime distributor to directly provide streaming content for Google

Video.[51] On the other hand, Media Blasters promoted online content later in the decade,

including streaming endeavors initiated with Crunchyroll in 2008, *Anime News

Network* in 2009, and Hulu by 2010.

In sum, CPM's multi-channel distribution framework appears to have been

structured by an impetus to diversify its industry presence through distribution and

subdistribution deals with larger distributors, television networks, and streaming

platforms. It is unclear whether platform diversification helped or hindered CPM's

market status. During the same period, Media Blasters overcame CPM in number and

genre diversity of DVD releases, but also appears to have branched out more slowly into

online, VOD, and streaming content. Ultimately, CPM's diversification strategy could

not save the company from financial peril by the decade's end.

Yaoi: A Distribution Category of Embedded Niche Overlap

For distribution studies, the case of American yaoi anime distribution underscores how

distribution decisions, infrastructures, and reach have the power to recontextualize

media for market purposes. American distributors experimented with an array of strategies that operated independently from content or original target audience. During the initial wave of circulation in the United States, yaoi products were categorized as ambiguous anime, foreign LGBT, and hentai until the word "yaoi" gained notable purchase in American anime vernacular. The history of its American distribution strongly suggests that yaoi was more than a niche-within-a-niche. As a distribution category, yaoi developed into an embedded niche intersecting with seemingly distinct niche markets: the emergent home video markets for LGBT media and anime. On the one hand, yaoi products have been historically understood in the United States as part of the LGBT media landscape, whereby yaoi products were sold in American gay media catalogues, covered in the gay press, and categorized as LGBT on some retail venues like the now defunct Amazon.com Listmania platform. On the other hand, as a subgenre of gender-defined niche of shōjo media, some anime that are now considered yaoi were marketed ambiguously in the context of early American anime consumption of the 1990s. Within that context, industry-defined categories—like yaoi—were still in flux, and trial-and-error consumption patterns proliferated. Because of this, early products like *Earthian*, *Fake*, and *Please Save My Earth* were compelled to seek audiences via networks of online reviews, yaoi fandom platforms, and Amazon's Listmania and So You'd Like To platforms. After 2001, a yaoi anime market solidified while an industry hierarchy formed. Distributors experimented with either placing yaoi anime within existing product lines or developing standalone yaoi media subsidiaries. Yaoi anime products once again emerged at the overlap of seemingly distinct niches. However, this time, such products were explicitly marketed with the term "yaoi" and were branded within bifurcated hentai and general release product lines that corresponded to age-

based segments of the anime audience. The first American distributor to develop a product line designated for yaoi media was CPM. However, the closure of two major retailers resulted in uncertainty for the company, and only three DVDs were released in CPM's yaoi line.

Despite CPM's restructure and reports that the company had recovered from financial peril, CPM filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy in 2009. This event was widely reported in both anime fan networks and the mainstream media industry press. Accounts of the bankruptcy varied, and reports offered numerous conjectures for the company's demise. Erica Friedman of ALC Publishing and Yuricon wrote a eulogy for CPM, and speculated that the Musicland bankruptcy and the Biblios licensing incident were significant negative factors in the company's history.[52] *Crain's New York Business* situated the bankruptcy as part of a wider demise in New York-based media industries due to the Great Recession and a contemporaneous decrease in tax incentives for local media productions.[53] One dedicated fan followed the bankruptcy case documents released on PACER, and culled from them revelations about CPM's subdistribution agreements with KOCH Entertainment and AD Vision prior to the bankruptcy.[54] The fan coverage speculated which companies might acquire CPM's licenses to release its library titles in the future. However, the subdistribution data also suggests that CPM was increasingly moving away from direct physical media distribution, yet it remains unclear whether this was due to a lack of interest, increasing emphasis on online content, or a decline in feasibility following the company's restructure.

The inability for press and fan accounts to reach a consensus on the reasons for CPM's demise speaks to the complexity of accounting for industry shifts more generally. Industrial history requires a diversity of sources and an awareness of how public image

maintenance utilizes measured information disclosure and selective information omission.[55] Unstated in the contemporaneous press and fan coverage of CPM's bankruptcy were the larger market transformations resulting from the rise in popularity of streaming platforms and the parallel decline in the DVD market. Netflix began offering streaming content in 2007, and introduced the option for stream only subscriptions (with no DVD rental component) in 2010. In 2008, Hulu launched its streaming site and began its subscription service in 2010. Also in 2008, Crunchyroll announced its partnership with official licensors to begin simulcasting official content in early 2009.[56] The DVD market was in decline by 2009 with sales down a third from the market's peak year of 2005.[57] While CPM was one of the earliest anime companies to seek partnerships with streaming and VOD platforms, the majority of those partners did not survive this early boom against Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and YouTube. Since 2009, a new tiered structure has emerged in the North American distribution of yaoi anime. In terms of release frequency, four distributors—Funimation, Media Blasters, Nozomi Entertainment, and Sentai Filmworks—hold significant proportions of the yaoi physical media market, each with several DVD releases and at least one Blu-Ray as of 2010.

For anime and manga studies generally—and BL studies in particular—this case study underscores how media content is not the sole influence on how a product is received. Profit-oriented distribution decisions and local cultures of yaoi reception—such as fan practices of categorization—condition the ways yaoi media are accessed and experienced. Yaoi continues to maintain an embedded niche status, perhaps with a more fluid definition across previously distinct LGBT and anime niches. In part, yaoi still exists under the aegis of LGBT media in its American consumption and the LGBT press continues to discuss yaoi.[58] It also continues to be categorized via American sexual

identities, such as the LGBTQ metadata tags on Amazon Prime for *Hitorijime My Hero* (2017, *Hitoriji me Maihīrō*) and *This Boy is a Professional Wizard* (2016, *Kono danshi, mahō ga oshigotodesu*). Yet this association with LGBTQ+ identities has notably diffused across North American otaku cultures as well. One case in point was the 2006 reporting on Southern California's popular Anime Expo. English-language sexual orientations were transposed onto the terms yuri, yaoi, and uke, mistranslating them respectively as "girl-on-girl," "boy-on-boy," and "bisexual."[59] This diffusion is also evident from the incorporation of other American queer signifiers, such as the increasingly common presence of rainbow flags at anime conventions to signal queer or queer-friendly booths and constituents.

Queer media elements have in some ways become naturalized in both contemporary anime production and North American otaku culture—reflecting profit motives and market transitions as much as cultural changes. For example, in the last ten years, there has been a tendency for studios to produce shows that imply shōnen-ai in their design and promotional materials, but do not follow through with sustained displays of homoeroticism or male-male relationships.[60] Such production decisions suggest an attempt to serve multiple markets—including both yaoi fandoms and fandoms averse to yaoi—and mirror the earlier assimilation of shōjo aesthetics within mainstream anime and manga of the 1980s.[61] During the early years of yaoi anime production, stylistic and narrative choices served to accommodate distribution to the yaoi market. Now, a related style-narrative combination—character design in the bishōnen style without explicit same-gender eroticism—reflects a strategy to circulate both within and beyond the yaoi market. Aware of this profit-oriented tactic, yaoi fans on online platforms have applied the critical terms "queer baiting" and "yaoi baiting" to

signal shows that insinuate male same-gender desire but lack substantive queer focus. As with its earliest American distribution, yaoi continues to be a site of struggle between commercial interests and fan sensibilities.

Appendix: Official Yaoi Anime Releases in the United States by Year Until 2009

Year	Date	Title	Distributor	Ariztical	Central Park Media		Media Blasters		Right Stuff	Other	Format
					US Manga Corps	Be Beautiful	Anime Works	Kitty			
1996	3/19/96	Please Save My Earth Vol. 1	Viz Video								VHS
	5/10/96	Please Save My Earth Vol. 2: Memories of the M	Viz Video								VHS
	7/12/96	Please Save My Earth Vol. 3: The Moment's Mem	Viz Video								VHS
	10/15/96	Kizuna	Ariztical	X							VHS
	10/15/96	Kizuna 2	Ariztical	X							VHS
1997	5/6/97	Darkside Blues	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						VHS
	8/26/97	Tokyo Revelation	Manga Video							X	VHS
1998	3/31/98	Kimera	Ad Vision							X	VHS
	8/20/98	Earthian: The Beginning of the End	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				VHS
	8/20/98	Earthian: Fallen Angel	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				VHS
	11/17/98	Earthian: Angelic Destroyer	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				VHS
1999	1/19/99	Earthian: Final Battle	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				VHS
	5/18/99	Fake	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				VHS
2000	6/11/00	Please Save My Earth	Viz Video							X	DVD
	12/19/00	Fake	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
2001	1/30/01	Earthian Anjelic Collection	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	6/12/01	NightWalker - Eternal Darkness	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						DVD
	6/26/01	Kizuna	Ariztical	X							DVD
	7/10/01	Angel Sanctuary	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						DVD
2002	8/27/02	Tokyo Revelation	Manga Video							X	DVD
	9/10/02	Level-C	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
2003	1/14/03	Descendants of Darkness 1	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						DVD
	1/28/03	NightWalker - Midnight Detective	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						DVD
	3/11/03	Descendants of Darkness 2	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						DVD
	5/13/03	Descendants of Darkness 3	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						DVD
	6/24/03	Mirage of Blaze, Vol. 1: The Summoning	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	7/8/03	Descendants of Darkness 4	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						DVD
	7/8/03	Descendants Of Darkness: DVD Collection	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						DVD
	8/26/03	Mirage of Blaze, Vol. 2: Ancient Rivals	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	10/28/03	Mirage of Blaze, Vol. 3: Darkness Descends	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	12/16/03	Mirage of Blaze, Vol. 4: Tragic Love	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	12/23/03	My Sexual Harassment	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
2004	4/27/04	Anime Test Drive: Descendants Of Darkness	Central Park Media (US Manga)		X						DVD
	11/30/04	Mirage of Blaze Box	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD

Year	Date	Title	Distributor	Aridical	Central Park Media		Media Blasters		Right Stuff	Other	Format
					US Manga Corps	Be Beautiful	Anime Works	Kitty			
2005	4/19/05	Kyo Kara Maoh - God (?) Save Our King! Vol. 1	Geneon							X	DVD
	5/31/05	Kizuna Much Ado About Nothing	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
	6/5/05	Kyo Kara Maoh - God (?) Save Our King! Vol. 2	Geneon							X	DVD
	8/9/05	Kizuna 1	Central Park Media (Be Beautiful)			X					DVD
	8/30/05	Mirage of Blaze: Rebels of the River Edge	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	9/13/05	Gravitation Lyrics of Love	Right Stuf						X		DVD
	9/20/05	Kyo Kara Maoh - God (?) Save Our King! Vol. 3	Geneon							X	DVD
	9/27/05	Sensitive Pornograph	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
	10/11/05	Kizuna 2	Central Park Media (Be Beautiful)			X					DVD
	11/1/05	Sukisho 1	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	11/1/05	Kyo Kara Maoh - God (?) Save Our King! Vol. 4	Geneon							X	DVD
	11/15/05	Legend of the Blue Wolves	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
	12/27/05	Sukisho 2	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
2006	1/1/06	Gakuen Heaven 1	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	1/3/06	Kyo Kara Maoh - God (?) Save Our King! Vol. 5	Geneon							X	DVD
	2/14/06	Loveless 1	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	2/28/06	Sukisho 3	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	3/7/06	Kizuna Kazuma Kodaka Signature Edition	Central Park Media (Be Beautiful)			X					DVD
	3/7/06	Kyo Kara Maoh - God (?) Save Our King! Vol. 6	Geneon							X	DVD
	3/28/06	Loveless 2	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	4/25/06	Loveless 3	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	5/2/06	Kyo Kara Maoh - God (?) Save Our King! Vol. 7	Geneon							X	DVD
	5/16/06	Sukisho! Complete	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	6/11/06	Kyo Kara Maoh - God (?) Save Our King! Vol. 8	Geneon							X	DVD
	9/5/06	Kyo Kara Maoh - God (?) Save Our King! Vol. 9	Geneon							X	DVD
	10/31/06	Gravitation Box	Right Stuf						X		DVD
2007	4/3/07	I Shall Never Return	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	5/1/07	Princess Princess 1	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	5/29/07	Gakuen Heaven 2	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	7/10/07	Princess Princess 2	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	8/7/07	Gakuen Heaven 3	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	9/11/07	Princess Princess 3	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	10/16/07	Gakuen Heaven 4	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	10/30/07	No Money 1	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
	10/30/07	Angel Feather	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	12/18/07	Princess Princess Collection	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
2008	5/27/08	Embracing Love - Cherished Spring	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
	6/10/08	No Money 2	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
	7/1/08	Gakuen Heaven Collection	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD
	10/14/08	Embracing Love - A Cicada in Winter	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
	12/30/08	Kiss in the Dark	Media Blasters (Kitty)					X			DVD
2009	10/20/09	Loveless Collection	Media Blasters (Anime Works)				X				DVD

1 "International Sound Track: Tokyo," *Variety*, July 20, 1983, 38.

2 Robert Whymant, "Japanese Boys' Comics Set Businessmen Chuckling," *Guardian*, August 24, 1983, 6. While *Patalliro!* was not mentioned in the *Guardian* piece, an earlier Australian article on Japanese comics with a similarly exotifying perspective referred to *Patalliro!* (spelled *Pataliro* in the article) as an example of a Japanese comic with homosexual content; Hamish McDonald, "Japanese Enjoy the Low Life—in Comics," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 31, 1982, 7.

3 In this article, an anime's categorization as yaoi is based on whether it is classified as such on a fan or industry website. See Appendix for a list of licensed anime categorized as yaoi in an American context up to 2009. While some American fans differentiate yaoi from shōnen-ai or boys' love, yaoi has been widely recognized as the dominant term in American fandom since the 2000s. For an early discussion of this as an industry-driven phenomena see Dru Pagliasotti, "Boys' Love Vs. Yaoi: An Essay On Terminology," *Research* (blog), July 17, 2008, http://drupagliassotti.com/2008/07/17/boys-love-vs-yaoi-an-essay-on-terminology/.

4 "Toei Takes Giant Step In Market Participation," *Variety*, March 7, 1984, 12, 412.

5 "NATPE '90: Booth by Booth at NATPE," *Broadcasting*, January 8, 1990, 93.

6 Thomas J. McLean, "As Comics Diversify, So Do Movie Options," *Variety*, July 19, 2006, A6.

7 Sean Cubitt, "Distribution and Media Flows," *Cultural Politics* 1, no. 2 (July 1, 2005): 207.

8 Bryan Wuest, "A Shelf of One's Own: A Queer Production Studies Approach to LGBT Film Distribution and Categorization," *Journal of Film and Video* 70, no. 3–4 (2018): 24–43. Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

9 Rayna Denison, "Anime's Distribution Worlds: Formal and Informal Distribution in the Analogue and Digital Eras," in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Media*, ed. Fabienne Darling-Wolf (London: Routledge, 2018), 403–18.

10 Kanako Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics," in *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, ed. John Lent (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1999), 109. Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 44–49.

11 A full yaoi and BL studies literature review exceeds the scope of this article. Important recent works in the field include an edited collection, Mark McLelland et al., eds., *Boys Love Manga and beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), and a special peer-reviewed journal section, Dru Pagliasotti, et al., eds., "Special Section: Boys' Love Manga (Yaoi)," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 44–63."

12 As Andrea Wood notes, a key difference between yaoi and North American slash fiction has been the pervasive commercial orientation of yaoi, Andrea Wood, "'Straight' Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1/2 (2006): 406.

13 Helen McCarthy, *The Anime Movie Guide* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1997), 172; Helen McCarthy and Jonathan Clements, *The Erotic Anime Movie Guide* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1998), 32-41.

14 "Lexicon: Yaoi," *Anime News Network*, May 17, 2003, https://web.archive.org/web/20030517015734/http://www4.animenewsnetwork.com:80/encyclopedia/lexicon.php?id=23.

15 For example, *Kizuna* was discussed in the gay press not as yaoi, but as a "gay Japanese cartoon" and it existed in the "foreign" sections of LGBT mail order catalogs. Allyson Mitchell, "Kendo & Ken Dolls," *Xtra!*, December 19, 1996, 31; "TLA Video Holiday 1997 Gay & Lesbian Video Catalog," 1997, Subject Files: Part 6: Spinsters-Youth Folder No.: 14920, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York, USA.

16 Anna Madill, "Erotic Manga," in *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*, ed. Clarissa Smith, Feona Attwood, and Brian McNair (London: Routledge, 2018), 133.

17 Denison, 409.

[18] Anime fans' "blind buy" practices were widely discussed in the forum section of the industry news source *Anime News Network*. Additionally, within Amazon.com's now defunct Listmania section—a functionality that allowed consumers to compile and share lists that ranked products under a descriptive heading—yaoi fans compiled lists of yaoi and shōnen-ai anime because of the fact that these products were not distributed with markers of that category.

[19] "Whats New! 1/5/98 Graphic Novels," *Anime Nation*, January 10, 1998, https://web.archive.org/web/19980110111125/http://www.animenation.com/freethought/comsoon.html ; "Whats New! 1/18/99 Adult Manga," *Anime Nation*, February 8, 1999, https://web.archive.org/web/19990208215308/http://animenation.com/freethought/comsoon.html.

[20] Moto Hagio, *A, A´* (San Francisco: Viz Communications, 1997).

[21] "Banana Fish," *PULP: The Manga Magazine*, October 13, 2000, https://web.archive.org/web/20001013145318/http://pulp-mag.com:80/manga/bf/index.html.

[22] Denison, 409.

[23] Other than *Tokyo Revelation* and *Earthian*, bishōnen anime released on VHS in the United States contemporaneous with or before *Fake* include *Darkside Blues* (U.S. Manga Corps), *Kimera* (A.D. Vision), *Please Save My Earth* (Viz Video), *RG Veda* (U.S. Manga Corps), and *Tokyo Babylon* (U.S. Manga Corps).

[24] This ambiguous copy was frequently invoked in online retail descriptions, for instance "Anime Castle Catalog: Fake (Dub)," Anime Castle, August 22, 1999, https://web.archive.org/web/19990822111037/http://www.animecastle.com/ACAWVD-9935.html.

[25] The full announcement text is as follows: "Dee and Ryo are a popular duo at the 27th Precinct of the New York City Police Department. Dee, the troublemaker of the pair, is crazy about Ryo. In the meantime, a series of mysterious murders that target only Japanese-Americans are being commited (sic). Who's doing it?" "Media Blasters Future Releases," Kitty Media, May 1, 1999, https://web.archive.org/web/19990501092707/http://www.kittymedia.com/mbnews.htm.

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[27] "Review: Fake," *Anime News Network*, March 11, 2000, https://web.archive.org/web/20000311050727/http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/review/fake.html.

[28] *Fake*, DVD (Media Blasters, 2000).

[29] Chris Beveridge, "Disc Reviews: Fake," Anime on DVD, March 3, 2001, https://web.archive.org/web/20010303030320/http://animeondvd.com/reviews/region1/e-h/fake-1.htm.

[30] Aestheticism.com began as a physical zine called *Aestheticism*, in 1996, and then shifted to an online format in 1997, eventually branching out into a members-only network. M.J. Johnson, "A Brief History of Yaoi," *Sequential Tart: A Comics Industry Web Zine* 5, no. 5, accessed July 2, 2019, http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/may02/ao_0502_4.shtml.

[31] Zac Bertschy, "Answerman, Yaoi Better than Hentai?," *Anime News Network*, February 18, 2001, https://web.archive.org/web/20010630052635/http://animenewsnetwork.com/columns/answerman/answerman-01-02-18.php.

[32] For example, two of the most recognized North American anime distributors ADV Films and AnimEigo were present as vendors, with ADV also sponsoring the convention, yet the two would not effectively enter the yaoi market.

[33] "Dealers: Merchandise." Yaoi-Con, February 21, 2001. https://web.archive.org/web/20010221231359/http://www.yaoicon.com/dealers.htm.

[34] "About Sponsorship." Yaoi-Con, August 16, 2001. https://web.archive.org/web/20010816093142/http://yaoicon.com:80/sponsors.htm#about.

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[38] "Animania," *Playstation Magazine*, July 1, 2004, 66.

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Desiring Futures: Hope, Technoscience, and Utopian Dystopia in

Puella Magi Madoka Magica

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Abstract: In this paper, I aim to analyze the animated television series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* through a combination of critical methods: neo-noir criticism, feminist studies of technoscience, and discussion of utopia/dystopia imagination. My focus is on how desire and hope—two interconnected but potentially conflicting concepts—create the central narrative tension in *Madoka Magica*. Besides, I will illustrate that the "genre subversion" of the series is connected to not only the fictional struggle of magical girls against their fates but also the real power structures and asymmetries in modern society. By scrutinizing how the series represents the difficulties to resist a future imposed from the standpoint of dominant social groups and how such impasse can be confronted, the paper argues that *Madoka Magica*, while not really committing itself to the imagination of radical alternatives to the existent social systems, is nonetheless able to affirm the desirability of having hope for futures that are yet to be imagined.

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Introduction: The Question concerning Hope and Desire

If to have hope is to desire better futures, desiring itself is nonetheless an act more complex than good or evil. The Latin word for "hope", *spero*, from which "prosper" is derived, serves also as the root of "despair" (*despero*). To make a wish, to hope for the prosperity of someone or for oneself may as well become a harbinger of future betrayal. The purely benign *spero* may exist in the rare moments of firm faith or triumphant will, but the conflict between hope and desire might be more prevalent in our everyday life. From Kierkegaard to Nietzsche, from Heidegger to Sartre, Western philosophers have struggled to find the condition of hope amid their pessimistic reading of the Janus nature of desire. Technological advancement and the birth of a "mass" society were sometimes seen as the source of such pessimism: with the rise of technical and capitalist rationality that challenged traditional ethics and values, all desire appeared to be arbitrary, tailored not for the well-being of humans, but for the propagation of machines.[1]

But in the rebellious desire, there might still be hope. When radical imagination towards the future is needed more than ever, feminist theories focusing on women's "life activity" that are able "to critique and to work against" capitalism and patriarchy may contribute to the discussion of hope in face of alienation and exploitation.[2] Furthermore, feminist and science studies scholars such as Donna Haraway have paid particular attention to the role scientific knowledge and practices had in the subordination and marginalization of people from other gender, class, and race groups, while exploring new ontology and epistemology capable of "constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination".[3] Science and technology, or "technoscience"

as a unit of analysis, thereby connects the questions about hope and future to the multiple contested practices, affects, and power relations embedded in the society.[4]

This paper aims to study the question of hope and desire in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011, hereafter *Madoka Magica*), a twelve-episode anime series. I will use the following three sections to introduce the central stage of the story—a dystopian city that delineates the brutal world of magical girls. In section five and six, the critiques of modern technoscience and of the "male gaze" will be juxtaposed to the narrative of the series. Finally, I will conclude the paper by drawing attention to the ambivalent ending of *Madoka Magica* and discuss the condition of hope it implies.

A Magical Girl Noir

As noticed by previous critiques, the entertainment value as well as shock *Madoka Magica* created were deeply shaped by its bold experiment on the "magical girl" (*mahō shōjo*) genre. Emerging in the 1960s and 70s, these animated works generally featured children-friendly stories about teenage girls' everyday life, friendship, and adventures after they acquired magical power.[5] *Madoka Magica*, according to Sharon Tran, is thus exceptional for its investigation into the complexity of the genre by "foregrounding the various conditions that compel Japanese schoolgirls to become *mahō shōjo* in the first place".[6] While Tran argued for the relevance of the series to young women in Japan by connecting its narrative to a sense of "powerlessness" induced by gender structures and economic neoliberalism, an audience reception study revealed that the series may resonate in diverse age, gender, and cultural groups

for its rich texts and subtexts that addressed a wide variety of messages.[7] The interaction between narrative and media technology in *Madoka Magica* has also been scrutinized.[8] How this paper can have a constructive dialogue with existing literature will be discussed in the later sections.

To approach the subversiveness of *Madoka Magica*, the utopian-dystopian aspects of its story will be my focus, and criticism of neo-noir cinema will be my main point of reference. Neo-noir is a genre which distinguishes itself from the "classic" film noir of 1940s and 50s by a reflexivity towards its own conventions, and by its more complex approach towards the absurdity, alienation, and ambivalence of modern life. In *Madoka Magica*, a sense of absurdity is reflected by its depiction of characters' struggle in the supernatural world they are bluntly thrown into. *Madoka Magica* also shares a set of motifs with the neo-noir genre: the "noir space" characterized by incessant conflicts and chaos, the "noir time" that intertwined "the distant future and the distant past", and the moral ambiguity of a protagonist who tried to understand "his own identity and how he may have lost it".[9] Although the narrative of *Madoka Magica* appears to be devoid of larger structures such as society, state, or history, I would like to suggest that, similar to the neo-noir genre, the series has embedded subtle reflection and critique of modern socio-political conditions within its seemingly "personal" tragedies.

In the beginning of the series, Madoka, the eponymous heroine, appeared to be an ordinary middle-school girl—until the day she met Homura, a student newly transferred to her class. Later, when shopping with her friend, Sayaka, she found a small, cat-like creature hunted relentlessly by Homura. Madoka and Sayaka were then ambushed by a horde of monsters before a senior

student, Mami, arrived and rescued them. Introducing herself as a "magical girl" who had signed a "contract" with the creature called Kyubey, Mami thus led the girls into a world they never knew. Initially, the plot consisted largely of the lighthearted adventure and fantastic combat typical of the magical-girl genre, but Mitakihara city—where the story took place—was not simply a generic background. It was, I would like to argue, depicted as a quasi-utopia. Mitakihara was a spectacular city with skyscrapers caricaturing real-world landmarks and neighborhoods composed of a mix of modernist and classical architectures. It was an eco-technocratic city where solar panels, wind turbines, canals, greenspaces, and classrooms equipped with electronic blackboards and automatic folding chairs co-existed in harmony. It was, interestingly, also a liberal city, with Madoka's confident working mother, supportive homemaker father, and the abundant life they prepared for her and her toddler brother exemplifying the happiness of a middle-class family engaging in social production and reproduction.

The irony of *Madoka Magica* was that, after the brief showcasing of the everyday happiness taken for granted by Madoka and Sayaka in a quasi-utopia, their apprenticeship under Mami would guide them through the "other" Mitakihara where witches and their familiars—the monsters magical girls were supposed to eliminate—were hiding in their supernatural "labyrinth", feeding on the vital energy of captured humans, and causing chaos and suicide. While the significance of witches in the series can be studied through the aesthetics of their design and abilities,[10] it may also be analyzed as a sign of a utopia irreversibly contaminated by the monstrous others it can neither understand nor erase. Such "contamination" became obvious when the tone of the story

radically changed by the end of episode three, in which Mami was grotesquely decapitated by a witch. The girls were thus forced to face the terrible reality. Since witches attract their victims to the space society deemed "marginal", such as hospitals, deserted buildings, or vacant areas, the girls can avoid these places and find refuge in the apparent safety of middle-class girlhood. However, they found it difficult, if not condemnable, to simply forget the sufferings of magical girls.

Subsequently, episode four articulated this invasion of anti-utopian space into the everyday life. Following a possessed crowd into a rundown factory, Madoka saw them mixing bottles of detergent and realized that it was a mass suicide attempt orchestrated by a witch. Soon captured, Madoka was engulfed by the agonizing flashbacks about her adventure and tormented by her unfulfilled promise to support Mami. Unable to rejoin the utopia where people lived without even knowing the menace of witches or magical girls' sacrifice, Madoka thus must remember all the pain and burden magical girls have endured, but even that was not enough. Apparently, the only way to reconcile the utopia with its dystopian failures was to remember them *as* a magical girl.

As it would later become evident, what made Mitakihara really a dystopia was not a Big Brother but little creatures like Kyubey. Constantly seeking girls to contract with, its offer appeared to be plain and simple: become a magical girl, and it will grant you a wish. Initially limiting itself to the role of an observer and guide, Kyubey nevertheless kept expressing its willingness to recruit the girls. Even though it promised to leave the girls alone as they were traumatized by Mami's death, Kyubey—as if long waiting for the moment—showed up right after Sayaka decided to accept the contract in exchange for the miraculous

recovery of her friend, a young violinist whose career was ended by an accident. Using her newly acquired magical power, Sayaka was able to save Madoka by the end of episode four. However, the alienation, violence, and cruelty of the magical world would soon turn Sayaka's heroism into the ambivalence of noir absurdism.

Survivors of Utopia

Although Kyubey probably couldn't care less if Mitakihara was a magical dystopia, Sayaka certainly set out to maintain its utopian façade. Inspired by Mami's commitment to hunt down witches and familiars, she regarded her decision to become a magical girl as fulfilling the responsibility to protect the people she cared and loved—including the young violinist who hardly noticed the girl's deep affection for him. Such moralization of the precarious life of magical girls can nonetheless be futile, or even self-destructive. As Frank Krutnik has argued, the classical noir, portraying its male characters as either struggling to meet up with the ideal aspects of hegemonic masculinity or indulging in a narcissistic fantasy that provided a "secluded and untested sense of perfection", has already captured the ethical predicaments faced by modern individuals.[11] On top of the portrayal of the difficulty, if not impossibility, to act ethically, neo-noir had a unique focus on how people struggled in the life *after* the dereliction of moral idealism.

For example, in *The Onion Field* (1979), the death of a police officer has induced no guilt in his murderers' mind, but caused endless regret for his partner. Being unjustly blamed for his colleague's death, the surviving officer resorted to alcoholism and petty crimes as if he attempted to turn himself into

a person deserving such punishment. The grim landscape of *The Onion Field* thus let the Kantian ethics survive only in the twisted form of "a shattered dream still worth having".[12] Sayaka's ethics, which drew a line between good and evil, were similarly fragile in the inhuman world she inhabited, but this moral idealism was also necessary for her to respond to a question raised by Mami in episode three: if Sayaka decided to sign the contract, was her intention based solely on the wish for the other's well-being, or a desire to be *reciprocated* by the other whose wish was granted by her? Sayaka apparently interpreted this question as an opposition between altruism and egoism. Consequently, her wish for the violinist's recovery, along with her decision to become a magical girl, can only be justified if they were conceived as purely altruistic acts. And yet by doing so, the "hope" she can have as a magical girl will be confined to a selfless, almost masochistic, desire for others' happiness. A tension centering on this problem was thus presented in episode five and six.

Sayaka's belief in duty and altruism was first and foremost dismissed by Homura, who argued that magical girls were not saviors but survivors themselves. Always trying to prevent Madoka from signing the contract, Homura claimed that the misery a magical girl would face originated in nothing but the "excessive" desire embodied in the wish she had made. Such a bleak future was suggested not without good reason: as a magical girl can only replenish her energy with the "grief seeds" produced by defeated witches, to use her power unwisely—such as fighting witches' familiars which did not bare the "seeds"—may be tantamount to suicide. No wonder Sayaka's principle was viewed by Kyoko, an experienced magical girl who arrived in Mitakihara upon Mami's death, as merely an insulting joke. After preventing Sayaka from killing

a familiar and lecturing her on the "common sense" to let it escape and develop into a harvestable witch, Kyoko easily won a duel with the enraged girl. By maximizing the grief seeds she had, Kyoko's powerful magic seemed to prove the superiority of her survivalist philosophy. However, the imminent threat to Sayaka's idealism was neither witches' menace nor the sabotage from other magical girls, but an enemy within: the concealed nature of her existence.

A plot twist occurred in episode six. Trying to stop another fight between Sayaka and Kyoko, Madoka threw away Sayaka's "soul gem"—the oval-shaped container said to be the source of a magical girl's power— causing Sayaka to lose all vital signs. As Homura rushed to retrieve the gem, Kyubey explained that a magical girl was in fact nothing but a chimeric combination of her soul— separated and preserved in the gem—and a biologically dead body, which can be controlled in a limited distance and repaired through magical power. Kyubey later claimed that it could not understand why humans were attached to their fragile bodies, and inflicted the pain previously suppressed by the gem on Sayaka to prove that its manipulation was necessary for magical girls to be combat effective. The Frankensteinian technology of soul gems therefore compromised Sayaka's ethical principle from the start: how can her already dehumanized existence contain, rather than spread, the evil lodging in those inhumane corners of the city? And is protecting Mitakihara a cause worth losing her own humanity for? After all, is it still an ethical duty for a magical girl to "save" the ignorant others instead of trying to save herself?

In addition to the challenges against her moral idealism, gender norms also played an important role in the dilemma Sayaka faced. In a noir film like *Bladerunner* (1982), for example, the struggle of cyborg-slaves was presented

as a source of salvation for the male protagonist who, after witnessing the agency of cyborgs, eventually came to understand the meaning of being a human.[13] When the female protagonists of *Madoka Magica* were turned into part-flesh, part-technology, and part-magic cyborgs, their bodies became a mark of disgrace. A sense of "self-contamination" was evident in Sayaka's confession to Madoka that she, with her body degraded into a "zombie", can no longer ask the violinist to reciprocate her feelings. What was identified by feminist scholars as the rebellious potential in cyborg—a "subtle understanding of emerging pleasures, experiences, and power"—was thereby repressed as unnatural and undesirable through Sayaka.[14] To demonstrate how feminist theory may help to elaborate issues of social structures in *Madoka Magica*, I will now turn to an analysis of episode seven and eight, where the struggle for moral principles was connected to a power asymmetry that made any hope for better futures unbearably difficult.

Survivalists' Dystopia

After the appalling revelation about magical girls' true nature, Kyoko tried to seek reconciliation by telling Sayaka her own story. A daughter of an excommunicated pastor, she made a wish to have people listen to her father's preaching. By becoming a magical girl, Kyoko both contributed to the safety of her hometown and lifted her family out of poverty. Nevertheless, after discovering her identity, her father denounced Kyoko as—ironically—a "witch", subsequently burned down the church and murdered her family. Surviving such monstrous violence had shaped Kyoko's survivalism. Seen in this light, her philosophy was probably formulated not devoid of the influence of moral

idealism. For magical girls to survive, Kyoko suggested, they must discard the naïve altruism by the name of "hope", act egotistically, and accept their past and future suffering as if they really *deserve* it.

Sadly, this rigid opposition between altruism and egoism, between benign hope and selfish desire, forced Sayaka to either abandon her principle or to protect it till the bitter end. The confrontation between the girls—in a ruined church, under stained glass with Christian figures, and centering on an apple Kyoko offered Sayaka as a token of friendship—was imbued with religious symbols. And yet to accept the apple, when the innocence mystified by religion had been long lost, was not to betray the Eden but to recognize the rules of dystopia. As Sayaka decided to cling on her ethics, interrogating Kyoko how the money used to buy the apples was obtained, she compelled herself to follow an "altruism" that moralized even the forbidden fruit as normative *good* in the myth of market economy. Uncannily, this separation of self-interested egoism from order-keeping altruism echoed the capitalist structure that separated use value from exchange value. From the workers' standpoint, the two kinds of value were artificial and falsely created. Living in a capitalist society asked the workers to internalize such division at the service of a market logic which deemed "exchange as the only important side of the dichotomy" and thus benefited the capitalists far more than the workers.[15] In order to see herself as ethical, Sayaka likewise had to fight for a society devaluing "egoistic" behavior, even though her sacrifice was ignored by the very people who benefited from her protection. Like the workers, Sayaka was exploited for the benefits of others.

Eventually, the cause of Sayaka's despair was both the unjust foundation of her "magical" power and the structural violence against her as a "girl". This

was shown in the shock Sayaka experienced in episode seven, when she was informed that one of her friends, a classmate whom Sayaka previously rescued from a witch, planned to confess to the violinist Sayaka used her wish on. Sayaka was struck by a bitter thought—she should not have saved her friend—and became overwhelmed by the subsequent shame. As the friend asked Sayaka to "face her true feelings" for the violinist, she found herself, with her body turned into a "zombie" and mind full of resentment, unworthy of being loved. If Kyubey's technology forced magical girls to view their bodies and minds as separate "hardware" and "software", the patriarchal social norms limited female subjectivity to the value of "purity" and "self-sacrifice". Sayaka's refusal of survivalism forced her to live with the unreasonable demands of both Kyubey's technology and patriarchy, and thereby denied herself the agency to seek love, meaning, or hope. The demands of being a magical girl and being a woman in a patriarchal society are thus juxtaposed.

The last day of Sayaka's life depicted the disintegration of her moral principle. After a self-destructive fight in which she deliberately "switched off" her sense of pain, a quarrel with Madoka, and witnessing her friend and the violinist become a couple, came a black-and-white sequence containing the most explicit depiction of the brutality of social structure in the series. On a train, two men were disparagingly talking about how a woman could be physically and emotionally abused, exploited for money, and ultimately discarded "for her own good". The scene was then abruptly cut as Sayaka angrily approached the panicked men, whose fate was unknown. Later, found by Kyoko at an empty station, Sayaka admitted that she had been wrong. A world that permitted neither the right to desire nor the possibility of hope was not worth

protecting. Finding her faith in moral action become utterly absurd, Sayaka transformed into a witch.

From the Standpoint of Perverted Reason: Science, Economy, and Gender

As the final secret about magical girl's existence—that she would become a witch once she exhausted her magical energy—was unveiled, one may likely ask what can be the benefit Kyubey derived from deceiving the girls into having hope, recruiting them into the pointless bloodshed, and awaiting their second transformation in despair? What may be the use of such an inhumane system which reduced a magical girl's future to nothing but the replication of her *history*—the individual struggle between hope and despair as well as the collective suffering of magical girls and their witch sisters? In this section, I will argue that Kyubey's scheme can be better understood through the interconnected problems of science, economy, and gender in the real world.

Disclosing its true identity in episode nine, Kyubey turned out to be an alien from a civilization which harvested energy from changes of emotional state. Since emotions and individuality were only "rare diseases" in Kyubey's society, it was on the Earth that Kyubey, acting as one of the "incubators", found the ideal energy source: the ebb and flow of human desire, especially the transition from hope to despair experienced by adolescent females. Magical girls' second transformation into witches was claimed to be a process so miraculous that it defied the law of thermodynamics. By reversing the unidirectional increase of entropy, the girls were seen by Kyubey as the best candidates to save the universe from its future heat death—or at least to save it

for the aliens who deemed the sacrifice of individuals from some "lower" civilization a rational choice. A closer look at Kyubey's argument reveals that its use of technological rationality to justify a normative claim ("sacrificing yourself for the universe") resonates well with the conundrum of moral idealism in previous sections. Nevertheless, Madoka was far from convinced by Kyubey's rationale—not because she rejected the idealism Sayaka had failed to fulfill, but because Kyubey's logic brazenly exposed the absurdity of moral idealism as an ideology *imposed from outside*.

In addition to the appropriation of science as justification of its exploitation of magical girls, Kyubey's discriminatory and essentialist reading about girls' "emotional" nature was arguably built upon an asymmetrical gender dichotomy that simultaneously took women's labor for granted while rejecting their claims to knowledge as being too "emotional". Apparently, Kyubey's standpoint was made dominant not only through its alien technoscientific expertise but also through its entanglement with the economic and gendered structure on the Earth. Western science has been criticized by feminist scholars as "a conquering gaze from nowhere" which effaced the partiality of scientists who were predominantly white and male.[16] Interestingly, the visual design of Kyubey may reflect certain aspects of this "gaze from nowhere". With a harmless, doll-like appearance, Kyubey can easily disguise itself as a typical sidekick in the magical-girl genre. However, its generic "cuteness" was surrounded by uncanniness even before its true intention was disclosed. In early episodes, a close-up of its face, which reduced the character to two large round eyes and an "ω" shape mouth, was frequently inserted and created an impression of surveillance and voyeurism. This intrusive gaze,

coupled with the fact that Kyubey referred to itself by a male pronoun (*boku*), hinted how scientific claims could be entangled with the gendered violence magical girls have suffered.

The economic root of Kyubey's perverted reason demands another line of inquiry. Here, I will make a brief digression into the formation as well as the representation of modern girlhood in Japan. The construction of a childhood scaffolded by a standardized school system is crucial. As a place to educate children about an "open-ended time" in which humans control their own destiny, school, according to Rappleye and Komatsu, is in fact an extension of the factory regime which imposes "clock time" to advance the efficiency of alienated labor.[17] Modern school therefore begot an ambivalent selfhood trapped in the capitalist society. In the early 20th century, being a girl (*shōjo*) at school—a place where affective bonds among women can emerge while patriarchy was kept at bay—may nevertheless symbolize certain forms of resistance. It can be argued that the fictional representation of modern *shōjo* was "created only to be admired and gazed at by girls".[18] However, while literature—including manga—created by women and for women remained popular in postwar Japan, since the late 1970s the depiction of *shōjo* also started to change.[19] Media related to *shōjo*, such as the magical-girl genre, was at least partially incorporated into the male-dominant market. By the end of the 20th century, the representation of *shōjo* was deeply enmeshed in a consumerist culture focusing on *kawaii* (cute) objects. As Kumiko Saito has pointed out, under such market conditions, "magical girl's mission is now solely to be cute and lovable so as to provide viewers in and outside the text visual enjoyment."[20]

In the end, neither school nor society, in the real or fictional world, was

unscathed by a system that reduced "future" to mere numerical calculation. Technoscience can as well be complicit in the system by providing it a quasi-rational foundation. To question Kyubey's abuse of rationality is thus also to problematize the meaning of "progress" in history. After all, in the world of *Madoka Magica*, it is upon this very contract between incubators and magical girls that human civilization is founded.

Redeeming History

According to Kyubey, the incubators have been intervening in the affairs of humans long before recorded history. Historical events such as the formation of states, wars, and the fall of empires were revealed to be the ramifications of magical girls' hope and despair. The world of *Madoka Magica* had therefore "progressed" only via an endless cycle of female sufferings. This historical "fact" made Kyubey's argument of utilitarian calculation more difficult to refute: our current society was made possible by nothing other than the sacrifice of a sub-population. Kyubey then compared its relationship with humanity to humans' relationship with domestic animals, and asserted that, by profiting from the historical breakthroughs enabled by the contract, humanity on the whole had gained far more than they had lost. Finally, it provoked Madoka by asking whether she had ever thought of the animals raised, propagated, and consumed in modern society. If humans seldom care about the suffering of creatures with which they build unequal relationships, why should the incubators care about humans?

Indeed, even if magical girls appeared to never free themselves from the shackles of their contract, Kyubey could not dictate the action of individual

magical girls either. The advantage it really enjoyed was a *privileged access* to knowledge and information. Its inaction upon knowing Kyoko's desperate bid to bring Sayaka back from her witch form, which resulted in the death of both girls, exemplified how knowledge and rational calculation helped Kyubey realize its scheme. Since it had long predicted the arrival of the "Walpurgis Night", a gigantic, almost undefeatable witch, in Mitakihara, Kyubey attempted to "retire" as many magical girls as possible. This would be the best strategy to nudge Madoka, whom Kyubey believed to possess the power to defeat the Walpurgis Night singlehandedly, into signing the contract. Consequently, it seemed impossible for the magical girls to gain the upper hand over the incubators without first attaining the same level of knowledge they possessed. And yet even such efforts cannot guarantee success in this unfair game. Homura's backstory, unveiled in the tenth episode, would testify to this.

In her original timeline, Homura was rescued by Madoka from a witch's labyrinth. The two girls then become close friends, but Madoka was soon killed in her encounter with the Walpurgis Night. To save her friend, Homura made the wish to travel *back* in time as a magical girl. Her initially shy, unconfident demeanor was quickly hardened across numerous timelines in which she repeatedly failed to defeat the Walpurgis Night, while gradually realizing the lies Kyubey had told. She nevertheless refused to give up, hoping to accumulate more and more experiences in each trial. Forrest Greenwood has noted the similarity between Homura's strategy and the save/load mechanism of video games, arguing that Homura's difficulties in "winning" the game was a reflection of the unique branching-time system in recent transmedia works in Japan. Such a system would allow new universes to be born via official spin-offs

or "the alternate, fungible futures posited by derivative fan works".[21] In both fan fictions and the canon, Homura can never fully control how the story unfolds. There will always be unforeseen events and unintended consequences, and her desire to save Madoka is eventually proved to be self-defeating. As hypothesized by Kyubey, it is precisely Homura's Sisyphean time travels that made Madoka, with her unprecedented energy potential, into a "lucrative" target for the incubators.

The futility of Homura's resistance notwithstanding, I believe there is significance in her persistent attempt to utilize her own *knowledge* about the system in the struggle against Kyubey's plot and the catastrophe of the Walpurgis Night. Scholars have called attention to the ways of knowing held by the "insider-outsiders", who are included as the functional necessity of a society but are excluded or marginalized by the dominant group which holds the power to make the self-serving rules.[22] Insider-outsiders might, however, obtain certain insights into the techniques of oppression, since their daily survival depends on it, that even the dominant group does not have. While Homura may not gain access to the "science" behind magical girls' transformation into witches, she can plan ahead for the fight with the Walpurgis Night while discouraging Madoka from becoming a magical girl—acts that even Kyubey could not comprehend initially. It was also remarkable to see how Homura, lacking an aggressive magical power of her own, utilized technoscience in her struggle: triangulating the location of witches based on statistics, using and *crafting* a variety of modern firearms, and calculating ballistic trajectories during combats were all skills she cannot afford to do without. If Kyubey's scheme was simply to wait for a magical girl's transformation into a witch,

Homura's project enjoyed no such luxury. Gaining knowledge about the magical world in a trial-and-error fashion, she must constantly learn from her experiences, actively survey the innumerable timelines from a standpoint both inside and outside the history, and hope to discover the "correct path" leading to Madoka's salvation.

But is such hope merely a mirage? After all, despite the efforts she made in creating an arsenal by handcrafting and stealing from military bases, modern weaponry—guns, cannons, explosives, and even missiles—appeared to be toys when facing the almighty Walpurgis Night. By the end of the eleventh episode, Homura was lying in the ruins of Mitakihara, pondering whether to give up altogether. The injured, fractured, already too contaminated history of magical girls and human civilization seemed irredeemable. But it was actually Kyubey who unknowingly provided the condition for the undoing of this dilemma. What the incubators failed to understand was that, while they controlled the technology to transform a girl into a magical girl, they cannot *replace* the girls' emotional labor—the "miraculous" power of wishing. Witnessing the cycle of suffering Kyubey showed her, Madoka had realized that history was the locus of resistance. Thus, in the final episode, Madoka decided to eliminate witches from the universe. Madoka then appeared in various historical and futuristic settings: before every magical girl on the verge of despair, she purified her soul gem and promised that the belief in hope and miracle was neither wrong nor futile. Simultaneously, she even destroyed the witch she would become in the timelines Homura had traveled. What was the "scientific law" in the eyes of Kyubey was eventually transcended.

Nonetheless, in the end, Madoka was forced to become a "higher" existence

which would uphold the new physical laws in a reconstructed universe. In a highly emotional sequence, she bid farewell to Homura as her body slowly dissolved into the light. While history appeared to be redeemed, Madoka was nowhere to be found. Neither inside nor outside the history, she had become the very condition for new stories to be told.

Desiring Futures

The ending of *Madoka Magica* was subject to various criticism. Some have argued that Madoka's self-sacrifice failed to challenge either the socio-economic system or the gender stereotype of female caregivers.[23] It is evident that the life of magical girls has barely improved in the new world—they still have to fight a supernatural enemy called "wrath", which replaced witches as the bringer of despair. Only the form of their *death* was changed: after exhausting their power, they mysteriously disappeared. Referred as the "law of cycles", this phenomenon was apparently known by magical girls as some sort of divine intervention. As for Kyubey, it remained an alien agent contracting girls for energy exploitation—only this time energy was extracted not from the girls but the enemy they fought against. Consequently, Madoka's wish seemed to merely reform, not revolutionize, the system. Sharon Tran's remark is more positive. Madoka's new mode of existence, by defying the "notions of agency grounded in an ideology of autonomous individualism", may actually challenge the neoliberal society.[24] This analysis can also be valid to some extent: Madoka could not wish for the redemption of history without her knowledge of the collective struggle of magical girls, or without the efforts she and her friend, particularly Homura, had made together in desiring different futures.

Consequently, to read Madoka's hope as imagining something radically new may shed light on what Elizabeth Grosz called "the movement of actualization" that entailed "the opening up of the virtual to what befalls it".[25] If Madoka's wish really created a new world, that was because she did not predetermine how this "utopian" world should look like in order to solve the ill of the day, but instead concentrated on the reality she must *negotiate with* so that a different world can be actualized, even though she had never known or thought of that world before. It was through an openness to flexibility, hybridity, and futures which remained to be made and remade that something new could emerge. The hope for alternative modes to organize space and time, along with ways to inhabit the world, may also come from the "cyborg writing" that tell stories "about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other".[26] While the tension between desire and hope is likely to remain, if we stay with the conflicting feelings and realities, if we can desire futures despite and *because of* such uncertainties, it may still be possible to transform the dystopian undertones in our utopian dreams into new sources of hope—into future worlds we will love to know and become part of.

Indeed, the genre subversion of *Madoka Magica* might be seen as "part of the self-revolutionizing nature of capitalist production" that operates totally within, not outside, the dominant ideologies of society.[27] Nevertheless, to investigate how the questions of hope, desire, and future are approached by mainstream media can potentially enrich our understanding of the socio-political contexts they aim to reflect. This paper examines these questions through the paradox of technoscience in *Madoka Magica*. As I have argued, the

series reflects the possibility and desirability to confront an imposed future by seeking alternatives that are yet to be thought. Although the questions raised by *Madoka Magica* are very different from the classical utopian vision about ideal political and economic structures, I believe it is only after our desire to think about time, history, and futures is initiated that a critique of such desire becomes meaningful. We might then engage in sincere discussions about the ways in which our desire can be mobilized and materialized for causes that are truly transformative for contemporary society.

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The Indigenous Shôjo: Transmedia Representations of Ainu Femininity in

Japan's *Samurai Spirits*, 1993–2019

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Abstract: Little scholarly attention has been given to the visual representations of the Ainu people in popular culture, even though media images have a significant role in forging stereotypes of indigeneity. This article investigates the role of representation in creating an accessible version of indigenous culture repackaged for Japanese audiences. Before the recent mainstream success of manga/anime Golden Kamuy (2014–), two female heroines from the arcade fighting game Samurai Spirits (Samurai supirittsu)—Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu—formed a dominant expression of Ainu identity in visual culture beginning in the mid-1990s. Working through the in-game representation of Nakoruru in addition to her larger mediation in the anime media mix, this article explores the tensions embodied in her character. While Nakoruru is framed as indigenous, her body is simultaneously represented in the visual language of the Japanese shôjo, or "young girl." This duality to her fetishized image cannot be reconciled and is critical to creating a version of indigenous femininity that Japanese audiences could easily consume. This paper historicizes various representations of indigenous Otherness against the backdrop of Japanese racism and indigenous activism in the late 1990s and early 2000s by analyzing Nakoruru's official representation in the game franchise, including her appearance in a 2001 OVA, alongside fan interpretations of these characters in self-published comics (dôjinshi) criticized by Ainu scholar Chupuchisekor.

Keywords: Ainu, indigenous studies, shôjo, gender, arcade gaming, stereotypes

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Introduction

Like many stereotypes of indigenous culture across the globe, there is a tremendous gap between the real and the imagined bodies of native Ainu in Japan. This essay examines how the corporeal representation of two unlikely Ainu heroines—Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu of SNK Playmore's console and arcade fighting game *Samurai Spirits*—are negotiated across a transmedia landscape. With the exception of essays by Ainu historian and musician Chupuchisekor, scholarship rarely considers the role that popular culture plays in establishing positive and/or negative stereotypes through the 1990s and 2000s, even though there have been many recent contributions to the evolving discourse about Ainu and indigenous representation.[1] Popular culture is ripe ground for the circulation of ideology through mass consumption. The appearance of Ainu characters in anime, manga, and video games prompts us to consider the various ways that these representations support—and occasionally subvert—particular Japanese narratives of Ainu identity in the present. It forces us to reconcile the growing gap between the Ainu people's actual lived experience in contemporary Japan and the visual manifestation of Ainu culture in mediatized space.

Samurai Spirits (Samurai supirittsu), better known in the United States as *Samurai Shodown*, was a popular arcade and console fighting game of the mid-1990s.[2] Nakoruru, who appears in the first iteration of the game in 1993, is a sword-toting Ainu priestess of nature (Figure 1). Her sister, Rimururu, was added to cast in *Samurai Spirits III: Peerless Blade of Zankuro* (Samurai supirittsu: Zankurô musôken, 1995).[3] While there are a few characters in popular culture that are coded as indigenous—such as *Shaman King*'s Usui Horokeu Usui ("Horohoro") and his sister Usui Pirika[4]—few

reach the intense popularity of Nakoruru. Her likeness has dominated the *Samurai Spirits* franchise and its numerous spin-offs, now numbering over twenty games. She has also been featured individually in her own adventure game in 2001,[5] an original video animation (OVA) in 2002,[6] and her own dating simulation in 2005.[7] In addition, Nakoruru was selected alongside Terry Bogard, a male protagonist first appearing in *Fatal Fury: King of Fighters* (1991), to serve as the mascot for a social activism campaign committed to teaching children how to be environmentally and health-conscious. The height of Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu's surging popularity in the mid-1990s and early 2000s coincided with a rising tide of Ainu activism. As the two sisters fought against and alongside an international cast of characters in *Samurai Spirits*, the Ainu community struggled to legitimate their existence in the eyes of the United Nations and the Japanese government.

Figure 1: Nakoruru's Ending Scene. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai Shodown* (Samurai supirittsu), 2019. (American release). Accessible on YouTube, https://youtu.be/Ri_OfmZXk7c.

Historically, the Ainu people inhabited territory that extended from the island of Hokkaido in northern Japan to the peninsula of Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands. Visual

stereotypes of Ainu culture propagated from the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries in Japan and abroad through the media of photography and woodcut engraving. Seen as uncivilized by Japanese and Western explorers to the region, the Ainu were often described as primitive, uncultured, and occasionally violent.[8] While texts portrayed older men as covered from head to toe in hair, often giving them the nickname of the "hairy Ainu" in Western travelogues, younger women (menoko) were fetishized for the elaborate tattooing of their hands, arms, and face. Certain American and European travelers speculated that the Ainu had proto-white or proto-Aryan roots, and in both a Japanese and Western context the Ainu were not viewed as Asian or Japanese.[9] Even in today's contemporary moment, these same nineteenth-century images are often invoked as accurate illustrations of Ainu culture. This move undermines the constructed nature of such images and the impact of Japanese colonialism on Ainu society. It also ignores the vibrant culture that exists today and frames Ainu culture as something permanently located in the past.

The rise and plateau of Nakoruru and Rimururu's popularity in *Samurai Spirits* mirrors significant shifts in Ainu politics. One year after Nakoruru's debut in 1993, Kayano Shigeru—an activist, teacher, and leading figure in the Ainu ethnic movement—became the first Ainu politician to sit on the Japanese Diet. He worked to foster the national recognition of Ainu culture and its value by furthering the Act on the Promotion of Ainu Culture and Dissemination and Enlightenment of Knowledge About Ainu Tradition in 1997. In the same year, he and landowner Kaizawa Tadashi challenged the expropriation of their ancestral land for constructing a large industrial dam in the town of Nibutani, Hokkaido. Although the Sapporo District Court denied the

plaintiffs substantive relief, their decision was critical in recognizing the Ainu as a distinct ethnic group within Japan.[10] After Kayano's passing in 2006, Japan voted in favor of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007. However, it was not until May 2019 that an act legally recognizing the Ainu as the indigenous people of Japan came into law, even though many feel that this falls short of similar legislation in other countries.[11] Nakoruru and Rimururu's brief history in media culture straddles this crucial historical moment of awareness and increasing politicization of the Ainu cause. Nevertheless, their intense popularity made it easy to spread misinformation about Ainu culture to those who treated their representations as accurate. In a mediascape that was devoid of any representation, they were generally embraced as characters with a positive image (pojitibu imêjina kyara).[12]

Before the recent mainstream success of Noda Satoru's *Golden Kamuy* (Gôruden kamui, 2014–)[13]—an anime/manga that features an evolving friendship between a veteran of the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War and a young Ainu girl written in consultation with an Ainu linguist—representations of Nakoruru and Rimururu formed a dominant expression of Ainu identity in visual culture beginning in the mid-1990s. As battling indigenous heroines created by the Japanese game company SNK Playmore, understanding the circulation of their representation and narrative helps us grapple with the proliferation of indigenous stereotypes. It also aids us in exploring how popular culture was mobilized to create an accessible version of indigenous culture repackaged for the Japanese mainstream. This essay explores Nakoruru's popularity and her role in communicating Ainu culture through a transmedia discourse of the body, or more

specifically, the bodyscape. A term coined by art historian Nicholas Mirzoeff, the

bodyscape is a complex of signs. Mirzoeff writes, "The body in art must be distinguished

from the flesh and blood it seeks to imitate. In representation, the body appears not as

itself, but as a sign. It cannot but represent itself and a range of metaphorical meanings,

which the artist cannot fully control, but only seeks to limit by the use of context,

framing, and style."[14] The body, and particularly the indigenous female body, has always

been a contested site. Rather than view Nakoruru's body as a self-contained entity

within the official game franchise, it is essential to examine her body in terms of its

excess to question how her image reproduces, masquerades, and reinforces notions of

ethnic Otherness. While it is important to recognize her "official" image as produced by

SNK Playmore, I argue that it is just important to reconcile how her image circulates

beyond what the company can fully control. As an example of what Henry Jenkins has

called transmedia storytelling, Nakoruru's narrative cannot be contained in a single

game or platform; her story is dispersed systematically across multiple delivery

channels.[15] Her game representation is but only one facet of how she manifests in the

larger anime media mix.[16] The indigenous excess of Nakoruru's bodyscape is best

understood when examining her image through various popular cultural contexts

beyond her in-game appearance, including the 2002 OVA titled *Nakoruru—The Gift*

That Came from That Person (Nakoruru ~Ano hito kara no okurimono ~), and

expansions to her story found in fan-produced dôjinshi comics. To cite Marc Steinberg's

notion of the anime media mix, each instance of Nakoruru's consumption "must be

regarded as a form of production that further develops the entire media franchise and

the consumer desire that supports it."[17] Reflecting on the theories posited by Mirzoeff,

Jenkins, and Steinberg, I argue that the bodyscape of Nakoruru and her sister is consolidated across platforms, and understanding its overall impact in visual culture requires us to look beyond any one media or visual text. Considering the scarcity of Ainu representation in popular media, Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu often stand in as a model and metaphor of Ainu femininity for a non-Ainu Japanese domestic audience in the 1990s.

However, while Nakoruru and Rimururu represent the Ainu in visual culture, they are often understood, consumed, and even fetishized according to what Sharalyn Orbaugh calls the hybrid Japanese shôjo.[18] The term shôjo (or "young girl") is typically invoked to describe the constellation of anime, manga, or video games targeted to a young female audience that engage in a consistent and hyper-feminized visual morphology. Frenchy Lunning describes the "expanding quantum" of fan practices and commercial products that "spiral around this enigmatic and singular center: the shôjo character," who is ubiquitous but ultimately constitutes an absent center in her own discourse.[19] The shôjo evades a stable meaning, but the term is often defined in opposition to material targeted to young boys, or shônen. While the shôjo and shônen audiences remained more or less separate through the 1980s, the 1990s saw an increasing hybridization of shôjo motifs—such as a strong female protagonist and an emphasis on female transformation and strength—with shônen elements—such as action, social responsibility, and the visual exploitation of the protagonist's sexuality.[20] I agree with Orbaugh's characterization here, and while Nakoruru's character reinforces longstanding stereotypes of the Ainu and their inextricable closeness to nature, her physical body de-familiarizes her own Ainu identity (or the Ainu excess of her

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character), making the exotic known in a way that is consumable through modes of the hybrid shôjo. While Nakoruru is a strong character who harbors a great power, her success is primarily due to her more hybrid qualities—namely, her fighting prowess, her desire to protect the environment, and her sexualized body. Lunning explains that the shôjo "wears her cultural abjection on the surface"; and that these bodies are "in no ways stabilized and in no way actual."[21] While Lunning is discussing the shape-shifting nature of the shôjo, I want to embrace her exploration of the body as surface. Nakoruru's indigenous identity is an ethnic costume that she can don while fighting and that aligns her with Ainu activist imperatives, but one that she can ultimately remove revealing the unmarked and elusive shôjo body underneath. This duality of her body is critical to creating a version of indigenous femininity that Japanese audiences can easily consume.

Nakoruru's "Official" Representation

To understand Nakoruru's transmedia bodyscape, we first need to establish her appearance and character in the *Samurai Spirits* franchise (Figure 2). When Nakoruru debuted in 1993, she already had a tough act to follow. Two years earlier, Capcom's 1991 *Street Fighter II* not only developed the fighting game formula that would be adopted in *Samurai Spirits*, *Mortal Kombat* (1992), *Tekken* (1994), and *Dead or Alive* (1996), but they also debuted the first female playable character, named Chun-Li.[22] Outside of role-playing games, female characters in action games often occupied supporting roles, or debuted as the occasional villain or target to be rescued. Nakoruru was an early part of this 1990s trend in arcade fighting games.

Figure 2: Nakoruru. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai supirittsu II* (Samurai Shodown II), 1993. (Japanese release)

Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu are the only Ainu characters in the arcade fighting genre. While *Samurai Spirits* is generally set in during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), neither Nakoruru nor her sister bears any of the traditional markers of Ainu femininity of this period, such as face and arm tattooing that not only warded off spiritual/physical evils but served to mark a woman's maturity.[23] As their bodies are unmarked, their Ainu identity is made obvious through clothing that has patterned borders loosely inspired by the intricate appliqué designs or the needlework of Ainu embroidery on traditional garments such as attush robes, ruunpe robes, and matanpushi headbands (Figure 3). While Nakoruru's original character design by artist Shiroi Eiji simply had wide red bands of color to indicate these borders (Figure 2), later versions of her design make use of a linear pattern akin to the Ainu protective designs that mimic brambles and thorns (ay-us-siriki) (Figure 4).[24] This can be seen in the character art for Nakoruru and Rimururu in *Samurai Spirits III*.

Figure 3: The ay-us-siriki or "thorn" patterns can best be seen on the embroidered borders of the garment. Ainu attush robe,19th century (Meiji period). Elm-bark fiber with appliqué of indigo-dyed tabby. Public domain. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/51082

Figure 4: Rimururu vs. Nakoruru. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai Shodown III* (Samurai supirittsu III: Zankurō musōken), 1995. (American release).

Her character design in the 2019 *Samurai Spirits* most closely mirrors Ainu design-motifs by including a "double-whorl" pattern (ski-uren-morew-siriki) and an "eye" pattern (sik-siriki) on the back of her outfit (Figure 4).[25]

Figure 5: Nakoruru's Ending Scene. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai Shodown* (Samurai supirittsu), 2019. (American release). Accessible on YouTube, https://youtu.be/Ri_OfmZXk7c.

Traditionally, this craft would have been passed from mother to daughter and the meaning behind these designs often had regional variation. Tsuda Nobuko argues that these designs often constituted a kind of "embroidered resistance" to the colonial brutality of Wajin (Japanese) men during the Tokugawa, and that sewing techniques had the very real capability of protecting the wearer from harm.[26] Patterns such as the embroidered thorns represented protection from and survival of such violence. The designs in the clothing of Nakoruru and Rimururu merely mark their Ainu difference while ignoring the real and practical meanings embedded in these patterns. Nakoruru's character in particular also plays in a loose kind of cultural fusion; her dominant color palette of red and white is visually reminiscent of the clothing of Shinto shrine maidens (miko). Even though there is no connection between Shintoism and the Ainu, it nevertheless lends itself to the interpretation of her role as a "priestess" of the Ainu.

In the game narrative, the sisters perform their Ainu identity through excessive reference to nature. The relationship between the Ainu people and the natural world is a

common trope of the native, and it is evoked in a dangerous conflation between indigenous and green political movements.[27] While often a reductive stereotype, both Japanese and Ainu alike tend to invoke this connection to nature. As anthropologist Lisa Hiwasaki has remarked, many prominent Ainu activists and politicians publicly promote the image of the Ainu as the nature-preserver, while framing the Japanese as the nature-destroyer.[28] Nakoruru and Rimururu are "priestesses" of the Ainu who live in a village called Kamui Kotan, the name of which combines the Ainu words for god and village. Nakoruru is aided in battle by her hawk (Mamahaha) and wolf (Shikuru), and she is notable for being the first character in a fighting game where her animal companions actively contribute to her fighting strategy. Her fighting style combines swift, short-range attacks with her ceremonial makiri knife (called chichi-ushi; it is often referred to an Ainu "kodachi") and varying kinds of air strikes. Rimururu idolizes her older sister, and as such her fighting style is similar with some modifications in its execution. She calls upon an ice spirit (Konru) that she uses to freeze her foes. The names of their skills are all inspired by the Ainu language.

Figure 6: Nakoruru's Kamui Kotan stage backdrop. Screen capture from SNK Playmore, *Samurai supirittsu II* (Samurai Shodown II), 1993. (Japanese release)

When you fight Nakoruru in *Samurai Spirits*, the scene changes to a snow-covered Ainu retreat, with male and female elders (her grandparents) at the entrance to the

home and a cast of animal friends (Figure 6). Nakoruru has the ability to speak to

animals and predict the weather—a utility that makes her an asset to her village

community. Even in the dating game, *Days of Memories: Ôedo Love Scroll,* your first

encounter with Nakoruru is facilitated through nature—you meet her hawk, Mamahaha,

and witness Nakoruru listening to the voice of nature (shizen no koe) that nobody

except Rimururu can hear. Nakoruru is not only enamored with the natural world, but it

is her sworn duty to protect it. After each win in battle, she exclaims, "Receive nature's

punishment!" (Shizen no ikari wo ukenasai!) or, "This is nature's punishment!"

(Daishizen no shioki desu!), a winning phrase that she also shares with her sister in

Samurai Spirits III. Nakoruru's taunts play on the popular catchphrase of *Pretty*

Soldier Sailor Moon (Bishôjo senshi Sêrâ Mûn, 1991), who would say "In the name of

the moon, I punish you!" (Tsuki ni kawatte oshioki yo!) before she took care of her

enemies.[29] While Nakoruru's identity as an Ainu woman is virtually inseparable from

her attachment to the natural world, her set phrases seem to consciously invoke the

archetype of the Japanese shôjo through this linkage with *Sailor Moon*. Nakoruru's

popularity is built on her legibility within the logic of the hybrid Japanese shôjo

popularized in anime and manga of the 1990s.

Nakoruru as the Hybrid Ainu Shojo

        Although they did not personally work on Nakoruru's early concept, game

designers Oda Yasuyuki and Kuroki Nobuyuki were surprised at Nakoruru's intense

popularity with fans despite her "modest, non-sexualized appearance."[30] Oda recalls, "A

lot of characters were popular because of their sexiness, but Nakoruru doesn't show a lot

of skin."[31] I argue that Nakoruru was not consumed in the same way as other female

fighters because she is easily deciphered within the language of the shôjo. Nakoruru's

presentation as the hybrid Japanese shôjo defined by Sharalyn Orbaugh is best seen

through example. Shortly after SNK Playmore released an adventure game based on

Nakoruru's character for PC and Sega Dreamcast called *Nakoruru—The Gift That Came

from That Person* in 2001, they released an original video animation (OVA) on DVD in

support of the project in 2002. While originally intended as a thirteen-episode anime

series, only a single episode was released to the public when issues of funding stagnated

the production. Despite its commercial failure, the OVA continues to have a strong fan

following.

The anime closely mirrors the narrative of Nakoruru's adventure game. In the

Samurai Spirits franchise, she is a self-described pacifist who only fights when

compelled by the destruction of nature. This tension lies at the heart of the adventure

game and the OVA. In the anime, her deep connection to nature manifests when friendly

forest animals start to behave strangely, signaling impending conflict (Figure 7).

Towards the beginning of the episode, a young child visits a recovering Nakoruru and is

then bit on the finger by her pet squirrel. Later, a white rabbit consumes the body of a

dead deer by the side of a pond with crimson blood streaking down its face. Finally, a

dark sky looms over a bear frothing at the mouth, about to attack. The bear, in

particular, is sacred to the Ainu, and this scene presages the disaster about to befall the

village of Kamui Kotan.

Figure 7: Aberrant animals. Screen captures from *Nakoruru ～Ano hito kara no okuri mono～* (Nakoruru—The Gift That Came from That Person), dir. Kanazawa Katsuma, 2002; available on YouTube. Accessed 1 June 2020. https://youtu.be/S-ssCvT8n3w

These aberrations of the natural world motivate Nakoruru into action. But the anime also uses her body as a freighted signifier. Images of her bare flesh are often paired with a flashback or premonition of natural calamity. Despite her visual objectification, Nakoruru's naked body is never sexually activated in the OVA, which is crucial for her to remain the shôjo. For example, her second nude scene in the short episode involves Nakoruru bathing alone (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Nakoruru's bathing sequence. Screen captures from *Nakoruru 〜Ano hito kara no okuri mono〜* (Nakoruru—The Gift That Came from That Person), dir. Kanazawa Katsuma, 2002; available on YouTube. Accessed 1 June 2020. https://youtu.be/S-ssCvT8n3w

Ripples disturb the water's surface before cutting to an image of Nakoruru's feet standing in a waterfall. The image slowly pans up showing the mature curves of her body, with hands clasped in front of her as if in prayer. She is sexualized but framed as pure. The anime cuts to her face with eyes closed, as she takes in the last moments of peace. She opens her eyes, walks forward, and reaches for a robe draped over a tree branch. As soon as she wraps her body, a black feather falls into the water, disturbing the smooth surface. Nakoruru turns around abruptly in horror and the scene cuts from the tranquil cool colors of the forest to a rust-colored sky, with bodies strewn all over the ground and crows hovering. Her body is shown in monochrome and she covers her ears to prevent the taunting of a disembodied voice accusing her of causing the carnage due to her unwillingness to fight. She collapses to the ground, hands still covering her ears, and the scene cuts back to "reality" where her friends are calling for her. The bathing scene is pivotal in the way it references disaster; in this case, a nearby village succumbed to a plague. Throughout the anime and her appearance in the *Samurai Spirits* games, Nakoruru is often torn between the desire for a relationship (with her childhood friend Yantamu in the anime; with the American ninja Galford D. Weller in the arcade game) and her responsibility to save Kamui Kotan and the natural world.

Nakoruru is sexually mature, but despite her exposure, the viewer never sees any overtly sexual act—in many ways, the anime presents her body as virginal. Lunning explains that the abjection of the shôjo's maturity and the desire for agency and power are "configured through a masquerade of innocence and purity."[32] We learn throughout

the anime that Nakoruru is a priestess who must never consummate physical love lest she betray her duty. For Nakoruru to fulfill her destiny in saving nature, she must remain pure and unmarked. However, in our ability to visually objectify her nude form, these scenes also seem to contain her Ainu excess through the absence of tattooing. As mentioned earlier, considering the story's Tokugawa timeline, Nakoruru's body might be expected to mirror that of an Ainu girl/woman living in the same period, most notably in the practice of tattooing. While video games and animation certainly take liberties when depicting other cultures, the politics of tattooing were a salient point of debate for the Ainu community. In 1871, the Meiji government issued tattoo bans and communities resisted these laws through the 1930s. Tattoos were an important cultural practice with connections to both marriage and the afterlife, and women bearing these marks on their faces, hands, and arms were one of the most abundant signifiers of Ainu culture in visual representation in and outside of Japan. Six years after the release of Nakoruru's anime and adventure game, the last tattooed Ainu woman would pass away, marking a true end of the practice. While Nakoruru indeed occupies a fictional world, the overarching story of *Samurai Spirits* asserts a kind of historical authority by referencing actual sites of Tokugawa-era conflict and real period figures along an alternative historical timeline. Nevertheless, rather than a tattooed body, Nakoruru demonstrates her ethnicity through her constant voicing of concern for nature, and through removable objects—her ruunpe robe, jewelry, and weapons. When she casts these ethnic signifiers off, as in her bathing scene, Nakoruru is effectively reframed not as an example of Ainu femininity, but as the sexualized, but pure, hybrid Japanese shôjo.

The viewer expects Nakoruru to sacrifice her life to thwart impending apocalypse (Figure 9). She does not join with her love interest and must become a spirit, or kamuy in the Ainu language, by relinquishing her mortal body. In his work *The Anime Machine*, Thomas Lamarre explores the relationship between the shôjo female, technology, and self-sacrifice in works like Hayao Miyazaki's *Castle in the Sky* (1986) and Hideki Anno's *Nadia* (1991).[33] He reflects that while it is only a young girl who can save us, it is primarily a male audience that demands salvation at her hands.[34] Despite her ability to fight and protect the environment, Nakoruru becomes the shôjo to enact her sacrifice for the primarily male, Japanese viewer. Similarly, Sharalyn Orbaugh sees the new hybrid shôjo of the 1990s as an active and powerful force against evil. Orbaugh explains, "the power of the battlin' babes *derives from* the tension between their sexual potential and their refusal to activate it… they must entirely reveal their liminal bodies—sexually mature, as seen from the full breasts, but 'pure' and somehow still childish, underscored by the lack of public hair and imperforate genitalia—in order to *take on* their power."[35] In both the anime and the video game, Nakoruru has romantic desires and reveals the entirety of her "liminal body," but ultimately refuses the sexual encounter in order to save the world and nature itself. To allow for sex would allow for the potential of motherhood and the disruption of the shôjo ideal.
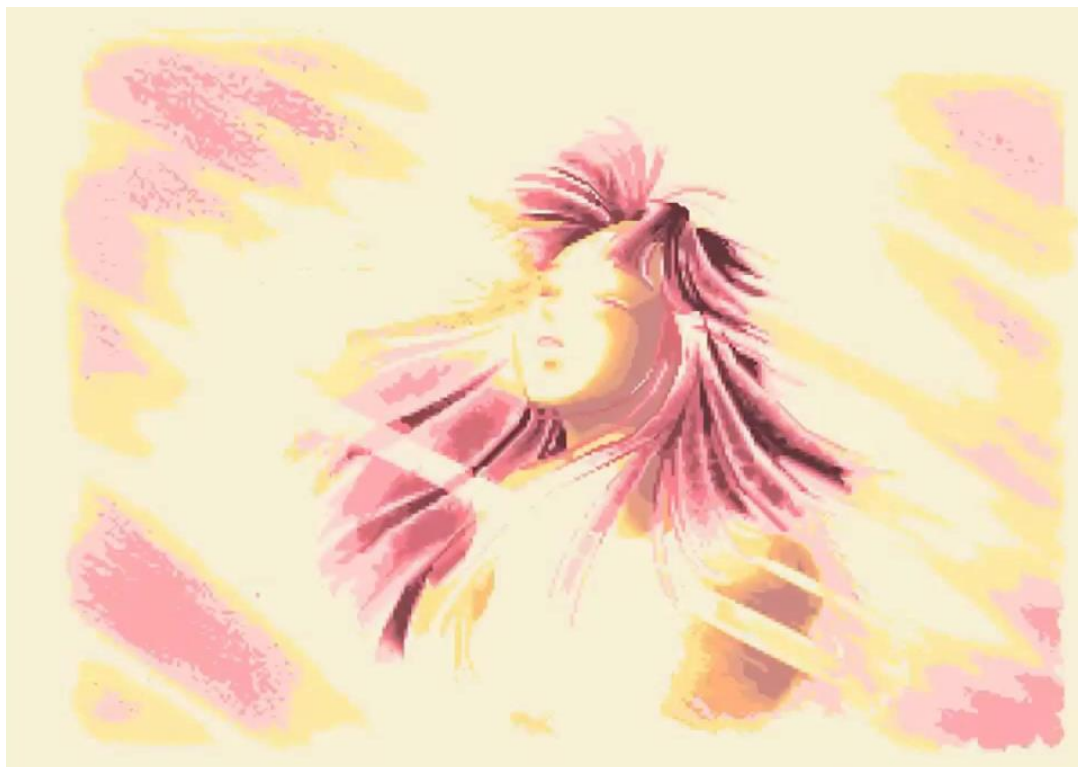
Figure 9: Nakoruru's sacrifice. Screen captures from SNK Playmore, *Samurai Shodown II* (Samurai supirittsu II), 1993. (American release)

Nevertheless, Nakoruru's Ainu identity activates the core of her power. While both Orbaugh and Lamarre discuss the shôjo in terms of the technological, Nakoruru derives her power not through cyborg superiority or technical advancement, but rather through a spiritual link created through an imagined ethnic tie to the land itself. This link resonates with contemporary debates over the deforestation of traditional Ainu land, and makes Nakoruru an ideal mascot for environmentally conscious activism. She is a strong and powerful character who harbors desire for another, and through its denial, she attains power to save the natural world. But only at the cost of her life. Her Ainu identity is worn on the surface, while her body retains the transformative potential of the shôjo hidden beneath.

Nakoruru's operation within the confines of the shôjo heroine frames her as a friendly representative of Ainu culture for a Japanese audience. Her character served as an important introduction to Ainu dress, beliefs, and language, even though she supported many indigenous clichés. She would come to represent the face of environmental protection efforts at the city and prefectural level outside of Hokkaido. For example, in 1994, she was featured as a mascot for Mitaka city's water services department and used to advertise direct debit into the national pension insurance program. The same year, Nakoruru would represent Kyoto's afforestation campaign to commemorate the 1,200-year transfer of the capital. The imagery of posters featuring Nakoruru is often largely disconnected from the issues they are used to campaign for, and often isolate and romanticize her in natural settings. Ten years later in 2004, Nakoruru and Terry Bogart would become the dual mascots of the Nakoruru and Terry Club meant to encourage environmental awareness and healthy habits for children.[36]

And although Nakoruru had somewhat plateaued in her popularity, in March 2011, character designer and comic artist Shiroi Eiji contributed a drawing of Nakoruru to support the victims of the tsunami and earthquake in Tohoku. While her likeness is frequently mobilized for environmental causes, her indigenous identity is often implied. These posters or promotional materials from the Nakoruru and Terry Club never explicitly reference the fact that she is Ainu and depend upon her visual adherence to the shôjo ideal to remain legible. The changing nature of her bodyscape gives her the ultimate flexibility of purpose.

Nakoruru and Rimururu's Representation in Dôjinshi

Along with their rise in popularity, Nakoruru and her sister became the subject of fan productions—particularly in the realms of cosplay and self-published fan works (niji sôsaku dôjinshi). Dôjinshi often take the form of magazines, manga, or novels, and these works are frequently, but not always, parodies or alternative storylines involving the worlds of popular manga, game, or anime series. Fans are often at the forefront of the media industry. While these fans are critical to the success and growth of any popular cultural series, in their hands, characters can expand beyond the boundaries of their original narrative world, entering territory that sometimes contains erotic and/or sexualized portrayals. Building upon Henry Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling, Nakoruru and her sister's stories unfold across several media outlets and platforms—both official and unofficial—in which a portion of end-users take an active role in the process of expansion. In the 1990s, these fan depictions became part of how we understand the bodyscapes of Nakoruru and Rimururu.

As Nakoruru and her sister gained in popularity through the 1990s, they frequently appeared in sexually explicit dôjinshi. These representations need to be framed against the political discourse surrounding Ainu culture during this very same period. The late Ainu musician and historian Chupuchisekor sounded the alarm bells when he became aware of several dôjinshi that specifically fetishized Nakoruru and Rimururu's ethnic identity.[37] Chupuchisekor was not rallying against pornography per say. For example, Nakoruru was featured in several pornographic dôjinshi manga that paired her with other female characters in the *Samurai Spirits* universe, such as the blonde French noble Charlotte, and he did not target these works in his criticism. Rather, he identified and called attention to several dôjinshi that exploited Nakoruru and Rimururu's Ainu identity by vaginally penetrating them by "Mother Nature" or having them engage in zoophilic intercourse with bears and wolves.[38] According to Chupuchisekor, these comics denigrated their Ainu bodies for the entertainment of Wajin, or ethnic Japanese. He feared that loyal fans of Nakoruru and Rimururu, who were brainwashed (sen'nô sareru) by this particular type of pornography, might think that this was an accurate representation of the Ainu world.[39] Indeed, by-and-large these fan-produced manga are not made for the benefit of those of Ainu descent, and Nakoruru's mere popularity in *Samurai Spirits* makes her a prime subject for dôjinshi like many other shôjo heroines; in other words, her shôjo identity takes precedence over her indigenous one. However, Chupuchisekor criticizes online defenders of these fan productions who have said that such pornographic representations of Nakoruru could actually be perceived as love or fondness of Ainu culture.[40] Between these debates, it is clear that Nakoruru and

Rimururu's representation balances the desire for the body of the ethnic Other with the desire for the body of the shôjo that operates independently of her Ainu identity.

In his writing on racial fetishism, Homi Bhabha explains the ambivalence at the heart of racial stereotyping.[41] The racial fetish often defines the colonized as "Other," but as a fixed and knowable stereotype; the Other is both distant and familiar at the same time. Bhabha writes that the body is always inscribed in both an "economy of pleasure and desire" and an "economy of discourse, domination and power."[42] Nakoruru and her sister simultaneously occupy both economies of representation. Images of the Ainu represent a series of paradoxes. As Bhabha explains in his reflection on Franz Fanon, "It is recognizably true that the chain of stereotypical signification is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief. The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces."[43] While Fanon and Bhabha are interrogating stereotypes of Blackness, there is considerable overlap when examining indigenous stereotypes in Japan. Considering the historical and continuing subjugation of the Ainu, we have to question how the representation of Ainu women—who are typically framed in terms of their Otherness—becomes palatable and knowable for a dominantly Japanese audience. The example of Nakoruru and Rimururu allows us to consider the polymorphous nature of Ainu representation in Japan according to Bhabha's logic. While they stand in as the indigenous Other through the trappings of Ainu ethnic identity symbolized in clothing and a closeness to nature, it is ultimately the visual language of the shôjo that allows

these characters to become familiar and knowable to the Japanese viewer. This "split" or "separation" of their character is never truly reconciled. As Bhabha states, "it is the visibility of this separation which, in denying the colonized the capacities of self-government, independence, Western modes of civility, lends authority to the official version and mission of colonial power."[44] In making the ambivalent separation visible and never reconciling the simultaneous repulsion/attraction, these Ainu heroines can never quite transcend their stereotype, which ultimately reinforces official narratives of power.

Conclusion

By operating within the confines of the hybrid shôjo heroine, Nakoruru and Rimururu's indigenous identity was rendered legible and made familiar to a Japanese audience. Although Japanese game designers constructed Nakoruru and Rimururu for a domestic audience, these characters nonetheless serve as an important introduction to Ainu culture, dress, beliefs, and terminology, even though they unwittingly support clichés of indigeneity and inaccuracies about the Ainu world. While the Ainu collectively organized in the mid-1990s, Nakoruru, in particular, would come to represent the bright, young face of environmental protection efforts at the city and prefectural level. Her popularity derives from her flexibility of both purpose and appearance. As we increasingly analyze indigenous representations in the media, and as native peoples work to produce popular media that reflects their culture and embraces indigenous modes of storytelling, it is worth considering the early role that Nakoruru, and later her sister, play in the transmedia landscape.

Nakoruru's character simultaneously supports a diluted version of indigenous femininity while embodying the hybrid shôjo in both official SNK Playmore productions and fan adaptations. To return to the concept of the bodyscape, it is the flexibility of Nakoruru's image that supports her transformation into an embodiment of both Ainu culture and environmental activism. Following Mirzoeff's formulation, Nakoruru's meaning cannot simply be contained by what he calls an "artist" (or in this case, a character designer, a director, or a development team).[45] Rather, her bodyscape is characterized by the various contexts, framings, and styles circulating beyond the official *Samurai Spirits* games and animation. Fan appropriations of Nakoruru and her sister Rimururu's image are hardly stable stylistically. Their bodies change depending on the artist or situation and range from childish portrayals of doe-eyed innocence (as seen in The Nakoruru and Terry Club) to the seductive and/or pornographic representations of the girls engaged in sexual relations with the very nature they swear to protect. These multiple, and occasionally contradictory, layers inscribe meaning onto Nakoruru and Rimururu's ever-changing imagined bodies, and fan representations are often authentically embraced in the evolving narrative of *Samurai Spirits*. Alongside other video game characters, Nakoruru and her sister were also frequently cosplayed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which further mapped their indigenous image onto the real bodies of women and men, most of whom were not Ainu in terms of identification. Whether these characters were created from video game pixels, an artist's brush, or a real body in costume, all of these representations collectively contribute to their larger bodyscape within the anime media mix.

Between official releases and fan appropriation, Nakoruru and Rimururu evade a stable identification. If the shôjo is the black hole—the absence—in the center of a swirling universe of objects as described by Lunning, we have to ask how indigenous identity is grafted on to this unstable fixture.[46] Nakoruru and her sister occupy a liminal space. As fighters, they represent Ainu women through superficial dress and imagined ties to the land. At the same time, these characters abide by the fantasy of the hybrid shôjo that requires a partial elision of Ainu identity; they are always shôjo first and Ainu second. Their ethnic Otherness seems to preclude our ability to render both their Ainu and shôjo identity simultaneously; we ambivalently flicker and hover between each, refusing to see either as whole. While we need to recognize Nakoruru and Rimururu for the way that their images engage in a particular history of Ainu representation in the 1990s, we also need to challenge the construction of Ainu femininity and the limitations of such stereotypes.

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[38] While Chupuchisetkor describes the content of these dôjinshi, he does not actually call out any specific circles, artists, or volumes in his critical essay.

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[43] Bhabha, 118.

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Book Review: *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the* Kibyôshi *of Edo Japan*

Dr. Andrea Horbinski

Kern, Adam L. *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the* Kibyôshi *of Edo Japan*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019.

Keywords: Book review, manga, anime, anime and manga studies

Author Bio: Andrea Horbinski holds a PhD in modern Japanese history with a designated emphasis in new media from the University of California, Berkeley. Her book manuscript, "Manga's Global Century," is a history of Japanese comics from 1905-1989. Her articles have appeared in Transformative Works and Cultures, Convergence, Internet Histories, and Mechademia.

Adam L. Kern's *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the Kibyôshi of Edo Japan* has become an indispensable text in the fields of manga studies and the history of early modern Japanese popular culture since its publication in 2006. In 2019, Kern and the Harvard University Asia Center published a paperback second edition with a new preface, making the book widely available at a not wildly unreasonable price – especially welcome given that the original edition sold out in 2007.

In the more than dozen years since its initial publication Kern's book has been cited extensively, but Kern's arguments have been widely misrepresented as boiling down to the idea that *kibyôshi*, the "genre of woodblock-printed comicbook [sic]" (xxv) that was wildly popular in 18thC Edo Japan, constitute the origins of manga—a tiresome notion that willfully ignores salient differences between popular culture and mass culture, between early modern and modern. To his credit, in the new preface to this second edition (the only new material in the entire book, which is actually a facsimile reprint) Kern confronts this chestnut head-on, declaring that "my contention is that the *manga* emanated *indirectly* from the *kibyôshi*" (xxv), going on to state that "the *manga* is the offspring of mixed parentage, not a slightly modernized clone of one or the other [Western cartoons and *kibyôshi* et al]" (xxvi). Regrettably, however, the new preface is actually quite short, with Kern limiting most of his substantive discussion to briefly sketching some of the developments in manga studies and comics studies since 2006. He laments, rightly, that "Comics Studies, while drawing some inspiration and legitimacy from the global popularity of *manga*, nevertheless has effectively isolated *manga* as the exception among non-Western comics that proves the rule of the superiority or, at least, primacy of Western comics" (xxvii). Unfortunately, accurately, succinctly put.

The book itself divides into two halves, presenting a thorough study of the "little yellow comicbook" in its historical and cultural milieu. The first section, in five parts, sketches out the landscape of An'ei-Tenmei culture and Edo identity, with the *kibyôshi* a crucial part of the same; considers the *kibyôshi* in the context of other forms of popular literature and entertainment; examines the *kibyôshi* in terms of comics expression, with a particular eye towards differentiating it from the assumption that its sole interest is as manga's progenitor; and finally concludes with an overview of the form's rise and fall, concluding that *kibyôshi* were a victim of their own commercial success. Relying heavily on the primary texts of the *kibyôshi* themselves and copiously illustrated throughout (including ten full color reprints), Kern's central insight is that the era of the *kibyôshi*'s greatest popularity was also the cultural peak of the An'ei-Tenmei eras (1772-1789, in toto), "a period of time largely marked by the perception of the eastward swing of the cultural center of gravity away from western Japan (Kamigata), with its old imperial capital of Kyoto and other nearby cities (especially Osaka), toward the new shogun's capital of Edo" (7). Compared to the well-known, Kyoto-centered Genroku era in the late 17thC, the An'ei-Tenmei and Bunka-Bunsei aka Kasei (1804-1829, in toto) eras have often garnered less attention in scholarship, but as Kern notes, the An'ei-Tenmei era in particular was when Edo began to come into its own as a cultural, not just commercial, center in its own right. The *kibyôshi*, Kern argues, "not only mirrored and constructed urban commoner culture, but was also one of the major vehicles for the assertion of that culture in the political sphere" (8). *Kibyôshi*, like the hybrid comics forms of *ponchie* ("*Punch* drawings") and then manga in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, "became the most salient form of political satire" (8)—which, Kern argues, is part of, but not the entire, reason why its heyday was so short-lived,

as the Kansei Reforms are generally agreed to have marked the beginning of its gradual decline, although he is at pains to note that the Reforms destroyed "the satirical strain within the *kibyôshi*, not the *kibyôshi* itself" (10).

A literature specialist by training, Kern's methodological approach to his material is commendably catholic: in his own estimation, he combines "a potpourri of pop culture, philology, visual culture, *histoire du livre*, and some other things thrown in for good measure" (25). In this, as he notes, his approach is only commensurate with the capacious and wide-ranging grasp of the *kibyôshi*, which display "a remarkable degree of allusively to the whole range of literature and culture available for consumption in eighteenth-century Japan" (13). Equally commendably, Kern is willing to meet the *kibyôshi* on its own terms, which given their subject matter are sometimes less than totally serious.

Whether in the new preface or in the original book, however, Kern is not quite willing to abandon the respectability politics that have bedeviled writing about manga and comics since that writing began. Though Kern is right to decry the lack of scholarly attention paid to *kibyôshi* in either Japanese or English, and to highlight the *kibyôshi* as a mirror and pillar of the rich popular urban culture of An'ei-Tenmei, he retreads the familiar *cursus honorum* of the ascent of the graphic novel to respectability in Anglophone cultural criticism, from *Maus* to Chris Ware to *Persepolis*, and thereby participates in it himself, as when he declares that "...*kibyôshi*, although assuming the guise of children's comic books, was anything but silly kid stuff" (9). He also devotes multiple paragraphs in the new preface to defending (by qualifying) his initial claim that *kibyôshi* were not a pornographic genre, arguing that a collection of pornographic *kibyôshi* made available online since 2006 "appear to hijack the *kibyôshi* genre's characteristic yellow covers, artistic style,

and storytelling conventions without actually being *kibyôshi* themselves" (xxxi). On the face of this brief discussion, Kern's hair-splitting does not appear to hold much water, but without more detail it is difficult to judge. His decision to refer to *kibyôshi* (and manga) as a genre rather than as a medium, and his use of the term "comicbook," are also idiosyncratic but ultimately recondite decisions.

If that were all, that would be enough, but the book's second half is what truly elevates it from key text to landmark—and in the new paperback edition, one worthy of consideration as a classroom text. Specifically, the second half reprints, fully translated, three full *kibyôshi* themselves, along with introductory essays. All three are by one Santô Kyôden, ranging from an acknowledged masterpiece of the form (Chapter 6), to a less popular sex comedy (Chapter 7) and a self-referential battle of media forms (Chapter 5). By fully translating the text within the images, Kern restores much of the immediacy of the *kibyôshi* reading experience to Anglophone audiences. Coupled with the first half's thorough consideration of *kibyôshi* as comics, as media, and as historical phenomenon, Kern's work stands the test of time and amply illustrates his contention that, despite not having given rise to manga, the *kibyôshi* "offers a similarly informative, visually compelling, and perhaps even an ultimately meaningful glimpse into one of the world's most fascinating civilizations during one of that civilization's greatest cultural efflorescences" (13). Students and scholars of manga studies, comics studies, and Japanese history will find much to reward them in *Manga from the Floating World*.