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## Yaoi: Voices from the Margins

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One of the ways in which scholars have tried to make sense of the existence of subcultures and fan cultures is by analyzing these phenomena through a conflict perspective. In such a theoretical perspective, subcultures and fan cultures are treated as gatherings of individuals who not only have similar personal interests, but also come from similar social backgrounds (e.g. class, age, gender) considered to be marginal relative to the dominant culture or mainstream society. As a result of their marginal status, they are said to feel neglected by the rest of society, and these subcultures and fan cultures provide them not merely a haven from harsh social realities, but an avenue to express their grievances and common critique against dominant social standards. Thus, despite their subordinate position in society, through their membership in subcultures and fandoms, they are able to find ways, albeit symbolic, in order to negotiate and struggle against hegemonic culture. This framework was most

widely used during the 1970s, well into the 1980s, with the seminal works of researchers from the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies or CCCS, integrating class-based analyses into the subculture as "resistance through rituals" (Hall and Jefferson 1976) discourse (for examples, refer to Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979).

Until now, the concepts of hegemony, oppositional cultures and symbolic forms of resistance seem to be widely used concepts in framing analyses of specific examples of popular cultural practices, subcultures and fandoms. For example, in my own work on the fans of yaoi, a romantic genre of Japanese comics that primarily depicts love relationships between two beautiful boys, I have observed that much of the literature discussing yaoi both as a genre and subculture focus on this symbolic resistance hypothesis, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality norms in Japan. Scholars and several yaoi manga artists

alike explain Japanese young girls' and women's interest in producing and consuming male homosexual love stories, as an expression of their "despair of ever achieving equal relationships with men in sexist society"(Suzuki, 1998), and their quest for ideal, equal human relationships (Fujimoto, 1991; Nobi, 2003).

However, in the past decade, several critiques have been raised towards this theoretical perspective. For one, while these groups may indeed be experiencing neglect and conflict with mainstream social standards and express some form of resistance and opposition against mainstream society, most of the time, such struggles do not go beyond the symbolic level and are thus considered to be lacking in social and political significance. Many of these subcultures and fan cultures do not have the ability to overthrow hegemonic social institutions primarily due to their members' relative lack of power in society. And thus, the expression of their grievances stays within the liminal, and possibilities for changing the status quo remain as a mere potential. Others may also argue that at times, subcultures too, can be complicit with hegemonic cultural patterns because, when seen from an even wider social context, their members may actually gain benefits from dominant culture. Thus, rather than become catalysts for social transformation, subcultures and fandoms, along with the pleasures that members experience from being part of these, are at times criticized as sociologically trivial groupings that merely promote escapism.

Given these differing perspectives and frameworks, several questions came into mind as I was trying to organize the various secondary data I have gathered

and attempted to fully make sense of the yaoi phenomenon for my own research: How have scholars tried to explain the fascination of some groups of women in Japan towards male homosexual love stories? How has yaoi's significance been theorized up until now? Does the resistance to mainstream gender norms supposedly expressed through the conventions and within the stories of the yaoi genre reflect actual resistance among these women in reality? The aim of this literature review paper, thus, is to shed light to these questions.

The paper consists of three main parts. First, I will provide an overview of the yaoi genre and its basic conventions. Second, I will examine the social context from which the use of male homoerotic relationships was born. In doing so, we will be able to trace the various arguments that have been made supporting the idea that the yaoi genre and subculture provides a venue for dissenting voices against mainstream conceptions of gender and sexuality in Japan. Finally, I will look at the debates that this genre has spawned during the early 1990s and recent studies made on yaoi fan activities which may challenge this interpretation of the rationale for fans' engagement with yaoi, as well as the genre's social significance. And in conclusion, based on the irregularities and gaps identified in the course of the discussion, I will propose certain aspects that I believe may need more careful examination, and which I plan to address in future research.

## The Basics of “Yaoi”

Before delving into a discussion on the possible reasons why certain populations in Japanese society read, write or draw yaoi, I will first briefly clarify the meaning and usage of the term “yaoi,” and define how it is used in this paper.

Yaoi is basically an umbrella term used to refer to a romantic genre of manga, animation and text-based fiction such as short stories and novels, the storyline of which revolves mainly around romantic relationships between beautiful boys. There is a variety of aesthetic treatments of such stories; some may be heavily poetic and pedantic, while some could be rather light or even prosaic. There are original, commercially produced works, but there are also fan-produced, self-published amateur yaoi manga. Usually, these fan-produced art and fiction borrow characters and settings from original mainstream manga and animation and they imagine alternative scenes and stories, or re-interpretations of the official story. However, in the case of yaoi, there is a special kind of tweaking involved. In fan-produced yaoi, usually two male characters who are not originally involved with each other romantically but somehow share a strong bond—be it friendship, rivalry or even hatred—are reinterpreted as indulging in romantic relations with each other. Even popular male celebrities, particularly those who belong to all-male idol groups or rock bands, are not spared from fan imaginations.

There are different terms people in the fandom use to distinguish the

differences that I have previously mentioned. However, since we more concerned with the discourses on gender and sexuality found across these differences rather than with the taxonomy of sub-genres, for the purposes of this discussion, whatever aesthetic style the story is expressed, and regardless of whether a work is original or fan produced, I shall all refer to them with the term, “yaoi.”

Yaoi is known primarily as a women’s genre: one that is produced mainly by women for women. Based on ethnographic data presented by Natō (2007) on women engaging in *dōjinshi* (fan comics and fiction) events, as well as my own observations when I briefly attended related events, next to being female, another defining characteristic of yaoi fans is age; those who read and write yaoi generally range from teenagers to women in their 30s. However, characteristics in other social categories are more or less heterogeneous. The fandom is comprised of both single and married women. In terms of occupation, there are students, professionals and blue-collar workers. As for geographic location, Natō notes that while a significant proportion of those who engage in *dōjinshi* events come from big cities such as Tokyo, Kanagawa and Osaka, the rest of the participants are scattered in other regions all over the country. Data in the said study do not even include regular readers and audiences (i.e. those who do not participate in *dōjinshi* events) of commercially produced yaoi and BL manga, which are distributed nationwide. Finally, in terms of educational attainment, yaoi fans include even those who have finished graduate school. In other words, apart from biological sex and age, fans of yaoi are definitely a

diverse group. In addition, because its artists and target audience are primarily women, those within the fandom are always quick to point out that yaoi should be differentiated from “gay comics.” Gay comics is mainly produced and consumed by homosexual men for homosexual men, and the conventions surrounding the aesthetic treatment and discourses on male homosexual relationships greatly differs from that of yaoi’s.

But why is it called “yaoi”? Where did the genre get its name? These are, indeed, very good questions, for going through the etymology of this word draws out some of the other general characteristics of the genre that has helped it gain both popularity and notoriety among those who have come to know of its existence. The term is said to have been coined during the 1970s by amateur manga artists, and used as a derogatory term to refer to fan-produced manga that do not have a very well-developed plotline. The word “yaoi” is formed by taking the first syllable of the following 3-word phrase, “**Y**ama nashi, **o**chi nashi, **i**mi nashi,” which means “no climax (as in the height of action in a narrative), no resolution (the story has no denouement or proper conclusion), no meaning.” These works are said to be mere takeoffs of an original work and merely feature snippets or short scenes—only the “yummy parts,” as Thorn’s (2004) informants put it—rather than a fully-developed story. Many of these works portray two male characters from an original series, where they suddenly find themselves in a moment of sexual tension, and, more often than not, end up kissing or even entangled in bed. And because a good number of these drawings are sexually explicit and very much pornographic, this led a lot

of fans to suggest another derivation for the term: “**Y**amete, **o**shiri ga itai!” or “Please stop, my ass hurts!” Violence in the presentation of male homosexual intercourse, such as rape, sadomasochism and incest, are also quite common in yaoi. Thus, for fans, the term “yaoi” is given another level of interpretation: “**Y**aru, **o**kasu, **i**kaseru,” or “Rape, violate and make him come.” (Thorn 2004)

#### *Development of Yaoi*

There are varied suggestions as to when or how exactly this genre came about. However, scholars and artists who were part of the amateur manga and yaoi boom during the 1980s mention the works of the “Year 24 Group” as those which have tremendously influenced their works (for examples see Fujimoto 1991; Suzuki 1998; Nishimura 2002; Nobi 2003). Known in Japanese as the *Hana no Nijūyonnen-gumi* (花の24年組), these influential women manga artists were born in Showa Year 24 of the Japanese calendar system and include artists such as Ikeda Riyoko (*Rose of Versailles*, 1972), Hagio Moto (*November Gymnasium* and *Heart of Thomas*, 1974) and Takemiya Keiko (*The Song of Wind and Trees*, 1978). They are considered as a revolutionary force in the development of girls comics or the shōjo manga genre as they were the first to experiment on illustrating romantic love between pre-pubescent boys in a highly idealized and poetic style. This style will later on be known as “shōnen ai”, or “love between boys.” Their stories were usually set in Europe, and the boys were drawn in a highly androgynous manner—“sex-scentless angels,” as Moto Hagio had put it (in Suzuki 1998, 251). However, it is Takemiya Keiko’s

*Kaze to Ki no Uta* which may be considered as one of the boldest works of the group, for it is this particular work where, from the opening pages of the series, for the very first time, two boys are seen in bed with each other, and they are not fast asleep.

The power of the images and narratives created by the Year 24 Group has been able to spark the imagination of the next generation of female manga artists. Thus, many researchers consider yaoi as an outgrowth of the shōnen ai works of the Year 24 Group. The sex-scentless angels gradually involved into more noticeably “masculine and physically powerful men” (Suzuki 1998, 251), albeit retaining a great deal of its androgynous charm. In 1978, *June* (a play on Jean Genet’s name), the first magazine dedicated to original yaoi works came out, and at present there are several magazines that specialize in yaoi works: *Asuka Ciel*, *Be x Boy*, *Boy’s Love*, *Comic June*, *Hanaoto* and *Zero*, to name a few major commercial magazines (Nishimura 2002). Also, amateur manga artists and fiction writers also saw the fun and potential that this newly-developed style presented, and adopted such techniques in producing both original and parodies of original works (Suzuki 1998, 246). In the semi-annual Comic Markets and even weekly *dōjinshi sokubaikai* (amateur comic sales or events), one can observe that yaoi remains one of the most popular genre.

#### *Conventions of the Yaoi Genre*

The conventions of yaoi continue to be re-imagined and innovated on by artists and fans throughout the years, but certain characteristics seem to remain

constantly popular in the genre.

First, depicting male characters in a highly androgynous fashion is a key convention, and is probably the most noticeable characteristic of yaoi. I will explain in greater detail why the aesthetics of androgyny is of central importance in understanding the psychology of yaoi production and consumption in a later, more relevant section.

The androgynous aesthetic is also linked to the next convention, which is called “coupling.” Coupling, or the appropriate pairing of two male characters from a particular work, is a fundamental practice within the amateur manga subculture. In a pair, characters are classified either as a “seme,” or “one who attacks,” who is generally the active or aggressive person in the relationship; or an “uke”, or “one who receives,” and is therefore the passive one in the relationship. From the drawings alone, one usually knows who the “seme” or the “uke” is: the “seme” appears and acts more like an adult, usually stands in a higher position of power compared to his lover, and may even seem rather cool, even scary in appearance. On the other hand the “uke” appears really sweet, child-like, and more often than not, is in a lower social position relative to the “seme.” However, the most important thing here in coupling, especially in the case of fan-produced works, is that the 2 characters one has paired should have a strong connection with each other (e.g. friendship, rivalry, or even implied sexual tension), and that it should not be some random pairing.

Lastly, the settings in yaoi stories are rather isolated. Most of the time, only boys seem to inhabit this world and that male homosexual love is openly

accepted. The invisibility of female characters is most noticeable in yaoi stories. If female characters do exist, they are usually considered as obstacles to the pair's happiness. However, in recent years, the "supportive older sister" and such types of characters seem to appear more often.

I believe that the preceding discussion have provided readers with sufficient background and information to somehow be able to navigate one's way through this subculture. And from here, we shall now proceed to address the questions regarding fans' reasons and motivations for engaging in this genre.

### Why Yaoi?

So why portray love between young boys? What reasons did artists starting from the Year 24 Group have for choosing to draw boys loving other boys, rather than girls liking boys, or even girls liking other girls? And what is it about yaoi that strikes a cord among a good number of young girls and women in Japan and makes it really irresistible? In order to better understand and appreciate the answers to this question, literature often point us to the need to look at the historical events and social developments occurring in Japan that generated yaoi's supposed predecessor, known as *shōnen ai*.

### *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Birth of Yaoi*

We must understand that during the 1960s and 1970s, when the first few

influential works of the Year 24 Group came out, Japan was in a period of rapid economic growth and saw the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement.

The Women's Liberation Movement or "*Ribu*," as it was known in Japan, sought change in Japanese society in the following ways: first, through the establishment of women's own identity and the development of their own ego; second, for people to recognize sexual politics and eventually seek liberation from this; third, to challenge oppression against women stemming from the family and other male-centered institutions; and lastly, to deconstruct the concept of "maternity" from supposed "essential characteristics" of womanhood, with hopes that by being able to recognize that they themselves too, could be sexual subjects outside of the ideal of "motherhood," and that they are more than mere "sexual objects."

While the *Ribu*'s efforts were constantly denigrated by the media and eventually rejected by majority of women, they were still able to influence a number of women writers and artists (Suzuki 1998, 247), which include members of the Year 24 Group, particularly Hagio Moto and Takemiya Keiko, who are self-identified feminists. They were mostly dissatisfied with the formulaic storyline that dominated manga for young girls during their time: the setting was usually in a school campus, a girl wishes for her one true love, girl meets boy—her "ideal prince"—whom she could depend only totally and bring her happiness. It is this kind of passivity and restriction of women's role to merely within the family brought about by a male-centered society

that a number of women writers felt the need to rebel against. The Year 24 Group in particular realized the potential and power of using the world of the imagination, the comic book genre in having their voice heard. In other words, they saw how manga was a way to express their thoughts and ideas to other people, where characters speak on behalf of the writer (Fujimoto 1991, 247). Takemiya also expressly stated in an interview that she used her works as a means to express herself “without getting into a fight, and in order to send a message of change to a generation of girls who are now grown women.” (in Aoki 2008)

#### *Why Love Between Boys?*

For the Year 24 Group, innovating the conventions of *shōnen ai* was primarily a reaction to the predictability of storylines that were have been used and abused in *shōjo* manga, or comics for young girls. According to Hagio Moto, she thought that romance stories for girls back then were just so formulaic and dull (in Fujimoto 1991, 282). Not just the women of the Year 24 Group were dissatisfied with the predictability of stories in *shōjo* manga. Yaoi artists and fans of recent years continue to mention yaoi's divergence from the usual Cinderella story as one of the main reasons they like the genre. And even if the storylines of yaoi manga has somewhat become as formulaic as heterosexual romance throughout the years, they like yaoi because it does not follow mainstream love stories, specifically because the characters do not follow the society's established norms on mating (Thorn 2004, 177).

Also, yaoi artists had issues with imbued meanings in representations of the female body, especially within the context of heterosexual relationships. For the earlier artists, female embodiment in itself automatically put their characters in a subordinate position in relation to men. In particular, being the “child-bearing sex” for them was considered a huge barrier to achieving equality in heterosexual relationships, for when a woman marries and gets pregnant, then the woman's role is immediately relegated to caring for the family and becomes dependent on her husband, having to abandon whatever dreams of a career she may have. Being born female is already in itself a social disadvantage. However, the sterility of homosexual intercourse does away any possibilities of pregnancy that may put either party in a subordinate position. In a way, one can say that for yaoi artists and fans in Japan, especially during the 1970s, male homosexual love is deemed as the only way that they can portray a love relationship between equals in the realm of gender (Suzuki 1998, 250). Furthermore, if it is self-identification that women seek through their characters, the androgynous depiction of the characters makes it easier for them to project themselves on either character.

But why not love between girls? That could also be deemed as love between equals too, as some may argue. Actually, Hagio agrees that yes, in theory, there should be no difference whether one depicts love relationships between two boys or two girls. In fact, while she was conceptualizing *Toma no Shinzo* and *November Gymnasium*, she mentioned that she made 2 versions of the story: one with a male-to-male pairing, and another one with a female-



female pairing. However, in the end, she decided against the female-to-female pairing in favor of the male-to-male one. Why so? She related that the female-to-female pairings for her was just “too vivid,” and “goeey as *nattō*.” Obviously, she felt rather uncomfortable about it. Hagio explains that since she knows so much about the female body, she can't help but describe it realistically, in the same way that she can't help but feel that she needs to be realistic as well with the portrayal of heterosexual relationships. And doing so makes her feel that what she is doing is just too dirty (Hagio and Yoshimoto in Suzuki, 1998, 248). Thus by deciding to write about love between boys, this eliminates the problem for her and any female reader who may have any sort of resistance against projecting themselves in lesbian characters and need not unnecessarily confront their lesbian desires. Also, since they are presented with male-male relationships, which they do not really know much about, then they feel that they are given as much freedom and license to imagine and idealize such relationships.

Takemiya also mentioned that back in the 1970s, the discussion and exploration of one's sexuality was still considered a taboo for women (Takemiya in Aoki 2008). Women still had a difficult time conceiving themselves as sexual subjects and agents, as the one holding the gaze—recognizing, exploring, building up one's desires and acting upon them. Ueno asserts that male homosexuality found in *shōjo* manga as in the case of yaoi should be regarded as a safety device that girls have formulated in order to operate this dangerous thing called 'sex' at a distance from their own bodies. “It was the wings that

enabled girls to fly,” she further argues (1998, 131). Hence, we could say that these women writers believed that the only way that women may be able to frontally engage their realistic passions and bodily transformations was by putting them on a safe place and distance to experiment and imagine their sexuality. And the first few manga of the Year 24 Group aimed just to do that: to provide that safe place and distance. And by extension, feminist scholars have continued to assume that yaoi continues to provide this sexual sanctuary for young girls today that the Year 24 Group's *shōnen ai* genre was able to do so for girls in the 1970s to mid-1980s.

Also yaoi artists and readers are said to be actually seeking active and assertive characters that they could identify with—those who are active and assertive in their day-to-day affairs, in romantic relationships, even in bed. And as discussed earlier, we could see why the use of female characters would also be difficult. The lack of female characters or, if they do exist, their vilification (meaning, that they are depicted as obstacles to the beautiful boys' relationship) is an interesting yaoi convention that one could consider at this point. Yaoi artists and fans provide several explanations for this.

Thorn noted that those who are drawn to yaoi are usually those who are dissatisfied and unhappy with mainstream norms of gender and sexuality (2004, 181-2). This self-directed misogyny in yaoi can be said to be an expression of their own disdain for mainstream expressions of femininity, their dissatisfaction and desire to break free from the sexual timidity and passivity they as women were expected to internalize, that at times they wish that they have been born

male rather than female. Here, an interesting transgender element comes in. A number of yaoi artists and fans also say that the genre provides them a space where they could imagine how they could love a man as a man, but without the need to “correct” their bodies. Several yaoi manga artists who have reflected upon their work on yaoi as a mode of sexual expression support this transgender/transsexual argument, although some have put it in an extreme way. Sakakibara Shihomi, a popular yaoi-style novelist, mentions that a number of yaoi artists and fans like them, may probably feel that in a way they are “gay men in a women's bodies” (in Thorn 2004, 177). Nobi Nobita also relates that yaoi provides her with the imaginary phallus that would allow her to “violate the man or character” that she likes. The release of sexual aggression towards a person one likes, which is considered by many women even up until now as a “typically masculine” trait, is made possible in yaoi primarily by projecting oneself as the *seme* in the story (2003, 247-50). Thorn’s informants have also shared that they enjoy yaoi stories because they present an idealized world, some despising femininity, and even wishing that they have been born male rather than female (2004, 177). Hence, we can say that for such women, yaoi allows them to indulge in the fantasy of loving a man as a man, or to rephrase it, as an equal in the sense that they are not constrained by any predefined gender expectations.

However, while they may seem to get so much pleasure from imagining an ideal world full of boys, or even prefer to be male than female if they had the choice, yaoi fans may also feel contempt for the norms on “straight

masculinity.” A survey was conducted among yaoi fans in 2000, asking whether they are inclined to be *uke* or *seme* fans, and an overwhelming majority stated that they are usually *uke* fans. The *uke* for a lot of yaoi fans and artists represents the passivity, child-like traits that they long to see in “straight men,” and at the same time, they wish to be able to “violate” and be aggressive towards men, especially these types (Nishimura 2002, 82-5). Yaoi fans mention too that what makes this genre more fun for them is that they are able to assume either, or even both the role of the *seme* or *uke* whenever they feel like doing so. In a way, we see how yaoi fans seem to have developed a conception of gender and sexual desire that teeters away from the male-female binary that modern society has firmly established as natural.

Furthermore, yaoi has been used not only by straight women in the exploration of their heterosexual desires, but also by lesbians and gays, as documented by Welker (2000) and Lunsing (2008), separately, as they seek to discover and explore their queer identities and desires. Especially in the exploration of lesbian desire, the sexually ambiguous portrayal of characters, particularly those from the Year 24 Group’s leaves them open to interpret both characters as both female, rather than both male, and thus been very useful in the development of their queer subjectivities.

#### The “Yaoi Ronsō”: Challenges to the Subculture as Resistance Theory

Finally, let me briefly discuss the interesting points of the debates on

yaoi that spanned from 1992-1994, and documented in the feminist magazine, *Choisir*.

From the late 1980s-1990s, a “gay boom” took place in Japan, which was said to be largely brought about by great attention the media had focused on the increasing popularity of yaoi manga. It had put male homosexuality, in particular, to the fore of media attention. The editors of *Choisir* had invited gay activist Satō Masaki to comment on these developments, in order to encourage discussions regarding the said issue. In 1992, *Choisir* published Satō’s scathing open letter, severely criticizing the artists and fans of the yaoi genre. Throughout the two-year debate, his side can be said to be summarized in the following key points.

First, he claims that the human rights of male homosexuals are harmed by yaoi. He mentioned how disgusted he was with the way females objectified male homosexual sex for their own pleasure, which for him, was similar to the way perverted old men would ogle at pornographic images of young women. Satō then further criticized yaoi for spawning the gay boom in Japan which didn’t contribute anything for the welfare of gay men at all. He claimed that, it even promoted a skewed image of gay relationships, rather than a realistic one. He said that yaoi portrayed all gay men as beautiful, which didn’t provide much material for a lot of gay men, who do not consider themselves as such, to relate to or help in the formation of their gay identities. Another derisive remark he made was that he believed that women who produce yaoi as “homophobic,” for they generally do not openly identify the character as “gay,” but rather express

that the characters love their partners for who they are, but they just happen to be men. Their male embodiment was merely an accidental characteristic, rather than the main root of their desire. And finally, he attacked yaoi for promoting escapism for women. He argued that good manga does not promote escapism, but rather, it helps make the world easier to live in. He criticizes the lack of political drive behind yaoi, and that it only encourages women to withdraw in their own little world of illusions and fantasy (Lunsing 2006).

Several counterarguments were presented to Sato’s criticisms and published in *Choisir*. Many of the artists who reacted to Sato’s letter stressed that yaoi is a fantasy genre, and as such, its objective is not to realistically portray homosexual relationships. Yaoi artists and fans alike expressed their surprise at how people in general believe that yaoi is primarily about gay men. Thorn puts it very well by saying that the yaoi genre tells us less about gay men but actually more about Japanese women’s dissatisfaction of gender stereotypes that restrict women’s life paths (2004, 180). It is made for and by women who could not cope with directly facing their own sexuality through depictions of heterosexual acts. Yaoi was not meant to create a space for gays to express and form gay identities and come out in real life. In addition, rather than “homophobic,” I think that the often-used line in yaoi stories where the characters “love someone for who they are, and they just happen to be men,” is more of an expression of a fundamental human desire for unconditional acceptance, love and intimacy.

Finally, in response to the criticism on escapism, in 1993, Takemiya stated

that yaoi is a “first step towards true feminism” (in Thorn 2004, 179), meaning that it has the potential to encourage people towards political action in order to achieve the goals of equality of women and their freedom from rigid gender structures and role expectations. However inspiring some forms of popular culture can be, I believe that it would take more than people’s participation in liminal, subcultural spaces in order to effect significant change in society. Unless members of a subculture are prepared to steel themselves, leave the secure world of liminality and adopt an active, confrontational stance against the rigid gender structures as well as the pressures imposed by the hegemonic masculine models reified in one’s society.

### Future Research Themes

In the preceding discussion, we have seen how scholars and manga artists have attempted to explain the emergence and popularity of male homosexual love stories among young girls and women in Japan. They explained how yaoi and its predecessor, *shōnen ai*, emerged as the fruits of a period in Japanese history where women were beginning to question the androcentric ideologies that work within society. Inspired to action in whatever way they can, they eventually sought ways to break free and from the rigid gender norms that limit women’s experiences and inspire others to do so. Thus, they argued that the yaoi genre provided a means and space for women to claim as their own, albeit liminal space in a male-dominated world. In the world of yaoi, they are able

to symbolically subvert institutions and texts favorable to men in a patriarchal society.

Scholars and manga artists alike further stress that yaoi also encouraged the exploration of female desire and their wish to be able to act as sexual subjects equal to that of men. The transgressive, gender-bending conventions allow for flexibility of interpretations and multiple readings among its audience allow for the possibility of women to come to terms with issues on sexual orientation and desire in various combinations and permutations. However, in the course of the discussion, we also saw that some subcultures offering liminal spaces for the expression of resistance and alternative ideas, such as yaoi, neither offers control over society nor does it necessarily lead to progress towards equality. Without stepping out of the secure boundaries of subculture and fandom and actively engaging in political action, realizing the goals of feminism which spurred the genesis of this genre in the first place will be improbable.

Thus, several issues still remain unresolved. While so much has been written about the theme of resistance against androcentric social standards *within* yaoi works, it is still unclear as to whether this also reflects the real dilemmas of the fans of these works, and whether they really mean to actively express opposition towards hegemonic institutions. So far, the analysis and discussion on yaoi and its resistant expression remains merely on the literary level. Literary expression and analysis does not necessarily reflect the reality of the yaoi artists and their fans. For example, Natō’s ethnographic study reveals the gap between some academic readings and interpretations of yaoi works

and the yaoi fans' and artists' own feelings towards their fandom. Some of her informants criticize scholars and researchers who emphasize the themes of feminist resistance underlying dōjinshi fan activity, saying that many of them “do not feel that they are oppressed as women,” and that they do it mainly for the fun of it (2007, 102-5). Furthermore, some of the purportedly “open feminist” shōnen ai and yaoi artists may also be criticized as feminists only on the surface, as their political drive and will do not seem to go beyond the liminal and literary. These issues point to us to the need to shift our attention from the genre, to the discourses and meanings that fans themselves create in relation to their production and consumption of yaoi works.

Furthermore, the yaoi genre's complicity to the heteronormative social order has been, to a certain extent, questioned throughout the Yaoi Ronsō, but is still left largely unexamined. As yaoi artists and fans continue to stress and deny that the characters in their beloved works are not actual homosexual men, it makes one wonder what exactly these young girls and women think and feel towards homosexuality. Is there really homophobia lurking behind this seemingly gender-liberal genre, as Satō argued? Thus, in the greater scheme of things in Japanese sexual politics, how marginal exactly are these yaoi artists and fans? Again, this points to us to the need for more agent-centered, ethnographic investigations of this phenomenon.

These are the some of the questions and issues that I hope to address as I continue with my work on the yaoi fandom.

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# **Yaoi: Voices from the Margins**

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The dynamics of conflict and resistance between subordinate social groups and hegemonic groups has always been a significant issue in the study of subcultures and fan activities. However, in the past decade, this theoretical perspective has been placed under critique by scholars from the social sciences, questioning whether subcultures and fan activities in reality always and necessarily express conflict and resistance towards hegemonic culture. This paper aims to illustrate this theoretical dilemma by examining the case of the yaoi genre and subculture in Japan.

As we survey the various academic literature produced and fan accounts documented concerning the yaoi genre and subculture in Japan, we see that it has been often argued mainly through in-depth literary analyses of yaoi works that it serves as a tool and space for the dissenting voices against mainstream conceptions of gender and sexuality in Japan. Scholars and members of the subculture alike locate the beginnings of yaoi within the context of the Second Wave of Feminism in Japan during the 1970s, and constantly discuss how a pioneering group of women manga artists in this era devised the gender-bending conventions now used in this genre in order to reconcile their issues concerning equality among the sexes, the representations of and meaning imbued in the female body, and the nature of desire. However, in the final analysis, several questions still remain unresolved given the current state of knowledge regarding yaoi. This paper will consider these issues and in the end, propose several questions that the researcher will investigate in her future research plans.

**Key words :** yaoi, subculture, fan studies, counterculture, gender and sexuality