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# The Great Mirror of Fandom: Reflections of (and on) Otaku and Fujoshi in Anime and Manga

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THE GREAT MIRROR OF FANDOM: REFLECTIONS OF (AND ON) *OTAKU* AND
*FUJOSHI* IN ANIME AND MANGA


by



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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2006



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# ABSTRACT

The focus of this thesis is to examine representations of *otaku* and *fujoshi* (i.e., dedicated fans of pop culture) in Japanese anime and manga from 1991 until the present. I analyze how these fictional images of fans participate in larger mass media and academic discourses about *otaku* and *fujoshi*, and how even self-produced reflections of fan identity are defined by the combination of larger normative discourses and market demands. Although many scholars have addressed fan practices and identities through surveys and participant observation, many of these studies work with Western groups of fans whose identities may not be consistent with those of Japanese *otaku* and *fujoshi*, and fewer studies have addressed the way these fans are reflected in the very media (anime and manga) they consume. I examine both negative and positive depictions of *otaku* and *fujoshi*, as well as the representations of fan gender identities and sexualities, across a broad range of anime and manga, including *Rusanchiman (Ressentiment)*, *Genshiken*, *N.H.K. ni Yōkoso (Welcome to the N.H.K.)*, *Otaku no Video*, *Kuragehime (Princess Jellyfish)*, *Oreimo*, and *Mōsō Shōjo Otakukei (Fujoshi Rumi)*. The varied depictions of *otaku* and *fujoshi* in these works illustrate the tension between *otaku* and *fujoshi* identities and normative social roles, the problematic elements of identities defined through consumerism, and the complexities of the interaction between fans' fictionalized and lived desires.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s in Japan, anime and manga fandom has gained increased visibility and representation—both for better and for worse—in mass media and scholarly discourses; interest and exploration of *otaku* and *fujoshi* have also extended beyond Japan's borders into Western news media (particularly via discourses on Japan as strange and/or futuristic in comparison to normative Western practices) as well as English language scholarship with the popularization of pop culture and fandom studies. Representations of subcultures and marginalized groups, whether created by insiders or outsiders, are important components of how members of these groups define and understand themselves, as well as how individuals outside those groups comprehend and respond to members. Exploration of these discourses also helps in understanding how identity and subcultural practices relate to larger cultural norms and concerns.

Fan communities span nations, media, and genres, and can themselves be divided up into smaller subgroups. In Japan, hardcore fans, particularly of anime, manga, and video games, are referred to as *otaku*. More recently, female fans interested in *yaoi* and Boys' Love—romantic and erotic stories of male/male couples—have been referred to separately by the term *fujoshi*. This thesis traces representations of *otaku* and *fujoshi* within a variety of anime and manga titles, created from the early 1990s through today, to explore how various stereotypes and ideas about *otaku* inform these titles, as well as how images of *otaku* become assimilated into normative tropes and discourses already occurring in these media. Anime and manga about fans reflect, construct, and capitalize on a subjectivity and social framework based on active consumption in order to market fans to themselves and to mainstream audiences. Within these works is a tension between recognizing and authorizing *otaku* modes of consumption, socialization, and sexuality

while also emphasizing, and pulling *otaku* back into, heteronormative roles as well as social and economic responsibilities. These fictional (and occasionally more or less auto-biographical) depictions are an important piece of the discussion about *otaku* behavior, values, and practices but have been largely overlooked within the academic conversation.

<u>Defining *Otaku* and *Fujoshi*</u>

As Azuma Hideo explains, *otaku* "is a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on" (3).[1] The term is generally used to refer to male fans and frequently associated with younger, college-age individuals. Sharon Kinsella notes that most participants involved in creating *dōjinshi* (amateur publications sold at events like Comiket) are in their teens and twenties (*Adult Manga* 110); data from Comiket 77 in 2009, however, places the overall average age of circle organizers at 30.3 years (Ichikawa 10). Azuma bears this out, stating that although *otaku* culture "maintains an image as a youth culture" its chief consumers are in their 30s and 40s (3). Age, therefore, is not a limiting factor in who may or may not be classified as *otaku*.

Women are also major participants in *otaku* culture, making up the majority participants at *dōjinshi* events (Ichikawa 10). Female fans, however, are often referred to using the term *fujoshi*, a self-deprecating term that takes the word for "respectable woman" and replaces one of

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[1] A brief note on name order and Romanization: within this thesis, names are represented in original Japanese order (i.e., family name first and given name second), and I refer to Japanese scholars or characters by their family names; for Romanization, I use Revised Hepburn conventions unless the official English translation or Romanization offered by a publisher differs (e.g., the English version of *Genshiken* uses "Ohno" and "Kousaka" rather than using a macron). For manga and anime titles, I use the title of the official English language release if it is available; otherwise, I will provide the Japanese title Romanized and a suggested translation following; if the title contains a loanword or non-Japanese word, I revert to the English spelling (as I do in referring to the series *Rusanchiman* by *Ressentiment* after the first reference).

the kanji to create a homonym meaning "rotten women"; the term specifically refers to women who are fans of Boys Love (BL) or *yaoi* but is sometimes used more generally to refer to any female fans (Galbraith "*Fujoshi*," 212; Okabe and Ishida 207). For my purposes—in order to delineate based on interests and also because the depiction of female character with traditionally male-associated *otaku* interests versus the depiction of female characters who like BL and *yaoi* will be relevant—I will use *fujoshi* to refer specifically to BL/*yaoi* fans and *female otaku* or *otaku* to refer to female characters focused on other fandom interests.

When discussing fandom and identifying fans for study, most scholars focus on particular practices of active consumption. Henry Jenkins, one of the first and most prominent fandom scholars, highlights fans as somehow excessive in their consumption, but also as "textual poachers" who actively engage with and make unorthodox and/or transformative use of media (24). Extreme emotional attachment and intensity of media consumption or relationship to the media is often a component, but as Cornel Sandvoss notes, it can be difficult to measure or place benchmarks on emotional response; self-labeling is often used when conducting ethnographic research but this still leaves specific definitional boundaries fuzzy since some viewers may self-identify as fans when others would consider them casual viewers, and some individuals may be reluctant to identify or define themselves as fans due to negative connotations with the image of fandom (6). Thus the precise limits of "fan" can be uncertain.

Sandvoss offers a minimum criteria of "regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (8), but this definition, while perhaps minimizing the span of individuals left out of ethnographic study, is almost unworkably broad for the purposes of identifying narratives centering around fans or fan practices. The defining feature of *otaku* is

generally held to be the depth of their knowledge about and fan enthusiasm for their subject of choice (Okada). Some thus refer to any fan with a high level of knowledge and/or who actively participates in fandom culture via producing fanfiction, fanart, *dōjinshi*, cosplay, etc. as an *otaku*, though there may be debate as to the exact amount of knowledge or active participation required. Saitō Tamaki provides a somewhat different definition of *otaku* based on his ethnographic research and psychoanalytic analysis, however. For Saitō, the defining characteristics of *otaku* are: an affinity for fictional contexts, the use of fictionalization to possess their objects of affection (this may include productive fan activities), multiple orientations in enjoying fiction, and the ability to view fiction (for instance animated characters) as sexual objects equivalent to real objects or people (227). All of the existing definitions and concepts of *otaku* provide concepts of use, but it can become difficult when choosing exclusionary boundaries and each definition may leave out individuals who could meaningfully be counted as *otaku*.

The general focus on a high degree of knowledge and time/effort investment in their fandom of choice is a consistent and useful metric; and, while I am unsure if I agree with Saitō's view of fictionalized sexuality as defining or necessary to classification as an *otaku*, sexual attachment to fictional characters and concepts is indeed an important and relevant factor. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, the works selected all focus on individuals who self-identify, or are regularly labeled by others, as *otaku* or *fujoshi*; who engage in active fan practices related to *otaku* culture such as *dōjinshi*, cosplay, or "excessive" consumption/collecting; and/or illustrate predominant stereotypes, values, or critiques of *otaku* behavior. In order to further limit scope to a manageable degree I have generally focused on depictions in anime and manga of *otaku* associated with the related fields of anime, manga, and

video games (as opposed, for instance, to *otaku* with an interest in subjects such as trains or military history and/or weapons). In addition to the fact that anime and manga are of particular interest to me as fields of study, Kikuchi Satoru's survey on *otaku* stereotypes showed that 28% of respondents, the largest portion, associated *otaku* with an interest in anime, with manga and video games tied for the second largest specific media or genre at 11% each (73).[2] If *otaku* are so frequently associated with anime and manga, then representations of *otaku* in these media are the most likely to have been themselves produced by *otaku*, and to be targeted toward, or at least consumed by, *otaku*. Thus, examining works in these media formats offers arguably the most relevant way of understanding how *otaku* represent themselves and also see themselves represented within the sphere of their own subculture. Where exceptions are made, it is because the work in question (for instance, *Kuragehime [Princess Jellyfish]*, whose female *otaku* have a range of non-anime and -manga interests, like dolls, trains, and, as the title suggests, jellyfish) concerns these *otaku* alongside anime/manga/gaming fans, fills a gap in the range of depictions, or is particularly important to consider within the context of the discussion.

The term *otaku* as a name for obsessive fans originated with Nakamori Akio's 1983 article "*Machi ni wa otaku ga ippai*" (This city is full of *otaku*), the first entry in a column series called *Otaku no kenkyū* (*Otaku Research*). *Otaku* literally means "your house" and is a highly formal, rather impersonal mode of address that fans at science fiction, anime, and manga events had begun to use, prompting Nakamori to use it as a label ("*Otaku* Research #2"). The reason for young male fans addressing one another so formally may be linked to social awkwardness, but *otaku* researcher and founding member of the animation studio Gainax, Okada Toshio traces its

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[2] The actual second place was for "other" at 18%, but as this is a catch-all category it is not useful in identifying areas of focus for this thesis.

use to the members and works of Studio Nue. Kawamori Shoji and Mikimoto Haruhiko, creators of *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross* (1982, dubbed and televised in the US as the first portion of *Robotech*), a highly popular and influential work among anime fans, began using the formal *otaku* at the prestigious Keio University and incorporated its use into *Macross*; fans then began using it themselves at events (Okada). Prior to Nakamori's column, fans were generally referred to as *mania*, derived from the English "maniac," fanatics, or *nekura-zoku*, meaning "gloomy tribe" (Schodt 44; Nakamori, "*Otaku* Research 1"). Concurrent with and following Nakamori's introduction of the name, some attempts were made to develop other terms for this growing subculture, such as a well-meaning but ultimately failed attempt by *The Anime* magazine in 1984 to develop a stylish, positive image of anime fans branded as "Yappies," a contraction of "Young Anime People" ("Yappie Handbook" 89). Though the term "*otaku*" started with Nakamori in 1983, it did not gain widespread familiarity until the end of the decade, primarily due to a news story that would greatly influence the public perception of anime and manga fans.

<div align="center">Negative Stereotypes of *Otaku*</div>

As with many descriptors of groups of people, the word *otaku* has held a number of different connotations and value judgments. For much of that history the associations have been negative, but self-defense from within the *otaku* community and economic developments related to the pop culture *otaku* consume have created a more positive counter-narrative. As these various images, stereotypes, and value judgments have naturally made their way into media depictions of *otaku*, and a good deal of the theoretical and critical literature on *otaku* deals with

*otaku* attributes and identity, here I would like to discuss the various important voices and events that have shaped the popular image of *otaku*.

Negative stereotypes and judgments of *otaku* date from Nakamori's 1983 article "*Otaku* Research #1: This City is Full of *Otaku*." Here, the depiction of *otaku* seems quite similar to common stereotypes of nerds or fanboys in America, centered around social awkwardness and unattractive or unpopular physical appearance and clothing. Nakamori describes the attendees at Comiket as

> like those kids—every class has one—who never got enough exercise, who spent recess holed up in the classroom, lurking in the shadows. … Rumpled long hair parted on one side, or a classic kiddie bowl-cut look. Smartly clad in shirts and slacks their mothers bought off the "all ¥980/1980" rack at Ito Yokado or Seiyu [discount retailers], their feet shod in knock-offs of the "R"-branded Regal sneakers that were popular several seasons ago, their shoulder bags bulging and sagging — you know them. The boys were all either skin and bones as if borderline malnourished, or squealing piggies with faces so chubby the arms of their silver-plated eyeglasses were in danger of disappearing into the sides of their brow; all of the girls sported bobbed hair and most were overweight, their tubby, tree-like legs stuffed into long white socks.

A failure of appropriate masculine behavior is also part of the negative *otaku* image, both due to effeminate behavior and a failure to react and engage romantically and sexually with real women as opposed to anime characters (Nakamori, "*Otaku* Research #2"). Anxiety about *otaku*'s relationships with real women and with sex would become a continuing feature of the discourse and imagery.

Sexual dysfunction became an integral part of negative *otaku* stereotypes with the arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu in 1989 for the sexual assault and murder of four young girls. A search of Miyazaki's home revealed "6,000 videotapes of kiddy porn, splatter flicks, and cartoons" (Whipple). His collection included numerous *shōjo* (works marketed toward girls) and *lolicon*

(featuring sexualized depictions of characters who are, or appear, underage) manga and anime, and he had apparently attended Comiket and contributed to *dōjinshi* (Ōtsuka 438; Schodt 45). Faced with such a bizarre and shocking serial murder in a low-crime nation, and confronted by a subculture unusual to most Japanese citizens, the media seized on Miyazaki's *otaku* interests as a potential explanation for his behavior and heavily associated his crimes with the rest of the *otaku* and *dōjinshi* subculture.

Some commentators and experts identified Miyazaki's manga as a contributor to his crimes, alleging that he was unable to recognize the difference between fantasy and reality. Psychologist Dr. Oda Susumu stated that "The little girls he killed were no more than characters from his comic-book life" (qtd. in Whipple). Manga and anime were prime targets for blame both because of the existing anti-social stereotypes associated with the *otaku* and because, as Sharon Kinsella explains, "it was implied that the more fantastical a cultural genre, the more likely it is to directly encourage flights of fantasy (or horror) in its readers" (*Adult Manga* 128). Manga and anime in fantastic genres, such as fantasy and science fiction, that had been embraced by *otaku*, as well as sexually explicit material and *dōjinshi*, became convenient targets for regulation and social control to ease public anxieties while the "social problem" and spectacle of *otaku* youth could provide fodder and ratings for media outlets in extension of Miyazaki's case itself.[3]

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[3] For information about regulation and legal crack downs on *dōjinshi*, see Sharon Kinsella's *Adult Manga* and Sharalyn Orbaugh's article "Creativity and Constraint in Amateur Manga Production" (2003). Manga has also come under legal regulation via 2010's Tokyo ordinance Bill 156, the "Healthy Youth Development Ordinance" or "Non-Existent Youth Bill." For information about the bill and fan response to it, see Mark McLelland, "Thought Policing or the Protection of Youth? Debate in Japan Over the 'Non-Existent Youth Bill'" (2011); and Alex Leavitt and Andrea Horbinski, "Even a Monkey Can Understand Fan Activism: Political Speech, Artistic Expression, and A Public of the Japanese Dôjin Community" (2012).

Miyazaki's crimes, and his frequent association with the word *otaku* and with manga and *dōjinshi*, forever changed the perception of *otaku* for many Japanese. In many instances, the media surrounding the Miyazaki incident was the first exposure to *otaku* as a subculture or group identifier, fundamentally linking Miyazaki with manga and anime fans. Sharon Kinsella states that after 1989 "*[o]taku* came to mean, in the first instance, Miyazaki, in the second instance, all amateur manga artists and fans, and in the third instance all Japanese youth in their entirety. … The sense that this unsociable *otaku* generation was multiplying and threatening to take over the whole of society was strong" (*Adult Manga* 128–29). The 1990 edition of *Gendaiyōgo no kisochishiki*, a dictionary of modern terms, offered the following definition of *otakuzoku* (*otaku* tribe), in which the influence of the Miyazaki case is clear:

> A term for the increasing number of gloomy young men who share an interest in things like videos and computers, and refer to one another by "otaku (your home)." As a result of becoming absorbed in a high tech society dominated by an ethic of "me-ism" where they cannot consider anyone outside themselves, they have a tendency to be isolated and may suddenly commit bizarre, inhuman crimes like Miyazaki Tsutomu. Originating in fetishisms like necrophilia and pedophilia, and manifesting in a pygmalion complex for Licca-chan or computer hacking, their connection with the outside world becomes severed and their increasing participation in an artificial keyboard society appears to exacerbate their disorder (qtd. in Kikuchi 64)[4]

The extent of the negative image associated with the term *otaku* may be best encapsulated by the fact that, despite airing segments and inviting cultural commentators to speak on this subculture, the NHK in fact banned the term, only allowing "fan" or "mania" to be used (Okada). Negative associations of antisociality, poor hygiene, unattractiveness, and sexual deviancy that come with

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[4] *Bideo ya pasokon nado no dōkōkai ni detekite otagai ni aite no koto wo 'otaku' to yobiau nekura na wakamono ga fueteiru toiu. Jibun no kotoshika kangaerarenai mi-izumu sedai ga haiteku shakai no toriko ni natta kekka, Miyazaki Tsutomu no yōna bukimi de hiningenteki na koritsu ningen no gekijōgata hanzai ga gekihatsusuru keikō ni aru. Nekurofiria (necrophilia-shikan) ya pedofiria (pedophilia-shōniseiai), fetishizumu (fetishism-jūbutsusūhai) kara hajimatte, rika-chan ningyō henaishō ya konpyūtā-hakkā ni itarumade, sotonaru sekai to no kairo ga puttsunshita ningen ga, amari ni mo mukishitsu kashita kiibōdo shakai wo chūshin ni ijō zōshokushiteiru rashii.*

the term *otaku* still persist, with a survey in 2000 showing that 62% of responders in Japan

associated *otaku* with negative traits (Kikuchi 72). However, the emergence of *otaku* scholars

and commentators, as well as economic trends in media commonly developed by and associated

with *otaku* have produced a counter-narrative seeking to position *otaku* in a more positive light.

<div align="center">Reframing and Redeeming the *Otaku*'s Public Image</div>

Azuma Hiroki states that the aftermath of the Miyazaki incident "made it difficult to

speak objectively and candidly about *otaku* culture until the end of the 1990s" and that pressures

particularly against academic analyses came both from general and academic disgust with *otaku*

but also from protectiveness and a rejection of commentary by outsiders on the part of the *otaku*

community (5). The beginnings of the shift, however, may be seen as early as 1990 (the year

following Miyazaki's arrest) as economic support for *otaku* as high-spending consumers began

to circulate. That year, *Asahi Shimbun* published an article with the headline "Are you a member

of the *otaku* tribe? A clique rich in information, the changing vanguard of consumption"

(Kikuchi 65).[5] It was not until the mid-90s, however, that major commentators began to surface.

The first high-profile pro-*otaku* voice was Okada Toshio, a member of the animation

studio Gainax. His book *Otakugaku nyūmon* (*Introduction to Otakuology*), published in 1996,

presents *otaku* as cultural connoisseurs with a particularly refined sense of taste and analysis.

Okada describes *otaku* consumption and knowledge through three "eyes" or ways of approaching

and understanding art: the eye for style (*iki no me*), the eye of the artisan (*takumi no me*), and the

eye of the connoisseur (*tsū no me*). The first eye, the eye for style, is an individualized viewpoint

that enjoys the work, discovers its beauty, and follows the growth of the author; the eye of the

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[5] *Anata mo otakuzoku shiteiru? Chishiki yutaka na kodawariha shōhi saizensen ni henka*

artisan analyzes the work logically and sees through its structure to comprehend and duplicate technique; and the eye of the connoisseur gathers information about the work's production including backstage drama. Through these modes of seeing, Okada emphasizes the *otaku*'s attention to detail, thoroughness, and individual judgment.

The terms used to label the 'eyes' are derived from Edo-period aesthetics and sensibilities, through the lens of a 1930 work that retroactively defined Edo-period sensibilities, *Iki no kouzou* (Steinberg 453). The link to traditional Japanese culture and sensibilities is intentional and important to Okada, with *Otakugaku nyūmon's* final chapter title declaring *otaku* to be the "legitimate successors of Japanese culture" (Okada). Okada simultaneously positions *otaku* as more advanced consumers and appreciators of culture while also lending them legitimacy through a link to Japanese culture and history.

While Okada sought to emphasize the *otaku* as inheritors and maintainers of traditional Japanese thought, other commentators would seek to position *otaku* as a fundamental break with earlier culture and traditions. Azuma Hiroki, in his book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (originally published 2001), describes *otaku* as founded in imported Western aesthetics and values, imagining and embodying a "pseudo-Japan manufactured from U.S.-produced material" (20). Azuma locates the roots of all *otaku* interests (such as anime, science fiction, special effects films, and computer games) within American culture imported after Japan's defeat in World War II (11). Furthermore, Azuma positions *otaku* consumption and taste as quintessentially postmodern rather than a resurgence or continuation of historical trends.

Azuma first locates *otaku* culture's inherent postmodernity in two of its major features: the prevalence of derivative works and the abandonment of reliance on a grand narrative. The

popularity of *dōjinshi* as seen in attendance and sales figures at Comiket demonstrates that *otaku* place little if any value on a perception of realism or originality; in an illustration of Baudrillard's theories about the postmodern dominance of *simulacra*, "without reference to the real world, the original is produced as a simulacrum of preceding works from the start, and in turn the simulacrum of that simulacrum is propagated by fan activities and consumed voraciously. ... [T]he products of otaku culture are born into a chain of infinite imitations and piracy" (26). Second, Azuma explains that *otaku* demonstrate the postmodern move away from cultural 'grand narratives,' valuing fiction equally to reality and developing alternate *otaku*-specific social values and standards to replace larger, all-encompassing ones that no longer exist or function (27). It is *otaku* culture's adaptation to the lack of a grand narrative that forms the central point of Azuma's theory, that *otaku* culture strongly illustrates a new "database model" of reality.

Rather than the traditional idea of a "deep inner layer" containing society's unified world view or framing narrative, which produces the outer surface layer of reality and in turn is perceived by the viewer, who is determined within the confines of the grand narrative, the postmodern or *otaku* mode of perception and consumption is structured like a database. The grand narrative inner layer is replaced by a data bank of settings or world views, and individuals "read up" and use the elements within the database to both comprehend and produce various simulacra (32–33). This can be particularly seen in the tendency, as Ian Condry describes in his ethnographic experience observing anime production, to focus primarily on characters rather than narrative within anime production as well as consumption ("Anime Creativity" 141). Azuma also identifies the development and implementation of various character traits intended to

evoke *moe* (affectionate feelings, sometimes defined primarily by a protective impulse) from viewers as an example of the database model at work; characters are "broken up into elements, categorized, and registered to a database" and new characters are then developed by combining various elements from that database to evoke the desired response (47). Not only is *otaku* taste and behavior thus positioned as fundamentally distinct from history and traditional aesthetics, but *otaku* also become a valuable object of study to comprehend postmodern life, and aspects of *otaku* behavior and consumption that could be categorized as immature, delusional, or dysfunctional are now portrayed as functional, valuable, and perhaps even more optimally suited to life in present society.

In addition to the attempt to rehabilitate, or at least better explain, the *otaku* from a standpoint of economics and consumption, some scholars such as psychoanalyst Saitō Tamaki have turned their attention to the subject of *otaku* sexuality. The Miyazaki case painted *otaku* as dangerous sexual predators and deviants, but Saitō states that despite the preponderance of perverse imagery and subject matter in the fictional sphere of *otaku* sexuality, perversion—the main component of the *otaku*'s sexuality—is separate from action in the real world. According to Saitō, Miyazaki is the exception rather than the rule, and when *otaku* do have relationships with others in the real world, they are almost uniformly heterosexual and can be considered healthy ("Otaku Sexuality" 228). While most work on *otaku* deals either with males or with *fujoshi*, but not both, Saitō discusses both and notes that the pattern of separation between *otaku* and *fujoshi*'s sexuality and real life are consistent across both groups. He does, however, note a distinction in focus. Male *otaku* tend to focus on the character's figure or situation, as "a man fears the undermining of his own subject position, and he must establish that position firmly

before he can desire an object....The word *moe* is used by male *otaku* to locate the agent of that desire" ("Otaku Sexuality" 231). *Fujoshi*, on the other hand, are less concerned with subject positionality and can identify more fluidly with objects of desire; thus, "her attraction to a text surpasses that of the male *otaku*" and *fujoshi* are more concerned with the character pairings and the assignment of dominant/penetrative (*seme*) and submissive/penetrated (*uke*) roles ("Otaku Sexuality" 231). For Saitō, *otaku* and *fujoshi* sexuality is safe and does not represent any particular pathology, nor is it innately immature or repressed.

<div align="center">Overview of Research on <em>Otaku</em></div>

Perhaps drawing from trends in academic studies of Western media fans the majority of academic work related to *otaku* and *fujoshi* is sociological or historical in nature.[6] Also likely due to the easier availability of survey respondents or groups for observation by American scholars, a sizeable amount of the work focuses on American fans classified as *otaku* due to their interest in anime, manga, and other forms of Japanese popular culture. Lawrence Eng, a scholar who self-identifies as an *otaku*, has written a dissertation and published work primarily researching American *otaku* that tracks how the concept was imported to the US fandom and has changed within the American context since the 1990s; he proposes a unified "*otaku* ethic" spanning both Japanese and American *otaku*, the chief characteristics of which are the importance of information within a system of secrecy and trading, information and identity management through appropriation, and the use of networks for personal and collective gain ("Strategies of Engagement" 96–101). A great deal of research into cosplay—the practice of making and

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[6] In addition to works cited here, see for instance Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers;* Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* and Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington's *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World.*

dressing up in costumes of anime, manga, and video games—has used American fans as the focus.[7] As my central concern is representations in anime and manga, media both created by and primarily targeted toward Japanese consumers, I focus primarily on scholarship investigating and describing *otaku* in Japan.

Patterns of *otaku* and *fujoshi* behavior and taste are a primary focus area for scholars. In "An Exploratory Study of the Otaku Adolescent Consumer," Niu, Chiang, and Tsai conducted focus group interviews with *otaku* in Taiwan to determine their purchasing habits and preferences, concluding that "communicating methods for this group rely on [anime, comics, and games] subjects or their extension" and "it is not just the things in themselves that are consumed, but rather the world view [that] is contained therein" (723). In "Love Revolution: Anime, Masculinity, and the Future," Ian Condry discusses the expression of *moe* among male *otaku*, particularly related to the case of an *otaku* petition to legalize marriage to fictional characters, in order to examine changing ideas of masculinity and how understanding and "proposals supporting the value of affective consumption as a legitimate expression of masculinity offer the chance to reframe political action away from centralized governance toward a more distributed and networked understanding of power and social change" (281). *Otaku* consumption becomes of interest not simply from an economic standpoint but also as an expression of personality and sexuality, and for some scholars it offers possibilities for transforming social structures and gender identity.

The vast majority of scholarship on *fujoshi* is focused on examining why women enjoy reading and watching romanticized, highly fictionalized tales of male/male romance and sex.

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[7] Okabe Daisuke's "Cosplay, Learning, and Cultural Practice" does focus on Japanese cosplayers.

Saitō Kumiko discusses tropes and patterns in BL manga in comparison with Western slash fanfiction and posits that through BL and *yaoi*, *fujoshi* "seem to question and thereby challenge their positions of being socially and economically subordinate while sustaining, and further adapting to, existing gender discourses promoted in society" (187). Dru Pagliassotti surveyed American BL readers to collate reports of what precisely they enjoy about BL/*yaoi*, comparing it with previous scholarship on women's enjoyment of romance novels. She argues that male/male romance including BL and *yaoi* should be considered a distinct subgenre of romance fiction, with largely similar motivations for enjoyment; *fujoshi*, however, display some divergent priorities for desired content, including less expectation of happy endings and a greater emphasis on erotic content (65, 74). Several scholars have pursued the issue of not simply the same-sex nature of the romance but also the use of androgynous male characters and questions of gender identification. Matsui Midori states that androgynous young men in *shōnen-ai* manga of the 70s "were the girls' displaced selves...compensating for the absence of logos and sexuality in the conventional portraits of girls" (178). Much of this literature focuses on the use of BL or *yaoi* as a female-positive space for the expression of desire and the struggle for identity, but also sometimes constitutes a somewhat pathologizing discourse focused on women's social abjection and posits a sort of fictionalized penis envy that requires them to identify with male characters.

Whereas most of this literature accepts the general understanding that BL and *yaoi* have no connection whatsoever to actual queer individuals and that most *fujoshi* are heterosexual, James Welker has sought to complicate this image. In "Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: 'Boys' Love' as Girls' Love in *Shôjo Manga*" he cites several *fujoshi* who identify as lesbian and consider BL as a formative part of their sexual development, analyzing two classic manga titles

to describe how they "opened up space for some readers to experiment with marginalized gender and sexual practices and played a role in identity formation" (843). In "Flower Tribes and Female Desire: Complicating Early Female Consumption of Male Homosexuality in Shōjo Manga" Welker analyzes correspondence from female readers of Japanese gay magazine *Barazoku* to examine how fantastic images of homosexuality from *shōnen-ai* manga intersected with awareness of real gay men, and how these manga and *Barazoku* "helped them to understand and validate their own same-sex desire or nonnormative gender identification" (212). This work, though it overlaps with the literature focusing on women's proxy identifications with men in BL, is a valuable expansion of the research on *fujoshi*.

More recently, in addition to a focus on the question of why *fujoshi* like BL/*yaoi*, some scholarship has begun specifically to examine patterns of *fujoshi* socialization and identity management. In "*Fujoshi*: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among 'Rotten Girls' in Contemporary Japan" Patrick Galbraith observed socialization and interaction between *fujoshi* both online and in person. He describes their intimacy as "characterized by playful surface interaction" and bounded by specific "temporal and spatial limits" (214). Moreover, they primarily engage in "*moebanashi*" or discussion of moe which "temporarily allows an expanded consciousness as participants access a shared imaginary" (222–23). Okabe Daisuke and Ishida Kimi, in "Making *Fujoshi* Identity Visible and Invisible," also observed several *fujoshi* in order to track how they managed concealing and revealing their identity and knowledge as *fujoshi*, balancing secrecy from coworkers or even boyfriends with socializing in *fujoshi* peer groups. It is encouraging to see research on *fujoshi* begin to branch out from simply the question of why women are interested in men being romantically involved and physically intimate with one

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another. The scholarship still lacks any serious attention to female *otaku* other than BL/*yaoi* fans, as well as attention to practices other than *dōjinshi*/fanfiction production and cosplay.

 *Otaku* and *fujoshi* spaces and gatherings are also a subject of interest. Morikawa Kaichiro's "Otaku and the City" tracks the history of Akihabara, a Tokyo district with a high concentration of shops catering to *otaku*, and discusses how *otaku*'s disconnection from mainstream society and the tension between the desire for self-determination and community alongside the desire to avoid attention culminated in *otaku* private space merging with public space (155). Morikawa also explains how the gender divide between male *otaku* and female *fujoshi* culture influences physical space and economic development through the split and parallel development of the *otaku*'s Akihabara and the *fujoshi*'s "Otome Road" in Ikebukuro, a physical divide that pushes *otaku* and *fujoshi* subcultures forward because each "evolves and advances when members of the opposite sex are absent" (141). In "Akihabara: Conditioning a Public 'Otaku' Image," Patrick Galbraith uses Akihabara to discuss how both economic and cultural issues are reflected in and productive of change to this public *otaku* space. His observations over several years in Akihabara demonstrate how "even as otaku feed a global chain of innovation in commercial products, consumption patterns, and cultural practices, they are treated as disruptive and pushed out of sight in Akihabara to make way for official platforms to promote Japanese cool" (212–23). This exhibits an interesting trend, which can be seen operating through some of the works here, between *otaku* and *fujoshi* connection to politically expedient narratives celebrating Japanese soft power pushing them into greater visibility and surface acknowledgment, while the lingering negative stereotypes and the negative or troubling

aspects of these fans' consumption practices demand a sort of sterilization or selective attention in order to fit discourses of trendy Japanese cool.

Similarly, Fan-Yi Lam's article "Comic Market: How the World's Biggest Amateur Comic Fair Shaped Japanese *Dōjinshi* Culture" traces the history and development of the largest outlet for distribution of amateur publications, many made and consumed by *otaku* and *fujoshi*, and links it with changes in *otaku* subculture and expanding public visibility and changing views on Japanese pop culture associated with *otaku*. Tamagawa Hiroaki also tracks the history of Comic Market as a central space and channel for *otaku* self-expression, "an alternative market system that...provides otaku media for otaku by otaku" (128).

The link between the development and nature of *otaku* culture and larger changes or trends in Japanese society has also received some scholarly attention. Sociologist Miyadai Shinji, in his book *Sabukaruchaa shinwa kaitai* (1993, Dismantling the subculture myth) and his essay "Transformation of Semantics in the History of Japanese Subcultures since 1992" discusses major shifts in Japanese subcultures including *otaku* and links them to a larger context of changing Japanese self-image and modes of perceiving reality. In particular, he links the growth of *otaku* subculture to a transition wherein "the measuring stick for evaluating reality shifted from order and then future to the *self*. … In this age one utilizes anything—whether it is 'reality' or 'fiction'—in order to achieve the homeostasis of the self" (234–35). Postmodernity's fading distinction between reality and fiction is tied closely to the development of *otaku* subculture and the changing attitudes about *otaku*, something echoed by other scholars, particularly Azuma Hiroki.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the rather small community of scholars analyzing anime and manga, little analysis has been devoted to representations of *otaku* within media. The works that have received attention are largely the works of director Kon Satoshi and the novel and live-action movie and television sensation *Densha Otoko* (Train Man). These analyses explore the tension in depictions of *otaku* between negative stereotypes and positive or redemptive depictions, as well as the way the figure of the *otaku* intersects with other social issues.

In "Monstrous Media and Delusional Consumption in Kon Satoshi's *Paranoia Agent*" Gerald Figal discusses the depiction of addictive, escapist consumerism and the spread of *otaku* tendencies within Kon's only television anime. He presents the series, especially the simultaneously charming yet monstrous figure of the cute mascot Maromi and its shadow "Li'l Slugger," as embodiments of how media "become the source of discomfort and disconnection, feeding in turn a desire for immediate comfort-through-escape" (155). The most negative traits associated with *otaku*—narcissism, social dysfunction, and avoidance of reality/responsibility— pervade society without the counterbalancing of any positive sorts of active engagement. The most overtly depicted *otaku* character is a stereotypical unattractive, obsessive fetishist.

Kerin Ogg, however, in "Lucid Dreams, False Awakenings: Figures of the Fan in Kon Satoshi," views Kon's representations of *otaku* as balanced between condemnation and sympathy. The most reductive negative stereotypes are, Ogg argues, counterpointed by positive depictions of devoted cinemaphiles (an echo of Kon himself) and other fans who "often provide the key information, insights, and eye-opening new perspectives needed to resolve the plot" (169). Overall, Kon's message seems to be that fannish enthusiasm or focus is not inherently bad, but becomes dangerous when fans avoid or escape the real world.

Melek Ortabasi, in "National History as Otaku Fantasy: *Millennium Actress*," touches on the ways that the fan-turned-documentary-director Genya embodies various ideas about and depictions of *otaku*, but primarily explores the way the film goes about "redefining otakuism as artistic method, rather than personal taste" and "puts the emphasis on how national culture is produced" while reflecting *otaku* sensibilities in its structure (292). Thus Kon's own *otaku* leanings result in a simultaneous celebration and critique of Japanese film history that can be tied both to Japanese tradition and to modern *otaku* related art movements like Superflat.[8]

*Densha Otoko*, a novel purporting to reprint and summarize a real life romance as chronicled in posts from the 2ch message board—along with its extremely popular live action movie and television adaptations—is one of the most well-known depictions of *otaku* in Japanese popular culture and has attracted some scholarly attention. Ming-Hung Alex Tu, in "'Stranger on a Train': *Denshaotoko*, Serialization, and Otaku Cosmopolitanism," analyzes the serial structure of the narrative—seen both in the episodic chunked format and the distribution of the story through progressive forum discussions—as well as the train imagery to be a reflection of networked, even posthuman *otaku* culture. The series reflects a particularly Japanese group consciousness, *nakamaishiki*, at work whereby *otaku* form alternative social structures online that are close and emotional, yet also "performative and temporary" as they attempt to "overturn the *soto* (strangers) into *uchi* (*nakama*), to seek consolidation in each's own isolation" (43, 52). In "Where Have All the Salarymen Gone? Masculinity, Masochism, and Technomobility in *Densha Otoko*," Susan Napier explores the way the *otaku* functions as both an inheritor of

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[8] *Superflat* refers to a postmodern art movement, influenced by manga and anime, which involves the use of flattened forms and an emphasis on the shallowness or emptiness of consumer culture. The movement was founded by the artist Murakami Takashi, who used the term as a title for a 2001 art exhibition.

traditional Japanese masculinity based on "stoicism, sacrifice, and perseverance or endurance" and a new masculine identity that is more vulnerable and interdependent (170). Thus, the *otaku* "can be read as a national wish-fulfilling fantasy—a desire for what are believed to be basic Japanese values to still operate and be influential in a society where technology is crowding out history, culture, and community" (174). Though more romanticized than Kon's depictions of *otaku*, then, *Densha Otoko* seems to balance between criticism and redemption of the *otaku*.

<u>Thesis Structure</u>

The purpose of this thesis is to position anime and manga representations within the larger discourses; therefore, I have generally organized its structure based on the major features of those framing definitions. Chapter One, "Down-and-Out in Akihabara–Negative Depictions of Otaku" discusses critical and exclusionary concepts of *otaku* and *fujoshi* personalities and practices and surveys reflections of those alienating images within anime and manga titles. I explore the way these works reflect concerns about *otaku* and *fujoshi* as social and economic failures, as well as disconnected from reality; second, I examine ways that *otaku* and *fujoshi* represent excess in terms of their overly affective consumption and sexual inappropriateness; and finally, I focus on the use of grotesque imagery as visual markers of both *otaku* failures (rejecting reality and responsibility) and excesses (in multiple senses, "letting oneself go").

Chapter Two, "From Outcast to Otaking—Positive Depictions of *Otaku*" discusses the way *otaku* and *fujoshi* are "normalized" or placed back into mainstream social roles and expectations via these fictional depictions in direct opposition to critical discourses, such as those I discuss in Chapter One. The chapter also examines the way that some positive images of *otaku* and *fujoshi* seek to redefine those social roles and expectations and delineate a particular fan

identity. I explore three aspects of positive representations in these works: their focus on *otaku* and *fujoshi* practices as passionate and productive; the predominance and importance of social acceptance; and the rejection of antisocial imagery through a focus on relationships and on consumption as a foundation for and means of community building. Following these portrayals of *otaku* and *fujoshi* as appropriately fitting and fulfilling normative social roles and expectations, I also discuss the argument that *otaku* identity offers a challenge to masculine identity by embracing and privileging traditionally "feminine" modes of consumption, as well as the roots of popular *otaku* media and aesthetics in works created by and targeted toward girls; however, I also question the degree to which these *otaku* masculinities reinforce patriarchal modes of dominance and objectification of women, as well as whether this sense of masculinity can be appropriately attributed to *otaku* rather than to a more general cultural shift. I also discuss the problematic elements of consumer-defined identities and the way *otaku*—particularly female *otaku*—become marketable objects rather than complex reflections of female fans' lived experiences.

Chapter Three, "'Something Inside Me is Opening Up'—Exploring Fictionalized and Lived Genders and Sexualities," discusses the general (largely academic or at least professional) conception of gender roles and sexual orientations common among *otaku* and *fujoshi*, as well as the nature and significance of the erotic components of their fan practices. I then survey anime and manga depictions to demonstrate where these discourses about *otaku* and *fujoshi* sexuality are reinforced and where recent works complicate our understanding of *otaku* and *fujoshi* desires, thus challenging the accepted academic wisdom and suggesting a need for revisiting and revising our preconceptions. Like the positive depictions discussed in Chapter Two, the images of *otaku*

and *fujoshi* sexuality and gender identity discussed in this chapter exhibit a tension between reintegrating fans into heteronormative molds, and challenging or complicating mainstream concepts of desire.

# CHAPTER ONE: DOWN-AND-OUT IN AKIHABARA–NEGATIVE DEPICTIONS OF *OTAKU*

Since its introduction by Nakamori Akio in 1983, and especially since the infamous trial of Miyazaki Tsutomu for the murder of several young girls, the term *otaku* has been the center of a frequently fraught and anxious discourse. The early image of the antisocial, sexually perverse, and potentially dangerous *otaku* functions as a part of broader Japanese cultural anxieties and media coverage about changing gender roles, economic instability, and population decline. Anime and manga, media frequently associated with *otaku*, participate in this discourse by featuring *otaku* (and more recently *fujoshi*) characters as protagonists and representing *otaku* subcultures and practices. This chapter charts negative images of *otaku* occurring in anime and manga titles produced from 1991 up to the present, examining the ways in which these works reinforce these broader social anxieties. Many of these works express criticisms from non-*otaku* but in some cases may reflect *otaku* creators' own self-deprecating explorations of fans who are defined largely by a constant tension between failure and excess, of being simultaneously "not enough" and "too much." *Otaku*, on the one hand, fail to engage adequately with and invest in social norms and obligations, and lack the skills required to succeed financially or sexually. On the other hand, they also display an excessiveness (of emotion, of enthusiasm, or of body) that is positioned as off-putting or inappropriate. These ideas of failure and excess are strongly intertwined, and some aspects (such as the visual language surrounding *otaku* bodies) may combine elements of both simultaneously.

In this chapter I discuss various aspects of this negative discourse with recourse to several titles, which I will return to throughout the chapter, in particular Gainax's 1991 home video

*Otaku no Video*, Hanazawa Kengo's 2004 science fiction series *Rusanchiman (Ressentiment)*, and Takimoto Tatsuhiko's 2004 manga version of the dark comedy *Welcome to the N.H.K.* I will deal first with the ways that images and narratives of failure figure into fictional representations of *otaku* across these series; second, I will explore ways that these titles display *otaku* as uncomfortably excessive both visually and narratively; finally, I will examine the way that both the aspects of failure and excess combine into an image of the *otaku* as monstrous and grotesque.

<p align="center">The Fan as Failure</p>

In many ways the *otaku* presents an example of social and economic failure, unable to meet expectations of career achievement, human interaction, or gender performance. At the most severe, he or she may even potentially be unable to deal or engage with reality, retreating into fiction as a method of avoidance. While the *otaku* may not necessarily be lacking in intelligence, skill, or drive, these qualities are seen as "wasted" on things with no value: activities that do not make money, lead to romantic/sexual success with partners, continue family lines, or establish social power and influence.

Even the *otaku*'s choice of media, the very media boundaries by which we define *otaku*, marks a sort of cultural failure. While the concept of *otaku* is related to devoted fan behavior and can be focused toward a variety of targets (e.g. trains, animals, or sports), fans of media products commonly associated with children or viewed as mass- or pop-cultural, rather than "high art," are the ones typically labeled as *otaku*. Reporting and surveys about *otaku* primarily identify them as fans interested in anime, manga, video games, science fiction, and *tokusatsu* (special effects) films and television (Azuma 3; Kikuchi 73). Many properties popular among *otaku* and *fujoshi* are designed for children; therefore, adult interest in them is construed as odd or

immature. *Fujoshi* frequently base their fan works on *Shōnen Jump* titles such as *Bleach* and *Death Note* aimed at adolescent boys; likewise, magical girl series such as *Sailor Moon* and more recently the *Purikyua (PreCure)* franchise, titles designed for elementary school girls, are highly popular with adult male *otaku*; and, of course, many giant robot/mecha and *tokusatsu* series popular with adult fans, such as the *Super Sentai* franchise (exported to the US as *Power Rangers*) or *Kamen Raidā* (*Masked Rider*) are primarily elementary school children's entertainment designed to sell toys.

This is not far off from common attitudes toward fans in the West; in her discussion of unauthorized amateur fan films, Sara Gwenllian Jones notes that many socially ostracized hardcore fans akin to *otaku* (the sort frequently classified as "geeks" or "nerds") in America are considered immature or intellectually stunted due to their association with "devalued cultural objects such as celebrities, pop music, television series, films, and 'trash' genres such as science fiction, fantasy and horror" (171). Individuals equally passionate about, for instance, opera or Kabuki Theater (or so-called "literary" fiction and art cinema as opposed to fantasy and science fiction media) are by contrast viewed as culturally and intellectually advanced, sophisticated connoisseurs. Though the proliferation of media and the financial success of what was traditionally viewed as "low" culture have, to a certain extent, broken down these divisions they do still operate; particularly in a social structure, like Japan's, heavily concerned with responsibility and duty, the *otaku* violates expectations by refusing to privilege or devote attention to sufficiently adult or intellectual hobbies. The *otaku*'s determined flight from responsibility/reality and the sometimes concomitant low socio-economic status are key aspects

of the negative stereotype. The attainment of "normal" social goals and the ability to meet both financial and sexual expectations are what generally mark "graduation" from *otaku* status.

The image of the *otaku*-as-failure presented in anime and manga relates to this idea of the fan who does not attain proper, responsible adulthood, but it is also strongly tied up (particularly for male *otaku*) with a failure to adequately perform their expected gender role. In the first place, a perception of *otaku* pursuits as largely focused around consumption rather than production, and unsteady amateur work rather than stable corporate jobs, positions the *otaku* as an economic risk or outright failure. Patterns of employment in Japan demonstrate that men are still expected to support a family while women are pushed to have children and focus on the home. Despite the increased participation of women in the workforce since World War II and legal mandates for equal employment opportunities, men are still in privileged positions of power and earning status within the workforce. Mary Brinton's study of female workers in Japan finds that women are primarily relegated to part-time or piecemeal work due to the expectation that they will quit to eventually pursue motherhood; conversely, white-collar jobs with promotion tracks are largely male dominated, and Japan has a greater gender wage gap than many other nations at similar levels of development (3–4). This workforce imbalance and gender-based system of economic expectations is reflected in the fact that few depictions of female *otaku*, even ones that skew negative, include or focus on a lack of career or academic success; since women are not under as much social pressure to support a family financially, such images of failure are not needed as cautionary examples or chastisements.

Though Gainax's *Otaku no Video* (1989) is the first anime title to focus positively on *otaku* characters and subculture, and one created itself by *otaku*, including script by critic Okada

Toshio, it also incorporates self-deprecating negative stereotypes that poke fun at *otaku* failings while also exaggerating the characters to emphasize that these images are distortions and do not accurately represent fans. The title is a made for video production (commonly referred to as OVA, an abbreviation for the Japanese term Original Video Animation, or sometimes OAV among American audiences) and is divided into two alternating types of segments: an animated portion that tells a fantastic narrative of *otaku* success and passion based partially on the real-life founding of Gainax (and its accompanying retail outlet General Products), and an assortment of live-action mockumentary style interview segments titled "Portrait of an Otaku" which showcase socially awkward caricatures of hapless *otaku*.[9]

Kubo, the protagonist of the animated portion of the OAV, begins the narrative as a "normal" college student: he is a good student, with a membership in the tennis club and a pretty girlfriend, apparently on the path to normative success. After he runs into his old classmate Tanaka, however, Kubo ends up becoming an *otaku* and throwing himself headlong into his new hobby. Though we see the enjoyment Kubo gains from his participation in Tanaka's *otaku* circle, Kubo's girlfriend expresses concern and we see, both from her dialog and from certain visual signifiers, a simultaneous representation of Kubo's "downward spiral" from the socially accepted path on which he began. Kubo gradually begins to ignore his girlfriend and becomes progressively more distracted from the rest of his life as he works late nights helping the circle and studying *otaku* trivia (both of which offer no pay or externally recognized reward). Kubo himself becomes more obviously exhausted and neglectful of his appearance—unshaven,

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[9] In general I have avoided discussing live-action properties about otaku in this thesis, even though a number of popular and relevant titles like *Densha Otoko* and *Akihabara@deep* exist; this is largely a concern of scope. In this particular case, however, these segments are combined with the anime portion of the OAV and obviously intended to work together in juxtaposition, such that to omit discussion of them entirely would make any analysis of *Otaku no Video*'s contributions to otaku self-representation incomplete.

increasingly pudgy, with dark circles under his eyes—and we see that his apartment becomes messier and messier. One scene shows that his tennis trophies and other belongings, signifiers not only of his "normal" life but of his respectable accomplishments, have been shoved haphazardly into a box to make room for various *otaku* paraphernalia (manga, anime tapes, magazines, etc.). Academic performance and even participation in the tennis club signify as assets that will facilitate career growth and future earnings, but becoming an *otaku* interrupts these. Kubo will later go on to defy the image of the *otaku* as failure (as I will discuss further in the next chapter), but his arc still involves an initial decline and a failure to meet expected goals.

The first "Portrait" segment echoes this alignment of *otaku* with failed accomplishment. In it a nondescript salaryman discusses his participation in the SF club and his *otaku* hobbies during college. Though they did attempt projects and put together a few fanzines, their key project, a film, never materialized. "We had a lot of plans for it but due to one thing or another, nothing much came of them," he says. As if to continue this theme of failure, he also reveals that he eventually dropped out of college before completing his degree. Though we do not know the details of this subject's current job, given the demonstrable connection between high-paying jobs and degree attainment (particularly from good colleges), the viewer is likely meant to assume it is relatively low paying and without much possibility of upward mobility.

Depictions of the *otaku* as romantic and sexual failure, unable to achieve a relationship with a woman at all, but especially one that will lead to marriage and produce children, is even more central to the idea of *otaku* as failing at performing masculinity. Considerable public discourse about *otaku* has lately focused on the development and popularity of *moe*, particularly in the realm of dating simulation games offering virtual girlfriend experiences as well as fan-

targeted consumer goods aimed at satisfying sexual and companionship needs such as

*dakimakura* (hug pillows) printed with favorite characters, sexually titillating or explicitly

pornographic collectible figures, or sex toys themed/branded with particular characters. For

instance, a brief spate of consternation and negative media attention followed an online petition

posted in 2008 which requested that the Japanese government recognize marriage between real

individuals and fictional or "2-D" characters.[10] Concerned news reports appeared even in

international media, where the petition was characterized as "a reflection of the nation's growing

obsession with escaping reality" and was speciously connected to an apparently unrelated case in

which a woman posted online that she planned to kill her parents in retribution for an attempt to

throw out her manga collection (Demetriou). In the case of foreign media attention, news stories

like those about the petition or ones about *dakimakura* not only participate in debates that

pathologize fan culture but additionally serve as easily created and attention-grabbing exoticized

narratives about "wacky" Japanese pop culture or consumer patterns, thus perpetuating

patronizing "West versus the rest" attitudes toward Japan.

More significantly, however, the image of the *otaku* as a sexual failure participates in a

larger, overarching discourse enacted both within and outside of Japan regarding the country's

perceived population crisis. Increases in life expectancy combined with low birth rates have

resulted in Japan having an older median age compared to other industrialized nations.

Approximately one quarter of the population is 65 and over, with only 38.3% falling in the prime

working age range of 25–54; younger groups show even lower numbers, with only 13.4% of

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[10] *"Nijigen kyara to no kekkon wo hōteki ni mitometekudasai"* (Please legally recognize marriage to 2-D characters) was posted to the online website Shomei TV and can be viewed at http://www.shomei.tv/project-213.html; it received 3,550 signatures, though there is some online debate regarding to what extent the signers are serious or are merely having fun or "trolling."

citizens aged 0–14 years and 9.7% aged 15–24. Population growth has recently been claimed as

negative at -0.1%, with a birth rate of 8.23/1,000—ranking 219th compared to all other nations

(CIA). These statistics have spurred impassioned discourse and debate about Japan's ability to

support its economy and care for its aging population in the future. Blame for these falling

birthrates and the continued recession is often placed on so-called "parasite singles … men and

women in their 20s and early 30s who live off their parents even if they have a job" (Sasaki-

Uemura 320). Much of this discourse focuses on women choosing to avoid marriage, but an

*otaku* subculture, whose members are more interested in fictional women and are apparently

unable to attract partners, is also a convenient target.

Economic failure and the concomitant sense of haplessness are also defining aspects of

Takuro, the protagonist of Hanazawa Kengo's 2004 manga *Rusanchiman* (*Ressentiment*), the

most cutting negative depiction of *otaku* discussed in this thesis. Takuro is a 30-year-old factory

worker stuck in an unfulfilling, apparently dead-end job; he still lives with his parents,

presumably indicating that he does not make enough income to support himself. Shortly after his

introduction in the first volume, Takuro wonders "Crap, what have I been doing up until now? I

finished trade school, got a job in a totally unrelated field, and spent 10 years working at a

factory" (1: 12).[11] His dissatisfaction with his life and his forward prospects is such that he notes

"I cry a lot, lately" (1: 15).[12] This lack of career and economic success works in concert with his

relationship failures to set the groundwork for his becoming an *otaku*. In an effort to escape his

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[11] *Kussō, ore wa ima made naniyattekitanda. Senmongakkō sotsugyōshite mattaku kankeinai bunya ni shūshokushite 10nen kōjyo kinmu.*
[12] *Saikin yoku namida ga deru.*

frustrating reality, he purchases and becomes obsessed with an advanced girlfriend simulation game.

Takuro is also a prime example of anxieties about *otaku* sexual and romantic failure. He is himself a "parasite single," working and making an income but still living with and apparently reliant on his parents; they appear to take care of all the cooking and home maintenance in addition to paying the bills. Furthermore, the manga is explicit that his interest in the game, and his subsequent transition into *otaku* fixation, stem from his complete failure at interacting with women in reality. He recalls that, during high school, "the cumulative amount of time I spent talking to girls all three years was less than ten minutes ... even though it was co-ed" (3: 132).[13] While he is not a virgin, he has "never had sex except with professionals," using his work bonuses to visit soaplands (1: 12).[14] It is also strongly suggested that Echigo, the *otaku* friend who introduces Takuro to the game, is himself compensating for his lack of real romantic attachment; he lives alone and he never mentions or is seen with a girlfriend or spouse, instead amassing a virtual harem of attractive, obedient young women within the game.

Even further compounding the notion of *otaku* as romantically and sexually inept is Takuro's interaction with Tsukiko, the virtual girlfriend he purchases. She is a unique model with a more advanced personality than most, and, unlike the compliant "standard models," frequently resists Takuro's physical advances. In their first encounter, Takuro unsuccessfully sexually assaults Tsukiko, who fights him off and even bites him; throughout their interaction, though the two do become closer and even date, she retains a stubborn will of her own. She also has lingering feelings for another man, her programmer, rather than being instantly and

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[13] *Ore nante kōkō sannenkan…joshi to shabetta jikan gōkei 10ppunikada. Kyōgaku nanoni.*
[14] *Ima da, shirōto dōtei*

completely in love with Takuro as we see Echigo's harem are with him. This difficulty with Tsukiko, whose advanced AI and individual personality force Takuro to interact with her more like a human being rather than a controllable doll, alongside Takuro's potential (but ultimately failed) romantic opportunity with a female coworker, reinforces the critique that the *otaku*'s consumer-based model of desire and relationships and apparent inability to adequately interact with, or satisfy, real women are markers of their personal and social failure.

While Shimoku Kio's ensemble comedy *Genshiken* is primarily a positive and loving depiction of *otaku* and *fujoshi*, including their successful romantic relationships both with other fans and non-fans, it also incorporates scenes in which some of the most obviously/stereotypically *otaku* characters find themselves hapless around, or actively off-putting to, women. Minor supporting character Kuchiki, a late addition to the group (who generally serves the narrative function of causing or escalating situations by being completely obnoxious) is routinely rude and sexually inappropriate toward the female members of the club. In a more down-to-earth depiction of the issue, Madarame (one of the main characters) finds himself alone in the club room with Kasukabe, an attractive non-*otaku* girl who is dating another one of the club members. Madarame finds himself unable to hold a conversation with her, even about minor topics; he reverts mentally to the framework of a dating sim game, imagining different dialog selections, but of course those sorts of pre-programmed, limited interactions don't exist in or apply to real interaction, and he remains paralyzed with anxiety.

Though its use of the image of the sexually failed and frustrated *otaku* is tongue in cheek, *Otaku no Video* also deploys the stereotype in some of its "Portrait of an Otaku" segments. In one an interview subject, referred to only as "Mr. A," has developed specialized electronic

glasses capable of correcting for specific types of visual distortion—a capable and clever bit of engineering which he deploys solely for the purpose of slightly reducing the mosaic censoring used on porn. During the segment, "Mr. A" is specifically noted as a virgin with no real girlfriend. Another segment pokes fun at the erotic game/virtual girlfriend segment of the *otaku* market, interviewing a man whose dialog primarily contains obsessive repetitions of how cute "Hiroko-chan," the girl in his game, is. Both subjects, throughout the course of their interviews, remain fixated on their media despite the presence of the interviewer; in the case of Mr. A, he seems to be masturbating (or at least gearing up to) while the segment is going on, and his apparent living area is dark and almost claustrophobic. The fact that these segments are fictionalized, consisting of actors rather than actual *otaku* subjects, and contrasted with the animated portion's story of *otaku* success and power indicates that, perhaps unlike other negative depictions like those in *Ressentiment* or *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, these are not serious criticisms. They do still, however, acknowledge the existence of these stereotypes and allow the *otaku* creators to self-deprecatingly mock the *otaku*'s problems and the strangeness to outsiders of their subculture.

These aspects of economic and sexual failure can be read as related to ideas of masculine gender roles not only through their participation in and overlap with other discourses and ideologies surrounding masculinity, but through the relative lack of critical imagery about female *otaku* or *fujoshi* focusing on the same issues. Extremely negative depictions of female *otaku* and *fujoshi* are overall much less common than those of males, but even in the examples we do see the focus is different. Since women are not viewed socially as expected breadwinners, media about female *otaku* and *fujoshi* largely do not even include, let alone focus on, lack of career or

academic success. In *Genshiken*, for instance, though mention is made of Saki's apparent success opening a clothing boutique and Ogiue's attempts to become a professional manga artist are portrayed, there isn't much sense that it is a major failure for them not to attain career success; most other series with female *otaku* or *fujoshi* are either about characters in high school who don't yet face career pressures and/or focus primarily on relationship aspects. One small exception is *Princess Jellyfish,* which does concern some financial issues related to the women's ability to purchase their building and save it from demolition; the leader of the household is portrayed as a *hikikomori* who does not leave her room, but she does have a successful career as a BL manga author, and the other women of the house often help with production of her manga to meet deadlines. Some critical depictions of female *otaku* do focus on failure to adequately perform beauty practices or to acquire or maintain romantic relationships, but these are much less prevalent.

There are a number of complicating factors that affect the differences between pop culture imagery of female and male fans. In the first place, less overall attention has been paid to female fans in the larger cultural discourse; the idea of the *fujoshi* has only fairly recently become known to the larger mainstream population. Secondly, the industry has simply produced far fewer works focused on female *otaku* and *fujoshi*. I posit that this is due to the aforementioned lack of visibility compared to their male peers, imbalances between women and men within the industry, and also to the deployment of the female *otaku* or *fujoshi* as herself an object of consumption for her male peers (I will expand on this last point in Chapter Two).

Though sexual/romantic failure is a key focus, critical images of *otaku* and *fujoshi* frequently move beyond this to represent fans as failing more generally to form acceptable peer

connections and friendships. Academic discourses and positive media images of *otaku* and *fujoshi* focus on communal practices involving fan groups and discussion networks, group production and sharing of fan creations, and information sharing. Critical depictions of *otaku* and *fujoshi*, however, continue mainstream discourses about antisocial *otaku* while also perhaps allowing *otaku* and *fujoshi* creators to negotiate their own misgivings and doubts about these fandom networks. Outsiders and insiders can ask themselves questions about what constitutes human connection and social success, and whether or not fan practices facilitate or interfere with these.

Antisociality has been a defining aspect of the negative *otaku* stereotype since its inception. Even Nakamori's *Otaku no kenkyu* articles, which brought the term into common use to refer to fans, described its subjects as kids who "spent recess holed up in the classroom, lurking in the shadows." Even before the adoption of the term *otaku*, *nekura-zoku* (gloomy tribe) was used to describe fans, framing them as both withdrawing from social interaction and repelling it by driving others away through their odd behavior. We see this sort of general social failure in *Ressentiment* where both Takuro and Echigo apparently lack not only romantic bonds but also regular strong friendships; they have some interaction with coworkers but these are strained, and the extent of Takuro and Echigo's interaction with one another is almost entirely devoted to discussing technical and user process details of the game. *Otaku no Video* addresses this more directly in the first "Portrait of an Otaku" interview, in which the interviewer asks the subject whether he had any real friends. After a noticeable pause, he eventually states that "I had a lot of friends to watch anime and go to Comic Market together with. Well … I don't know if I can call them my 'real friends.'" While he notes that some club juniors visit him occasionally, he

seems unable to mention any current close friends. Furthermore, all the interview subjects are alone and only refer to interacting with others in the context of club participation or as part of an exchange network for *otaku* goods and services (e.g. video trading or selling stolen animation cels). Though these images are counterbalanced with the apparently warm friendship and partnership between Kubo and Tanaka (as well as the rest of the circle) in the animated portion— and certainly fan networks and community are forms of social interaction and negotiation that should not be discounted—these live-action segments, nonetheless, offer, as their name suggests, portraits through which the *otaku* making and watching *Otaku no Video* are invited to assess and negotiate questions about what constitutes genuine friendship and social success.

All of these perceived social and economic failings feed into perhaps the root anxiety about *otaku*: the retreat from, or fundamental inability to engage with, reality. Imagery and rhetoric of fans both in Japan and the West have often represented them as deluded or unable to correctly prioritize real over fictional attachments. Both entertainment and information media in America have frequently constructed fans as "fantasists, fanatics, obsessives, erotomaniacs, deluded individuals reacting violently against a world which refuses to conform to their fantasies" (Jones 171). This sort of inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality—or perhaps just the refusal to value reality more highly—is a cornerstone of anxious discourses of *otaku*, from the potentially dangerous criminal like Miyazaki to the hapless so-called loser living vicariously through virtual girlfriend games.

The idea of withdrawal from and/or disconnection with reality is particularly resonant in Japan due to its overlap with the issue of *shakaiteki hikikomori* (social withdrawal), a psychological condition that Saitō Tamaki defines as "cooping oneself up in one's own home

and not participating in society for six months or longer, but that does not seem to have another psychological problem as its principal source" (ch. 1). A related term is NEET, meaning "not in education, employment, or training," which refers to young people (primarily male) who are unemployed and not pursuing formal education or vocational training to help their prospects. Exact numbers for cases of *hikikomori* are difficult to obtain, but estimates range from 700,000 to over a million (Saitō intro). In conjunction with the previously mentioned demographic concerns about the aging workforce and the future of the economy, such a large number of working-age men (along with some women) who remove themselves from employment and school is a source of additional social anxiety. While *hikikomori* are not necessarily *otaku*, or vice versa, some certainly are and the social perceptions and discourses about both groups overlap, particularly regarding antisocial behavior.

While I will not focus on the director Kon Satoshi's works extensively, as they have been covered adequately elsewhere, his depictions of *otaku* are centrally concerned with avoidance of or retreat from reality.[15] In his films and television series, "characters whose backgrounds include fannish pursuits are portrayed as deluded, childish, isolated, irresponsible ... they use entertainment and hobbies as a way of escaping real-world problems; they shirk their responsibilities and drop out of the community" (Ogg 161, 169). In Kon's film *Paprika*, the protagonist Dr. Chiba lectures her *otaku* colleague, Dr. Tokita: "you get preoccupied with what you want to do, and ignore what you have to do. Don't you understand that your irresponsibility costs lives" (*Paprika*). Chiba also characterizes his *otaku* fascinations as "freakish masturbation," once again pulling together the idea of one-sided or unfulfilled sexuality with a failure to achieve,

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[15] See Figal, Ogg, and Ortabasi for more detailed work on Kon's representations of otaku.

or avoidance of, responsible adulthood (*Paprika*). *Otaku* characters in Kon's other works like *Perfect Blue* and *Paranoia Agent* exhibit similar avoidant behaviors, sequestering themselves in dark rooms outfitted like shrines to idol singers or illustrated *moe* characters. In fact, the core theme of *Paranoia Agent* is the use of media to avoid personal responsibility and to escape from reality, particularly through fictional characters meant to be soothing, idealized companions (whether in the form of beautiful girls or adorable dog-like mascots). In *Paranoia Agent* Kon extends this critique of individual behavior to consumers of pop culture as a whole, but *otaku* exhibit these behaviors most strongly and are the most overtly negatively caricatured in appearance and surroundings.

Retreat from reality and the attempt to replace the unpleasant pressures and responsibilities of adult life with a comforting fictional realm is the central conceit of *Ressentiment*. Echigo, who introduces protagonist Takuro to the virtual girlfriend experience that will become his fixation, has largely disengaged from reality. Takuro himself, a slob who relies on his parents to keep house, notes that Echigo's apartment is filthy and unkempt; Echigo's real surroundings, his daily living spaces, are clearly neglected in favor of the virtual world. When Echigo explains the virtual world to Takuro, he offers him "a complete escape from reality," which will mean that he won't "need real women anymore" (1: 25).[16] Success and fulfillment within the bounds of conventional social standards seem impossible (or at least unpleasantly difficult) for the *otaku*, so his solution is to retreat. Avoidance, a lack of economic future, and sexual failure are all interrelated and combine in a perceived ceding of reality and responsibility on the part of *otaku* and *hikikomori*.

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[16] *Kanzen na genjitsutōhi…mō genjitsu no onna nante iranēyo.*

The perception of the *hikikomori* as a social "failure" itself relates back to masculine gender roles. Most recognized patients are male, but it is unknown to what extent this reflects patterns of the condition overall or simply the tendency for families of male *hikikomori* to more frequently seek help due to social pressures toward male economic achievement combined with a greater acceptance of retiring, home-bound roles for women (Dziesinski 6–7). Interestingly, the therapeutic process for *hikikomori* is itself gendered. During his ethnographic work with a treatment center for social withdrawal patients, Michael Dziesinski observed that a large portion of the recovery process involved male-male socialization and induction into behaviors and "habits … usually associated with male adults" such as "a gambling pool on the Akebono K1 wrestling match, smoking, reading horse racing results in the newspaper, watching television sports, playing mahjong, and discussing sports" (13). For *otaku* and *hikikomori*, then, there is an overwhelming sense that a failure to adequately perform masculinity is synonymous and closely tied with an ability to face reality and "adult" responsibilities.

### The Excessive Fan

If the *otaku* is, on the one hand, characterized by failure and lack, he or she is, on the other hand, viewed as inappropriately excessive: an excess of appetite leading to conspicuous and socially unacceptable consumption, an excess of enthusiasm and inappropriate emotion, and most particularly an excess of bitterness and obsessive nostalgia. This idea of excess is not unique to Japanese representations of fans, but can be seen in Western imagery and criticism as well, in which fans are characterized by their "excessive and deviant responses to cultural objects" (Jones 171). All of these excesses are not only interrelated, but in some cases stem directly from and constitute a response to the *otaku*'s (perceived) failure.

*Otaku no Video* displays this excessiveness in both the animated and live action segments; by showcasing it in both, it simultaneously celebrates such enthusiasm as a source of vitality and motivation toward achievement, while also mockingly acknowledging its sometimes alienating effects. Kubo's narrative arc throughout the animated portion centers on overachieving, as he declares his desire to become the ultimate *otaku*—the Otaking—and convert the world to *otaku*-ism. He and Tanaka's *otaku* goods company, Grand Prix, "invades" Manchuria in order to build larger factories and increase production. Later, Kubo spearheads the construction of a massive *otaku* theme park, a literal world in which *otaku* can lose themselves and which, presumably, can serve to help indoctrinate the masses into *otaku* practices and consumption. In the closing scene of the animated story, Kubo and Tanaka revisit the remains of their *otaku* paradise, sunk underwater alongside a large amount (if not all) of Japan; one is left to wonder to what extent the growth of Kubo's *otaku* empire, the unfettered consumption it epitomizes, may have played in destabilizing the environment or in power balances between governments which resulted in such wholesale destruction.

The "Portrait of an Otaku" segments continue this play on excessiveness. One subject, a major participant in a tape trading network, is surrounded by videos of various programs; he remarks that he is so busy keeping up with the recording schedule and exchanging tapes with other fans that he no longer has time to actually watch any of the programs. His enthusiasm and collector's mania have grown to the extent that they have obliterated the original enjoyment of media! Even more attention is paid to the excessiveness of fandom in an interview with an American fan who proclaims a nearly religious fervor for anime and manga, explaining that he gave away all his possessions in order to travel to Japan for the sake of his collection. The way

these live-action segments acknowledge *otaku* foibles while still mocking the media's

disapproving and fearful deployment of exaggerated narratives is sharply illustrated in this case;

careful attention to the actor's English dialog underneath the Japanese over-dub reveals that he is

not actually saying any of the things contained in the Japanese audio—rather, he is simply

discussing his enjoyment of the wider subject matter and stylistic range in Japanese anime and

manga compared to American animation and comics. This juxtaposition between the actual

person's words and the narrative placed (literally) over it by the documentary framework

illustrates the way that mass media and public discourses about *otaku* deviate from lived

experience in order to sensationalize negative images.

Excessiveness on the part of fans is frequently rooted in, and closely linked to, the

*otaku*'s (perceived or actual) failure to appropriately enact social and gendered practices. An

excess of bitterness about one's own failures or shortcomings, and an overpowering nostalgia to

revisit better times—or redo the periods of failure—produces a desire to escape reality in favor

of fictional contexts and replace relationships with idealized and controllable indulgence in *moe*.

Consumption, particularly of media associated with childhood or the fantastic, becomes a

strategy for escape and to repair the sense of failure stemming from oneself or others' social

judgment. It is no coincidence that the most extremely critical depiction is titled *Ressentiment*.

In negative or critical works about *otaku* such as *Ressentiment* and *Welcome to the

N.H.K.*, as well as in *Otaku no Video* with its tension between idealism and self-critique, male

*otaku* are sometimes motivated by bitterness and resentment. Romantic and sexual rejection are

the primary sources of lingering anger that reinforce or generate the character's status as an

*otaku*, and this anger is also frequently projected onto women. This anger can promise to be

productive, prompting the *otaku* to create or put in effort in order to counteract social stigma and prove himself successful, as we see in *Otaku no Video*.

Kubo's decision to become the "Otaking" is directly prompted by his frustration over discovering that his girlfriend has left him for another man because of his new *otaku* hobbies. Despite her initial declaration that she envies individuals "who can focus their minds on something" it becomes clear that wider hierarchical values apply to the acceptable range of subjects a prospective partner can embrace. As Kubo rages, "if you're into playing tennis, that's just fine and dandy but if you watch anime, you're weird? Why?!" It seems difficult to disagree with him as we watch the circle's apparent happiness while they discuss anime and cosplay, as well as the creative and business efforts Kubo and Tanaka pour into building a successful *otaku*-centric company. Particularly when we compare it to the initial scenes of Kubo's tennis club peers conversing about popular cars and lining up to buy limited edition sweatshirts—not significantly different from enthusiastic *otaku* consumption but apparently vapid and unstimulating for Kubo.

More frequently, however, this anger is depicted as stunting, resulting in increased isolation or retreat from reality, which itself is seen as further failure. In *Ressentiment*, Takuro's genesis as an *otaku* stems from his romantic and sexual failures with women, prompting him to specifically pursue advanced *bishōjo* games as a substitute for a real partner. As discussed earlier, he expresses great bitterness over his inability to talk to women as far back as high school. His frustration produces nothing throughout the course of the manga. At the end of the series Tsukiko, the AI girlfriend, eventually becomes a whole human being. The precise manner in which this is achieved is left unexplained, but it does not occur through Takuro's intervention;

rather, Nagao (Takuro's prospective real life love interest and Tsukiko's ostensible competition in a traditional love triangle narrative) makes a deal to become Tsukiko's mother and help her enter reality. The two women form a family and Takuro is once again left alone, still in a dead-end job. In *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, Satō and Yamazaki (the *hikikomori* protagonist and his *otaku* friend) channel their feelings of rejection by women into a video game production project. Yamazaki, bitter about rejection in elementary school and a more recent, similar brush-off by a classmate, tells Satō that "women are nothing but lying snake-tongued witches" and that he and Satō can "get our revenge in our imaginations" by developing a rape-themed erotic game (2: 64). Of course, while this appears initially to be productive, if problematic, ultimately the project is unsuccessful; moreover, Yamazaki immediately drops his so-called righteous anger when the girl he perceived as rejecting him calls to say she can go out with him after all (it was a misunderstanding the whole time, a pointed stab at overly-defensive attitudes of social victimization). In the end, Yamazaki abandons being an *otaku* entirely in favor of working on his family's farm, and then eventually ends up marrying.

Thus the *otaku*, and perhaps more specifically the *otaku*'s devotion to *moe* and focused affection for fictional characters, is portrayed as a symptom and feature of the *ressentiment* of individuals struggling with their place in society—whether economic or social. Envy of others who achieve social and financial success festers, and as Kierkegaard describes, "prevents the individual from devoting himself to others" and may even take a position as "the constituent principle of want of character, which from utter wretchedness tries to sneak itself a position, all the time safeguarding itself by conceding that it is less than nothing" (48, 51). So we see, for instance, *Ressentiment's* Echigo and Takuro use virtual reality to grant themselves a

(presumably) safe position of eminence and satisfaction, while Takuro continually vacillates between rage at others and a conception of himself as wasted and pathetic. Given the pressures of family and social responsibility, and the inclusion of discourses about *otaku* into discourses and anxieties regarding the current and next generation of young people's ability and willingness to create and care for families (both children and aging parents or grandparents) this bitterness as an obstacle to connection and devotion returns us again to the *otaku* as a failure.

Envy of others' success and resentment about one's own position transmutes into blame and aggression, as the *otaku* "seeks a cause for his suffering...something living on which he can upon any pretext discharge his feelings either in fact or in *effigie*" (Nietzsche 105). The *moe* character or, even more so, the *bishōjo* game—whether created or consumed by the *otaku* in question—presents an *effigie* of the blamed category of woman. The fictionalization of *otaku* life and desires, here, illustrates Scheler's characterization of *ressentiment* as envy and bitterness, a desire for revenge, with "a concomitant pronounced feeling of 'inability' and 'impotence'" (29–30). In *Welcome to the N.H.K.* Yamazaki and Satō attempt to write rape scenes into their game, violating the main female character as an outlet for anger that they know they cannot express in reality; if they were to try, as they say, "that'd be the end" (2: 64). In *Ressentiment*, Takuro more than once tries to vent his sexual frustrations and feelings of rejection on Tsukiko, attempting to force himself on her when she is reluctant to have sex with him as he expects.

Gender plays a role not just in the expectations which *otaku* and *fujoshi* fail to meet, but also in how their anger or frustration at that failure manifests. While *fujoshi* characters are sometimes subject to the same bitterness about social ostracization as *otaku*, the source of their rejection and their subsequent expressions of anger tend to differ. In the works surveyed, *fujoshi*

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were less prone to face primarily romantic or sexual rejection—in fact many *fujoshi* characters have boyfriends—but instead tend to suffer general bullying by peers of both genders, or focused bullying from other girls. Furthermore, in expressing their anger the *fujoshi* characters did not tend to project their frustrations or aggression onto men as a whole; they were more likely to focus inward, turning their bitterness and resentment toward their own *fujoshi* habits and other fans.

Chika Ogiue, a *fujoshi* character in *Genshiken*, has a character arc dealing with her recuperation from bullying and humiliation in middle school following her classmates' discovery of her *fujoshi* interests. The harassment, which included the revelation of her *yaoi dōjinshi* to school officials and the boy she liked (who was himself a subject of the works) culminated in a suicide attempt. When Ogiue joins the club she is belligerent toward the other members, introducing herself by declaring "I hate otaku...I especially hate girl otaku" and remains hesitant to admit to her *fujoshi* tastes (4: 151–52). It takes some time before she is willing to openly purchase *yaoi dōjinshi* with the group, let alone to create works again.

*Fujoshi Rumi* contains a similar plot line about Matsui, a beautiful popular girl who initially leads a bullying campaign against Rumi, the protagonist. Matsui is revealed herself to be a *fujoshi*, who was previously overweight and harassed by classmates for being an *otaku*.[17] Describing the experience, Matsui says "I lost my will to fight back...I decided to 'change' and 'stop being an otaku'" (1: 98). She transformed herself through dieting, new clothes, and makeup, becoming socially successful. Her targeting of Rumi is acknowledged to be based on jealousy

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[17] Matsui specifically refers to "a fad to bully an 'otaku,'" possibly a reference to the real practice of *otaku-gari* or "otaku hunting" in which thieves would target otaku in Akihabara. An alleged interview with an otaku hunter explained that otaku are expected to have money but not fight back, making them easy targets; he also expressed disgust at otaku, calling them gross and like cockroaches, as an additional reason for singling them out (http://www.tanteifile.com/tamashii/scoop/0208/09_01/)

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over Rumi's acceptance by her peers, including two popular and attractive boys, but Matsui and Rumi almost immediately become friends once the truth is out in the open.

There is a slight difference in pattern when looking at Tomoko, the protagonist of *Watamote ~No Matter How I Look at It, It's You Guys' Fault I'm Not Popular~* (*Watashi ga Motenai no wa dō Kangaetemo Omaera ga Warui!?*), which began publication as a manga in 2011 and was adapted into an anime series in 2013. Tomoko is an *otaku* primarily interested in *otome* games, usually romance-themed visual novel games designed for girls and focusing on playing as a female character to win the affection of various male characters. Her experience in *otome* game narratives leads her to assume that, upon entering high school, she will become popular; instead, she finds that she has become a loner severely lacking in social skills. As suggested by the title of the series, Tomoko struggles with resentment toward others as a result of her problems fitting in, and with the ability to understand her own failings. In keeping with the other female characters, Tomoko directs her bitterness generally outwards, but can be especially negative about other girls of whom she is jealous. In the first episode, for example, Tomoko observes a clique of her female classmates and thinks, "Girls who form their own groups like that are just boy-crazy idiots anyway! Only scumbag boys would hang around bitches like them! If I'm supposed to hang around people like that I'd rather be alone" (*Watamote*, "Since I'm Not Popular, I'll Change My Image a Bit"). Unlike Ogiue and Matsui, however, who turn their resentment inward at themselves, seeking to eliminate their own *fujoshi* interests, Tomoko does not express any particular dislike for her interests or for other female *otaku* and *fujoshi*. In fact, when Tomoko reunites with Yū, a friend from her old school, she is happy to be able to still discuss anime and games with her; their disconnect stems from the fact that unlike Tomoko

herself, Yū has been much more successful at integrating with the broader group, having become pretty and popular as well as having a boyfriend. Tomoko does seek to become "normal" and popular by repeatedly trying (and failing abysmally) to do everyday things like talk to boys, hang out at a coffee shop, and get a job at a cafe. She does not, however, attempt to stop engaging in her *otaku* pursuits as we see with Matsui and Ogiue. Tomoko's failure at romantic interactions is portrayed in a fashion much more analogous to the male *otaku*; she is completely unable to interact socially with boys, and her attempts to look pretty and desirable are extreme failures—a point to which I will return shortly in my discussion of the grotesque within images of *otaku*. Her romantic and sexual frustrations are a more central point of concern than they are with the other female *otaku* and *fujoshi*. Whether this points to a change in perceptions of female *otaku* or simply an exception to the general trend remains to be seen as new depictions emerge.

Without detailed ethnographic research it is difficult to state how closely this pattern accords with real life, or whether it primarily reflects dominant propaganda discourses about *otaku* and *fujoshi*, but the gender divide is intriguing. It may be possible that concerns about the significance of *moe* and love for 2-D characters reflecting misogynist attitudes toward women— as male *otaku* are unable or unwilling to deal with women who exercise their own demands in a relationship—are accurate characterizations of the *otaku*'s motivations. If so, then perhaps this harsh resentment of women by male characters, in conjunction with female *otaku* and *fujoshi* self-loathing and denial, is meant to expose and criticize patterns of misogyny in Japanese culture broadly, and/or the *otaku* subculture in particular. The heavier focus on romantic and sexual failure in depictions of male *otaku* may also reflect the greater social pressure placed on men to start and support families. It is also worth noting that almost all the representations of

female *otaku* and *fujoshi* are created by male writers; even titles that are autobiographical, such as *Tonari no 801-chan* or *My Girlfriend is a Geek*, are written by men in relationships with *fujoshi* rather by than the women themselves; some exceptions have begun to surface, such as *Princess Jellyfish*, which is noticeably less critical and more nuanced in its portrayal of female *otaku* than the titles discussed in this chapter. The male perspective of creators may converge with the overall tendency to present female characters within a narrower range of attractive character design, the general social pressure on and socialization of women to dress well and look attractive, and the common focus on romance in narratives about female characters (and for female readers) to result in depictions of female *otaku* and *fujoshi* that tend toward more physically attractive characters who are liable to be more successful romantically.

The tendency toward bitterness and *ressentiment* among *otaku* described above leads into another aspect of negative *otaku* stereotypes regarding escapism and arrested development. The envy and obsession with past slights produces a form of excessive, even obsessive, nostalgia. Critical depictions of *otaku* often rely on this past-orientation and desire to recapture or redo history as a component of social avoidance and escape, and a central motivation toward becoming an *otaku*. Especially when considered in conjunction with the fact that many media types and genres associated with *otaku* are intended for children, the *otaku* and the *fujoshi* are cast as continually attempting to remain in a time that offers a promise of less complication, of greater happiness, or allows the illusion of being able to remake the past into such a safe place.

In *Ressentiment*, much of Takuro's motivation—and that of other characters as well—revolves around the attempt to simultaneously recapture youth as a time before life went too far off the rails, as well as reworking that past (specifically high school) into the idealized,

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romanticized image that is consumed within fictional media. The virtual world allows the *otaku*

to (re)live the past as fictionalized fantasy, to have what popular culture dictates as the high

school that should have been. The shared digital world in which Takuro and Echigo's virtual

girlfriends reside is divided into two halves. One side, which is built specifically to mimic reality

more closely—as opposed to the other which depicts a fantasy world—is in fact overtly named

"Nostalgia." Within Nostalgia, several recreated high schools offer male players and their

computer-generated girlfriends the ability to "recapture their lost high school years" and

experience "only the best parts of high school life" (3: 133, 137).[18] Takuro and the other players

can replace their "gray-colored youth" with a rose-colored one, to manufacture a usable past that

erases difficulties and opportunities for failure (3: 147).[19]

Though its imagery and view of *otaku* practices are more positive, *Otaku no Video*

similarly roots becoming an *otaku* in nostalgia; clinging to the past here is a matter of recapturing

joy, rather than pretending to undo failure, but the *otaku* lives in the past nonetheless. Kubo's

induction into the *otaku* lifestyle is specifically linked to his desire to go back to a more carefree

time in high school. His initial interest and his first exposures are specifically to anime and

*tokusatsu* programs he watched in his own youth, rather than new works (those will come later

after he is already hooked). Tanaka's collection of video tapes promises a bridge to Kubo's own

past. Tanaka describes his *otaku* circle as a place where "every day is like a school festival." The

animated narrative in *Otaku no Video* closes with nostalgia as well, with the much older Kubo

and Tanaka visiting the sunken remains of their lavish *otaku* theme park, only to—in a sequence

ambiguous in its status as fantasy or reality—transform the central robot monument into a

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[18] *Ushiwareta gakkō seikatsu wo mō ichido torimodoshitainosa…gakkō seikatsu no oishī tokoro dake!*
[19] *Haiiro datta seishun*

spaceship and fly, newly revitalized and reunited with the rest of their once-again youthful *otaku* circle, into the unknown.

Between *Ressentiment* and *Otaku no Video* we see two extremes. Within this range, *otaku* creators and audiences negotiate the question of fixation on the past. If the past is another country, then media offers the promise of enabling the *otaku* to visit or even reconstruct that country. The possibility, and the way the *otaku* uses it, can be potentially liberating and joyful or paralyzing and bitter.

<div align="center">The <em>Otaku</em>'s Grotesque Body</div>

Though not universal within critical or satirical depictions, grotesque imagery is sometimes deployed to visually emphasize and signify the ideas of failure and excess already presented. The deployment of the grotesque within these visuals draws heavily on European concepts of the grotesque, which found their way into Japanese modern thought via cultural interchange with continental Europe, Great Britain, and America. As Miriam Silverberg notes in her examination of the Japanese period of *ero guro nansensu* (erotic grotesque nonsense) the Japanese magazine *Grotesque* incorporated the general Western usage of imagery and rhetoric related to the "unseemly, unwieldy, nonhuman, or the monstrous" as well as the "scatological, sexual, parodic, antiauthoritarian, and feminized aspects ... [and] racist and pornographic elements" (203–04). The disjunction between the abject *otaku* and the rest of society also suggests a connection to what Silverberg identifies as the particular Japanese concept of Asakusa grotesque focused on the "down-and-out" (204). Most uses of the grotesque in critical anime and manga relate to the *otaku* body, specifically fatness, but also incorporate an emphasis on various

bodily fluids, unpleasantly or monstrously exaggerated facial expressions, and caricatures of the objects of *otaku* desire.

This imagery is continuous with mainstream discourses about and judgment of *otaku*. At the same time, perhaps we see indications of a tension within *otaku*—a self-deprecating acknowledgment of the ways that they sometimes match the negative stereotypes and indeed fail to meet the social values they internalized, in the midst of an effort to revise their own image and to define their own identity and values. This grotesque *otaku* is simultaneously pathetic and threatening, monstrous yet fundamentally possessed of a vulnerable and sympathetic humanity.

Sheer physical girth is the most common way artists illustrate both the failure and excess of the stereotypical *otaku*. Fat *otaku* feature in Kon Satoshi's *Paprika* and *Paranoia Agent*, as well as Hanazawa Kengo's *Ressentiment*. These characters' weights are emphasized in some cases by extreme physical contrast, for instance the massive difference in size between Tokita, the overweight *otaku* in *Paprika*, and his female colleague Chiba. In a key scene, Chiba finds that Tokita is so large he is stuck in the elevator and she must pull him out; standing behind him and then pressed against his back, he dwarfs her. In other cases, the depiction of these *otaku* sweating contributes to the perception of them as lacking physical fitness and endurance.

This use of fat imagery in negative depictions of *otaku* plays into common discourses—both within and outside of Japan—about fatness as a symptom of poor health and an indicator of poor character. Japan's beauty industry is massive, and includes dieting products and services as a key component targeted both at men and women. Laura Miller, in *Beauty Up*, a book on the Japanese beauty industry and modern Japanese body aesthetics, notes that "beauty has become an aspect of social responsibility and etiquette" for both genders that "fits well with long-

standing Japanese ideas about self-development and discipline" (10). Ability to manage one's

appearance, in particular weight, is considered a marker of individual strength and sense of social

responsibility. The perceived inability to do so, which fatness indicates, "means that the person

lacks control, is slovenly, weak, and inadequate" (Miller 12). Thus the image of the obese *otaku*

represents, on one hand, their excessive appetite—perhaps itself a comment on their

consumption habits which are perceived as childish and irresponsible, as well as an association

that Christopher Forth traces back to early Western culture and negative attitudes toward

luxuriance, "when the unchecked quest for physical pleasures and comforts followed its natural

course from overripeness to decay" (249). On the other hand, obesity signifies the *otaku*'s failure

in his lack of self-awareness, control, and sense of care and responsibility for others that would

lead him to manage his body for the sake of health and aesthetics.

The visual representation of *otaku* as obese also participates in discourses and anxieties

regarding their ability to properly understand and perform masculine gender roles. Visual

conceptions of masculinity are in flux as women increasingly reject marriage and traditional

sorts of men; given, as discussed earlier, concerns over population growth, pressure on men to

convince women into marriage is perhaps higher than ever. Laura Miller explains that

contemporary Japanese beauty standards for men, which emphasize thinness, lack of body hair,

and height, represent Japanese women "manifesting refusal of postwar patriarchal culture and

exposing the sexist nature of beauty ideology," which can be seen in women's tendency to

"express contempt by calling salarymen...*chibidebu no kimochi warui oyaji* (short, fat, creepy

old fart)" (157). The salaryman strongly represents conventional Japanese masculinity for

previous generations, standing in for the familial arrangement of breadwinning father and

housewife mother, in which the father is primarily absent from the home due to his long working hours while the mother supervises the children and household.

Interestingly, though neither Takuro nor Echigo in *Ressentiment* accomplishes a high paying job with promise of forward mobility, nor a family, physically they perfectly echo the contemptuous modern female categorization of salarymen. Both are short, overweight, and look rather older than their actual age (Takuro could easily be mistaken for a man at least in his 40s). This disconnect is brought home in Echigo's virtual persona, where he appears perfectly matching the *bishōnen* aesthetic of thinness, elegance, grooming, and beauty that has become ubiquitously popular in both manga/anime and real life. Echigo uses his immersion in the game not only to obtain the interest of women he is unable to capture in reality, but specifically also to remake himself into the image of modern male beauty, despite the fact that he has no need to— his fictional harem will love him regardless. Here, we see that the *otaku*'s weight reflects his ambivalent position in relation to his own masculinity: unable to manage the self-discipline or strength to meet many traditional demands of moral and physical rigor, yet also too mired in an old-fashioned patriarchal masculinity that no longer appeals to Japanese women.

The grotesque also seems to be gendered because it is predominately male *otaku* who are depicted in this manner. This may be due to the larger amount of social pressure on male *otaku* given concerns over economic and reproductive futures, but also likely relates to the generally more narrow range of designs employed for female characters to maintain them within the bounds of attractiveness. *Watamote* represents the primary exception, as Tomoko is routinely portrayed as offputting and even disgusting. Her hair is unkempt, she has bags and dark circles under her eyes, and she is more prone to leer or grimace than smile or frown. Episode six goes

the furthest in emphasizing Tomoko's physical grotesqueness. After a late night of playing *otome* games, Tomoko thinks that she somehow looks more radiant and cute; determined to upgrade her appearance, she goes on an obsessive binge of playing sexually themed games, but in reality she is simply growing increasingly greasy from not showering. After she gets sprayed with soda, Tomoko notices an increase in attention from boys, but the reason is that the sugar residue, unwashed, has resulted in Tomoko being covered in ants; the staring is merely horrified disgust. The grossness and physicality seen in Tomoko is rare with female *otaku* or *fujoshi* characters (rare with female characters in general and protagonists in particular) but only future works will show whether it is the start of a general change in attitudes and depictions of female *otaku* or merely a single outlier.

    *Ressentiment* augments the physical grotesque through depictions of bodily fluids, particularly sweat and urine. The very first page, and our first sight of protagonist Takuro, features him discarding a tissue after masturbating. Close up shots frequently feature Takuro and other characters visibly sweating, and in scenes where they experience strong emotions they are liable to drip saliva, snot, or tears that would not normally be used in manga or anime. Even Takuro's supposedly perfect virtual girlfriend, Tsukiko, is in the middle of urinating during her first appearance. In *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and its Traditions*, John Clark explains that a focus on bodily excretions is a common motif in satirical works: "proud, self-delusional man ever aspires to elevate himself and his dignity, whereas the satirist destroys such upward mobility by reducing man to defecating animal" (116). The constant seep of bodily fluids highlights the *otaku* as abject and pathetic.

At the same time, the wetness and physicality of these fluids, and the orifices from which they emerge, forcefully reminds us of the *otaku*'s humanity and connection to others. Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as "unfinished" and "open to the outside world ... The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, and defecation" (26). Sara Cohen Shabot, in her discussion of grotesque philosophy, explains that this "*meaty ...* perishing body" constitutes "a fragmentary, complex reality, plagued by multiple relationships to the self and the other" (60). *Ressentiment*, then, in its contrast between the grotesque, visceral flesh of the *otaku* and the clean, controllable fictionality into which they seek to escape (which is constantly undermined by the intrusion of not only pleasurable physicality through genitalia and fluids produced during sex but also 'unsanitary' and 'ugly' fluids like urine and snot) struggles between the *otaku* as social pariah and object of derision and vulnerable, relatable, and essentially human.

The theme of humanity and connection evoked by this physicality and openness suggests James Scheville's characterization of the European grotesque's "undeniable compassion in the urge to struggle and continue, to seek the necessity of companionship absurd though it might be in the face of vacancy" (9–10). It also offers a potential connection with Silverberg's image of the particularly Japanese deployment of Asakusa grotesque focused on poverty and the juxtaposition between haves and have-nots, the "notion of the grotesque as cut off from other human beings" (206). In the case of this original prewar usage it referred to economic poverty and specifically the homeless. Though there is some connection of *otaku* to economic lack, for instance in Takuro's "parasite single" status or the overlap of *otaku* and *hikikomori* in *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, the extreme prewar level of economic abjection and an emphasis on homelessness

is absent. Perhaps, however, this grotesque of separation, the "coexistence of need with abundance" is instead related to social poverty, to the negative conception of the *otaku*'s failed participation in society (Silverberg 206). Given that *Ressentiment* most consistently and strongly deploys this sort of visceral grotesque alongside Takuro's repeated efforts toward connecting with women both virtual and real, attempts at which he largely fails, this makes sense. Furthermore, the conclusion sees Tsukiko embodied and become fully human through Takuro's real-world love interest agreeing to give birth to her; the blood and pain of labor, the sacrifice and opening of the body to connection, prevails. The grotesque *otaku* struggles to negotiate an affinity for the virtual with a lingering need for the human, for the ugliness and beauty of relationships.

Grotesque imagery participates in discourses of *otaku* as excessive via depictions of exaggerated facial expressions in manga and anime. Hanazawa Kengo's *Ressentiment*, Oiwa Kendi's art in the *Welcome to the N.H.K.* manga, and Tanigawa Nico's *Watamote* all involve numerous close shots of *otaku* faces distorted in desperate grimaces, with wild eyes, and not uncommonly with the addition of sweat or saliva that would normally not be seen in other manga art (see fig. 1). These manic faces immediately visualize the excessive lust, bitterness, or anger already surveyed as a key component of the *otaku* stereotype. Lust in particular is commonly linked with these distorted, grotesque faces, whether Satō manically leering over young girls in *Welcome to the N.H.K.* or the drooling, animalistic faces of Takuro and other *otaku* preparing to sexually use virtual *bishōjo* in *Ressentiment*.

Fig. 1. Tomoko stares in envy and frustration at classmates participating in an after-school club; "Since I'm Not Popular, The Second Term is Starting," *Watamote*, Crunchyroll, 2013.

As with the other aspects of grotesque imagery, these visuals serve to maintain a push and pull between the audience and the *otaku* protagonists. As the central POV characters, we empathize with the suffering and awkwardness of characters like Tomoko, Takuro, or Satō, but these distorted, leering faces re-establish a sense of disjunction between us and them. In some cases, as in portions of *Ressentiment*, the audience is visually positioned in the path of the obsessive or exploitative gaze, aligning the reader with the virtual girlfriend or the "normal" classmates and coworkers of the characters. On the one hand, this technique helps prevent the audience from fully engaging with the lead characters, but it also helps to maintain an ambivalence, in which we can from time to time grasp and empathize with the peripheral social position of the *otaku* and feel ostracized, while still being baldly confronted with the unpleasant or questionable aspects of these characters' personalities and practices.

In *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, however, *otaku* desires are also rendered grotesque through a mocking depiction of character designs driven by the database mentality outlined by Azuma.

Shut-in protagonist Satō and *otaku* neighbor Yamazaki set out to create the ultimate *moe*

character following a design process similar to the one mentioned in Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's*

*Database Animals*:

> sampling and combining popular elements from recent otaku culture ... each
> element, with its own origins and background, constitutes a category that has been
> developed in order to stimulate the interest of the consumers. It is not a simple
> fetish object, but a sign that emerged through market principles (42)

The result here, however, is not cute but monstrous, a "childhood friend's maid robot ... she can't

use her legs and she's blind ... even schizophrenic and she has Alzheimer's ... an alien too" (1:

89–90). It is a disordered mishmash of vulnerabilities and tropes that culminates in a drooling,

pathetic wreck. *Otaku* desires, especially the deployment of female vulnerability and

helplessness as a central pillar of *moe* aesthetics, is rendered inhuman and grotesque. This

imagery reiterates mainstream discourses about the low quality of *otaku*-targeted media, the

pathological and misogynistic overtones of *moe*, the strangeness of *otaku*'s fictionalized desires,

and what Azuma characterizes as "animalized" patterns of consumption.

It is difficult to ascertain precisely the number or relative proportion of *otaku* versus non-

*otaku* readers or viewers for the titles discussed. Some, like *Otaku no Video*, given its home

video only release likely are seen only by *otaku* eager to consume images of themselves, and can

be confirmed as created themselves by *otaku*. Others, like *Ressentiment* and *Welcome to the*

*N.H.K.* are in serialized magazines and on television channels that open up the likelihood of a

wider audience. Therefore, it is problematic to make any firm assertion regarding the degree to

which these works constitute *otaku* criticizing and negotiating their own identities versus

outsiders simply circulating existing discourses. Overall, the use of stereotypes and imagery

common to previous negative stereotypes about *otaku* suggests a continuation of external

judgment and scapegoating of *otaku*. At the same time, we see indications of a tension within

*otaku* as well—a self-deprecating acknowledgment of the ways in which they sometimes fail to

meet social standards they likely have internalized, in the midst of a struggle to understand their

own identity and revise their public image.

# CHAPTER TWO: FROM OUTCAST TO OTAKING—POSITIVE DEPICTIONS OF *OTAKU*

As cultural and academic discourses began to incorporate positive images of *otaku*, and *otaku* themselves became involved in the production of commercial anime and manga titles, various fictional representations of *otaku* and *fujoshi* emerged that incorporated variously celebratory, comforting, and wish-fulfillment characteristics. The precise nature of these positive representations is still almost entirely defined by the qualities and agendas set within the negative discourse, as *otaku* (or at least producers seeking to market to *otaku* audiences) push back against characterizations of *otaku* as failures with images of socially and economically successful fans. Media about *otaku* primarily seek to reintegrate their subjects into accepted economic, social, and romantic obligations and success. The discomfort with, and alienation from, these normative models of identity and success provide some pressure towards defining new models of *otaku* or *fujoshi* roles and expectations, but ultimately these self-conceptions remain defined within existing social contexts and value systems; the desire to forge new models of identity and self-worth conflict with the urge to fulfill expected conventions. Further complications are introduced by the exigencies of production and consumption within capitalist markets. Given that *otaku* identity is founded on and defined by consumption, representations of *otaku* and their lives are integrated with popular tropes from the "database" of *otaku* tastes to allow *otaku* to, in turn, consume themselves; the representation of female fan identities within popular culture are particularly affected by this, culminating in the development of the consumable *moe otaku* girl character, which combines identification and erotically charged objectification.

In this chapter I explore positive and celebratory images of *otaku* and *fujoshi* across several manga and anime titles (many of which have already been introduced and examined in previous chapters), primarily focusing on Gainax's *Otaku no Video*, Shimoku Kio's *Genshiken*, AIC Build's anime adaptation of Fushimi Tsukasa's *Oreimo* light novels, Brain's Base's anime adaptation of Higashimura Akiko's *Princess Jellyfish* (*Kuragehime*), Sutahiro's *Otaku no Musume-san*, and Kurihashi Shinsuke's manga *Manii Rōdo* (*Maniac Road*). I begin by reviewing positive depictions of *otaku* that directly respond to negative discourses of economic and social failure. Then, I discuss ways that positive fictional depictions of *otaku* attempt to revise normative identities and qualifications for success, and define new forms of masculinity and self-worth. Finally, I note the difficulties posed by constructing or revising a sense of identity based on consumerism, particularly the way that demands of marketability and media tropes serve to sell the *otaku* back to him or herself, and the way that *fujoshi* and female *otaku* are especially represented by others for the purpose of selling them to male fans as consumable fetishized objects.

## Positive (Self) Representation as Normalizing Response

In general, many of the positive representations of male and female *otaku*, as well as *fujoshi*, in anime and manga constitute a counter-narrative against the common negative discourses described in the previous chapter. In contrast to ideas of *otaku* and *fujoshi* as economic and social failures, these works depict fan practices and skills as enabling productive creation or translating into business savvy within related fields, and fan networks of consumption and discussion as robust and fulfilling social experiences that lead to meaningful friendships and/or romantic bonds.

*The Skilled Otaku*

As described in Chapter One, negative images of *otaku* primarily concern themselves with failure, within both the labor/economic and social spheres (though of course these are linked via expectations regarding family and gender roles). As a rejection of this, several manga and anime portray *otaku* interests and pursuits not as obstacles to or distractions from commercial success and productivity, but as a useful means of gaining expertise that can translate into employment and marketable creative labor. The analytical and genre-savvy eye Okada describes in *Otakugaku nyuumon*, and a grasp of database concepts, enable the *otaku* to understand generic and formal conventions of anime and manga, as well as to assess the marketability of goods for their fellow *otaku*. Thus they can in turn produce intellectual property appealing to consumers and meet social expectations of productivity, gainful employment, and financial success.

This model of hobby expertise turned business sense is a central point of Gainax's *Otaku no Video*. Once educated as an *otaku*, Kubo is able to parlay both his expertise and his passion into building two massive hobby companies and transforming a niche market into big business. The obsessive focus on media that others criticize as a retreat from reality and an obstacle to worthwhile pursuits or financial success instead facilitates achievement and influence. As I discussed in chapter one, his *otaku* knowledge and skills position Kubo as a conquering industry general capable of "invading" Manchuria to expand his production capabilities and building a literal *otaku* paradise in the theme park that plays into the climactic, possibly hallucinatory attainment of eternal youth and comradeship (itself framed not as a retreat but as a bold expedition into the frontier of space). Kubo's knowledge of what he and his fellow *otaku* like

enables him to create things that will sell; even more than simply selling to *otaku*, however, Kubo seems to have the potential to fulfill his goal of converting everyone in the world to *otaku*, developing media and products that even ostensibly non-*otaku* consumers cannot resist.

This transferability of knowledge is not unique to *Otaku no Video*. In Kurihashi Shinsuke's 2002 manga *Manii Rōdo* (*Maniac Road*) the protagonist, Takezō Muto, uses his expertise in model kit building to save the three female owners and operators of the Kinushima home and electronics store from debt collectors. His deep fan knowledge allows him to sell the personal collection of the Kinushima girls' father, a famous model kit artist, for a tidy sum and then to transform the shop into a successful *otaku* hobby outlet. He eventually takes over U.S. operations for a major hobby corporation. Therefore Muto is able not only to parley his *otaku* knowledge and skills into financial success, but also to fulfill the traditionally masculine narrative role of the rescuing stranger who arrives just in time to save the heroine. Fushimi Tsukasa's *Ore no imōto ga konna ni kawaii wake ga nai (My Little Sister Can't Possibly Be this Cute)*, shortened to *Oreimo* (2010), features a young man who discovers that his attractive, popular, fashionable sister Kirino is secretly an *otaku* obsessed with *imōto* (little sister) dating games and magical girl anime. Kirino eventually uses her understanding of the database elements and tropes essential to little sister *moe* to write her own highly successful light novels that get adapted into anime.

In addition to possessing the ability to transfer direct knowledge and expertise about specific media or genre conventions into economic profit, *otaku* and *fujoshi* in these positive representations also gain valuable and directly professionalizable experience from participating in fan creative endeavors, which reflects real-life instances of professional manga artists and

video game developers emerging from amateur and fan-based *dōjinshi* culture (for instance, famous *shōjo* artist group CLAMP's early work creating fan comics based on titles such as *Devilman* and *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*, or the success of *dōjin* game creators ZUN and Type Moon whose works have inspired *otaku* merchandise and anime series). In Shimoku Kio's *Genshiken*, three members of the college fan club are able to make careers out of their experience as *otaku*. Sasahara, spurred by his leadership of the first club *dōjinshi* in years, gets hired as an editor working on pro manga and is able to apply his experience directly working with artists and assembling an amateur publication. Ogiue uses her experience drawing *dōjinshi* to submit drafts to publishers and obtain a spot as a pro manga artist. Kousaka lands a job at a game development company that produces erotic games.

Beyond the transfer of specific knowledge and skills, we also see representations of *otaku* and *fujoshi* who are able to translate their general passion or interest in a subject into creative output, even if their focus is not on media. *Princess Jellyfish* (2010) focuses on Tsukimi, a jellyfish *otaku*, and the other female *otaku* and *fujoshi* with whom she shares a house. She develops an unlikely relationship with Kuranosuke, a cross-dressing fashionista, and he becomes determined to help the women not only save their home (which is at risk of being torn down for a development project) but also to help Tsukimi come out of her shell. Furthermore, her *otaku* performance is explicitly equated with Kuranosuke's love of fashion, a more socially acceptable form of consumerism and self-expression, through their mirrored roots in both characters' relationships with their deceased mothers. In the climax of the anime adaptation, Tsukimi and Kuranosuke, supported by the other *otaku*, sell handmade jellyfish dolls and eventually begin a line of jellyfish-inspired clothing. Not only does Tsukimi's passion as an *otaku* translate into

success, but it can do so obliquely and in combination with other fields of expertise such as fashion. The manga and anime for *Princess Jellyfish* both spend a large amount of time and attention reinforcing the ways that *otaku* interests and practices, whether for anime and manga, trains, or jellyfish, are traditionally considered fundamentally opposed to and distinct from fashion. The *amāzu* (nuns), the name the *otaku* girls call themselves, refer to normative teenagers and adults interested in fashion somewhat derogatorily as "Stylish" (*oshare ningen*) and regard them with discomfort or even terror. Visually, the series represents the *otaku* girls as turning to stone in the presence of Stylish individuals to display their awkwardness and panic, a sharp contrast with the sort of grotesque imagery used to represent *otaku* awkwardness in titles such as *Ressentiment* and *Watamote*.

In the first episode, Tsukimi has a minor panic attack and returns home merely attempting to go to a photo exhibit in Shibuya, a section of Tokyo with many trendy stores. She laments to her mother's memory that, unlike many of the girls in Tokyo, "somewhere along the line, instead of becoming a princess…I ended up a freak [*kusatta onna no ko*]" ("Sex and the Sisterhood"). By unifying Tsukimi's *otaku* focus and behavior with Kuranosuke's interest in fashion first through the equivalence between their rooting in trauma and second by showing them as compatible and even enabling one another, alongside subplots involving Kuranosuke performing short-term makeovers of Tsukimi and the other girls, *Princess Jellyfish* eradicates the understanding of *otaku* practices as non-normative. It reveals these distinctions as artificial, and any resulting shame or awkwardness as products either of this unnecessary exclusion or simply of individual personality regardless of being an *otaku* or *fujoshi*. The use of visually neutral or even humorous imagery to display awkwardness rather than grotesque visuals helps maintain the

emotional connection and identification the audience feels with Tsukimi and the other *otaku* women, rather than producing a sense of discomfort that prompts us to withdraw.

The applicability of *otaku* knowledge and skills can be a subject of humor as well. Though positive depictions of *otaku* tend to be optimistic regarding the development of discrete technical, creative, or professional skills through active fandom and *otaku* focus, the relationship between interactions with objects of *moe* or fictionalized romance with real world interpersonal skills tends rather to be a source of chagrined humor related to disappointments. In *Genshiken*, as I mentioned earlier, when extreme *otaku* Madarame is alone with Saki, a non-*otaku* and an object of his secret affections, he attempts to imagine the encounter as a dating sim game for guidance but realizes that his experience in that realm is utterly useless. However, in *The World God Only Knows*, the protagonist Katsuragi Keima is a master at dating sim games, known as the "God of Conquest" for his ability to complete every game and obtain the heart of every girl. Hearing about his skills, a demon named Elcea recruits him to assist with hunting down "loose souls" that are possessing unhappy girls by making them fall in love with him, thus forcing the demons from the girls' hearts. Though he expresses reservations, wondering how he can manage with "no save function...no backlog," it does turn out that Keima's skills make him successful. Despite his conquest of girls in real life, however, Keima is a dedicated *otaku* and continues to champion the *moe* qualities of fictional girls, insisting that "my world only needs the girls from games" ("Love Makes the World Go Round"). The series parodies and alludes to a large number of conventions from dating sim games and other anime. While Keima serves as a wish-fulfillment figure, able to conquer the hearts of real girls if he puts his mind to it and accompanied by a beautiful demon girl on his quest, he is also portrayed as somewhat ridiculous via his affected "God of Conquest"

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status; his haughty mannerisms are juxtaposed against the perception of fellow students that he is a nerd, and they refer to him as *otamegane* (four-eyes *otaku*). Furthermore, while Keima protests that he does not need real girls, it is clear that he is still flustered and affected by them. *The World God Only Knows* uses common *moe* tropes and cute girl character designs to market toward *otaku* audiences and sell merchandise; the tension between Keima's expectation of database tropes which are sometimes frustrated (for example, when the girls' track team wears practical long shorts instead of the common fetish uniform of bloomers) and sometimes fulfilled, and Keima's ability to seduce real women while maintaining the position of power to reject them in favor of fictional characters provides wish fulfillment while also allowing *otaku* to poke fun at themselves.

## *Otaku Society and Acceptance*

Just as many of these positive depictions specifically oppose ideas of *otaku* as economic failures, even more reject the idea of *otaku* or *fujoshi* as romantic and social failures. Rather than characterizing fandom as alienating individuals from reality or from one another, these titles point to dedicated fandom as a source of social connection and acceptance; moreover, they insist that there is no fundamental social divide between *otaku* or *fujoshi* and non-fans. Anime and manga depict fans negotiating romantic relationships and networks of friendship and family, both among *otaku* and across social boundaries between *otaku* and non-*otaku*. Almost all the works surveyed feature *otaku* hobbies and interests facilitating links between individuals and among groups of fans. *Otaku no Video*, *Genshiken*, *Oreimo*, *Dojin Work*, and *Otaku no Musume-san* all feature groups of fans participating in clubs, creative companies, or *dōjinshi* circles, as well as broader networks of online friendships and *dōjinshi* or cosplay communities. This focus

on social networks counteracts negative stereotypes of *otaku* as gloomy or antisocial, but also reflects the reality of *otaku* and *fujoshi*. The relevance of information, expertise, and collecting to *otaku* culture encourages and even necessitates collectivity. As Patrick Galbraith notes,

> There is so much information and media out there that no one can master everything, so they watch a little here and a little there and depend on others to fill in the blanks. We see a lot of networking and sociality emerging as a result, just as in earlier times people might have formed otaku circles to pool limited resources (art supplies, videos) and knowledge ("Interview Part Two")

We see this sort of expertise sharing and balancing at work in depictions of clubs and circles. Each member of Tanaka's circle in *Otaku no Video* focuses on a different specialization (military, special effects, *bishōnen* characters, etc.) and this translates into the ability to delegate work and use expertise after they found Grand Prix to monetize their *otaku* knowledge. In *Genshiken*, not only expertise and skills—for instance Tanaka's mastery of costume making, Ohno's expertise at portraying characters when cosplaying, Ogiue and Kuga-P's art skills, Sasahara's newly discovered talent for organization and editing, Kousaka's knowledge of and skill with video games—but physical goods and resources like *dōjinshi* collections and PCs can be pooled and shared. *Otaku* and *fujoshi* communities also cross international boundaries; in *Genshiken*, one of the female club members, Ohno, has two American *otaku* friends she met during a study abroad. These characters, Angela and Sue, make appearances in the first series and Sue eventually becomes a club member in the second series when she attends school in Japan.[20]

As prevalent as, or even more prevalent than, the emphasis on *otaku* friendships and social networks is a focus on romantic and sexual relationships. Reasons for this focus on

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[20] I have not included it in this thesis because the series primarily deals with an American otaku character and my focus is on Japanese fans, but Felipe Smith's *Peepo Choo*, written by a Western author but originally published in the Japanese magazine *Morning Two*, deals with American and Japanese fans meeting and interacting, and the cross-cultural stereotypes and misunderstandings between the two. It also deals with Japanese fixations on, and misunderstandings of, urban American popular culture.

romance likely have multiple roots. For one, reassurances that *otaku* are capable of beginning

and sustaining sexual partnerships assuage personal anxieties of *otaku* and *fujoshi* who struggle

with the opposite sex, while simultaneously addressing and defusing mass media rhetoric

connecting *otaku* with social concerns about declining birth rates, which I discuss in the previous

chapter. There are likely commercial and generic motivations as well. *Densha Otoko*, one of the

first majorly successful pop culture works to focus on *otaku*, centered on a star-crossed love

story between an *otaku* and a non-*otaku* woman; for an entertainment market that frequently

indulges in sequels, remakes, and that repeats previously established successes to insulate against

financial risks associated with production, following that precedent is a sensible choice.

Furthermore, romance is a common element in many manga and anime series for both male and

female audiences, either as the central focus or as a major subplot. The presence of romantic

tropes is to be expected then, particularly in titles aiming for demographics like *moe* and *bishōjo*

*otaku* (such as *Oreimo*) and at the shōjo market (such as *My Girlfriend's a Geek*) where

interpersonal relationships are a primary focus.

Romantic relationships within works about *otaku* and *fujoshi* do sometimes include

pairings between male and female *otaku*. Two of the major pairings in *Genshiken*—Sasahara and

Ogiue, and Tanaka and Ohno—are romantic relationships between fellow *otaku* who

simultaneously share overlapping and diverging interests within fandom. For instance, Tanaka

and Ohno are both passionate about cosplay and do enjoy several of the same works geared

toward male fans, but as a *fujoshi* Ohno also has tastes not shared by Tanaka; Sasahara and

Ogiue share a similar combination of equivalent and different interests. In Sutahiro's *Otaku no*

*Musume-san* (2006), we also see romantic tension between protagonist Kōta and Haruka, a

female *otaku* who also lives in the Higansō complex and works with Kōta as an assistant to Morita Sōsuke, a well-known shōjo manga artist.

The majority of romantic relationships, however, are seen between one *otaku* and a non-*otaku* partner. Of the twelve major romantic relationships in the manga and anime surveyed, nine are these type of mixed pairings; in the three series primarily focused on *fujoshi—Tonari no 801-chan*, *Fujoshi Rumi*, and *My Girlfriend is a Geek*—all the *fujoshi* characters are involved with non-*otaku* men. Only in *Genshiken*, where Ohno and Ogiue are part of a larger ensemble cast, do we see *fujoshi* dating male *otaku*. As with the use of romance in general, some of this may be attributed to the influence of *Densha Otoko*; this is especially likely with the three *fujoshi*-focused titles, as two of them are similar autobiographical works written by men about their experiences with their *fujoshi* girlfriends, and can be seen as imitative works seeking to capitalize on the success of *Densha Otoko's* "real life" cross-subcultural gimmick. Similar economic and marketability concerns may drive the use of non-*otaku* and *fujoshi* perspective or identification characters when series are targeted toward mainstream audiences or at least published in venues where non-*otaku* readers are likely. Many manga magazines are read by mainstream audiences. *Princess Jellyfish* was serialized in Kodansha's *josei* magazine *Kiss*, which prints many titles with broad appeal like *Nodame Cantabile* (which received a major hit live action drama adaptation); similarly, *Afternoon*, which serialized *Genshiken*, features a wide range of titles many of which are read by mainstream readers. In the case of the two autobiographical titles, *Tonari no 801-chan* and *My Girlfriend is a Geek*, these initially began as a Webcomic and a blog, respectively, which cultivated a broad reader base outside of *otaku* or

*fujoshi* circles, and part of the focus was the oddness of the *fujoshi* girlfriends from the perspective of their "normal" boyfriends.

These mixed relationships, whether ultimately successful or merely acknowledge as potentially viable, satisfy an urge to recontextualize *otaku* and *fujoshi* as essentially "normal" and compatible with mainstream values and society. If they are similar enough to non-*otaku* and non-*fujoshi* to form and maintain close relationships, or at least can be marketed as romantic desirable objects, they become reintegrated from the status of potentially dangerous or off-putting "other" back into the position of a "self" with which non-fans can identify. They can therefore serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they act as wish-fulfillment for *otaku* and *fujoshi* who may be insecure about their social status or upset that they cannot be more open with romantic partners. It would be overly simplistic or generalizing to claim that these sorts of mixed relationships do not in any way reflect the lived realities of *otaku* and *fujoshi*. Though dating and marriages in the real world frequently rest on shared interests, population statistics and the complexities of human relationships (along with the claim that several of the works depicting these mixed relationships are autobiographical) suggest that actual *otaku* and *fujoshi* do at least sometimes find themselves romantically involved with non-*otaku*. The degree of openness within those relationships may vary, of course, based on the individuals and the stage of the relationship. In their ethnographic work with *fujoshi*, Okabe and Ishida describe *fujoshi* who date non-*otaku* men, though they frequently "try to minimize disclosure of their *otaku* identity" due to negative perceptions by the mainstream, hiding their hobbies and interests on dating sites or even from established partners (216). If, particularly for *fujoshi*, mixed dating is a lived experience but is frequently complicated by a perceived difficulty or inability to be honest with those partners,

then fictional romances between *otaku* and non-*otaku* partners reflect their reality while simultaneously providing a comforting idealized image of desired openness. At the same time, these works also ease public anxieties about *otaku* and *fujoshi*, as well as provide a romantic/sexual object to market to consumers that is still relatively normative and non-threatening, yet just "different" enough to gain attention in a crowded market.

This representation of the potential for stable integration also extends beyond romantic and sexual ties and encompasses larger social patterns. In series with larger ensemble casts, like *Genshiken*, *Otaku no Musume-san*, and *Princess Jellyfish*, mixed romantic relationships are frequently presented alongside similarly mixed friendships, as the non-*otaku* member of the pairing, and non-*otaku* family members (such as Kōta's daughter in *Otaku no Musume-san* or Sasahara's little sister in *Genshiken*) interact with the members of the *otaku* clubs or circles. As Kotani in *Otaku no Musume-san* explains about herself and her friendship with Kanau, a non-*otaku* girl, "I drew a line between me and everyone else, and thought I couldn't converse with anyone on the other side. That girl taught me such a line doesn't exist...after that I started to understand kids in my class....and I started to think reality's good too" (9: 36).[21] Here Kotani directly verbalizes a rejection of the idea that *otaku* practices or interests fundamentally or necessarily divide fans from others; rather, this sort of estrangement or antisociality is a construction of the very discourses that Other *otaku* and *fujoshi*.

These romantic relationships and networks of friendship are deeply tied to self-acceptance for *otaku* and *fujoshi* characters as well. Support and acceptance both from fellow

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[21] *Watashi no hōkara ipponsen o hiitetannya koitsura to wa hanashi ga awahentte katsute ni omoikondotta sonna kyōkaisen nante arahenkoto o sono ko ha oshietekuretanya...arekara kurasu no ko tomo chotto hanaseru yōninattena...ima wa genjitsu mo ē natte omōyōni nattekita*

*otaku* and from outsiders normalize *otaku* interests, while the loss of uneasiness over fandom practices is framed as an essential part of self-actualization. Ian Condry discusses the relevance of public exposure and acceptance within *otaku* practices and discourses, theorizing that even in *moe* and *nijikon* ("2-D" complex or romantic and sexual orientation toward fictional characters) manifestos, or efforts like the petition to recognize marriage to fictional characters, which equate to a repudiation of real women or common social values, such public declarations and expression constitute "an affirmation of the importance of social acceptance" ("Love Revolution" 281). Whether "reluctant insiders" or failed men, *otaku* are nonetheless part of society; even in internalized feelings of *moe* and an identification based around consumption and emotion, the understanding and valuation of self comes hand in hand with the building of social ties and recognition from others. In *Oreimo*, Kirino begins by hiding her *otaku* hobbies; despite the fact that she is popular and works as a model, it is through forming social relationships with other *otaku* and in acceptance of her interests by her non-*otaku* brother that Kirino becomes content. In *Genshiken*, when confronted with the open display of *otaku* goods not only in the club room but in Kousaka's apartment, Sasahara notes that "I realized that what I lack is the courage to accept myself for who I am" (1: 44–45). This connection between self-actualization and acceptance, and openness about one's interests to both fellow *otaku* and non-*otaku*, is a major continuing theme in *Genshiken*. Ogiue's character arc is primarily about her overcoming a traumatic experience in her past and coming to accept herself as a *fujoshi*, which is enabled by her club mates' acceptance of her practices and desires. When she expresses self-doubt and nervousness about making *dōjinshi* and therefore revealing her "sick and twisted fantasies," Ohno replies that "I'm starting to like you more and more" and that she wants to know "every filthy little detail" (7: 43–

44). In fact, trying to deny one's own *otaku* or *fujoshi* tendencies does not seem to work; Ohno tells Ogiue that "every time you try to hide it, you end up looking like even more of an *otaku*" (7: 44). As discussed in the previous chapter, *Fujoshi Rumi* also features a character who denies her *fujoshi* interests and in fact bullies the protagonist, but similarly she comes to openly express her interests and the two of them become friends.

Acceptance from non-*otaku* is crucial as well. Not only do these functional relationships and the ability of non-*otaku* or *fujoshi* to understand and perceive the value in fan interests and practices serve as a rejection of predominant discourses of alienation and disjunction between *otaku*/*fujoshi* and "normal" social life and interests, but they also serve to reintegrate *otaku* and *fujoshi* consumerism into larger patterns of consumption. In an increasingly mediated and consumer-driven world, and as divisions between "high" and "low" culture narrow, these fictional depictions move to demonstrate the lack of difference between an affection for anime or manga and an affection for pop music or trendy clothing. *Genshiken's* Saki, Kousaka's non-*otaku* girlfriend, not only accepts and learns to negotiate her partner's interests and tastes, but her acceptance is crucial to Ohno as well when she reassures her about having unorthodox *fujoshi* tastes (for older, balding men rather than standard *bishōnen*), saying "the scary thing is that you feel like you have to push people away just so you can hide that part of yourself" (1: 162). In *Otaku no Musume-san* as well, one character reminisces fondly about a friendship with a rich older man who became an *otaku* in his retirement, and considers it important that "nowadays, when people will make fun of us without understanding, this person from an earlier era praised

otaku like us" (7: 22).[22] In *Princess Jellyfish*, as discussed earlier in the chapter, Tsukimi finds

acceptance and some degree of understanding through her friendship with Kuranosuke, and the

social distinctions drawn between her *otaku* hobbies and his interest in fashion are rendered

meaningless.

<center>Advertising a New <u>*Otaku* Masculinity</u></center>

Though a great deal of the construction and representation of *otaku* and *fujoshi* identity

within entertainment media (as well as overall popular and academic discourses) concerns itself

with reintegrating the *otaku* or *fujoshi* identity in with general social roles and norms, there are

also representations that claim to redefine or reimagine roles and values via *otaku* and *fujoshi*

practices, and to forge a new sense of (post)modern identity. Most of the activity and depictions

framed as transformative relate to concepts of masculine identity and sexuality. This seems

appropriate given that discourses of *otaku* alienation and failure, as previously discussed, largely

concern gender roles, in highlighting in particular the tension between traditional and shifting

notions of masculinity.

*Otaku no Musume-san* presents a singular instance of attempting to define an idea of

*otaku* fatherhood that departs significantly from normative parental expectations, both

repositioning the father as caretaker and asserting that *otaku* have potential distinct advantages as

parents. The protagonist, Morisaki Kōta, is shocked when his heretofore unknown ten-year-old

daughter shows up on his doorstep. She arrives to live with him while her mother travels and

works odd jobs to avoid debt collectors and earn enough money to pay off her debt. The series

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[22]*Imamade bokura wo rikaisezu baka ni shiteita sedai sono saisentan ni itadearō nendai no kono hito ni otaku de aru jibuntachi wo mitometemoraeteru*

traces Kōta's hesitance and inexperience as a father, through a number of mistakes and misunderstandings, to his acceptance of his role and devotion to his daughter. The major thrust of the manga concerns Kōta becoming the primary parent for his daughter, to the extent that even given the opportunity for his daughter to return to her mother (and the possibility of a two-parent household, as her mother has a potential new husband) she selects her single father as her preferred caretaker. This emphasis on male parental involvement, particularly without a corresponding mother figure, sharply diverges from normative ideas of masculinity.

Child care is primarily considered a female responsibility, stemming from the Meiji construction of idealized womanhood as "good wife and wise mother" (Nolte and Hastings 158). This conception persisted into the modern era through stereotypes of the "education mama" in the 1970s and 80s, as well as continuing gender-based patterns of employment "in which women's labor is considered supplemental to the household income" and thus women are relegated to part time work, while the salaryman became "the absentee father who returns home after the children have gone to bed and leaves for the morning commute before they wake up, seeing them only on Sunday" (Sasaki-Uemura 319). Men, while expected to marry, are not socially assumed to bear responsibility for directly raising children. Single fathers in popular culture, including anime and manga, are not unheard of; they can be found in a number of titles ranging from the magical girl series *Card Captor Sakura* to the *shōnen* action series *Bleach*. In the majority of cases, however, as in those two titles, this only occurs due to the death of the expected primary caretaker, the mother. Single fathers by choice (which Kōta may not be initially but is by the close of the manga) are much rarer, and may often be a case of female wish fulfillment for women who desire to see men bear and understand their own difficulties including

career sacrifices for the sake of parenthood; for instance, another manga and anime focused on a man who chooses to become a single father is the *jōsei* (women's) manga *Bunny Drop*. Thus *Otaku no Musume-san* represents an interesting fusion of messages: it reintegrates the *otaku* into mainstream narratives of social responsibility and success, but it also challenges conventional notions of ideal masculinity by emphasizing the *otaku* as potentially nurturing.

Concerned discourses often position *otaku* consumerism as a mark of immaturity or childishness, particularly because *otaku* frequently embrace media targeted at children or have an interest in fantastic subjects that may be deemed childish. Combined with anxieties about the way that *otaku* eroticize fictional characters and contexts that are non-normative, and may involve underage or visually young-looking characters in *lolicon* materials, these stereotypes raise questions about the ability of *otaku* to responsibly care for children. *Otaku no Musume-san* responds to this allegation by demonstrating the potential of *otaku* to be responsible, but also seeks to reframe the definition of appropriate adulthood and the value of maintaining a connection with "childish" tastes and interests. Throughout the series, Kōta's hobbies and priorities cause a number of problems in his performance as a father; in one instance he fails to come home promptly while his daughter is sick because he is waiting for a midnight video game release. Conversely, however, his *otaku* expertise and connections also make him a good or even preferable parent. His knowledge of video games and his trading card collection enable him to socialize with his daughter's classmates and become the "cool" parent, as does his work as an assistant to a popular *shōjo* manga author. As one character says, "a good father is the kind of person who can share a child's point of view. If so, then isn't an otaku who's most like a child

the ideal father?" (4: 126).[23] *Otaku no Musume-san* represents some ambivalence about *otaku* self-restraint and ability to prioritize, but still suggests that *otaku* practices and identity may lead to a revised model of masculinity, family formation, and maturity.

In reality, many *otaku* or outside commentators also seek to redefine masculinity and renegotiate *otaku* social positioning and values by using *moe* to frame their practices as an affective form of consumerism that is positioned by some commentators as a new form of masculinity. In "Love Revolution," Ian Condry argues that, despite the fact that "good" *otaku* are frequently judged by the same standards of economic productivity as the traditional salaryman model of masculinity, at the same time "otaku represent a new form of manhood through consumption that offers an alternative vision of value … an otaku perspective on masculinity reminds us of the vulnerability experienced by many men who live outside the dominant ideal of male success" (270). To begin with, consumerism in Japan is frequently imagined and critiqued as essentially feminine. In his examination of the work of the popular female novelist Yoshimoto Banana and her positioning within *shōjo* culture, John Wittier Treat highlights the concept of the young girl or *shōjo* as

> a definitive feature of Japanese late-model, consumer capitalism … The role of the *shōjo* in this service economy was not to make these products, but to consume them (more precisely, to *symbolize* their consumption). The *shōjo* are, if you will, 'off the production line,' lacking any real referent in the 'economy' of postmodern Japan. Until they marry, and thus cease to be *shōjo*, they are relegated to pure play as pure sign. It is in the interim of their *shōjo* years that these young women (and the young men that increasingly resemble them) participate in a uniquely *un*productive culture (362)

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[23] *Ii chichioyatte no ha kodomo to onaji mesen ni nareru hito no koto wo iurashiidesuwa. Nara otakutte no ha motto kodomo ni chikai risō no chichioyatte koto yanaidesuka?*

The link between consumption and *shōjo* also functions through the increased marketing and consumption of *kawaii* or cute goods and characters. *Otaku* become linked with femininity first through their role as consumers and social anxieties about their lack of traditional, masculine productivity, and second through their tastes for cute characters influenced by *shōjo* manga visuals. Sharon Kinsella, in "Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: Otaku and the Amateur Manga Movement" describes the rise in popularity of *shōjo* manga among male readers and *dōjinshi* creators and explains that the roots of *lolicon* and through it, the contemporary *moe* sensibility, lie in these "ultra-cute (*chō kawaii*) girls' manga written by and for men" (305). The influence of female design sensibilities on male fans' fictionalized erotic tastes can also be seen through creators like Takahashi Rumiko, who wrote comics for boys and whose cute girl character Lum from *Urusei Yatsura* became a major *bishōjo* icon, as well as the long-standing participation of female manga artists in the production of men's erotic manga, including *lolicon* publications like *Manga Burikko*.[24]

In one sense, then, the *otaku*'s ability to leverage consumer knowledge into marketable production transmutes a feminine activity into a sufficiently masculine exercise of power and discovery, particularly in *Otaku no Video* where Kubo not only becomes a veritable conquering dictator through the power of capitalism but in the process also triumphs over his evil ex-girlfriend, who steals his company. Conversely, however, the proud alignment of the *otaku* with consumption alongside the derivation of *otaku* tastes and erotic sensibilities from feminine media

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[24] *Manga Burikko* was a *lolicon* manga magazine published from 1982–85; though it is no longer in print, it has a presence online at http://www.burikko.net/ with information on the published issues and the history of the magazine. For more on the role of women in producing erotic manga for men and their involvement with *lolicon* in particular, see Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* and Galbraith, "Lolicon: The Reality of 'Virtual Child Pornography' in Japan."

and ideas of cuteness threaten to undermine and redraw the boundaries of traditional masculine identity.

One concern when discussing shifting notions of *otaku*-specific masculinity in actual Japanese society (i.e., as an identity or set of values divergent from and/or at odds with the mainstream masculine gender role) is the task of isolating changes to masculine roles that are unique to, or particularly strongly tied to, *otaku* contexts and practices. Frequently, news stories and cultural commentary, particularly those from overseas writing about Japan, conflate *otaku* with other groups of men and link general shifts and practices to *otaku* for the sake of convenience or the marketability of discussing the "strange" *otaku* subculture. Discourses about these sorts of shifts away from productive work and toward consumerism, as well as those about the avoidance of sex and marriage, span multiple groups of men that may or may not actually overlap. For instance, as I discussed in the first chapter, while *otaku* often may also be *hikikomori* or NEET, the latter two groups extend beyond *otaku*. Even more confusing is the tendency, especially among foreign commentators, to conflate the orientation towards fictionalized desires and the prioritization of 2-D *moe* over real relationships by some *otaku* with the notion of so-called *soshoku danshi* or "herbivore men" (Rani). Herbivore men, as opposed to traditional carnivore men, are not overly career driven and tend to either deprioritize or lack any interest in sexual relationships, but in terms of style, interests, etc. are more akin to what Americans would term "hipsters" than "nerds" or *otaku* (Haworth; "From Carnivores to Herbivores"). Therefore it is not necessarily or solely *otaku* who are performing masculinity in some of these alternate ways. As some have also pointed out in response to the fraught media discourses about lack of sex or romantic interest among Japanese men, many of these statistical

trends away from marriage and even dating, and increases in being comfortably single, are seen

in America as well, and "a number of Eastern European countries have lower fertility rates than

Japan, but we don't often see articles portraying Czechs and Poles as sexless nerds" (Keating). It

seems, then, that Japan at large is undergoing changes to gender roles that have likely grown too

restrictive and unsatisfying, and that many industrialized or post-industrialized nations are

experiencing alterations to patterns of sexual and romantic intimacy. This makes the

identification of particularly *otaku* masculinities a daunting proposition.

### Problematics of *Otaku* (Self-) Representation: Tensions, False Advertising, and the *Otaku* as Product

Untangling *otaku* identity from wider cultural changes and sifting through biased and

variously motivated discourses make discussions of discrete fan identities problematic. Fictional

depictions of *otaku* and *fujoshi* can help academics by offering a source of comparison with, and

an extension of, ethnographic and survey data about real fans, but as I have already discussed

these images are contiguous with broader cultural discourses and are weighted by various social

and rhetorical pressures. Even when dealing with self-representations made by *otaku* creators,

economic and market pressures work alongside the status of *otaku* as defined and motivated

primarily by consumption to render *otaku* and *fujoshi* themselves into consumable commodities

rather than reflecting their lived experiences and thoughts. Works about *otaku* frequently

negotiate and play with common character elements and tropes from what Azuma would

characterize as the *otaku* "database," merging fictional contexts with reflections of real *otaku* life

while frequently also joking about the ways that these database elements and fictional contexts

fail to intersect with reality. *Otaku* creators and audiences inhabit a spectrum of fictionality and

*otaku* sensibility, informed by their own experiences, public discourses about themselves and their community, and practical goals and concerns.

Particularly in works designed to appeal to male *otaku*, common *moe* elements and tropes are employed. For instance, Kirino in *Oreimo* fulfills the *moe* qualities of "little sister" and *tsundere* (a character who is outwardly normally harsh or combative—*tsuntsun*—but flips between that and an underlying sweetness or vulnerability—*deredere*), while common visual fetish or *moe* tropes like maid costumes are included. In some cases, these tropes are used while also being deployed as a joke; in *Dojin Work*, one of the female characters is named Osana Najimi, a pun on the Japanese term for "childhood friend," [25] and is herself the childhood friend of male character Justice, thus both poking fun at and embodying a common database element for *moe*.

In some cases characters call out the disjunction between these database elements and reality, as in *Genshiken* when Sasahara's club mates discover he has a little sister. He bitterly remarks that a real sibling is completely unlike a *moe* little sister character, and such things are "just fantasies made up by guys who never had a little sister" (2: 119). Furthermore, his lived experience of having a sister makes him uninterested in those types of characters, perhaps interfering with the ability to separate the fictional database elements from reality as smoothly. This contrasts with *Oreimo*, in which the separation between *otaku* fantasy and "reality" is less defined due to its use of fanservice and *moe* as a selling point (not just for the series itself but for related merchandise such as collectible figures of the female characters). In that series, not only

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[25] The "childhood friend" is a common role or characteristic in dating simulation games and other romance works, frequently for female characters but sometimes also male characters.

is the *otaku*, Kirino, *moe* for little sisters despite being one herself, but she and her brother experience romantic and erotic attraction to one another.

Kirino in *Oreimo*, alongside other *moe* female *otaku* characters such as Konata from the comedy manga and anime *Lucky Star*, represent a fundamental problematic within the *otaku's* supposedly revised masculinity. Female *otaku* and *fujoshi*, who almost entirely lack self-representation due to the low number of women in high directorial or editorial positions within the anime and manga industries, are not only represented second-hand through men but are converted into products for consumption by *otaku*. On the one hand, if *otaku* are what Lawrence Eng describes as "reluctant insiders," members of the dominant social class (in this case potentially middle-class heterosexual Japanese men) who fail at or are trying to work their way out of traditional masculinity, then these female *otaku* characters may serve as objects of identification. Both Sharon Kinsella, in "Minstrelized Girls: Male Performers of Japan's Lolita Complex," and Patrick Galbraith in "*Lolicon*: The Reality of 'Virtual Child Pornography' in Japan," explain that *lolicon* artists and consumers frequently cite their empathetic connection and psychological identification with the girl. Itō Gō states that even in depictions of rape or sexual abuse, readers "are projecting themselves on the girls who are in horrible situations" (qtd. in Galbraith, "*Lolicon*" 103). The *otaku*'s disconnection from traditional masculine identity thus encourages an identification with the feminine.

On the other hand, this supposed revision of gender roles still incorporates and relies on elements of domination and control central to traditional masculinity. Naitō Chizuko discusses the "loliconization" of Japanese society as part of backlash against changing roles of women, arguing that "when the privilege of men to express their own will is negated, the symbol of

'woman' (*josei*) as a commodity property circulated among men comes to be replaced with the proxy symbol of the 'young girl' (*shōjo*) … the young girl is, through her youthful innocence, made to lack a will of her own, and the ideals and delusions of the male gender can be freely projected into the empty vacuum" (328–29). The fictionalized *moe* girl and the female face given to the *otaku*'s image of self, then, becomes not just a way to identify beyond gender but a way to reassert authority over women in a way they cannot in real life. In "Otaku Sexuality," Saitō describes the male *otaku*'s orientation toward fictionality and production of fan materials as a way to possess "the objects of affection (anime, manga, or video-game heroines)" (237). Indeed, we rarely see this apparent identification with women or seeming comprehension of femininity extend beyond the consumption of woman as object. Shigematsu agrees that while "a male reader may identify with a girl insofar as he momentarily 'sees' from her perspective, and may momentarily imagine what it is like to be her … this may not necessarily lead to a consistent desire to be sympathetic towards her" (137). *Otaku*, it seems, even if they are reluctant to be insiders, retain some of the privileges of insider status by virtue of their positioning as men within a patriarchal social system, as well as many *otaku*'s likely status as ethnic Japanese and middle-class. *Otaku* therefore may on some level recognize and feel the limitations of traditionally masculine roles and capitalist systems, but still recreate old models of authority and control in the midst of supposedly new lifestyles.

Ultimately, surveying these fictional depictions of *otaku* and *fujoshi*, and the commodification of the Self and Other necessitated by a consumption-driven *otaku* subculture raises questions about the nature and limitations of identity. Depictions of *otaku* and *fujoshi*, whether in efforts toward normalization or in efforts to redefine and reposition these fans within

society, function as narratives about identity and the acceptance thereof by self and others. At the same time, *otaku* and *fujoshi* are defined by learnable knowledge and skills, as well as the possession and consumption of obtainable physical goods and media. Thus we see *otaku* and *fujoshi* practices characterized both as reflections of innate identity and personality, as well as something that can be put on or acquired, and into which one can be inducted or recruited (as Kubo is in *Otaku no Video*). To what extent can consumption of media constitute an identity? These fictional depictions provide no concrete answers. It seems clear that alienating discourses and practices about *otaku* modes of consumption have resulted in a sense of oppositional identity, but efforts to delineate a distinctly different selfhood are hopelessly muddled. Furthermore, if identity as an *otaku* or a *fujoshi* is defined by consumption, then as media continue to specialize and fragment such that fans' interests overlap less and less, a category as broad as '*otaku*' or even '*fujoshi*' may lack much functional meaning. Still, the sense of mutual understanding and support displayed, for instance, in *Genshiken* or *Princess Jellyfish* indicates that this identity, vague and oppositional as it may be, bears the potential for self-actualization and community.

**CHAPTER THREE: "SOMETHING INSIDE ME IS OPENING UP"—
EXPLORING FICTIONALIZED AND LIVED GENDERS AND
SEXUALITIES**

As attitudes and discourses related to *otaku* and *fujoshi* stem from and overlap with anxieties about changing gender roles and the reproductive future of the nation, gender identity and sexuality have been relevant, if not always explicitly central, subject matter. In the first chapter, I discussed the ways that critical and propagandized negative discourses on, and representations of, *otaku* frequently depict a failure to adequately perform masculinity and normative models of sexual desire and family formation. In the second chapter, I explored contrasting positive images of *otaku* and *fujoshi*. These positive portrayals, which often include instances of self-representation, work alongside academic commentary from cultural and psychological researchers (which are themselves sometimes self-representations, as fans enter the academic sphere and research fandom), to push back against negative stereotypes and anxieties surrounding fans and exert a normalizing pressure; at the same time, the function of consumerism as a basis for *otaku* practices results in the conversion of *otaku* and *fujoshi* into objects of their own self-consumption.

While defensive illustrations of *otaku* and *fujoshi* heteronormativity, and the corresponding complete disjunction of real and fictionalized desires, may be rhetorically useful, I argue that it is equally as oversimplified as the original anxious discourses. The relationship between lived and fictionalized desires is highly complex, and an understanding of being *otaku* or *fujoshi* as an identity category and fannish consumption as emotional/affective, in addition to materialistic, necessitates a dynamic and intimate exchange between fans' lives—including their gender identities and sexual orientations—and the narratives and fantasies they prioritize. In this

chapter, I direct close attention to the ways that *otaku* and *fujoshi* sexualities are depicted in manga and anime, in particular the way that consumption of erotic and fetishized media—that is, fictionalized desires—compares with fans' actual sexual and romantic behaviors. The texts I examine include several titles discussed in earlier chapters—namely *Genshiken*, *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, *Otaku no musume-san*, *Oreimo*, and *Fujoshi Rumi*—as well as the short comedy web series *Turning Girls* and the manga *Fudanshi Shugi (Fudanshism)*. While *otaku* and *fujoshi* in anime and manga do frequently correspond to the heteronormative mold so frequently asserted in academic and cultural commentaries, these titles suggest a more complex interplay between real identities and fictionalized desires, wherein each exerts influence on the other; furthermore, we begin to see the emergence of a more fluid conception of sexuality and gender identity that suggests we should reconsider whether the professed heteronormativity of *otaku* and *fujoshi* is an accurate image or merely a function of normalizing discourses that should be reconsidered.

Positive portrayals of *otaku* and *fujoshi* seek to pacify concerns that these fans are abnormal or dangerous by assuring us of their ultimate harmlessness and normality. As Carl Sandvoss explains, much of the early academic work on fandom in English "was not only the analytic representation and theorization of fandom, but also a form of political representation: a statement against the double standards of cultural judgement and the bourgeois fear of popular culture; a statement in favour of fan sensibilities which gave a voice to otherwise marginalized social groups" (3). Though Sandvoss is referring in particular to the work of pioneering fandom scholars like Henry Jenkins, dealing primarily with American fans of domestic properties, English-language academic work on *otaku* and *fujoshi*—both in Japan and elsewhere—has roots in this tradition and perpetuates many of its sensibilities. Furthermore, commentators and

academics in Japan have separately felt pressure to normalize *otaku* in the aftermath of incidents

like the Miyazaki trial. Particularly given the prominence of issues related to Japan's declining

birth rate and corresponding pressures on men especially to start and support a family, sexuality

is an important field where defenders of Japanese *otaku* can reassure the broader culture that they

are capable and even potentially successful at performing heteronormative desire.

Representations of *otaku* and *fujoshi* within anime and manga, alongside the majority of

academic and popular pro-*otaku* commentary, strongly display this normalizing tendency where

gender and sexuality are concerned. Additionally, as commercial works intended to be

marketable to *otaku* and/or *fujoshi*, but frequently also to general audience, anime and manga

depictions face at least some amount of market pressure to conform to established patterns of

genre and content, and to be accessible to a fairly broad consumer base. As a result, these anime

and manga frequently work alongside the academic and cultural commentary to represent *otaku*

and *fujoshi* as sexually normative in their lived reality. Many argue that, whereas eroticized

media for *otaku* and *fujoshi* include such elements as cross-dressing, homoerotic relationships

(*yaoi* and BL for *fujoshi* as well as *yuri* or lesbian titles aimed at both male and female

consumers), *futanari*, incest, rape, and underage characters, in their "real" lives *otaku* and *fujoshi*

are cisgender, heterosexual, and largely absent of any actual performed sexual fetishism which

might be construed as criminal, dangerous or unpleasant.[26] Discussions of real life romantic and

sexual relationships among *otaku* and *fujoshi*, whether within the scope of academic publications

or general commentary, rarely include mentions of queerness or participation in fetish scenes

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[26] *Futanari* refers to a particular fantasy form of intersex or hermaphroditic biology, young women possessing both a vagina and a fully functional penis.

such as BDSM or transvestitism, and—apart from the Miyazaki case—incidents of sexual violence or pedophilia on the part of *otaku* are not mentioned.

The majority of *otaku* and *fujoshi* characters depicted in the reviewed anime and manga are indeed heterosexual, and rarely engage in non-normative sexual practices outside of their own media consumption within the narrative. Though existing in fiction, a distinction between the "real" and the "fictional" is often in effect where the characters are concerned. This echoes the picture drawn by academics. Saitō Tamaki, who has perhaps written most extensively about *otaku* desire and sexuality, discusses

> *otaku* sexuality's estrangement from everyday life. For example, there are many varieties of the odd sexuality (*tōsaku*) depicted in the eighteen-and-over genre, including an attraction to little girls that could be seen as pedophilic … contrary to popular expectations, the vast majority of *otaku* are not pedophiles in actual life. They are said to choose respectable partners of the opposite sex and to have the kind of sex lives one would term healthy ("Otaku Sexuality," 228)

Saitō affirms that this applies to *fujoshi* as well. In "*Fujoshi*: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among 'Rotten Girls' in Contemporary Japan," Patrick Galbraith also states that "*fujoshi* typically lead heteronormative lives despite their queer fantasies" (212). There is a sharp distinction, then, between the database elements and fantasies *otaku* and *fujoshi* explore within fictional contexts and their admitted desires and behaviors with real people. This separation as described in commentary on real fans is echoed within pop cultural depictions.

In many anime or manga in which *otaku* and *fujoshi* deviate from heteronorms, it is due to: 1) a representation of *otaku* or *fujoshi* meant to be negative or critical; 2) a plot device or convenience that does not reflect on the character's actual desires; or, 3) a result of the deployment of female *otaku* or *fujoshi* as consumable objects of desire for male *otaku* and a

corresponding blending of *otaku* representation with the implementation of fictionalized fetish and genre tropes.

Anime and manga titles intended to critique *otaku* practices, especially where they relate to an inability to properly separate fantasy from reality and respect social boundaries and responsibilities, sometimes depict *otaku* engaging in sexual behavior characterized as inappropriate and deviant; the sensitive issue of *lolicon*, or the eroticization of underage girls, is the most commonly used. In *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, for instance, the line between fictionalized and actualized desire is occasionally porous as a part of the series' overwhelmingly critical, darkly humorous discourse about *otaku* obsession. In one storyline, Yamazaki and Satō's interest in *lolicon* extends to real young girls. Certainly this episode, including the culmination wherein Satō lurks outside an elementary school to take photos of girls, implements common anxious discourses about *otaku* sexuality as deviant and potentially dangerous, and consumption of fictional materials as a "gateway" or precursor to actual behavior, and fictionalized "2-D" desires as equivalent to interest in real young girls.[27]

It is important to note that Satō himself is not primarily an *otaku*, but rather a NEET who becomes sucked into various *otaku* behaviors by his neighbor and friend Yamazaki. Throughout the series, Satō frequently over-indulges in various antisocial and destructive behaviors as part of his struggle with his own status as a NEET, his self-esteem, and his paranoia; this seems to be

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[27] NGO and activist groups like ECPAT and CASPAR have expressed concerns over a link between *lolicon* media and real child pornography and sexual abuse (McNicol; "Lolicon Backlash in Japan"). Legislation has been introduced to regulate drawn or animated depictions of underage characters, including a 2010 amendment to the Metropolitan Tokyo youth welfare law to restrict depictions of "nonexistent youths," which was eventually rejected, and recently proposed amendments to Japan's child pornography laws that does not distinguish between photographic images and illustrations or CG ("Tokyo Bill on 'Virtual' Child Porn Set for March Vote [Update 3]"; "Tokyo's 'Nonexistent Youth' Bill Rejected by Assembly"; "Japan's Ruling Party to Reintroduce Child Pornography Law Revision").

the case with Satō's interest in *lolicon*, which is spurred initially by Yamazaki as research for the erotic game they plan to produce. From the beginning, Satō himself expresses dismay and disgust at, but also attraction to, the concept, thinking "I knew [Yamazaki] was messed up, but THIS" and that "I felt so sick looking at [the images] that my head hurt. At least, I should have" (1: 59). His consumption of the images is a constant push-pull of self-disgust, as he thinks that "I can't do this anymore ... It can't get any worse ... I don't want to live anymore" (1: 61), while also displaying an apparent compulsion to continue. Thus it seems tied to his other self-destructive and escapist behaviors including his use of recreational drugs. In fact, Satō seems driven by an urge to simultaneously indulge in *lolicon* as a way of proving to himself how low and terrible he is while also hoping that his own shame will spur him to change. When he drags Yamazaki to the school to photograph girls, he frames it as a plan to "escape from this darkness...escape from...the lolita complex" by having Yamazaki take photos of his own disgusting behavior, creating irrefutable evidence of himself as "a disgusting, miserable, dirty man" (1: 65, 67). Additionally, even Yamazaki views Satō's behavior as too extreme, first declaring that "there's something wrong with you" and "you make me sick" after Satō obsessively downloads huge numbers of photos (1: 62). In the end, during their outing to the school Yamazaki flees in disgust.

Though Satō is framed as grotesque and pathetic, as discussed in the first chapter, his own self-disgust and the outward physical manifestations of his struggles against his psychological issues (the bags under his eyes, his sweating and shaking and tears, his unhinged facial expressions, etc.) render him also powerfully vulnerable and sympathetic. The reader is encouraged not just to pity Satō but to hope for his own recovery, that he can achieve his desire

to "live a clean and decent life" (1: 69). Furthermore, while dark, *Welcome to the N.H.K.* is a comedy; the exaggerated visuals and the extravagant way that Satō flings himself obsessively and excessively into each new subject or practice is *funny*. This puts the reader in an interesting position regarding the consumption in which Satō is engaging: on the one hand condemning his behavior as morally wrong and disgusting, yet on the other hand not entirely rejecting or disavowing Satō, or separating ourselves from identifying with him. Furthermore, while the manga brings together and unifies fictionalized and real desires by conflating illustrated *lolicon* with distribution of photos, it also affirms the disjunction between reality and fiction in the reader's positioning towards the manga through parodic exaggeration and urges us to laugh and shake our heads at Satō lurking outside an elementary school rather than treating it as we would in reality.

By contrast, Nitta in *Otaku no Musume-san* displays a continuous interest in real as well as fictional young girls as a core element of his character and sexual interest, including the protagonist's daughter. His interest is always framed negatively by the other characters, who continuously stop his advances to avoid any actual culmination of his interests, reaffirming to the audience that his desires and behaviors, when moved beyond the realm of the fictional, are not acceptable. Interestingly, however, this disapproval is not as strong and Nitta's interest in *lolicon* is not portrayed as threateningly as Sato's is. This likely has to do as much with established genre tropes and humor relying on the audience's knowledge of them—a recurring factor in the series, as I have already mentioned; the routine annoyance and intervention displayed by the other characters, including through comedic portrayals of physical violence and restraint, is mixed with and tempered by a sort of fond exasperation of the sort usually seen toward the

traditional lecherous comedic relief characters (e.g. dirty old men, panty thieves, and peeping toms) seen in anime and manga stretching back to at least the 1970s.[28] Sexual harassment as a source of humor is a staple of many series, particularly *shōnen* titles. When *Otaku no Musume-san's* Nitta is taken together in context with the manipulation and use of tropes within the manga in general, as well as the author's wry recognition of the gap between reality and fiction—as seen when several characters, discussing the building manager's marriage and active sexual desires, remark that if their life were a *moe* manga the fans would burn their volumes—he may not be a violation of the separation between fictionalized sexuality and real desire, but a reification of it; the very ridiculousness of his behavior and the fact that it is itself ultimately fictional allows it to be humorous.

Cross-dressing appears to be the most common trope representing non-normative sexuality or gender identity in *otaku* and *fujoshi* among the titles surveyed. In general, however, it represents the second major category of non-normative sexuality depicted, that of plot necessity which does not reflect a character's actual desires. Situational cross-dressing is extremely common in anime and manga, particularly in *shōjo* titles but also in series meant for male audiences.[29] By "situational" cross-dressing I refer to a character disguising him- or herself as the opposite gender in order to accomplish a particular goal, often involving access to a gender-restricted space (an all-boys or all-girls school, for instance) rather than as an expression of a sexual fetish or a trans*/genderqueer identity. Within the context of series about *otaku* and

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[28] These types of characters are too numerous to list exhaustively. For common exemplars see Happosai in Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma 1/2*, the protagonist Saeba Ryo in *City Hunter*, or more recently Kon from *Bleach*.
[29] See, for instance, in *shōjo* titles including *Ouran High School Host Club, Kaze Hikaru*, and *Hana Kimi* or in *shōnen/seinen* works *Maria+Holic*. I refer to these as "situational cross-dressing" because the character engages in it for practical reasons, often to attend a school only for the opposite gender or to otherwise gain access to a character, organization, etc.

*fujoshi*, the situational impetus for cross-dressing often involves cosplay; even then, the reason for cosplaying itself may be situational. In Morishige's romantic comedy *Fudanshizumu–Fudanshi Shugi* (*Fudanshism–The Fudanshi Doctrine*), for example, the main character Miyano is initially pushed into dressing as a woman to fill in for his sick *fujoshi* sister at a *dōjin* event; upon discovering that the girl he likes is herself a *fujoshi*, he continues to cross-dress and pose as a fellow *fujoshi* to spend time with her. Miyano's sexual orientation and gender identity are heteronormative, but cross-dressing provides access to a space wherein he can continue to pursue a normative interest; this pattern in and of itself is the most common theme in situational cross-dressing, in which a potentially queer relationship (due both to the ostensible same gender of the individuals involved as well as the transvestitism) enables and covers a heterosexual relationship that ultimately returns to its "real" status when the cross-dressing character no longer needs to maintain their disguise.

*Genshiken* also makes use of situational cross-dressing during the first manga series, though only within the context of cosplay. When the club attends Comic Fest to sell their first *dōjinshi* Kousaka, who has always stood out with his *bishōnen* good looks, dresses as a female character from the basis series for their book in order to draw in customers. His attitude towards the costume is entirely pragmatic, and he never cross-dresses, or expresses interest in female clothing, outside of the context of event promotion. One can certainly argue that Kousaka's ability to attract customers through this costume is itself evidence of a queered interest among the *otaku* to whom he markets his *dōjin*; however, the extent to which those *otaku* are interested in Kousaka as a cross-dressing male is left unexplored and complicated by the nature of his appearing as the character. It is difficult to say how much of the attention may come from his

own attractions as opposed to the *otaku*'s interest in his adopted character. His fellow *Genshiken* members, the only ones to comment, seem mostly uncomfortable. Madarame asks, "am I supposed to get a nosebleed now or something?" to which Sasahara replies, "Yeah, if you can" (5: 138).[30] Shortly thereafter, when Kousaka steps to the front of the table the guys note his "shapely legs" and discuss him not wearing stockings, before blushing uncomfortably and changing the subject (5: 147). This discomfort is likely a continuation of their unease with Kousaka's cross-dressing, but can be interpreted ambiguously as awkward arousal.

Furthermore, Kousaka is stated to be incredibly good at appearing feminine even without experience or practice. When he again cross-dresses for event promotion in *Genshiken Second Season*, new club member Hato is shocked that Kousaka is "beautiful enough to pass himself off as a girl" despite "not wearing...any makeup" (2: 127). At his surprise, Madarame responds that Kousaka is "a force of nature. He's in another dimension entirely" (2: 128). This raises the question of whether or not the *otaku* viewing him are viewing him primarily as a man in women's clothing or as a cute girl. The question of this interest will be complicated further in *Genshiken Second Season*, to which I will return later in this chapter, but it remains certain that Kousaka's own participation is solely pragmatic and he maintains a heteronormative, committed relationship with Saki.

Alongside the use of the humorous lecher trope as seen with *Otaku no Musume-san's* Nitta, authors sometimes use incest as a way to depict *otaku* or *fujoshi* characters' sexuality within established genre tropes for purposes of marketing. The female *otaku* protagonist of

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[30] The nosebleed is a common visual signifier in anime and manga for sexual arousal, usually deployed with a comedic gloss. The convention may stem from the desire for an overt visual joke sign that avoids the full explicitness of an obvious erection.

*Oreimo*, Kirino, displays a fixation toward anime and games dealing with 'little sister' characters. Though at first the series seemed to be avoiding an actual romantic or sexual interest between her and her older brother, it is eventually revealed that her *otaku* hobby is a result and expression of her real interest in her brother, and the two in fact secretly marry prior to the conclusion of the series. As discussed in the previous chapter, Kirino represents a character who, while potentially available as a source of cross-gender identification for male *otaku*, is simultaneously (and most importantly) an object intended for marketability and consumption; this very marketability includes not just her appealing character design and *tsundere* personality, but her attraction and sexual availability to her brother, who serves as the primary point of audience identification. *Otaku* can thus satisfy their fictionalized interest in little sisters both through Kirino herself and vicariously through her own interest in this trope.

<div align="center">The Interplay of Fantasy and Reality</div>

The emphasis on separating reality and fiction in regard to *otaku* and *fujoshi* sexuality is meant to counter not only anxieties about sexual deviance but also the commonly expressed, general accusation that devoted fans cannot tell the difference between, or incorrectly prioritize, real life versus media. If the image of the *otaku* or *fujoshi* unable to distinguish fantasy from reality, or simply existing as passive slaves to media depictions that render them dangerous, is a ridiculous oversimplification then I suggest the counter-discourse—the *otaku* or *fujoshi* who is only and completely heteronormative and whose fictionalized desires are somehow completely disconnected from his or her real self—is equally simplistic. Certainly, we may all use fiction as a space to enjoy or indulge in fantasies that we would never consider enacting. At the same time, however, personality and experience help to shape tastes in media and the fantasies in which we

indulge, as do our social and cultural contexts. If fictionalized fantasies are not a direct reflection of immediate or exact *otaku*/*fujoshi* desires, they may still be a space in which *otaku* and *fujoshi* can express, explore, and process aspects of their identities and desires, particularly in relation to something as intimate and fundamental as sex.

Some commentators, particularly Saitō Tamaki, have argued that, rather than being confused, *otaku* and *fujoshi* instead have a much more nuanced and advanced grasp of the distinction and a correspondingly better ability to interact with and consume media in a postmodern system. While I am hesitant to make claims about *otaku* or *fujoshi* being intellectually or otherwise superior to other groups, I do believe that the particular interaction with media and fictionalized desire *otaku* and *fujoshi* engage in does result in a highly nuanced interplay between real life and fiction. We see this particularly strongly in the existence and use of the *fujoshi*'s "otome filter," which is reflected in several of the more (auto)biographical and naturalistic manga and anime created recently.

The "otome filter" is a means through which *fujoshi* translate 3D (real) individuals and situations into fictionalized (2D) BL patterns and imagery. This concept has so far been unexplored in major scholarly discourses, but Japanese blogger bangin explains that

> Although they seem to see real people, they are good at distincting [sic] 2D and 3D. For example, if a *fujoshi* sees two schoolboys having a chat on the bench, she would 'cook' them and make a story in 2D … In this way, *fujoshi*s can travel between 2D and 3D freely. As if they are wearing sunglasses…yes, this is what's called [otome filter] to filter out 3D and turn whatever into 2D

Through the "otome filter" *fujoshi* fictionalize their own surroundings and individuals they know in real life. Real people are recontextualized and situated within genre and fetish tropes common

to BL and *yaoi* media, and appropriate *fujoshi* narratives are constructed.[31] In some cases these real individuals may be only casually or distantly related to the *fujoshi* in question, but we also see depictions where *fujoshi* apply the "otome filter" to men they desire or are actively involved with in real life.

Turning Girls, a six-episode web series developed by members (several of whom are themselves female) of the anime studio Trigger about four young women on the verge of turning 30, features a second episode titled "If Anything Happens to Me, Please Destroy the Hard Disk," which is devoted to *fujoshi* fantasy and provides a concise depiction of the "otome filter." Chiwa, a working professional who writes *dōjinshi* as a hobby, is constantly distracted from work by fantasies transforming the people around her into enactments of BL tropes. An older coworker and the stern younger supervisor swap positions and become a sadistic *seme* and *uke*; her boss's annoying twin grandchildren become an eroticized incestuous *shotakon* couple where one boy teases and dominates the other; and finally, even the hot and cold water dispensed from the vending machine become argumentative potential lovers with the cold taunting the other to "heat me up with your passion" (Anime Bancho). Chiwa ends up shirking her work duties in favor of frantically scripting a hot water/cold water *dōjinshi* for the upcoming event. Here, the "otome filter" is represented visually both by a shift in art style (at least when representing humans) to an exaggerated parody of flowery shōjo styles, as well as an ornate flower-and-filigree border.

Though Chiwa may have problems with impulse control and scheduling, forgetting her work tasking in favor of her hobby, it is clear that a distinction remains between the real

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[31]This may be a vital component in, or at least connected to, practices related to fanfiction and dojinshi production about real individuals such as band members or actors (classified as Real Person Fic or RPF in English-speaking fandom).

individuals in question and their translation into appropriate tropes and frameworks for BL fantasy. Certain core elements are retained, such as appearance, relationship, and context, while personalities and interactions are reframed according to established, fetishized *seme*/*uke* dynamics and romantic conflicts.

The *otome* filter appears, and plays a much more significant role, in both the first and second series of *Genshiken*. Ogiue walks into the club room one day to find Sasahara and Madarame joking around, with Sasahara grabbing a hold of Madarame's tie. Ogiue translates her two club mates into appropriate BL/*yaoi* roles of Sasahara as the controlling, aggressive underclassman and Madarame, in her terms, "would definitely be the 'bottom'" (6: 91). In the *Genshiken* manga, as opposed to *Turning Girls*, the artist represents the changed interpretations of the characters through the *otome* filter primarily via subtle cues of facial expression and character design, as well as the BL-evocative dialog in the scenes Ogiue pictures. For example, the *seme* version of Sasahara Ogiue illustrates has a much more arrogant expression than ever seen on the real individual (see fig. 2).

Fig. 2. From L to R: The actual tie-pulling incident, Ogiue's fantasy version, and her design for *seme* Sasahara and *uke* Madarame; Shimoku Kio, *Genshiken*, Vol. 6, (New York: Del Rey), 86, 91, 103.

The coding of these designs is acknowledged in the narrative. When Saki, the non-*otaku* dating one of the club members, sees Ogiue's illustration of Sasahara she assumes it is a signal of Ogiue's romantic interest in Sasahara; Ogiue attempts to clarify by illustrating a similarly coded *uke* version of Madarame, but Saki merely interprets this as a sign that Ogiue is in love with both. When Ogiue shows the illustrations to fellow *fujoshi* Ohno, however, she instantly 'reads' the correct interpretation of "Sasahara-san as an aggressive 'top' character" but offers that she would "rather see Madarame-san as a cowardly 'top'" (6: 104). When this fantasy scene was translated into the animated adaptation, however, in addition to being expanded it also used more overt visual language like *Turning Girls* would later implement: overlaying common feminine and *shōjo* manga techniques such as flowers, bubbles, as well as differences in the voice actors' delivery and the character designs.

This conjunction between the *otome* filter and Ogiue's "real life" interests is not isolated. The manga later reveals that Ogiue created similar work about classmates during middle school, including a boy she liked, resulting in disciplinary action from the school as well as humiliating rumors and resentment from her classmates, which led her to deny and hide her *otaku* and *fujoshi* tastes. The reoccurring nature of this type of fantasy, combined with the way Ohno and, later, the new *fujoshi* members of the club who join during the second series share the reading of individuals they know in real life suggests that it is not a particularly strange occurrence. Indeed, though male *otaku* are not shown to participate in this sort of practice, Ogiue ultimately attempts to come to terms with herself and determines whether a relationship with Sasahara is possible by showing Sasahara her works about him. He notes that, despite not being attracted to men, he is physically affected by the passion and rawness of her work "even though I served as the model I see the character as a totally autonomous individual" (8: 103). The media literacy skills and ability to negotiate real and fictionalized desires allows Sasahara as an *otaku* to comprehend Ogiue's reading and creation, and to be affected by it despite his own tastes.

Though Ogiue's fictionalized versions of her club-mates are distinct, and based on translating reality into appropriate tropes, they are both connected with and separate from her real desires. Ogiue is not interested in Madarame romantically or sexually; she does have a real interest in Sasahara, however. When Sasahara states his perception that Ogiue "put a lot more love into Madarame-san's character" she clarifies that it's "purely the character…that doesn't reflect my actual feelings for the real Madarame-san in any way whatsoever" (8: 105). Her feelings for Sasahara are present, though, and do find their way into her fictionalized version of him; she explains that if he "were just a little more aggressive we could've gotten past this [the

stasis in their relationship] a long time ago" (8: 112). In the case of the fictionalized Sasahara,

then, his characterization is an amalgamation of BL tropes alongside characteristics that would

be desirable, or at least convenient, in her gaining a real relationship with him. He is still a

construct separate from the real individual, but informed by real feelings and desires. Ogiue's

presentation of her fictional materials to Sasahara also to some extent opens up an active dialog

between the fictionalized and real sides of her desires. The complicated interplay of real desire

with fictionalization through the *otome* filter, as well as the way *otaku* and *fujoshi* oriented media

allow the negotiation of identity and desire, feature even more heavily in the second series of

*Genshiken* through the character of Hato, to whom I will return later in the chapter. The

depictions we see in *Genshiken* suggest that *fujoshi* simultaneously connect *and* make

distinctions between their lived sexuality and the tropes and patterns of their fictionalized desires.

<u>Reconsidering *Otaku* and *Fujoshi* Sexuality</u>

Of course, the general heteronormativity of both the academic discourses and the pop

culture representations may simply be a reflection of fans' lived experiences. However, it is vital

to continue to re-examine assumptions and previously established patterns, especially where

those assumptions may be particularly subject to bias or the result of an attempt to produce a

politically or socially useful narrative. The fundamental heterosexuality and normative gender

identities of *otaku* and *fujoshi* have often been taken for granted, but some direct fan commentary,

recent academic works, and media depictions of *fujoshi* suggest this understanding may be

flawed.[32] Though the objects of BL and *yaoi* works are men, this does not necessarily indicate

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[32]This assumption is seen in academic discourses on Western fandom as well, with the conventional wisdom stating that slash fans are primarily heterosexual women. Recent demographic statistics compiled by one of the largest fanfiction websites, Archive of Our Own (AO3), however, reflect a rather larger proportion of queer and trans* or

that *fujoshi* are primarily or only heterosexual; indeed, if *otaku* and *fujoshi* are capable of separating fantasy and enacted sexuality, then assuming that *fujoshi* are primarily heterosexual simply because the media they consume and produce involves men may be as naïve as to assume that an *otaku* consuming *lolicon* works is an actual pedophile and a danger to children.

Overtly lesbian *fujoshi* characters are very few and far between. I have located only two in my survey of manga and anime, both of which appear not in narratives primarily about *otaku* but as side characters in other stories. In *Bakemonogatari*, the character Kanbaru Suruga, a *fujoshi*, reveals she is a lesbian. When she offers herself to her male classmate Araragi in order to keep him away from the girl she loves, she phrases it with specifically BL language, declaring "I'm prepared to receive (uke) your attack (seme) any time, anywhere;" when Araragi appears confused, she attempts to explain about BL and, when he makes it clear he understands that, she wonders "could it be that you're an 'uke'" ("Suruga Monkey, Part 2"). Sex and desire involving men, for her, are fictionalized through the context of BL as opposed to her regular desires and when placed in a position to perform heterosexuality she places herself within a BL context (making her advances on him interestingly both heteronormative and yet queer in terms of her identification and conceptualization). The *yuri* manga *Hanjuku Joshi* features two *fujoshi* characters, Chie and Yuria, and the two also star in a one-shot spinoff titled *Hanjuku "fu"joshi*. Their interest in BL is contrasted with their real-life preferences for other women, but both of them also display an interest in *yuri*. Here, we see that their fictionalized desires and media consumption can be both distinct from, and representative of, their actual sexual orientation.

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genderqueer fans than commonly indicated in the discourse (see Lulu, "AO3 Census: About You"). While AO3 does boast a global user base, with fics available in many languages other than English, its statistics cannot be taken as a direct illustration of identities within the *fujoshi* community; when considered in conjunction with some of the less heteronormative scholarship and pop culture examples herein, however, it suggests that it may be necessary to reconsider our assumptions about fans and continue to gather updated demographics.

Self-reports from Japanese *fujoshi* commentators and critics who are lesbians or transgender indicate that not only can queer women find enjoyment in BL manga, but early male/male manga narratives may in fact have allowed these women to explore and negotiate their own desires. The lesbian activist Ôe Chizuka has stated that *shōnen ai* manga helped to fill a void of directly represented lesbian desire, and that she identified with early male/male manga by Showa 24 group artists like Takemiya Keiko and Hagio Moto (39). Manga fan and scholar Mizoguchi Akiko actually acknowledges the same early *shōnen ai* works as directly formative of her sexuality, that through reading them she "'became' a lesbian" (49). Additionally, some BL manga authors themselves identify as lesbian, and/or create both BL and yuri manga. Wim Lunsing states that Hirosegawa Susumu, a gay manga author, claimed many BL manga authors are lesbians, though Lunsing himself believes that only applies to a minority ("*Yaoi* Ronsō"). Though it can be difficult to find concrete information about the sexuality of many manga authors, the number of female BL mangaka who also create yuri manga or *dōjinshi*—including Chi-Ran, the partnership of Zaou Taishi and Eiki Eiki, Minami Haruka, Morinaga Milk, Nangoku Banana and more—suggests the presence of queer *fujoshi* and the flexibility of real and fictionalized desires.

Within English-language scholarship on *fujoshi*, James Welker has been the primary voice exploring the way early *shōnen ai* manga in the 1970s led women to explore the publications and lives of real queer men more than previously thought, and may have offered lesbians a space to negotiate their own desires and identities. Welker surveys letters submitted by *shōnen ai* fans to gay men's magazines like the seminal *Barazoku* that express kinship, curiosity, and longing about gay men and lifestyles. As lesbianism was—and frequently still is—far less

visible and established as a subculture in Japan than male homosexuality, manga about beautiful boys in love and magazines about gay men may have been a convenient outlet. Perhaps more importantly, for women struggling with their sexuality and concerned about family and public judgment or punishment, "it was probably easier for women to buy, borrow from friends, or stand in a shop and read *Allan* or even *Barazoku* than to subscribe to a lesbian newsletter that might be intercepted by family members. Indeed, the veneer of an interest in *shōnen'ai* or even *homo* men may have made an otherwise unacceptable desire easy to dismiss as insignificant" (Welker, "Flower Tribes and Female Desire" 222). Welker notes that, rather than simply fantasizing through reading these gay magazines, at least one letter suggests that "some women were using the imagery of *homo* men not as a model by which to understand their homosexual desire but as the very means to act on it via the performance of fandom and/or consumption of texts about male homosexuality" ("Flower Tribes and Female Desire" 222). Thus, female fandom in its early days displays this complex, simultaneous separation and connection between real and fictionalized desires, just as fannish practices of consumption and production function both as entertainment/fantasy and as action.

Unfortunately, most of this commentary focuses on works from the 1970s which, while sharing roots in the visual and narrative conventions of shōjo manga, are not precisely equivalent to the style and content of contemporary BL manga and *yaoi dōjinshi*. Representations of lesbian *fujoshi* beginning to surface within anime and manga—or at least acknowledgement of the potentiality of female/female intimacy and desire within female fandom—as well as overlap among authors and readers of BL and *yuri* suggest that lesbian desire may still be a factor for contemporary *fujoshi*. The precise nature of identification or fantasy play in modern BL and *yaoi*

works might not be exactly the same as that surrounding classic *shōnen ai* works, however, inviting further research and consideration of the conjunction between fictionalized gay erotics and lived lesbian identities.

Apart from lesbian identification and direct same-sex relationships, the affective community between *fujoshi* and their sharing of highly personal, if fictionalized and regulated (via standardized tropes and genre conventions), sexual and romantic fantasies create an intimate community between women that prioritizes female desire and communication. In some cases, then, socializing and sharing with other *fujoshi* becomes a space of potentially homoerotic tension between women. This appears sometimes in interactions between *fujoshi* characters that are either explicitly portrayed as flirtatious without consummation, or in which the atmosphere and visual language can be interpreted as sexually charged due to the emotional and sometimes physical intimacy of the characters.

*Fujoshi Rumi* displays this potential erotic tension most overtly in the relationship between Rumi and her rival turned friend Matsui. Rumi frequently thinks about or remarks on how beautiful Matsui is. Furthermore, from the point when Matsui and Rumi accept one another as fellow *fujoshi* several of their interactions are, jokingly or not, coded with visual language used in *shôjo* romance. After Matsui first reveals herself as an *otaku*, Rumi asks her about her feelings on her own current favorite series, Full Metal Prince and the two bond over their *moe* feelings for "the rascal type with cat ears and shorts," flinging themselves into one another's arms (1: 95–96). Immediately afterward they quote a romantic interaction from *Gundam*. The visual language throughout is coded as romantic through their tearful gazes with close-up framing of their eyes, the use of sparkles and flowers in the backgrounds, and their clasped hands

during the *Gundam* quotation. The two frequently engage in physical affection as well, with Matsui giving Rumi her first kiss; when she apologizes for taking it, Rumi replies "It's okay if it's you! I'm actually honored" (1: 100). They also express jealousy regarding one another's relationships with men, though it is obviously exaggerated. Matsui specifically references yuri and *shōjo* popular with yuri fans (such as *Maria-sama ga miteru*), remarking that if she is going to lose Rumi to a boy she would "rather change the theme to 'the secret flower garden of maidens!'" (1: 126). Later, when Matsui is having a potentially romantic moment with one of the boys, Rumi flings herself at Matsui, declaring that "I don't want a guy to take you away! Your soft breasts and small waist are mine" (2: 197). Emotional intimacy, physical closeness, and touching are common in their interactions and the characters themselves, as well as artist's use of visual language, reference the possibility of reading their relationship as romantic and/or sexual. At the same time, however, the shocked and dismayed reactions of the boys witnessing these interactions reinforce these interactions as non-normative and indicate that on some level they are not taken seriously.

*Genshiken* trades less heavily on this sort of ambiguous intimacy, but there are instances in which the emotional and mental intimacy enabled by women's fandom are shown alongside physical intimacy that can be read as potentially sexually charged or that is playfully intimate. When Saki discovers Ohno's unorthodox taste in men—namely, bald middle-aged characters— Ohno panics because she's been ridiculed for her taste before. As Saki attempts to call the other (male) members of the club in, Ohno wrestles her down and the two make their first open and intimate connection. Though the context is not explicitly sexual, as Ohno was merely trying to distract Saki and stop her from calling the others, the visual framing of the scene, using close-ups

of flushed faces, loose and wild hair, and Ohno crouched over Saki, can easily be read as sexually charged (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Saki and Ohno discuss unorthodox desires and shame; Shimoku Kio, *Genshiken*, Vol. 1 (New York: Del Rey), 162–63.

A later volume extra contains a much more typical scene eliding physical intimacy with close female friendship, as the women attend a hot spring, while also joking on both a direct textual and meta-textual level about the way women frequently interact in manga and anime. Ohno asks if Saki wants to touch her breasts, or if she can touch Saki's, noting that "girl characters always say that every time there's a hot springs scene in a manga or anime" (7: 187). Though the scene is, on the one hand, mocking the sexualization of female intimacy in media

aimed at men, the manga reminds the reader that such physical contact, even in the context of a joke, depends on a real intimacy; when Sasahara's younger sister wants to touch Ohno, she is obviously uncomfortable, first refusing and then asking her to stop when she continues.

Some depictions of physical intimacy between women occur as fanservice for the purpose of titillating male viewers, and this may well be at work in *Fujoshi Rumi* and *Genshiken*. Both manga run in *seinen* magazines with a primary readership of young adult males; *Fujoshi Rumi* in Futabasha's *Comic High* and *Genshiken* in Kodansha's *Afternoon*. However, *seinen* magazines are read by female readers as well; in fact, *Comic High*'s tagline is "Girlish comics for boys and girls." Furthermore, a large amount of the readership of *yuri* manga and *dōjinshi* are women. *Yuri* manga stems from a literary tradition within girls' magazines, many *yuri* manga (including the earliest) were published in *shōjo* magazines, and the demographic data from Ichijinsha's *Comic Yurihime* magazine shows the readership at 70% female ("*Jōsei dōshi no LOVE wo kaita, danshi kinsei no 'yuri būmu' ga yattekuru!?*"; see also Shamoon and Bando). It is possible, then, that this teasing ambiguity is intended to resonate with female readers as well as male.

Ultimately these women are placed back into the context of heterosexual relationships. Despite the lack of direct sexual involvement, however, these bonds between women are still relevant to discussions of identification and desire, due to their importance and the ways in which ideas about lesbian identity and the relationship of real and fictionalized desires to identity are constructed among Japanese women and among *fujoshi*.

Though Patrick Galbraith reaffirms the common perception that *fujoshi* are primarily heteronormative, he notes that within his ethnographic research that some *fujoshi* involved in

heterosexual relationships "described themselves as lesbians" but often seemed to elide same-sex desire and physical intimacy with being "deeply intimate with members of the same sex" ("*Fujoshi*" 214). This seems to accord with Adrienne Rich's theorization of female/female erotic experience as merely one component of the "forms of primary intensity between and among women" (648). Wim Lunsing reports this sort of identification in his ethnographic work on sexuality in modern Japan, describing the difficulty of classifying informants because

> there are those who regard homosexuality as an emotional attraction which does not necessarily need to be consumed sexually …. there is an even greater ambivalence about what 'lesbian means.' The word *sōsharu rezubian* (social lesbian), mostly used in feminist circles who follow in the steps of Adrienne Rich … helped to explain part of the problem. The word 'lesbian' may be used to refer to an intimate relationship with a female friend. Pop media are somewhat clearer with their *chotto rezu* (a little bit lesbian), which is used to indicate women who are heterosexual but prefer not to become involved with a man because they find them uninteresting and may ultimately become involved in homosexual activities (*Beyond Common Sense* 49–50)

The lines between homosociality or "platonic" female relationships, and homoerotic or "lesbian" relationships may not be quite so clearly or easily drawn.

While many *fujoshi* may not necessarily identify as lesbian or engage in sexual relationships with other women, fandom represents a space in which women discuss and jointly satisfy both romantic and sexual desires and fantasies through the exchange of emotionally and erotically charged materials. This intimacy in some ways supersedes other ties generally thought to be more primary than friendship, as many *fujoshi* do not feel they can share their interests with boyfriends/husbands or family members. Okabe and Ishida's *fujoshi* informants discuss ways that they conceal their fandom from others, lying to boyfriends about their knowledge of *shōnen* manga or even hiding their *dōjinshi* in a box ready to ship to fellow *fujoshi* in the event of their death so their "parents won't have to cry when they go through my things" (219). In what ways

does this type of community, this sharing and exploration of female desire between women in a sometimes highly intimate manner, relate to and impact real and fictionalized desires? If nothing else, *fujoshi* fandom can be positioned within the lesbian continuum, and is therefore relevant to conceptions of queer identification and the continual creation and re-creation of identity through consumption and fictionalized desires.

## Negotiating Identity through Anime and Manga

Simply classifying *otaku* and *fujoshi* as heteronormative and attempting to completely isolate their fictionalized fantasies from their lived identities and desires also ignores the ways in which identity and sexuality are flexible and continually negotiated. Fiction, then, becomes a viable avenue through which changing conceptions of self and evolving desires are explored, worked through, and sometimes then integrated within identity. The character of Hato, in *Genshiken Second Season*, is the most complex and nuanced depiction of how fantasy and media consumption serve both as a detached escape but also a stage on which to negotiate and come to terms with one's own evolving self. Hato uses *fudanshi/fujoshi* practice and community itself as a role through which he can construct and try on an idealized concept of self, and though he initially treats his fictionalized fantasies as completely separate from his real life and identity, in the end it becomes clear that they are also a way for Hato to compartmentalize, face, and finally accept elements of his own gender and sexual identity. Hato's experiences reinforce that, while fictionalized desires and patterns of consumption do not necessarily equate to identity, it is too simplistic to state that a wall exists between the two; our emotional and erotic interests in fiction relate strongly to our lived experiences and desires, and identity (including sexuality) is fluid and evolving.

Hato is a *fudanshi*, but when he initially joins the Genshiken he presents himself as a woman and a *fujoshi*; shortly afterward, the other characters discover that he is male. At first, Hato identifies as cisgender and heterosexual. When former member Madarame asks whether Hato is sure he's not gay, Hato replies "I'm not … I've only ever fallen in love with women in real life" (2: 117–18). His cross-dressing is confined to his participation as a *fujoshi*; he does not attend school during the day as a girl, only stopping to change before club meetings or fan events. The behavior is framed as a practical measure employed following a traumatic experience in high school. In a parallel to Ogiue's subplot from the first series, Hato was also bullied after his interest in BL and *yaoi* was discovered, though due to Hato being male it had the additional component of homophobia. Hato's female dress and makeup, then, are a disguise that functions to allow him to engage in his hobby without standing out and potentially attracting harassment.

Though Hato's gender presentation is initially framed as purely practical, analogous to other instances of situational cross-dressing, it is eventually linked to Hato's personal identity. After his gender is discovered, Hato continues to cross-dress during club activities or *dōjin* events. When he is confronted about why he does not present openly as male despite everyone's awareness of his gender, fellow *fujoshi* Yoshitake asserts that obviously Hato is "starting to enjoy it," an assessment Hato does not refute (1: 45). Hato's presentation is frequently linked to identity or inner nature rather than simple practicality. Ohno muses that "It's almost like he puts himself under hypnosis, his 'womanness' is so absolute. The clothes and voice are nothing more than a matter of technique. What makes Hato-kun truly special is more internal. It's the way that he is able to self-actualize his ideal *fujoshi* image to such a high degree" (3: 97). The connection between Hato's feminine persona and his identity is further reinforced by the way the manga

visualizes Hato's *fudanshi*/*fujoshi* fantasies and his inner monologues about BL. Hato's inner *fujoshi*, the voice of his own otome filter, is portrayed as a nude rendition of his female self who floats nearby and remarks about the erotic potential of individuals and situations (see fig. 4). Later, when the manga reveals that Hato's *fujoshi* persona is based off Kaminaga, a girl in high school on whom he apparently had a crush, the manga simultaneously displays both a female Hato and Kaminaga together (see fig. 5), indicating that on some level Hato's *fujoshi* self is indeed a part of his identity and self-conception rather than simply a copy or mental image of Kaminaga, and causing Hato himself to question his gender identity.

Fig. 4. Hato relaxes in Madarame's apartment, as his inner *fujoshi* gets excited; Shimoku Kio,

*Genshiken: Second Season*, Vol. 1 (New York: Kodansha USA), 167.

Fig. 5. As Hato thinks about his cross-dressing and his sexuality, an imagined Kaminaga speaks to him. Her face and breast size are visibly different compared to Hato's normal inner *fujoshi*; Shimoku Kio, *Genshiken Nidaime*, Vol. 14 (Japan: Kodansha), 136.

Hato also goes the furthest toward blurring the division between fictionalized desire and reality in the way his conflicting *fujoshi* and presumably heterosexual male selves deal with processing real people and events through the *otome* filter. In a continuation of Ogiue and Ohno's fantasies about Madarame and Sasahara from the first *Genshiken* manga, Hato also

indulges in *yaoi* fantasies about Madarame. When Hato uses Madarame's apartment near campus to change between male and female clothes, his internal *fujoshi* fantasizes about the two of them, placing Madarame and Hato into established tropes. In one example, while Hato is straightening up the apartment, *fujoshi* Hato says "You know what to do! 'I haven't seen senpai in ages but I always clean up when I'm here.' It's time for the usual 'lovable underclassman' act!" (3: 107). As Hato and Madarame spend time together the lines between this semi-fictionalized fantasy and real sexuality become blurred through Hato's fantasizing.

After discovering that Ogiue and the other members of Genshiken also applied the otome filter to Madarame and even created drawings, Hato eventually draws his own *yaoi* featuring himself with Madarame. Interestingly, the precise configuration of the pairing in terms of *seme* and *uke* dynamics as well as the version of Hato involved change and Hato's own view of them and willingness to share demonstrate the ways that they involve his own negotiated and changing desires. *Fujoshi*-Hato begins with processing the pairing in terms of Hato x Mada, echoing the others' assessment of Madarame as *uke* and portraying Hato as male (and therefore separate from Hato's inner *fujoshi*, who is represented as a woman). While it might seem somewhat strange that the use of Hato's daily masculine identity would remain more separate from self-identification, it still maintains a barrier between his consumption of BL and his real life desires; he describes the drawings as "the result of using cross-dressing to distance myself from reality, objectively putting myself and Madarame into the role of characters...but from a third party

perspective I'd just seem gay [ellipsis in original]" (14: 128). [33] Perhaps this configuration also

allows Hato to question his sexuality less as the prospective dominant partner.

Later, however, Hato also begins producing Mada x Hato works which exclusively

involve Hato's feminine presentation. His fictionalized interests and purportedly practically

motivated cross-dressing now begin to cross over more intensely with his desires. When

considering this, Hato reminds himself that "fantasy and reality are completely separate" but his

inner *fujoshi* teases him, asking "isn't this [cross-dressing] a manifestation of fantasy? Doesn't

that put you that much closer to getting it?" (14: 133–35). [34] Later, Hato thinks "That's what I

was trying not to think about…no, I won't be tempted! I won't lose sight of reality!"[35] (14: 137).

Tellingly, Hato hides and becomes more anxious about these works than his earlier Hato x Mada

fantasies. At one point, at least partially prompted by the discovery of his Mada x Hato works,

Hato decides to quit cross-dressing and BL, but ultimately is not happy without them.

When Hato reunites with Kaminaga, the template for Hato's *fujoshi* identity, she raises

the possibility that Hato might be bisexual or gay yet in denial. While at first Hato denies this, he

increasingly questions his own desires and feelings for Madarame, and finally admits to them

even though it is unlikely that they will be requited. The series remains ambiguous whether

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[33] *Boku jishin ga jousou ni yotte genjitsu kara kairishi akumade jibun ya senpai wo kyara toshite kyakukanshi shita kekka no sanbutsu dakedo…..sobakara mitara bokumo tada no homo dayona…*; The original Japanese release of *Genshiken Nidaime* numbers volumes continuously with the original series, starting at 10; the American release, on the other hand, begins numbering at 1. Volume 14 here refers to the original Japanese edition (since it was unpublished in America at the time of writing); the corresponding part of the story will be numbered as Volume 5 in the American release.

[34] *Mōsō to genjitsu wa mattaku no betsu*- the term "*mōsō*" here literally means 'delusion' but has been used in other media (see, for instance, the otaku-themed *sentai* series *Akibaranger*) to refer to otaku fantasies or daydreams, hence my use of that word in the translation. *Kore wa mōsō no gugenka daro? Mushiro kocchi no hou ga ari urunjyane?* While *kore* (this) is the reading denoted in the furigana, it is applied to the kanji for cross-dressing; I have used both in the translation above.

[35] *Sore wa kangaenaiyounishiteta koto…iya madowasarenaizo! Genjitsu wa miushiwanai!* – The verb *madowasu* here can mean to mislead/delude/deceive or to seduce/tempt

Hato's earlier infatuations with women were honest (indicating bisexuality) or a product of denial (indicating either his homosexuality or his heterosexuality as a trans* woman), as well as whether his desires for men extend past Madarame or predate his interest in BL. *Genshiken Second Season* does not seem to suggest that consumption of BL "caused" Hato to develop homoerotic desires, thus still rejecting some of the more anxious discourses about harmful media, but nonetheless his consumption and his participation as a *fujoshi* serve as a way for him to negotiate both fictionalized and real desires.

*Genshiken Second Season* also returns to complicate questions of desire and consumption, and the line between fictionalized desire and reality, through Madarame as well. Kousaka is once again conscripted for situational cross-dressing for the purpose of selling merchandise, this time for the erotic game development company at which he works. In this case, however, the game is itself about cross-dressing boys but marketed toward male *otaku*. Furthermore, the character Kousaka cosplays is a character modeled after himself, who also bears his name. At one point, Hato finds the game in Madarame's apartment and wonders if he played the game, and whether or not he cleared the route with the Kousaka character; Madarame confirms that he has, which naturally sends Hato into a spiral of BL thoughts. Madarame seems to relate to the game entirely within a fictional context, stating that it's "all fantasy, of course," an assessment that is certainly emphasized by the fact that the characters as declared cross-dressing males but "look entirely like girls" and all the characters' story endings involve the avowed biologically male characters being pregnant (3: 125). At the same time, Madarame does not seem entirely unaffected by Hato. He often blushes around Hato and, though they are rather comfortable and become friendly, Madarame does sometimes waver between interacting with male-Hato and female-Hato. After

Hato finds the cross-dressing boy game, while talking to Madarame outside his apartment, Madarame is visibly flushed while the SFX emphasize his heartbeat, and he firmly reminds himself that "He's a man. A man!" (3: 116). Whether this is intended as a setup for an eventual consummation of a relationship with Hato is unclear at this point in the manga's development.

Genshiken Second Season is still ongoing, and Hato's subplot has not yet come to a full conclusion, but arguably the act of negotiation itself and the role his fictionalized desires and fujoshi practices play in the process are more important than a final declaration of identity. Even beyond Hato himself, the series seems even further committed than the first, or than any other work about otaku and fujoshi, to portraying and exploring the complex and shifting significance of consumption to identity, and the relationship between fictionalized and lived desires.

Though the urge to use both fictional depictions of otaku and fujoshi, as well as academic and cultural commentary platforms, to push back against dehumanizing or fear-mongering discourses about fans, these attempts to reposition fans' desires and practices back within normative frameworks may not accurately give voice and image to fans' lived experiences. Defensive discourses about otaku and fujoshi heteronormativity are also enormously problematic if they explicitly or implicitly equate queer sexualities and gender identities with fetishes. Even more troubling, is the way that these "normalizing" discourses obliquely connect queerness or consensual fetish practices with crimes such as pedophilia and rape. The simplistic effort to simply divide otaku and fujoshi's fictionalized sexual contexts, lumped together under rubrics of deviance or unhealthiness, from a lived reality that emphasizes their heterosexuality as a sign that they are "normal" risks further Othering and medicalizing queerness or trans* identities. If explorations of sexuality, desire, and fantasy within otaku and fujoshi spaces and lives are to

move beyond the merely reactive stage of defending fans from anxious discourses and rendering them "safe," then the scholarly discourse in particular must continually re-examine itself and its subjects and question whether or not it uncritically reinforces restrictive, constructed ideas of "natural" and "normative" gender identities, sexualities, and desires.

If indeed our understanding of fan demographics is incomplete, I suspect that reasons include a combination of external pressures and biases pushing for a normalizing discourse about *otaku* and *fujoshi*; selection issues in ethnographic research and dissemination patterns of surveys; reticence on the part of minority fans to out themselves; greater flexibility in identity categories presented within recent surveys and interviews; and changing demographics as online participation in fandom allows a wider range of individuals to enter, participate, and create peer sub-groups within larger fandoms.

Even in the event that a statistical majority of fans are cisgender and heterosexual, fan researchers and commentators must take care to avoid erasure of fans who do not fit this mold, and explore the ways that these fans' gender identities and sexualities intersect with, and impact, their experience as *otaku* and/or *fujoshi*. In the case of lesbian *fujoshi* who consume romantic and/or erotic works featuring only men, as well as the case of *fudanshi*—"rotten boys," or male fans of BL and *yaoi*, some of whom identify as heterosexual yet consume homoerotic narratives created by and for women—this adds yet another layer of complexity onto the separation between lived and fictionalized desires, and raises a number of valuable questions (many of which I cannot fully address here) regarding the intersection and interaction of personal identity/experience, market pressures, cultural norms, identification, and fantasy. I agree that fictionalized and real desires frequently operate separately and even sometimes oppositionally,

but the real interplay between the two (indeed, the overall relationship between personal identity, social interaction, and consumption) is far more nuanced and fascinating than a simple normalizing or protective discourse can convey. Some acknowledgement of this complexity is beginning to surface in academic and general conversations, but works like *Genshiken Second Season* reflect this on a personal level. Past the arguments of researchers, these depictions reaffirm and make even more visible the experiences of fans, and the ways that *otaku* and *fujoshi* practices of consumption and production facilitate both escape but also the expression and negotiation of identity and desire.

# CONCLUSION

Depictions of *otaku* and *fujoshi* in anime and manga, whether created by fans or by outsiders, participate in an ongoing discourse about changing patterns of consumerism, social roles and expectations, and sexuality. These fictional depictions of *otaku* and *fujoshi* who are themselves defined by a rich engagement with fictionalized contexts have thus far been a neglected portion of the discourse, but this thesis has attempted to contribute to filling that gap. Ultimately, the development of *otaku* and *fujoshi* identities remains bounded within or defined by pre-existing norms and discourses. Fictional depictions of *otaku* and *fujoshi,* despite the economic significance of fans to supporting these media and the involvement of fans within the industry (either through their entry into the profession or exerting economic and vocal pressures) display these same restrictions, reinforcing these discourses if only in the attempt to oppose them.

*Otaku* identity formation and representation show the struggles of individuals who on the one hand belong to majority and privileged social groups yet are still pushed towards the borders of that demographic and may feel a sense of alienation from their peers. The image of *otaku* has become more positive, but these works still primarily function to reintegrate fans within established normative standards of gender performance and economic success. We clearly see the ways in which social and economic disenfranchisement erode these boundaries, however. Changing conceptions of Japanese masculinity and a sense of economic and political malaise in the lingering aftermath of the economic bubble bursting manifest in the rise of a feminine-inflected affective consumption of *moe*, in disavowal of the pursuit of relationships and marriage in favor of the "2-D complex," and in the interweaving of *otaku* with the growing class of young men who are "checking out" as *hikikomori* or NEET.

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*Fujoshi*, perhaps because their fictionalized engagements can be read as more fundamentally queer or challenging to established ideas about female desire and gender roles, present a bit more flexibility in the realm of these fictional depictions. In particular, the depictions of the *fujoshi* "*otome* filter" are the most profound illustration of the complexity of fans' engagement with, and negotiation of, varying levels of reality and fiction, as well as the ways that media consumption dovetail with lived experience. Furthermore, the emerging idea of *fudanshi*, or men who are becoming part of the *fujoshi* community, and the potentially erotic tension operating under the surface of many depictions of *fujoshi*, push at the boundaries of the common mainstream and academic notions of fan gender identities and sexualities. *Genshiken*'s Hato's negotiation of real and fictionalized desires, cross-dressing, identification as *fujoshi* versus *fundanshi*, and the conjunction between his presentational identity and his creative output in particular urges us to reconsider the way we discuss fans, consumption, creativity, and identity. However, the pervasive disenfranchisement of women within the Japanese workforce hobbles the degree of self-representation available within these fictional works; to some degree this pop culture view of *fujoshi* always occurs at a remove, through the eyes of men.

Ultimately, these fictional representations of *otaku* and *fujoshi* not only help to broaden our understanding of fan consumption and experience, but to redirect our attention to the ways that existing discourses and norms shape and constrain the entire field, including the academic literature. They also raise questions about consumption and its relation to identity that are not easily answered.

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