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# Boys' Love and Female Friendships: The Subculture of Yaoi as a Social Bond between Women

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BOYS' LOVE AND FEMALE FRIENDSHIPS:  
THE SUBCULTURE OF YAOI AS A SOCIAL BOND BETWEEN WOMEN

by

AMY ANN O'BRIEN

Under the Direction of Jennifer Patino

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I argue that the yaoi community addresses a gap in subculture studies through the ways in which women use the genre to socialize. Yaoi is a genre of Japanese animation and comics which focuses on romantic relationships between two men and is directly geared towards women. Through ethnographic research in the United States, I look at how the women I interviewed conceptualize their participation within the community and what yaoi means to them. The women within the yaoi community are not rebelliously opposing the mainstream as many subcultural theories suggest, but are instead carving out a social space for themselves and others who have a distinct taste for the yaoi genre.

INDEX WORDS: Thesis, Subculture, Youth Culture, Yaoi, Women, Gender, Identity, Sociality, Consumption, Cultural Anthropology

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AMY ANN O'BRIEN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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2008

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Michael and Carol O'Brien, who continually supported me in all my academic endeavors regardless of how "offbeat" they were. I dedicate this to them for all the advice, love, and motivating pep talks they provided which made this project possible and for the examples of hard work and perseverance they both exemplified throughout my childhood and on into adulthood.

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## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Sitting at the tables outside Smoothie King on a Saturday afternoon, Cameron, Sarah, and I discuss yaoi as we sip our smoothies. Yaoi is a genre of Japanese animation (anime) and comics (manga) which focuses on romantic relationships between two men and may include sexually explicit content. Although I have only met Cameron once prior to this afternoon and I just met Sarah today, both women are friendly and engaging. In fact, despite the occasional question or topic that I bring up, the “interview” feels less like a structured event and more of a conversation between friends. I am continually surprised and touched at how willing yaoi fans are to talk with me about their experiences with yaoi. I found easy friendship and a welcoming camaraderie a common theme throughout my fieldwork in the yaoi community.

During our conversation, Sarah jokingly comments, as some people sit down a few tables away, that we will most likely frighten them off. The comment is made laughingly as it is not our intention to frighten anyone away, but upon hearing our unusual conversation it is understandable why some people may be inclined to leave. As I began to delve into the reasons why women participate in the yaoi community, I was continually struck by the sociality involved be it through anime conventions, the internet, or spending an afternoon talking about yaoi with a few other people. How do the women involved describe their experiences as a member of the yaoi community? What motivations are cited for their continued membership? How do yaoi fans situate themselves in regards to the mainstream culture? How is the consumption and appropriation of yaoi used by fans? Lastly, in what ways do women use the yaoi genre as a way to forge and maintain social bonds?

With the growing influence of Japan's cultural capital on the global stage, American youth are increasingly drawn to Japanese products (Allison 2006). The study of yaoi provides an

interesting intersection of contemporary youth culture. While the internet and online communities are increasingly visible, such as MySpace.com, the yaoi community exists both online through message boards and discussion groups and offline through conventions devoted to Japanese animation. These conventions act as a site of community building and material consumption. Online communities link the geographically dispersed yaoi fans and the conventions are then able to provide a tangible community.

Additionally, yaoi is predominantly a woman's genre, which adds another layer of paradoxical behavior to the equation. The yaoi genre involves the blurring of gender lines since the men in yaoi titles are often visually sexually ambiguous and, in personality, the traditional gender roles of male and female are often transposed onto the two male characters. Beyond official yaoi titles, many fans will also read into the "subtext" of popular anime or manga titles and see yaoi pairings. From this subtextual reading, fans will then engage in "textual poaching" (Jenkins 1992) by appropriating the characters through fan writings and drawings. Often viewed by outsiders as male homosexual pornography for women, this ethnocentric view is rejected by yaoi fans who place an emphasis on the authenticity of the characters' relationships. How do the women involved view the inclusion of sexually explicit content within yaoi titles? While this may be deemed racy or deviant by outsiders, how do members of the community view the content? Are yaoi fans making a political and social statement by participating in this unorthodox community or is their participation solely dependent upon the personal pleasure derived from the genre?

The study of yaoi with a focus on subcultural youth experience is an opportunity to delve into a contemporary youth culture with a chance to explore the relationship between the appropriation of mass cultural material and fantasy commodities for subcultural purposes and the

formation of social groups centered around distinctive tastes. The yaoi community is an interesting subculture as it not only highlights the increasing prevalence of foreign items in American popular culture, but also represents an example of a subcultural group which has not received much attention within subculture studies. Through the use of ethnographic methods, I focus on the personal and daily experiences of American yaoi fans as a method for exploring the experience of contemporary youth in a postmodern world that is increasingly technologically linked to other cultures.

### **Background**

Research regarding science fiction titles, such as *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who*, and fan conventions began in the 1970s (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). Tulloch and Jenkins situate fan conventions as a forum for elite fans with extensive knowledge of the title to discuss their readings of the show since they are, in reality, a powerless elite who are dependent upon networks and ratings. The fan conventions then serve as a situation that allows the elites to gather and discuss the show in depth. However, science fiction and anime conventions are also sites of identity and group formation. The first American anime convention, Yamatocon, occurred in Dallas, Texas on August 13, 1983. Estimating roughly 100 attendees, the convention featured anime screenings and a dealer's room to purchase merchandise. Yamatocon returned for a second convention in 1986 and was joined by Animagic, also held in Dallas, Texas. Twenty years later, roughly 120 conventions devoted to Japanese animation are held on an annual basis with more conventions starting up each year ([www.animecons.com](http://www.animecons.com), accessed on November 24, 2007). The social occurrence of conventions are not new, but more literature and research is needed to ascertain what these conventions mean to attendees and what they mean within a larger social and cultural context.

Previous works on Japanese influence on American popular culture focused predominantly on the material consumption aspect of Japanese products (Allison 2006) or on the camp/cute nature of characters, such as Godzilla and Hello Kitty (Tsutsui and Ito 2006). While works focus on Japanese products (Patten 2004, Schodt 1996), such as anime, as they appear within the American context, there is a lack of discussion regarding the resulting manifestation of anime conventions aside from brief mentions (Kelts 2006, Poitras 2006). Additionally, there is relatively little academic research done regarding yaoi. Mark McLelland discusses yaoi mainly from the perspective of writing against strict Australian legislation which prevents women from creating supportive online networks that challenge concepts, such as a homophobia, by classifying yaoi as a form of pedophilia (McLelland 2005). McLelland argues that studies should be conducted which are not focused on finding “difference,” but concerned with promoting an appreciation of the “diversity...of that which goes by the name of 'sameness' or 'normality'” (McLelland 2005:28).

The yaoi genre originated in Japan from the category of “ladies comics,” which were specifically targeted at adult women. Yaoi, with its homoerotic themes, are written “by women for women” (Morton 2003:246). The term yaoi is an acronym for “yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi” which translates to “no climax, no point, no meaning.” More often referred to as boys' love in Japan, the genre depicted highly romanticized relationships between men and first arose in the 1970s (McLelland 2005:10). These stories were created in reaction to unfavorable love stories between heterosexual couples which struck fans as contrived or predictable. Yaoi titles gained momentum and popularity in Japan throughout the 1970s. These titles were serialized in magazines like *June*, which was first published in 1978, and helped amateur artists to enter mainstream publishing. Many of Japan's famous female manga artists also contribute to the

genre as homosexuality is “part of the everyday landscape” of girls' comics in Japan (McLelland 2005:11). While depictions of sexually explicit content are often conceptualized as “for men” in the U.S., visual pornography is not limited to men in Japan (McLelland 2005:11). In the late 1990s, the boys' love genre in Japan was estimated to have half a million core readers. While yaoi titles are often restricted to an adult audience in the U.S., the genre is openly sold in Japan and young women and schoolgirls comprise a majority of the primary readership (McLelland 2005:13). The Japanese genre of yaoi is also popular with female readers abroad who use the internet to find online titles and also to purchase printed yaoi titles (McLelland 2005:14). Many of my informants cite discovering yaoi through the internet in the mid to late 1990s. A common theme of discovering yaoi is through watching anime shown on Cartoon Network and, while searching the internet for more information about the titles, people “find” the yaoi genre. As the availability of anime and manga in the U.S. increases, so does the prevalence of yaoi titles. In particular, yaoi titles have been increasingly available in bookstores, such as Borders, within the last few years. However, aside from brief descriptions of the genre (Morton 2003, Patten 2004, Schodt 1996) there is a lack of research regarding the yaoi genre in the U.S. and how it is embraced by the women involved.

Within fan writings the genre of “slash” appears, which features homosexual stories involving male characters. Jenkins identifies “slash” as a form of female empowerment through the appropriation of characters which are then used to explore sexual fantasies (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995:264). Furthermore, Jenkins argues that “slash depends not simply on a mapping of conventional male and female roles onto the relations between two male characters...slash explores the possibility of existing outside of those categories, of combining elements of masculinity and femininity into a satisfactorily whole yet constantly fluid identity” (Jenkins

1992:193). With this theory of why women enjoy viewing relationships between men, it is possible to argue that perhaps women are projecting the desire for less dichotomous gender roles. Judith Butler defines fantasy as moving people beyond the present and into the idea of possibility, which tests the boundaries of reality (Butler 2004). By women appropriating male bodies to fulfill their fantasies, perhaps these practices represent what Butler terms “undoing gender” as women take on new roles through not only consuming media, but becoming creators of it and mapping fluid gender roles onto male bodies. Furthermore, by taking the community out of the domestic sphere and gathering in a public space as well as rejecting socially normative behavior for viewing sexually explicit content, women are reshaping gender practices and representations among American youth.

### **Literature Review**

The study of youth and their practices has evolved over the past century. Beginning studies of youth within anthropology focused on rites of passage and adolescence, which viewed youth from the perspective of adults. This view blurred the cultural experience of youth practices and stripped them of their agentic powers. Sociologists have focused on youth studies, but with a view of their actions as social deviations or forms of resistance. However, neither approach truly encompasses the cultural experience of youth with the contributing factors of global capitalism, transnationalism, and local culture (Bucholtz 2002:525).

Theorizing youth practices through subculture, popular culture, and fan culture has evolved significantly since the 1970s. Early theories regarding subculture heavily focused on class and disregarded popular culture. Several common threads through early subculture theories can be traced, such as the concept of resistance, either through actions or consumption, and the focus of subcultural groups as a whole rather than at an individual level. More refined theories of

subculture incorporated popular culture and media with a focus on the individual and daily activities. However, these theories lacked the social aspect of subcultures and rendered subcultures indiscernible from other parts of culture. Theories were developed regarding fan cultures and deal with consumers as unorthodox users of popular culture and media. In early theories, youth practices were broken down and homogenized, keeping a distinction between subculture, popular culture, and mass media. While contemporary theories of youth culture are not perfect, they encompass a more holistic view of the youth experience, taking into account global capitalism, mundaneity, sociality, transculturalism, and individual experiences.

### *Youth and Subculture*

Youth studies within early anthropology predominantly focused on rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood. The sociology of youth has been more visible than the anthropology of youth and significantly influenced the study of youth cultures. In the early twentieth century, sociological branches of criminology and delinquency studies served as a foundation of youth culture studies within the U.S. (Bucholtz 2002:525-526,536). However, these studies did not focus on the actual youth as much as the deviant actions that youth often engage in. The Chicago School of sociology emphasized the shared set of symbolic meanings the group holds to, which is “deviant” from the dominant culture (Bucholtz 2002:536). Mass cultural forms of communication and entertainment were viewed as threatening the traditions of working class life and were treated negatively (Gelder 2007:85-87).

Based upon this view of deviance, the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was developed, which is often viewed as the foundation of youth culture studies. The concept of subculture originated from the Birmingham School in the 1970s with influence from Marxist cultural theory and an emphasis on class (Bucholtz 2002:536). Phil

Cohen's study of the working class community in London's East End caused him to theorize a “generational conflict” between the traditional values of the parent culture and the modernization and consumerist values of the youth. Rather than live in alienation, the youth become subcultural and leave their community, moving from one social group to another in an attempt to find cohesion. However, this solution is more imaginary than real to Cohen who views it from a structuralist and ideological perspective. Cohen comments that subcultures are “symbolic structures, and must not be confused with the actual kids who are their bearers” (Cohen 1972:23). The emphasis is on the social group rather than the actual kids who comprise them.

Cohen's concept of subculture as an imaginary solution for working class youth was expanded by the CCCS through the incorporation of French structuralist and Marxist Louis Althusser's theory of ideological subject formation, which is imaginary for all people, not just the subcultural working class youth. To prevent this from discrediting subcultures as unique, the hegemony theory of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci was utilized. Hegemony addresses the issue of how the subordinate class remains below the dominant class. While the dominant class uses coercion to subjugate, it also elicits the subordinated classes' consent. Hegemony theory also allows for opposition since a subordinated group cannot be completely absorbed (Hall 1986). Subcultures show resistance by claiming public space and utilizing commodities in different ways from the dominant group (Gelder 2007:89-90).

Adopting the concept of bricolage from structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, John Clarke examined the style of subcultures and how the meanings of commodities are altered. Clarke suggests that subcultures are attempting to fix the problems of class contradictions as the working class community merges into the “class-less realm of consumer culture and mass communication” (Clarke 1993:189). Continuing with the concepts of style and bricolage, Dick

Hebdige asserts that consumption and aesthetics are the primary focus of youth subcultures. Subcultures appropriate commodities and assign them new meanings and purposes, which are different from the dominant culture's understanding of the products (Hebdige 1979). Through this way, youth subcultures are symbolically resisting the dominant culture and the ideology which is commercially transmitted through commodities (Storey 2003:135-136).

The CCCS study of subculture focused predominantly on white, working class male youth groups who gathered in public areas. This focus disregards girls, as they were more often located within the domestic sphere, and race; although a stronger focus on ethnicity was later brought into the CCCS by Stuart Hall (Gelder 2007:91-92,96). These early studies of subcultural groups focused heavily on a structuralist approach in that youth would leave one social group in order to find cohesion with another group. This resistance to the older generation was not only portrayed through changing social groups, but also through the appropriation of commodities for subcultural use. However, this approach does not necessarily fit the yaoi community as participants are not “leaving” one group for another and the focus is on women rather than men.

#### *After Subculture*

Critical of these early subculture theories developed by the CCCS, later subcultural theorists placed distance between their work and that of the CCCS by calling their work “post-subculture.” Gary Clarke criticized the CCCS for placing the focus on the sensationalistic aspects of subcultural style and symbols (Clarke 1981). The homogenizing view of subcultures, which many CCCS contributors took, led to a loss of focus on the individual and their experience. The emphasis on the difference between members of subcultures and members of the dominant culture also resulted in a glossing over of the mundane day-to-day activities that subculture members participate in as well (Storey 2003:138-139).

The modern approach of the CCCS was rejected by subculture studies in the past decade in favor of a postmodern approach, which distinguishes the difficulty in discerning a clear division between the dominant culture and subcultures. Whereas with early subculture studies the focus on the individual was neglected and people joined subcultures in order to find social groups, recent subculture studies have emphasized individualism as a rational and beneficial trait. David Muggleton's subculture studies focused on the idea of the individuality within consumer culture through the ability of self-expression and diversity (Muggleton 2000). The division between youth culture and popular culture, which the CCCS favored, is no longer necessary to espouse a symbolic class identity over the negativity of consumerism. The focus shifted from class differences to the use of consumption to craft an individual identity (Gelder 2007:100-106). While cultural products, such as television, previously received a less favorable view, now youth culture and popular culture are recognized as being interwoven together without negativity (McRobbie 1994:156). Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber address the issue of "invisible" girls by focusing on the home and looking at the relationship between girls and consumerism. While McRobbie and Garber are critical of previous CCCS work for failing to focus on women, their study focused on the material consumption of girls and the lack of resistance displayed since girls remain close to the dominant culture through their tendency to remain within the domestic sphere (McRobbie and Garber 1991). McRobbie argues that all-girl subcultures may delay adolescent girls from being pushed into adulthood too fast. She states that an all-girl subculture "might forestall these processes and provide members with a collective confidence which could transcend the need for 'boys'" (McRobbie 2000:42). While McRobbie mentions the female punk subculture, which occupies the public domain, the main focus remains on girls within the roles of consumers or domestically bound. As Muggleton argues, the

postmodern approach to subcultures emphasizes an expression of individuality through consumerism. However, the recent emphasis on individualism negates the concept of subcultures as a social experience. Breaking down subcultures to an individual level without also viewing the sociality involved renders subcultures invisible and indiscernible from the dominant culture or other subcultures, which would then make the concept of subculture redundant (Gelder 2007:106). The yaoi community contains elements of individualism as each fan interacts with yaoi products on a personal level. Despite this, there is a connection between yaoi fans as they socialize regarding their preferred genre.

### *Popular Culture and the Media*

Mass media earned a bad reputation from early youth and subculture studies as a threat to the resistance of youth cultures through the transmission of dominant ideologies within the media products (Bucholtz 2002:541). Theorizing media and its affect on youth culture has taken many different approaches. In the 1970s, the theory that dominated film studies was Screen theory, which was named after the journal that promoted it. Screen theory argues that mass culture transmits the ideologies of capitalist-patriarchal culture to the viewer (Traube 1996:134). In this model, the audience became a “textual subject” that is only capable of receiving the ideological message encoded within the media (Tulloch 1995:67). Screen theory was later criticized for disregarding the role of the audience.

In his 1979 work *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer promoted the concept of reception theory, which argues that understanding a cultural text is always done from the perspective of the person viewing the text. While the author may have an ideological message encoded within the text, the message is not inherent since the viewer may not recognize it due to viewing the text from within their own social and historical background (Storey 2003:41).

Gadamer describes reception theory as a “hermeneutic circle,” during which both the text and the reader contribute to the encounter: the reader asks questions of the text and remains open to the answers in order to achieve acceptable understanding (Storey 2003:42). The concept of a passive audience, which mindlessly accepts the ideological message within a cultural text is no longer relevant. While the audience is still receiving a cultural text, the reception is an act of active negotiation where understandings are achieved through the lens of personal experience (Traube 1996:134-135).

Under “new revisionism” the focus of consumer culture emphasized the creative ways in which commodities were appropriated. By refusing the ideological message within a text or using a commodity to “resist assimilation,” people are engaging in popular resistance of dominant culture. However, simply viewing consumption as an act of resistance or as a completely autonomous action neglects the production aspect of consumerism (Traube 1996:135). After all how can the consumption of available products be a completely autonomous action?

John Fiske theorizes media consumption as resistance by how the product is extracted from the dominant cultural circuit and then appropriated and redefined according to the consumer (Fiske 1989, 1993). The study of popular culture provides a challenge in locating the middle ground between Screen theory and reception theory. In order to prevent popular culture from being viewed as a manipulative venue for ideological messages or being reduced to simply an individualistic expression of its consumers, a view of popular culture as a mixture of production and reception must be attained. A view where the line between domination and resistance is not a clear boundary, but a blurred line which must be constantly negotiated (Traube 1996:136-142). Yaoi fans consume officially produced products, but are not limited by the

messages contained within them. Fans continually appropriate these products and not only assign them with new meanings, but also become producers by creating their own items when the official products available for consumption are insufficient. Thus, while not a completely autonomous action, yaoi fans are not passive consumers.

### *Fan Culture*

The question then becomes how is a product simultaneously mass cultural and subcultural? The yaoi genre is on one hand a mass cultural product which is distributed to a large group of people, but on the other hand is also a subcultural community. Edward Castranova addresses this question in his study of “massively multiplayer online roleplaying games” (MMORPGs) by stating that a product is mass cultural since it is available on a global scale and anyone may participate. However, the product becomes subcultural through the element of immersion, in that a place is provided for people to become “friends” and partake in engrossment as an action that indicates nonconformity. Castranova asserts this as a form of rebellion through the disregard players feel for the outside world (Castranova 2005).

Michel de Certeau, a French cultural theorist, examines the concepts of consumer and consumption. He identifies the concept of poaching as the way people construct their lives by borrowing from the property of others. This poaching is identified as a “secondary production” through the actions of consumers appropriating products for personal reasons. De Certeau theorizes the act of textual poaching as an active reader who does not passively receive the message conveyed within the text, but develops a personal and subjective reading (Storey 2004:139-142).

There is an engrossment factor that generally accompanies a fan culture and Henry Jenkins comments on the connotations behind the term “fan” as it is derived from the Latin word

fanaticus, which related to temple rituals and deity worship. The concept of fans as fanatics is not discounted by Jenkins, but emphasized in a more positive light through his theoretical developments. Jenkins draws on de Certeau's theoretical concept of textual poaching and pushes it further by stating that the fan is not under the control of the media which they are engrossed with, but are unorthodox users of the media (Jenkins 1992). Jenkins theories represented the populist perspective since anyone can participate. However, Jenkins was criticized for his romanticized view of fans as “consumer activists” and casting fans as oppressed rebels, while neglecting the elitist practices that fans may engage in, such as the gathering of fans at conventions as the owners of elite knowledge (Gelder 2007:142-143).

Rhiannon Bury theorizes the formation of fandoms as being about relating to other people who view a text similarly (Bury 2005). Much in the way that early subcultural theories focused on the formation of social groups, Cornel Sandvoss explains fan culture as providing a mobile home for fans (Sandvoss 2005). The consumerist aspect of fan culture is further complicated when fans become amateur producers of media. The individualistic nature of consumption, which was promoted by revisionism, is enhanced by this form of appropriation. The concept of cultural jamming is when subcultural groups appropriate recognizable logos and cultural products from the dominant culture and rework them to convey a subcultural message (Gelder 2007:142-152). Similar to textual poaching, cultural jamming works as a method of appropriation by the consumer, in which the ideological message conveyed is rejected in exchange for a personal message. The yaoi community is based on a shared enjoyment of a genre of anime and thus, is a fandom. Bury comments that fandoms are a way for people to socialize with others who view a text similarly (e.g. yaoi pairings that are subtextual rather than overt). Yaoi fans often appropriate characters based upon a personal reading of a text and become

amateur producers of media through activities, such as writing fanfiction.

### *Conclusion*

Theories regarding youth culture have developed and progressed since the 1970s. Early theory focused on class, resistance, imaginary solutions to problems with the dominant culture, a negative portrayal of mass communication, and a homogenizing view of subcultural groups. In order to move away from the theoretical mishaps of early subcultural studies, post-subcultural theories emphasized a postmodern approach with a focus on individual experience and an acceptance of popular culture as acceptably enmeshed with youth culture. However, these theories disregarded the sociality involved with subcultural group formation. Screen theory and reception theory both approached the production/consumption aspect of media texts, but from opposing sides. While a media text may convey an ideological message, it is also encountered by the audience through a personal perspective. The consumption of media products is argued to be a form of resistance through the revisionist perspective, which emphasizes the choice of the individual. The “secondary production” and textual poaching engaged in by fans represents a theory of individualistic consumption that recognizes the cultural text as originating from the dominant culture's production, but also focused on how it is reinterpreted with a new set of meanings.

The theories have evolved and shifted, building upon each other and deviating when deemed appropriate. Several common threads can be traced through the theories, such as the concept of resistance and the appropriation of commodities. While the early theories focused on social groups at large, they then evolved to focus on the individual with disregard for sociality. However, the most satisfying theory incorporates both aspects of subcultural groups: the sociality involved in finding people with similar views and interests, such as fans, and the

individualistic nature of the experience as well. Another common thread is the appropriation of material commodities by subcultures and the disregard of the ideological messages attached by the dominant culture in favor of a personal or subcultural interpretation. As the theories progress and evolve, a more holistic view of youth practices is achievable which allows for the blending of subculture, popular culture, and fan culture. Thus, granting the sociality of subcultures without disregarding individuality and the ability to consume a mass cultural product, but also understand the appropriation involved for subcultural purposes.

Through the yaoi community, I am seeking to illuminate how members of the yaoi community view their involvement with the genre. How do their responses and experiences correspond with and also highlight oversights of previous subculture studies? The goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of a contemporary youth subculture and learn what this particular subculture means to the participants. I am not looking to discover “the” yaoi experience, but am seeking to uncover and explore the various ways different people experience yaoi.

### **Epistemology**

Since I have attended anime conventions for seven years, I began to notice changes and interesting dynamics within the community, in particular the increasing amount of attendees and an expanding prevalence of subgenres within Japanese animation and comics. While I was not originally part of the yaoi community, I became aware and intrigued by the community through a friend, Sydney. Sydney organizes a yaoi event at Anime Weekend Atlanta, an anime convention in Marietta, and asked for help checking identification at the event because, due to the explicit content, minors were not allowed to view. Through helping her, I became increasingly intrigued by yaoi and its fans, which has led to my arrival at a topic for my master’s thesis. Through my

research I am hoping to foster understanding and awareness of a youth subculture within a subculture which is often ethnocentrically viewed as “women watching gay pornography.” However, at the end of the day, I am researching this topic because it is something I am deeply interested in personally and am unable to walk away from until I have sought understanding to the best of my ability.

Susan Bordo critiques the “maleness” of philosophy which provided the base for Enlightenment thought (Bordo 1992). Western philosophy is rooted in centers of power which then perpetuate the dominance of masculinity through ideology and structure. Thus, through the Enlightenment, ideas such as an “autonomous, public ‘masculinity’ and nurturant, other-oriented ‘femininity’” are perpetuated (Bordo 1992:35). Donna Haraway discusses the situated knowledges which accompany a feminist objectivity. Haraway advocates a truth claim which avoids the “god trick” of claiming knowledge and “seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway 1988:581). Rather than claiming a complete objective truth, Haraway argues for a knowledge that is positional which is “the key practice in grounding knowledge organized around the imagery of vision” (Haraway 1988:587). Instead of an all-knowing truth, Haraway supports “rational knowledge [which] is a process of ongoing critical interpretation among ‘fields’ of interpreters and decoders” (Haraway 1988:590). Thus, it is not only Enlightenment objectivity which produces truth claims. Rather knowledge is positional and embedded within different perspectives.

Joan Scott discusses the use of experience in determining knowledge. Scott argues that experience “reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems” (Scott 1991:778). Experience is not approached the same by everyone as each person carries their own history and preconditioning which then causes different interpretations of experience. Thus, as each person

experiences a different interpretation of a situation, how is a truth determined? Scott argues that discovering a singular, objective truth is not the purpose, but rather focusing on the experience as the object of analysis is what is important in understanding how categories such as race and gender are constructed to constitute a “truth” (Scott 1991). Analyzing experience is a critical process through which the preconditioned views of a person are deconstructed and understood within a social context.

My truth claims will be based upon situated knowledges and the validity of experience. Since I am part of the research and cannot separate myself completely, the concept of an objective truth in social research is a challenging precedent. While the Enlightenment produces a grounding point for several important notions, such as individualism and freedom, I do not agree with the idea of Enlightenment objectivity which produces a singular Truth. Theories of situated knowledge and multiple possibilities, such as Bordo and Haraway, are more agreeable to research focused on identity and fan culture. As Scott discusses, people may have similar experiences and walk away with different interpretations. Thus, I am researching the different interpretations yaoi fans have of their experience. People outside subcultural groups often impose intentions upon the members of the group (e.g. “gay pornography for women”) and, with an emphasis on experience, the perspective of the subcultural participants may be better understood.

Kirin Narayan argues that the dichotomous distinction between “native” and “non-native” anthropologists is an outdated paradigm that is becoming increasingly irrelevant as global flows connect geographically distant parts of the world (Narayan 1993:672). A trained native anthropologist was viewed as having insider knowledge of their “native” culture (Narayan 1993:673). However, this term is problematic in the way that it minimizes the complexity of

identity within a contemporary context. With the field of anthropology growing to include the Western world as well, traditional “real” anthropologists are also becoming “native” anthropologists, which Narayan argues supports her call for a rethinking of the term “native” anthropologist. Narayan calls for an enactment of hybridity and the idea of a multiplex identity which allows for the shifting of identity based upon the contextual situation. Multiplex identity acknowledges that people belong to numerous communities and the identity presented is often in response to the context of the situation (Narayan 1993:676). Additionally, the traditional concept of the native is to assume that there is a singular experience within a culture and disregards gender, class, age, and individual differentiation (Narayan 1993:676).

Despite complex backgrounds and ancestries, native anthropologists are assumed to be able to inform the anthropological community about authentic information from the insider perspective. However, within the community, the anthropologist may still be regarded as an outsider due to education, class, or numerous other factors (Narayan 1993:677). While a native anthropologist may have foundational knowledge of a community, it remains impossible for a person to know everything about a society, even if it is their own (Narayan 1993:678). I am a “native” anthropologist in that I have participated within the anime community for numerous years. However, before starting this research I knew relatively little about the genre of yaoi within anime and what I did know, I later found to be superficial and inaccurate.

Jayati Lal discusses the reflexivity which should accompany fieldwork through the politics of location and representation. Similar to Narayan, Lal argues against dichotomous divisions such as insider-outsider in fieldwork. A researcher may not be viewed as an insider within the context of fieldwork despite sharing commonalities, such as ethnicity (Lal 1996:102). Thus, a “native” researcher is not a productive category when conceptualizing fieldwork.

Furthermore, Lal attempts to reflexively place herself in the political and historical context which encompasses the field and thus, “break down the divisions between subject and object” (Lal 1996:124). By examining the “self-representations, silences, and resistances” of participants in fieldwork, the break down between the binary categories of subject-object is furthered (Lal 1996:124). While encouraging reflexivity, Lal warns against being paralyzed when confronted with the research analysis and the power of representation. Rather than remaining silent as a result of reflexivity, Lal encourages researchers to participate in DuBois’ “passionate scholarship” as a way to break down the dichotomous barrier between “Us and Them” (Lal 1996:125).

As seen with Horace Miner's work “Body Ritual among the Nacirema,” the power of representation through writing about people is heavy and language holds the power to make “ordinary” practices appear exotic and foreign (Miner 1956). I am always conflicted that I may not be representing my informants in a manner they would approve. Thus, uncomfortable with the notion of keeping my writing from my informants, I contacted my initial group of interviewees once I had written my first batch of conclusions and emailed my findings to them for their approval and critique. As I primarily maintain contact with my informants via the internet blog, LiveJournal, I also posted this thesis on my blog so they would have access to it. However, this does not completely remove the power in the relationship because I still have the final decision on what is written and what is not. Despite this unchanging fact, my informants are happy and supportive of my conclusions thus far and encourage me to continue writing about yaoi in an academic context. Furthermore, if I did not make my writings available to my informants I would feel as if I were withholding something that is rightfully theirs. I cannot fully reciprocate the knowledge and time they have given me, but I can, at the very least, keep them

involved and engaged in the process so they see the results which they helped to produce. Thus, I endeavored to be consciously reflexive, as Narayan and Lal have discussed, during my research and attempted to acknowledge my preconditioned perceptions and experiences which influence how I approach my research. Additionally, I attempted to be conscious of the power of representing people within my research and acknowledge that power in an attempt to reflexively disallow it from running rampant.

### **Methods**

The methods I used to conduct my research included a blend of traditional and online methods. I initially conducted exploratory research at Anime Weekend Atlanta in September 2007. Anime Weekend Atlanta has two events which are specifically geared towards the yaoi genre: a panel and a viewing room. I attended the panel, Yaoi After Dark, which lasted roughly three hours and observed the “party games” that comprised most of the event. Immediately after the panel, the room converts into a viewing area for a few hours. Yaoi titles are projected onto a screen for the people in the audience to watch.

I then attended Animazement in May 2008 and utilized participant observation during the unofficial yaoi panel. While Animazement does not offer specific yaoi events, several yaoi-themed titles were scheduled for viewing in the general anime viewing rooms. I attended these viewings of yaoi titles as well and conducted participation observation. I attended Anime Weekend Atlanta again in September 2008 to conduct participant observation at the panel and viewing. In particular, my goal in attending Anime Weekend Atlanta a second time was to observe changes since the previous year and conduct more directed research as I had then moved beyond the exploratory phase.

Although I only attended three conventions with research in mind, I have attended anime conventions for over seven years and continually draw on my past experiences and observations to analyze what I learned at these three specific conventions. In addition to participant observation at conventions, I also conducted in-person interviews with eight women between the ages of 20 – 26. I conducted several in depth follow-up interviews with four of the women. The average interview session lasted approximately one hour. I also conducted three group interviews where the women were able to discuss yaoi in a more conversational atmosphere. I predominantly used a semi-structured interview style and allowed interviewees to occasionally guide the interviews by going on “tangents.” I primarily met my informants at the conventions I attended and also utilized a snowball technique to find participants.

As the yaoi community also operates via the internet, I uploaded a survey online and posted a link on an internet blog community devoted to yaoi. This survey contained roughly forty questions and elicited the responses of women I am unable to interview in-person or come in contact with through snowballing. I received roughly twenty responses, with sixteen of them completing the entire survey. The ages of my online participants ranged from 18 – 40, although the majority of the women were in their twenties. I also spent time on the internet “surfing” websites and discussion boards focused on yaoi to gain an idea of what issues and topics the community discusses without the prompting of a researcher. Additionally, I watched and read yaoi titles which were recommended to me by research participants.

### **Ethics**

My first and foremost ethical consideration is to not cause harm to the people involved in my research. I treated all my research participants with respect as they are human beings and not simply research subjects. Furthermore, I refrained from disclosing information which may be

harmful to one of my informants, such as identifying traits. Additionally, I did not use subterfuge and informed my participants that I was conducting research. The purpose of my research is to foster understanding and knowledge of a youth subculture which is often misunderstood or invisible to the dominant culture. Yaoi is a genre which may be seen as unconventional according to socially normative practices, in that it is women viewing men in sexual situations and in that it is drawn and animated characters involved in these situations. Since the research topic is mildly controversial and may cause social stigma, I handled all information with utmost confidentiality and maintained the anonymity of participants.

The Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association states that researchers have an obligation “to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work” (American Anthropological Association 1998). The ethical principles of avoiding harm and treating humans with respect lay the groundwork for researchers to consider while conducting fieldwork. When engaging in conventional ethnography these ethical considerations play a fundamental role as the relationship between the researcher and the participants grows. The ethical ramifications of ethnography have long been discussed within the field of anthropology and new researchers are encouraged to acknowledge the power dynamics and possible exploitation that may occur during fieldwork (Johnson 2004:239).

The debate surrounding ethics and the internet focuses on the conceptualization of the internet as a “kind of public space” (Angrosino 2005:742). If the internet is perceived as a public space then are researchers held to the ethical standards of conventional ethnography or are researchers allowed to “freely” use “statements made in publicly accessible discussion boards” (Wilson and Peterson 2002:461)? Wilson and Peterson argue that the idea of online interactions as equivalent to a public statement being used without consent is a form of “electronic

eavesdropping” which “violates the speaker’s expectation of privacy” (Wilson and Peterson 2002:461). Bird and Barber emphasize the importance of viewing the virtual not as a new method, but a way of applying the various methods of cultural anthropology to a new context. Nonplace communities develop based on common experiences (e.g. physicians or Baptists) and virtual communities are an extension of this principle and develop through computer-mediated communications (Bird and Barber 2007). Anthropology as conducted via online methods should be held to the same ethical standards “of showing respect for people under study, of protecting their dignity and best interests, of protecting anonymity or giving proper credit, and of obtaining informed consent” as methods which are conducted face-to-face (Wilson and Peterson 2002:461).

Ralph Bolton tackles the traditional taboo of ethnographers becoming sexually involved while in the field. Bolton argues that this sexual restraint continues to reinforce the difference between the ethnographer and the “other” (Bolton 1995). Bolton argues that a “secure” ethnographer will be strong enough handle the ramifications of engaging in personal, sexual encounters with people while in the field (Bolton 1995:159). Furthermore, he endorses adding the idea that “the personal is also professional” to the feminist statement of “the personal is political” (Bolton 1995:162). Arguing that people can be violated even after signing an informed consent form, Bolton asserts that his research was conducted with primary allegiance to the community studied and thus, is ethically sound despite its non-traditional approach. Additionally, Mitchell Rolls makes a point in raising the question of why our generation feels “blessed with a universal and timeless blueprint on how to conduct ethical research” (Rolls 2003).

Thus, I treated my online research with the same ethical standards with which I engage in my traditional ethnographic methods. As Bolton comments, I also agree with the statement that “the personal is also the professional” in that I am conducting research, but I will also be engaging in personal relationships with my informants (Bolton 1995:162). While I did not engage in sexual encounters in the field, I did become involved in personal relationships and friendships during the course of my fieldwork, which must be reflexively engaged in rather than ignored. I endeavored to avoid causing harm to my participants and reflexively analyzed my ethical dilemmas in hopes of conducting ethically sound research to the best of my current abilities. However, as Rolls comments, what is ethical now may not be ethical in the future as it is a fluid and discursive topic (Rolls 2003).

### **The Virtual Challenge**

This research was restricted in multiple ways through challenges which I was not able to properly overcome within the scope of this project. For one, I was initially intrigued by the idea of conducting participant observation with a web community; in particular, a well known yaoi website which not only had a message board, but a download section. In order to download scans of yaoi manga or anime shows, members of the community must accrue points, which are accumulated through posting messages and general participation on the website. Thus, by commenting on discussions or posting manga scans, a level of involvement dictates how many points people had available to download items. While this website was my primary goal in terms of online methods, challenges such as permission from a moderator and determining how to ascertain participants' ages made this particular method unfeasible for this project.

Instead, I procured permission from a web blog group devoted to yaoi and posted an online survey. I received many in depth and thought provoking replies to this survey, but it

lacked the participant driven aspect that sets participant observation apart from surveys. I regret not having the ability to “hear” what yaoi fans had to say online without the prompting of a question. While I received the survey participants' email addresses for follow up questions, I find the structured interview style limiting and follow up via email slightly challenging. I initially conceptualized the online aspect of my research as an attempt to bring the “online self” into the project through learning how fans interact online with yaoi titles and with other fans. However, in the end, I predominantly utilized the internet as a way to find more participants. If given the opportunity, I intend to expand this project to encompass the online methods I originally planned.

### **Conclusion**

The study of the yaoi community provides a chance to learn more about the subcultural practices of contemporary American youth in a postmodern and technologically connected global sphere. Not only is yaoi a transcultural product, which flows into the U.S. through the mediascapes (Appadurai 1990) of anime and manga, but it also represents an intersection of material consumption and “textual poaching” (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). Furthermore, rather than remain in “intimate alienation” (Allison 2006), fans congregate at conventions as a site of sociality. This study provides a chance to learn how subcultural youth practices are incorporated into daily routines, online and offline, and what these practices, which may be viewed as unorthodox and transgressive by outsiders, actually mean to the youth involved.

My research seeks to learn about a youth subculture that can espouse an ideology of being “distinct” from the mainstream and, at the same time, emphasize the social relations which are formed as a result. I pay particular attention to the first exposure and enjoyment of the yaoi genre and when that enjoyment becomes a “big deal” as the two moments are often different.

While an introduction to the yaoi genre often occurs on the individual level, once connecting with other fans is when the genre becomes a larger factor within the women's lives. Furthermore, I seek to learn how women facilitate these relations through commodities, conventions, and the internet. How do these factors operate within the yaoi community to locate other people who have a similar distinct preference for this genre?

In chapter two, I address how yaoi fans conceptualize their enjoyment of the genre. While outsiders may view their practices as “deviant” or “oppositional,” I argue that it is less about opposing the mainstream and more so about finding a space for themselves and others who enjoy similar tastes. In chapter three, I look at how the consumption and appropriation of yaoi items are used by the community to “flag” down other fans. In chapter four, I examine the different ways that yaoi fans socialize and how different opportunities for sociality fulfill different roles. While this analysis does not cover the entire range of experiences of yaoi fans, I aim to use the experiences of the women I interviewed and myself to shed a small sliver of light on a subculture that is often tucked away on the fringes of the mainstream.

## CHAPTER 2 – SITUATING YAOI: THE DISTINCTION OF TASTE

Sitting on the floor of the Hyatt Regency in the early hours of the morning, I sat interviewing Jordan in an area with less foot traffic to avoid interruptions. Having met just a few hours ago while waiting in line for the Yaoi After Dark panel at Anime Weekend Atlanta, Jordan was answering my questions with a friendly candor that was both inviting and telling. Inquiring as to why she enjoyed the yaoi genre, she responded, “The fact that you don't see yourself in it. It's very safe that way...[and] it's so much easier to talk about two guys getting it on to your girlfriends.” After the interview, I mulled over the comment, her words continuing to intrigue me. After all, it was easier for me as well to talk to women about yaoi.

The study of the yaoi community inevitably touches on the issue of gender as women are engaging in a subculture that bases its premise on enjoying anime and manga titles that involve relationships between men. As Jordan stated, it's easier for two women to discuss two men engaged in sexual acts rather than a man and a woman. My informants describe yaoi as an activity for the females to enjoy together. Since there are no women involved in the yaoi titles, the discussion of these titles, even hardcore ones, is made easier because there is a level of separation. Jordan comments that she did attempt to talk “about yaoi with [her male] gay friends and it was weird” because they personally engage in the sexual acts depicted within yaoi titles.

The yaoi community appears to be a “deviant” subculture in that the participants watch and read titles that involve relationships between two men and, in most cases, sexually explicit content. However, this view of “deviance” is limited as the women involved within the community have a different perspective of their motivations. In addition to these considerations, the yaoi community also occupies a place within the study of subcultures as the seemingly “deviant” actions the women engage in are situated at the fringes of mainstream popular culture

and are sometimes acted out in a public setting. While the yaoi subculture is located on the outskirts of popular culture, most participants do not conceptualize their practices in terms of deviance or opposition. Rather, they are creating a specialized place for themselves, settled on the border of mainstream popular culture. Thus, it is key to understand the emic perspective of yaoi fans and understand why they enjoy the yaoi genre. Literature on subcultures often neglects the female role within these groups or addresses them as passive consumers within the domestic sphere. The yaoi community occupies an interesting place within the study of subcultures as it addresses not only an “unconventional” practice among women, but places them within an active and often public role.

In this chapter I will first address the reasons women cited for why they initially began to watch and read yaoi titles. What often appears to non-yaoi fans as a transgressive practice is more often a matter of taste which is distinguished as non-hegemonic. The term transgressive gives an air of illicitly engaged in activities, which is not a view held by most yaoi fans and when this view is held it is done so conditionally. Non-hegemonic tastes, instead, represent a preference for a genre which is neither conventional nor hugely popular, but is not viewed by participants as opposing the mainstream. Additionally, I will address how the literature on subcultures, which casts women as passive, domestic consumers, is refuted by the yaoi community through the actions of attending public conventions and engaging in textual poaching. I will then address the reasons women cite for continuing to participate within the yaoi community despite the outside opinion that yaoi is “gay pornography for women.” I address how this ethnocentric perspective imposes faulty assumptions upon the yaoi community as the reasons for watching and reading yaoi are far more complicated than simply looking for sexually explicit content.

However, I must first comment on how yaoi is a foreign cultural text and thus, is subject to a level of exoticism that needs to be addressed. Jan Lin comments that Chinatown is often represented within Western media as dangerous and exotic, which creates the image of an exoticized “other.” People will often self-exoticize themselves for numerous reasons. For example, self-exoticism can be used as a business strategy to attract tourists to restaurants and gain more money (Lin 1998). Exoticism within the yaoi genre is difficult to “pin down” as there is wide fluctuation between different titles and how they represent “Japaneseness.” Japanese yaoi artists did not begin the genre with a foreign audience in mind, but through the internet and an increasingly linked global sphere, the yaoi genre is now being consumed by non-Japanese fans who may base their views of Japan on these titles and their representations.

Women who watch yaoi usually “discover” it after discovering anime or manga in general. For example, several women I spoke with were first introduced to anime through *Gundam Wing* and later learned about yaoi through the internet. Thus, many of the women involved had already discovered their preference for Japanese aesthetics in regards to animation and comics. When I asked interviewees if they would watch or read yaoi that did not originate from Japan, most women responded that the importance was not on the origination point, but on the inclusion of a good storyline and well-developed characters. Kalloway comments, “Japan does not have the marker on sexy and awesome. As long as it was a visual/textual style that I found aesthetically pleasant, I'd be into it.” Nuriko reads non-Japanese yaoi titles; “[I] already do, in fact...I particularly like patronizing original American artists, if their comics are good. Although I do feel that if they can't imitate the Japanese manga aesthetic perfectly, then they should just find their own styles and draw like Americans. The whole 'trying to be Japanese but not really succeeding' thing is really unappealing.” Furthermore, non-Japanese yaoi appears to be

more acceptable when it is a fan product, such as fanfiction for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

While many yaoi fans in the U.S. would read non-Japanese yaoi there remains a focus on the Japanese aesthetic in anime and manga that makes these titles enjoyable. Several informants cite good art, be it Japanese or not, and a well-developed storyline as the primary importance in yaoi titles. Thus, it is not simply the “exotic” representation of Japaneseness that draws in fans. While I am unable to fully address how the storylines of yaoi titles represent Japanese culture and what that means for American fans and their views of Japan, it remains important to understand and remember that the yaoi genre is not an isolated cultural text and contains references to a different culture that may cause issues of representation. It is important to be mindful of cultural representations so they are not mistaken for presentations. This is particularly important for the yaoi genre as the relationships depicted within the genre are highly romanticized and idealized versions of male homosexual relationships.

### **Women and Subcultural Practices**

Early studies of subcultures focused predominantly on white, working class male youth groups who gathered in public areas. This focus disregards girls, as they were more often located in the domestic sphere. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber address the issue of these “invisible” girls by focusing on the home and looking at the relationship between girls and consumerism. While McRobbie and Garber are critical of previous CCCS work for failing to focus on gender, their study focused on the material consumption of girls (e.g. teenybopper culture) and the lack of resistance displayed since girls remain close to the dominant culture through their tendency to remain within the domestic sphere (Gelder 2007:96-99).

McRobbie criticizes previous subculture studies for failing to identify the role of women within subcultures. Women are either invisible within the studies, added as a “footnote,” or

viewed in relation to their sexual attractiveness (McRobbie 2000:12-13). Traditional studies of subcultures focused on actions which took place in public rather than in the home, which excluded women. McRobbie critiques Hebdige's willingness to acknowledge the absence of race in subculture studies while completely missing the issues of gender and sexism (McRobbie 2000:32). However, even McRobbie's research of women and subculture focuses narrowly on women as domestic consumers.

Performances of gender by subcultural participants are often used to produce an oppositional relationship between their practices and the mainstream and emphasize the difference between the two. Mendoza-Denton describes how cholas, Latina gang girls, destabilize hegemonic ideas of gender through their willingness to fight, which is communicated visually through the meanings inscribed into eyeliner, allowing people to perceive them as different from conventional girls (Mendoza-Denton 1996:55). However, this poses the question of why certain gendered performances are deemed conventional (e.g. girls wear eyeliner), while others are not (e.g. cholas wear heavy eyeliner to show their willingness to fight). Judith Butler argues that all of gender is a performance and thus,

through performativity, dominant and non-dominant gender norms are equalized. But some of those performative accomplishments claim the place of nature or claim the place of symbolic necessity, and they do this only by occluding the ways in which they are performatively established (Butler 2004:209)

Butler's model of gender is used by subculture studies to explain the fluidity and change found within subcultures as "subcultural identities are 'constantly mutating'" much in the way that gender is fluid according to Butler (Muggleton 2000:92). Furthermore, subcultures are often a way of escaping hegemonic representations of gender. For example, within the punk subculture, assuming the identity of punk allows women to discard the restrictions of "appropriate feminine

behavior” (Muggleton 2000:103-106). Gendered aspects of subcultures are often propagated by participants within the subculture, such as in the situation of the cholas. Additionally, gendered aspects of subcultures are also enforced on participants by the mainstream. Fan subcultures are often represented by mainstream culture as the “other” through attaching a gender category which is not legitimized within the dominant culture. Male *Star Trek* fans are often represented as feminized through their participation in fan cultures and desexualized through the assumption that their engagement in the subculture prevents a “normal” relationship with a female (Jenkins 1992:10).

Imposing views from one portion of a culture onto another happens not only in respect to gendered characteristics, but also applies to views on sexuality. When sexuality is discussed regarding youth, the viewpoint is often from the perspective of adults and problematizes the sexuality of youth through the emphasis on issues such as teenage pregnancy (Bucholtz 2002:534). While in some cultural contexts pregnancy is viewed as a legitimization of adulthood, the discourse within the U.S. renders it undesirable and a “social problem” which strips this aspect of sexuality of its agentive powers (Bucholtz 2002:534-535). Tied in with sexuality is the additional focus on body image among American girls which can be cast in a pathological light or as a form of agency depending on the perspective of the study which can focus on a “dieting epidemic” or the cultural practice of problematizing the body for purposes aside from negative body image (Bucholtz 2002:535). For example, young girls will discuss their bodily disparities in social groups not because they believe they are unattractive, but to serve as a social tool to use in discussion with other girls. Youth practices are viewed through a “problem-based” lens which defines their actions as “social violations rather than agentive interventions into ongoing sociocultural change” (Bucholtz 2002:535). Within early subcultural studies,

sexuality is relatively unaddressed and it is only within a context of “profanity” and transgressive content that homosexuality is referenced by Hebdige (Gelder 2007:93). Later studies on subcultures and sexuality focus on the erotic and sado-masochistic tendencies, such as with biker gangs and their interest in leather sexuality (Gelder 2007:137). However, there is still a gap in the literature regarding sexuality as it relates to youth and subculture practices, particularly from the perspective of the youth themselves and the agentive aspects of sexuality.

Before discussing the reasons women cited for participating within the yaoi community, I must first address the definition of the term yaoi. The term yaoi is problematic due to the fact that it does not represent in Japan what it represents in the U.S. Yaoi is actually an acronym for “yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi,” which often translates to “no climax, no punch line, no meaning.” The term yaoi originated in Japan to denote fan products, such as doujinshi (fan comics), which involve homoerotic themes between two men. However, the term is no longer in use and instead the term “Boys' Love” is used in Japan to denote titles that involve relationships between two men. In the U.S., yaoi is often used two different ways, either as a catch all term for products and titles that involve male/male relationships or to distinguish a title as involving “hardcore” sexual intercourse. The term shonen-ai, which translates to “boys' love,” is used in the U.S. to sometimes describe softer, less explicit titles involving male/male relationships. For this project, I will use the term yaoi since I am predominantly focusing on titles as they are interpreted within the U.S. The definition of yaoi that I am using is the former of the two, referring to products and titles that involve male/male relationships, regardless of if the content is deemed “hardcore” or “soft.”

I initially decided to conduct exploratory research within the yaoi community at Anime Weekend Atlanta because I wanted to discern what it is about yaoi that causes women to

disregard the normative social practices of viewing sexually explicit content. Pornography, in particular heterosexual pornography, is often viewed as demeaning to women and reinforces female subordination which makes it more palatable for men than women. While not all women and men agree with this perspective, many of my informants commented on a double standard that makes it acceptable for men to watch sexually explicit content and less acceptable for women to do the same. While it is rare for a woman to watch a title with sexually explicit content, the rules surrounding pornography are in the process of being reshaped by women who are making a place for themselves in the consumption of sexually explicit content (Juffer 1998:4-6). However, for a woman to watch sexually explicit content that involves two homosexual men rendered in either animation or comic form is even rarer. Yet these women who participate in the yaoi community are doing just that and my goal is to unpack the reasoning behind these actions. What reasons do women provide for their initial interest in the yaoi genre and what drives their continued membership? While often viewed by non-fans as “racy” or “transgressive,” how are the women involved viewing these concepts? Subculture studies often cite resistance as a motivating factor for joining subcultural groups, but how do yaoi fans conceptualize this? Is being oppositional their intention or is the purpose to be distinct and demonstrate their personal tastes? How do fans conceptualize the sexually explicit content within yaoi titles? Do they feel the content is intended to arouse and thus, pornographic? Or is their focus elsewhere?

I noticed several common themes among my interviews that comprise the reasoning behind why women are engaging in practices which may appear to non-yaoi fans as transgressive. Most fans do not view their participation within the yaoi community as an act of transgression and instead focus on the idea of yaoi as different and a matter of personal taste. The first theme is that, while yaoi titles often include sexually explicit content, the women do not

view yaoi as pornography since it is “tastefully” done and the sexual content is not the focus of the story. The second theme relates to the emphasis on the relationships within yaoi titles as being real and authentic, the true focus of the story. Third, which I will discuss in chapter three, most yaoi fans view yaoi through several different methods, such as fanfiction, manga, doujinshi, and anime. There is a lasting connection to the characters, beyond the explicit content, through several mediums. The last theme, which I will address in chapter four, is the sense of community and support that exists between yaoi fans, both on the internet and in real life. This community base gives fans a sense of security through strength in numbers. For all these reasons, despite the fact that women are viewing sexually explicit content involving two men – countercultural to the normative practices of viewing sexually explicit materials, which normally involves men watching sexually explicit titles that show either male/female or female/female pairings – they are not conceptualizing their actions as transgressive, but rather engaging with yaoi on a more personal level which emphasizes the draw of yaoi as a distinct and personal taste.

In his book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu discusses how consumption and different forms of capital help to reinforce class differences. Bourdieu argues that individual tastes and preferences for certain items (e.g. beer versus wine) are legitimized by society and normalized until they appear inherent to individuals (Bourdieu 1979). Bourdieu argues that “the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, [however] scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education” (Bourdieu 1979:1). The insidious downside to the assumption of inborn tastes is that it naturalizes and legitimizes social differences.

Thus, when understanding yaoi and the position of the women within the community, thinking in terms of taste is more beneficial than viewing their actions as oppositional or deviant.

As Bourdieu argues, there is no inherent taste and, instead, people learn and develop their tastes throughout their lives. Rather than striving to achieve the legitimized taste of mainstream society, yaoi fans take pleasure in their distinction and in finding others with similar preferences. I find Bourdieu's theory of taste a more helpful basis for understanding how yaoi fans position themselves in regards to the mainstream. These women do not necessarily view themselves as acting in opposition as they often shift identities within their own lives and, at times, are part of the mainstream culture. Instead, their membership within the yaoi community and enjoyment of the genre is better understood as their personal taste which marks them as distinct from the tastes often legitimized by society.

### **Coping with Content: Transgressive or Unconventional?**

While my informants acknowledged the unconventional nature of yaoi upon their discovery of it, the concept of yaoi as transgressive is a tenuous and conditional label which is relatively unused. Some informants appeared subtly conflicted when contemplating if they viewed their participation within the yaoi community as transgressive while others answered quickly and then qualified their response. Perhaps that hesitance and conflict is indicative of the situation, as not all yaoi titles are the same and transgressive is a fluidly applicable term. While discussing the discovery of yaoi, I directly asked if the term transgressive was applicable to the yaoi genre. Receiving a variety of responses which were often given based upon contextualization leads me to conclude that since not all yaoi is “practiced” the same then it is not necessarily possible to determine if yaoi as a whole is deemed transgressive by its participants. I will expand on the range of responses I received and aim to illuminate how the unconventional nature of yaoi is contextually viewed by its participants.

The question inquiring if yaoi is viewed as “transgressive” was barely finished when Jordan responded with an “Aw, man. Definitely.” Describing her discovery of yaoi as a conceptualized “ultimate no-no,” Jordan was intrigued by the unconventional aspect of yaoi and curious about “the physics of it” as she then did not have realistic knowledge of how two men would engage in sexual acts. However, Jordan’s adolescent curiosity regarding sex was not limited to yaoi and she describes watching the show “*Loveline* that was on...really late at night...It was about the same time I was watching that show.” In this way Jordan’s conceptualization of yaoi as transgressive is facilitated because of an adolescent inquisitiveness regarding sexuality. However, while Jordan states that she views yaoi as transgressive, perhaps this is not the most appropriate term to describe yaoi as what appears to truly be crossing a boundary in this situation is the act of inquiring about sex at a certain age, such as for Jordan as a twelve-year-old. Thus, if framed in the context of discovering yaoi at an older age, would Jordan conceptualize the initial introduction to yaoi as transgressive? Throughout my interviews with Jordan she did not present her current participation in the yaoi community as illicit. Jordan also comments, “I watched *Velvet Goldmine* with my mother. So she was very open to it.” While Jordan's father was not “openly open to it...he wouldn't be openly against it” either. This experience of having parents who do not view titles such as *Velvet Goldmine* as transgressive may also contribute to Jordan's views that, while taking age into account, viewing romantic relationships between two men that may escalate into sexual acts is not an action which steps over the boundaries of socially acceptable practices. Yaoi had an alluring factor to Jordan because she “knew it was different” and that made it even more attractive to her. Jordan comments, “My mom says I always have this thing for different stuff. I always love being different from everyone else. So I think that's why I liked it...cause it was different.”

While Jordan describes her early participation within the yaoi community as an “ultimate no-no,” Monica comments that she never viewed her practices as particularly transgressive. However, as not all yaoi titles are the same, Monica wavers while answering the question. Pausing she states, “I think maybe the more hardcore stuff...I was thinking...‘Oh this is kind of transgressive and naughty’...but the actual relationship...itself I never felt to be transgressive in any way.” Perhaps, for Monica, what is viewed as departing from social acceptability is more so the aspect of hardcore sexual content rather than homosexuality? Her actions are not conceptualized as being “rebellious or anything like that” despite the unconventional nature of the yaoi genre. Rather Monica views her participation within the yaoi community as an expansion of her personal views which promotes relationships that deviate from the traditional male/female formula. Monica comments that the pairings within the yaoi genre are often an “underrepresented portion of society that needs recognition.” For Monica, enjoying yaoi is more than a personal preference, it is a statement of tolerance and acceptance regarding marginalized portions of society. Monica also describes an accepting and open home environment regarding homosexuality. Similar to Jordan, Monica remembers watching *Boy Meets Boy*, a live action reality television series, with her mother. Monica comments, “I watched *Boy Meets Boy* when that was on with my mom. My mother would be like ‘Oh, I hope he ends up with such and such guy.’ [And I would say], ‘Oh, I do too!’” While *Boy Meets Boy* is not an “officially” yaoi title, the show contains elements which are also found within the yaoi genre in the portrayal of romantic relationships between two men. Additionally, Monica never felt that her participation within the yaoi community would have negative ramifications within the domestic context. Monica states, “I never felt like it was wrong or I was going to be disowned” for watching yaoi.

Sydney began participating within the yaoi community when she was an eighteen-year-old college student. While she did not watch yaoi as an underage girl, Sydney comments that she has encountered people online who will state that “My mother doesn't know I'm here.” In this way, Sydney views the participation of underage girls in the yaoi community as transgressive because of the element of subterfuge which is engaged in order to participate within the community. However, for women above the legal age of consent, Sydney states that the idea of watching yaoi as a transgressive action is “not so much” there. The internet plays a significant role in the introduction of yaoi. Rose comments, “I first learned about yaoi in middle school through *Gundam Wing* fanfiction on Fanfiction.net. I don't remember the exact year, but it was before NC17 fiction was banned on Fanfiction.net. I started reading 'shonen-ai' soon after. I did not watch any specifically yaoi anime until about three years later in high school. I started reading yaoi manga, slash original novels (fantasy books easily obtained at local bookstores), etc. starting in high school as well, around 2001.” Willow adds, “I first learned about yaoi in grade five while reading *Sailor Moon* fanfiction. I accidentally stumbled across a story about a love affair between Darien and Andrew. From then on, I was hooked!” Lisa comments that she “really liked the draw of secretive or forbidden love pushing through.” However, as Jordan comments, the “ultimate no-no” aspect of yaoi is a definite draw for some fans initially.

Catherine discusses her experiences with yaoi:

I grew up in a very conservative home, so I have to admit that the first draw was the idea of 'the forbidden'. As I grew more used to the idea and more involved in the stories, the characters became my main interest. The plots were certainly not altogether different from anything else I'd read, but I loved to read about the characters' take on the homosexual relationship and, in the cases of characters who were less enthusiastic about such things, their ways of justifying their relationship.

Thus, in these ways yaoi is understood not as transgressive so much as it is unconventional. As not all titles within the yaoi genre are the same, it is difficult to give the genre an essentialist label such as transgressive since it does not allow for the fluidity and variation that occurs not only between titles, but also between different viewers. While the women I interviewed describe adolescent viewers of yaoi as participating in a transgressive action, this is due largely to the method through which the yaoi titles are viewed as they are often hidden from parents and viewed in a secretive manner. As watching yaoi moves from behind closed doors to a more open and social experience, the transgressive nature of yaoi fades into the background. The women I interviewed identify the unconventional nature of their participation within the yaoi community, but do not view this as a deterrent and rather acknowledge their membership openly and with enthusiasm. At this point I must comment on the recurring theme of parents who are open and accepting of homosexuality and their influence on the women I interviewed either through watching a title that resembled the yaoi genre or simply being accepting of non-hegemonic styles of life. However, not all the women I met had such pleasant experiences with their parents and an open acceptance of their preference for yaoi.

### **Subculture Theories and Personal Experiences: Reconciling the Divide**

These explanations into the motivations and personal experiences of participating within the yaoi community both support and contradict the theories of youth subcultures discussed in the literature review. Youth subculture studies focus heavily on the deviant actions of youth practices. Early theories surrounding youth subcultures identify a generational conflict as the predominant motivating factor in why youth join subcultures. According to the theories, the traditional values of the parents cause youth to feel alienated and, instead of remaining isolated, to join subcultures to feel a sense of community (Gelder 2007:87-89). Furthermore, subcultures

are suggested to be an attempt to fix class contradictions as consumerism blurs the lines between the classes (Gelder 2007:90). By contrast, the postmodern approach to subcultures led to an emphasis on the individual and their self-expression through consumption and deemphasized the importance of socializing within subcultures (Gelder 2007:106).

The explanations I heard as to why women join the yaoi community did not stem from a generational conflict. Quite contradictory, stories of women watching titles which may loosely be identified as yaoi with their parents contradict this theory of youth subcultures. However, the idea of joining a subculture in order to find social cohesion is supported by my findings as the emphasis is often placed on the social aspects of participating within the yaoi community. With Jordan and Monica, yaoi did not become a large aspect of their lives until finding someone else to share it with. Early studies of youth subcultures over-emphasized the aspect of social cohesion and homogenized the participants within the subcultures. Early studies also had a tendency to focus heavily on the concepts of resistance and generational conflict. On the other end of the spectrum, postmodern studies of youth subcultures emphasized the individual to the point of neglecting the sociality that accompanies subcultures. The explanations regarding yaoi fall in the middle ground between both ends of the spectrum. While experiences with yaoi are individualized and unique to each participant, the larger context of the yaoi community as a place for socializing is also emphasized by the women I interviewed.

The assertion that youth subcultures are primarily concerned with consumption and aesthetics is both supported and contradicted with the explanations of yaoi participants (Storey 2003:135-136). As the yaoi genre involves commodities in the form of comics and television series, the concern with consumption can not be overlooked, but the products themselves are not as important as the relationships and community they facilitate. Furthermore, the tendency in the

literature to label subcultural practices as “resisting” the dominant culture is not wholly supported by yaoi participants. The fluid and fluctuating definition of what constitutes a yaoi title allows for the incorporation of “mainstream” titles such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. While a “yaoi view” of the title may be an unconventional reading, the fact remains that yaoi fans are not shunning and resisting all parts of the dominant culture. In these ways, the experiences of participants within the yaoi community are both supporting and contradicting previous studies and theories regarding youth subculture.

While the yaoi genre is acknowledged by fans as an unconventional community, there is a lacking sense of their actions as deviant or transgressive as theories of youth subcultures suggest. The internet and "gateway" titles, such as *Gravitation* or *Gundam Wing*, aid in the dissemination of knowledge regarding yaoi. However, it is upon the discovery of fellow yaoi fans and the community that yaoi enters the realm of a social group and consequently transitions to become a larger part of a person's life. Watching yaoi as an adolescent is viewed as mildly transgressive due to the tendency to keep yaoi hidden from parents and others. Once past adolescence, yaoi is not conceptualized as transgressive by the women I interviewed. Furthermore, there is a recurring theme of having parents who are openly accepting of homosexuality which factors into the view of yaoi as non-transgressive. Thus, the explanations provided by yaoi fans frequently blend the opposing views of youth subcultures, such as individualism versus social cohesion, to create a middle ground which is fluid and dependent upon contextualization.

### **Consumption and Spectacle: A Contemporary “Safe” Place for Women**

Literature on subcultures often focus on women within the domestic sphere in part because, historically, women in the public sphere were deemed to lack respectability. In this way

it is understandable why subculture studies focused on men in public as they were more visible than women. However, women are not as limited by this notion of respectability as in previous years and are commonly found in the public sphere without threat to their reputation. Anime conventions are a public site where both men and women are highly visible. Erika Rappaport discusses the shopping mall as a “safe” place for respectable women through the rise of Selfridge's department store which was marketed as “the ideal female 'rendezvous' or public meeting space” (Rappaport 2000:40). This created a public space for women without jeopardizing their respectability. Furthermore, the spectacle of the shopping mall created consumption practices based on amusement rather than practicality. Thus, the sociality of the corridor street is moved indoors and the shopping mall becomes a form of a fortified enclave which is a safe place for women to engage in consumption (Caldeira 1996). Similar to a shopping mall, an anime convention acts as a safe place for women to be in public. With a large focus on spectacle and consumption, an anime convention may be conceptualized as a form of a shopping mall. Instead of mall shoppers walking around conspicuously displaying their consumption practices through Gucci or Prada, convention attendees conspicuously show their preferences in Japanese animation and comics via costumes or purchased commodities. Thus, convention attendees are adding to the spectacle of the convention through cosplay and providing a form of marketing through their costumes which encourages the consumption of commodities in the dealer's room. Within this context, women may be viewed as respectable and moral during an anime convention as the purpose of the event is spectacle and consumption of material objects.

However, while the space of an anime convention may be construed as a safe place for women, the fact remains that women at conventions are even more visible than while walking

down the street. Carol Brooks Gardner discusses the street remarks women receive which treat them as if they are “out-of-role” despite behaving within their role (Gardner 1980:161). Public space is the “home territory” of men and as such are “licensed to make...commentary” (Gardner 1980:161). Thus, while women at anime conventions occupy a “safe” space via spectacle and consumption, their appearance is often commented upon and further magnified by the practice of cosplay. At anime conventions women are frequently on the receiving end of comments regarding their appearance which may also include their picture being taken with or without their permission. The photographing of women at conventions contains numerous complex layers. As Gardner suggests, some women view the comment and photograph request as an affirmation of their personal appearance (Gardner 1980:156). However, some women view the comments, looks, and photographs as invasive of their personal experience of attending the anime convention. While most people will ask to take a picture, occasionally there will be a convention attendee who will take pictures without asking the permission of the person being photographed. The validity of this occurrence appears to depend upon whether or not the person is wearing a costume. Thus, if a person is participating in cosplay they appear to give up the ability to completely control their image. While women are frequently commented upon at anime conventions for their personal appearance, men are also commented upon and photographed by women, perhaps as a form of “just desserts” as Gardner suggests (Gardner 1980:161). Through this occupation of public space, women within the yaoi community represent a subcultural group that is atypical of “traditional” subcultures.

### **Yaoi: Tasteful Eroticism Versus Pornographic Depictions**

Usami's left arm braces him as he leans over Misaki and holds him up with his right arm. Misaki's arms are clutched tightly to his chest as his back presses against Usami's chest. Misaki's

eyelids are heavy as Usami leans his head down, lips close to Misaki's ear. Shifting, the camera moves to Usami's lips as he whispers into Misaki's ear then to Misaki's face as he closes his eyes completely, Usami's hand cupping his cheek as a blush covers his face. The scene shifts again and shows Usami bracing his weight on his right arm and his leans over Misaki who is pressed into the mattress, his fingers curling around the sheets. Both men wearing shirts that hang open. The top right corner of the screen fades into black and the viewer can just make out the outline of Usami's bare leg, which is kneeling into the mattress on the outside of Misaki's hips. The camera moves to Misaki's face again as he throws his head back, hair covering his eyes. The moving to their intertwined fingers which clasp the sheets together. Misaki's arm is thrown across his face, obscuring his eyes, and his mouth hangs open as he breathes shallowly. The last frame of the scene focuses on Usami's face, his neck out-stretched as he leans over Misaki, smilingly softly with his eyes closed.

The entire scene takes place over roughly one minute and the characters briefly exchange words as soft music plays in the background. The scene is broken up and segmented by black screens with text that are intended to be Misaki's thoughts, written on the screen for the viewer to see; "The pain and the pleasure and the shame all drive me crazy and what really makes me angry is that he claims he's losing his control, and yet he sees right through even my most desperate efforts. I can't stand it." There are no graphic depictions during this scene of *Junjou Romantica* and yet the viewer explicitly knows that the characters are engaging in sex. What does this scene mean? It is a culmination of Usami and Misaki's relationship as both characters finally admit their love just before the scene. However, with breathy moans and sweat dripping, the scene undeniably has sexual overtones despite the lack of visible genitalia. Granted there is a wide range of difference between sexual scenes in various yaoi titles, with others being more or

less graphic, but how are scenes such as this interpreted by fans?

Pornography is commonly defined as the depiction of erotic behavior, such as through pictures or writing, which is intended to cause the viewer sexual excitement. When I asked my informants if they view yaoi as pornography, I mostly received variations of the same answer. The short answer is, for the most part, no. While yaoi may seem to an outsider as simply portraying two men in sexually explicit situations, yaoi fans do not view the explicit content as having the purpose of arousing the audience. Then, by the common definition of pornography, yaoi does not fit the mold. As Ruth Benedict comments in her study of Native American cultures in "Psychological Types in the Cultures of the Southwest," the importance is not always on how an outsider views a person's actions, but how people from within a culture interpret their actions and behavior (Benedict 2004[1930]:220-229). So for people outside the yaoi community to label all yaoi titles as pornography is a flawed and ethnocentric practice.

Additionally, I did identify varying degrees of reactions, from a firm "no" to the occasional "yes", to the idea of yaoi as pornography. When I ask Sydney if she views yaoi as pornography, she quickly states, "Absolutely not. I find it's offensive when people say it like that because it's not." She expands on her view and comments that, in a majority of yaoi titles, the sexual content is an "integral part of the story." She punctuates this comment by adding, "For most of it." Even while vehemently denying yaoi as pornography, Sydney acknowledges that within each genre there are titles that fail to fit the common mold. Specific yaoi titles which fall into the category of blatant pornography are solely focused on the sexual content and does not have a developed plot. These are seemingly disregarded as "true" yaoi to Sydney. However, the focus here is not the exception to the rule, but the reaction and intensity of emotion regarding the personal view. Similarly to Sydney, Lisa does not view the sexual content in yaoi as a form of

pornography:

Unless there is nothing but sex in every page or second of film, I consider yaoi to be a form of artistic expression. I view titles with a story or plot to be an expression of a romantic relationship. Pornography (for me) is anything that lacks a story and simply depicts sex to arouse the viewer. That does not mean that sexually explicit yaoi is only porn. Many good titles, such as one story in *Sensitive Pornograph*, have underlying plots and can be considered art, even though it was created to arouse the reader/viewer.

From this perspective, even yaoi titles which may intend to cause the viewer sexual arousal can be construed by some viewers as artistic expression due to the underlying plot in the show. Jessie also disagrees with the idea of yaoi as pornographic, “I don't think it is the same thing as porn. To me, porn is something to get hot to and masturbate over, sorry for the explicitness of that, but it's true. I don't get hot over it. I more so get absorbed in it and how sweet it is and if it is portrayed well. This is the same reason why I believe it is different from straight up porn.”

When I ask Monica the question, she takes a moment before responding, “I have such conflicting views on this. No, not really...I really tend to view it as art...because there's still a creative element to it.” Although there is often explicit content in yaoi titles, the sexual nature of the series is not the focal point. Additionally, the explicit content is viewed as tastefully drawn or animated because there is an emotional meaning behind the sexual acts. When I ask Jordan the question, she also hesitates before responding, “Some of it.” She then expands on her response to the question and sets conditional requirements for yaoi that is pornographic in nature. She views animated yaoi titles as being of a more pornographic nature than other yaoi mediums. Sexual content in manga is often rendered in an ethereal way that blocks the viewer from the sexual act while still showing it through segmented images. While reading a book and looking at an image on a page there is also a lack of sound. In anime, sexual content is often accompanied by the

breathy moans of the characters as sexual intercourse takes place. Thus, even while the images shown are piecemeal and segmented, the viewer is brought into the scene on an additional level as they hear, as well as see, the characters engaging in sex. However, she then comments that animated shonen-ai titles (the “soft” yaoi) are not pornography. Thus, by one definition of yaoi (the catch all definition), yaoi titles, even animated, do not necessarily translate as pornography even among yaoi fans who are more amenable to that depiction of yaoi. In this light, only a fraction of yaoi titles are deemed pornographic, if at all.

While all my informants did not identify yaoi as pornography, they did recognize the societal double standard that it is more socially acceptable for men to watch pornography or sexually explicit content, but not for women. Hentai, a genre of Japanese anime that also involves explicit content, is marketed to men and often depicts women in a debasing fashion, such as by being violated by a “tentacle monster.” Explicit content of this nature is identified by yaoi fans as pornographic because there is no story or feelings behind the sexual content. The point of hentai, according to my informants, is to arouse men much in the same fashion that live action pornography does. Blair comments, “I think it's more expected that a man watches porn, whereas people tend to be more surprised by a woman watching porn, regardless of whether it's lesbian, gay, or straight porn.” Megan also states, “Whenever you hear people discuss men watching porn it's like it's EXPECTED but when you discover a woman does it, she is looked down on. I don't get this at all. Women might be open about their sexuality if it was more accepted that they are just like men when it comes to sexual fantasies.” Some of my informants feel it is important for women to receive the same treatment as men when it comes to watching sexual content between two people of the opposite sex and argue for this fact explicitly.

On the other hand, some women thought that the double standard worked against men and for women. Catherine comments, “I think there is a double standard, to a point, but that it actually works in reverse. I know of a great many women who chastise men for watching pornography, but then turn around and read an erotica novel, or (in some cases) write a graphic yaoi fanfiction. I've never met a man who reacted as such, although I've met plenty who 'don't get' the yaoi genre.” Similar to Catherine's view, Nuriko thinks men get judged more so than women, “When women watch two men going at it, they're being 'naughty', but people just shake their heads and go about their business. When men watch two women together, then they're perverts and being demeaning towards women...I think women's sexuality is viewed as being more harmless, whereas men get the short end of the stick in this instance.” Thus, women within the yaoi community are not all in agreement about how the sexual content in yaoi titles should be viewed and if they are judged more harshly than men for viewing it. It is important to keep in mind that all fans approach yaoi with their own personal experiences and background and so not everyone is seeing the “picture” the same. Deciding if men and women are treated the same for watching sexually explicit content between two people of the opposite sex is a highly contextual process. Determining if something is a double standard, such as the aforementioned, or pornographic is determined based on individual experience and thus, it is my goal to simply show some of the views voiced to me by informants.

The first theme that I identify as contributing to the reason of why women are transgressing normative social practices of viewing male/male sexually explicit content is that the sexual content is rendered in a context of emotion, art, and relationships, which makes it unidentifiable as pornography to the viewer. Thus, by removing the idea of yaoi as pornography, the social stigma of women watching pornography is, in a sense, invalidated because yaoi titles

are regarded, and defended, by fans as being focused on a larger picture than just the sexual content.

### **The Romantic and Emotional Emphasis in Yaoi Relationships**

As stated in the discussion over whether yaoi is pornography, the emphasis within yaoi relationships runs deeper than casual sexual intercourse. As Sydney comments, the explicit content of yaoi titles has a specific place within the plot and is rarely there for the simple role of displaying sexual intercourse. However, since the explicit content is often highlighted by the plot as a key moment it draws additional attention. Jordan comments that the explicit content in yaoi is emphasized more than in heterosexual titles, which she theorizes is because “heterosexual stuff has been around for a long time so they've kind of delved in deeper [in terms of character development]. So I'm waiting for that to happen with yaoi.” However, by the formula that is presented in a majority of yaoi titles and as audience members interpret them, the character development, romance, and emotional relationships are currently emphasized in yaoi. They are simply coded and enunciated within a context of explicit content.

A majority of yaoi titles involve a dominant male (gendered masculine) and a submissive male (gendered feminine). Blair comments that “Yes, there are stereotypical roles. The uke tends to be feminized and in need of protecting, the seme tends to be stronger and stoic. I have seen the seme stereotype in mainstream films/tv, but the over feminization is slightly more rare in mainstream media, or portrayed in different ways.” Willow also describes the uke and seme stereotypes in yaoi titles, “The uke is almost always the outgoing, emotional, gregarious partner, while the seme is stoic, protective, and often taller than the uke.” The uke, meaning the “bottom” in sexual intercourse, is often the feminine and submissive character in yaoi relationships. The seme is the “top” and usually portrays the masculine and dominant character. Cameron is

conflicted about the depiction of male characters with feminine gender traits:

There's some that are, instead of being two guys, it's two guys but one guy looks like a girl and acts like a girl and has totally feminine mannerisms and everything, but he's still a guy so it's still yaoi...On the other hand, you can have very similar gender types together, but I think more often one is over feminized or both of them are over feminized, which I think is kind of interesting...I have kind of mixed feelings about how much I like the feminized versions because, on one hand, it's really interesting to see a male...having feminine traits and a lot of people are like 'Oh, it's girly. He's a girly girl and a wimp and a submissive.' and I'm like 'Is it really that horrible for a male person to have a feminine personality?' That almost seems like the feminine personality is less or negative. That's sort of weird. Why can't males ever be portrayed as submissive or emotional? I think in yaoi a lot of times they are so that's really interesting for girls to see that because a lot of guys aren't that way at all so it's really interesting to see that face put on them in yaoi.

Through the depiction of male characters as submissive and feminine, the dichotomous roles of male and female gender roles are placed onto the two male characters. Some fans, like Cameron, question the implications of this trend (e.g. the devaluation of the female gender). Kalloway comments:

I've seen quite a few stories where one character will talk about being a substitute woman or taking a woman's role, but that's all been in dialogue and through fear that their partner would leave them. I like my pretty men being, y'know, men. There's such a strange habit, especially in fanfic, of making one partner suddenly submissive (which leads to a lot of pseudo-non-con[sensual sex], which [is] worse). It's more about the random out-of-character than a distinct problem with gender roles. Let's not get into that yet – since using 'female' as a term for a submissive, domestically inclined person = fail. Like any genre, there's some good and some bad.

Despite some women disagreeing with how gender stereotypes are reiterated through the male relationships in yaoi titles, fans still continue to engage with the genre. Many women I interviewed discussed enjoying more recent series which depicted both male characters as

masculine and a few mentioned specifically seeking out these titles. Rose comments, “Now I continue to read the rare less dichotomized romance stories.”

As Sydney describes a plot trend to me, the dominant male will sometimes violate the submissive male in the beginning of the relationship (non-consensual sex), but then “something always changes halfway through [and] they always end up together anyway.” The explicit content is used as a plot device to generate emotions and move along the character and relationship development. Sydney elaborates that after “the dom...tortures the poor submissive, he ends up changing because of...the submissive. He [the submissive] always ends up being very, very strong. Able to bounce back and slap the guy in the face and say 'You'll never do that to me again'...and the dom starts thinking 'That's kind of sexy'...and there's a change of heart at the end.” This formula is able to appeal to women on two separate levels, they are able to identify with the submissive male since he displays female gender characteristics and, at the same time, are able to distance themselves from the act of violation since it involves two men instead of a man and a woman. Cameron describes how the gender characteristics of yaoi characters can be empowering and, at the same time, safe:

I think maybe, especially for Japanese women, it might be really empowering to see a male in that sort of submissive type of role that they're put into in their daily lives. Since most yaoi authors and readers are female...I think it's also sort of safe in that sort of way because it's not a woman being dominated or it's sort of a safe way to enjoy that kind of sexual relationship when it's not a woman. If it's not a woman being repressed or forced or, I don't know, enjoying sex, you don't have as much of yourself in it, I guess, when it's just two guys.

This plot device is finished off with a message of idealism for women and men that if they are strong and stand up for themselves then their man will reform out of love for them. Furthermore, Jenkins argues in his research of the slash fandom that by using two male bodies women are able

to depict a truly equal relationship without the inequalities presented by gender (Jenkins 1992). Through these relationships between two men the gender stereotypes and representations that women experience in daily life are stripped away as the two characters both occupy the male gender. However, Jenkins' concept of an equal relationship between men working within the yaoi genre hinges on how the characters are portrayed. When using the seme/uke model, which basically transposes masculine/feminine roles onto two male bodies, this theory does not necessarily "work" as the characters do not act in an equal capacity. Jenkins' argument is more applicable to yaoi titles which portray two men who both act in a similar fashion, be it masculine or a hybridization of masculine and feminine, as the "playing field" is more level in those titles.

The comment I often hear when women describe the relationships between men within yaoi titles is that the feelings seem more "authentic" and "real" than in heterosexual anime titles. As Sagawa, an editor of the company that publishes *June*, comments: "Gay characters have to overcome many social obstacles, thus engendering sympathy and occasional tragedy, and again making their love seem very 'real'" (Schodt 1996:123). Characters in yaoi titles not only have to deal with the normal issues that surround dating, but they must also navigate the struggles surrounding homosexual relationships, which makes the relationship appear pure to the fans. The characters are willing to overcome the obstacles presented by society for each other and their relationship.

With this emphasis on the emotional and authentic aspects of relationships in yaoi titles, women view the characters as being true to their feelings. The characters overcome relationship problems (one partner violating the other) and social problems (the stigma of homosexual relationships), which proves their love for each other and renders the relationship pure and authentic. Based upon these plot themes, the point of the explicit content is often not to simply

show sexual intercourse between two men and arouse the viewer, but to show the mountains these characters are willing to climb in order to be together romantically and show the depth of relationships.

### **Yaoi and the Self: Personal Reasons for Enjoying Yaoi**

In addition to the the major themes I highlight, many yaoi fans have a personal reason that also factors in to why they enjoy yaoi. Each of the three women I interviewed describe personal views or reasons, unique to each of them, that contribute to their enjoyment of yaoi. Monica comments that the relationships depicted in yaoi titles are an “underrepresented portion of society that needs recognition.” Expanding on her personal view of accepting relationships that deviate from the traditional male/female formula, Monica also states that she supports and watches yuri, which is the depiction of female/female relationships within Japanese titles. For Monica, enjoying yaoi is more than a personal preference, it is a statement of tolerance and acceptance regarding marginalized portions of society. While most of the women I interviewed in person are currently involved in heterosexual relationships, all are accepting of homosexual relationships and several of the women identify as bisexual.

For Jordan yaoi is an “escape from everything.” Jordan identifies that one of her reasons for liking yaoi is “the fact that you don't see yourself in it. It's very safe that way.” Jordan expands on this sense of removal by stating: “It's so much easier to talk about two guys getting it on to your girlfriends.” Since neither of the characters are women, it allows for a more objective and comfortable discussion with fellow female fans, which builds a more connected community. Jordan comments that she did attempt to talk “about yaoi with [her] gay friends and it was weird” because they personally engage in the sexual acts depicted within yaoi titles.

Sydney comments that she also enjoys a sense of removal by watching yaoi since no women are involved. While some of the explicit content is graphic, as in the situations of rape, Sydney acknowledges that, at the back of her mind, these acts would be worse if done to a woman. Thus, since it is a man, the occasional violence in yaoi does not deter her from enjoying it as a whole. Sydney follows up her comment by stating that it is not in fact acceptable to violate either a man or a woman, but due to her personal connection of being a woman, she has a preset notion that it is worse for a woman. So while there are several common themes of why women will take part in viewing socially unconventional material, there are individually unique and personal views that also factor into the formula.

While it is important to mention that the issue of gay rights is supported by all of the women I spoke to, it is equally important to acknowledge that participation within the yaoi community is not solely motivated by support for these rights. Women have numerous, intertwined reasons to enjoy the yaoi genre which are not limited solely to political reasons and thus, it is important not to over romanticize yaoi as a vehicle of supporting gay rights. However, it is equally important to take note that the yaoi genre, as it involves acceptance of homosexuality, also attracts people who have a preference for and beliefs which support a more liberal view of sexuality.

### **Legitimized Tastes: The Shota Subgenre of Yaoi**

While most yaoi fans do not view their participation within the yaoi community as transgressive, there is a subgenre of yaoi, shota, which is viewed as less legitimate within the genre. Bourdieu's theory of taste may be utilized to analyze this subgenre of yaoi titles and how the legitimization of taste shapes consumption practices. The shota subgenre of yaoi refers to romantic relationships between prepubescent boys and older men. Shota boys are under the legal

age of consent and these titles may include the topic of pedophilia which, according to Sydney, is “one of the offenses in the real world that people tolerate the least.” Bourdieu's theory of taste acknowledges that tastes are not inherent and inborn characteristics of people. However, people are often distinguished and classified according to their taste (Bourdieu 1979). Legitimate tastes are facilitated and encouraged within the yaoi community through the different methods of consumption. Although not directly relating to class inequality, the legitimization of yaoi tastes as noninclusive of shota represents a misrecognition of how shota may be conceptualized by its fans. This discomfort and lack of legitimacy for shota fans is enhanced through the acceptable consumption practices. While some shota titles may include content that makes the audience uncomfortable, as with the yaoi genre at large, shota titles fluctuate on a sliding scale between containing explicit depictions of prepubescent boys in sexual scenes to boys in their mid-teens being depicted in relationships with older men without sexually explicit content. Thus, not all shota titles are equal and the legitimization of taste which completely avoids shota is reinforced through what is deemed as an acceptable shota product.

While interviewing Monica and Jordan, I asked about the shota subgenre to which Jordan immediately replied, “I'm not into shota at all.” However, Monica pauses and softly states, “I can't say that I don't.” At this point, I have known Monica for six months and discussed the yaoi genre on several occasions. Mildly confused at not hearing about shota from her before, Sydney describes to me in our interview “how no one is going to wear a 'Got Shota?' button or anything and in the actual community online a shota fan is not as likely to mention that they are a fan of shota...[because] there is a history of shota fans getting ripped apart in certain yaoi communities for liking prepubescent boys and older men.” However, the shota subgenre does appear to be acceptable within certain contexts.

While discussing shota with Jordan and Monica, titles such as *Cardcaptor Sakura* and *Kyo Kara Maoh!* were referenced as shota titles that the two did not appear to have discomfort discussing. However, when *Boku no Piko* was brought up by Jordan, Monica immediately replied, “Now that's too shota for me...way too shota.” How are these titles different? What makes the shota in one acceptable and the other unacceptable? *Cardcaptor Sakura* and *Kyo Kara Maoh!* both contain subtextual yaoi pairings and thus, the shota is not explicitly endorsed by the author. *Boku no Piko* on the other hand is an outwardly yaoi title which is officially shota due to the author's intentions. From this, while the acceptability of shota may appear to be a lack of sexually explicit content, that analysis is thrown into question when doujinshi written about subtextual shota pairings is deemed acceptable. Sydney describes the standards under which shota seems to be acceptable:

It seems to be pretty acceptable if it's like *Naruto* where you have the 12-year-old Naruto with his 30-year-old sensei (teacher)...If it's an original series that would be less acceptable than if you bought a doujinshi of *Naruto* and Kakashi (his sensei)...I think it's more acceptable because in doujin anything goes, that's the reason they exist...So I think in a strange way there's an added level of surrealism...I mean it's already not real, but now it's extra not real when it didn't even happen in the original series. So in that case it seems to be more acceptable...[and] because it's a fan product you can always go back and say 'Oh this is just the fan's mind, the fan likes this' or something like that.

Thus, there is a difference in accountability regarding acceptable ways of viewing shota. While the author of an original series is addressing a large audience, the author of a fan product such as doujinshi is creating the title for personal reasons and consequently is predominantly addressing a personal view.

Marx's theory of the exchange-value of commodities is constructed involving the amount of human labor which goes into creating the product (Marx 1976[1873]). Within the context of

acceptable shota products, the amount of labor involved contributes to whether or not the product is deemed acceptable or not. Sydney comments, “It’s extra weird if the original author sat down and made up this whole story and thought about it intently and put all the time and effort into it...It can make you kind of squeamish.” However, if a fan creates a doujinshi which is done relatively quickly and with less consideration of an outside audience, the product is deemed acceptable as it is not done for a living and focuses mainly on fulfilling a personal pleasure for the fan.

A shota title is deemed acceptable only if it is consumed through fan products which emphasize the fulfillment of a specific fan’s personal pleasure and lacks the involvement of extensive human labor. An unacceptable shota title is one which is explicitly a yaoi title and thus, the intention of the author is to convey to an outside audience, through large quantities of time and labor, a message of young boys in romantic or sexual relationships with older men. The genre of shota, in which not all titles are equal, is collectively deemed less acceptable than “traditional” yaoi titles. This is emphasized through the legitimization of “traditional” yaoi titles in which it is acceptable to be explicitly yaoi, intended for an audience, and includes time intensive human labor.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this section I highlight themes and reasons as to why women of the yaoi community are rejecting the normal societal practices of viewing explicit content. Women do not view their participation within the community as “wrong,” but several do discuss how the initial appeal of yaoi was its unconventional nature which made it seem like an “ultimate no-no.” Watching “hardcore” yaoi at a young age is viewed by some yaoi fans as transgressive because the viewer is hiding their participation which makes it appear illicit and, additionally, it seems

the real concern is over adolescents watching sexually explicit content. I also discuss how anime conventions act as a place of spectacle and consumption which renders them a “safe” public place for women. While subculture studies focused on men because they were in the public sphere, this is no longer a justification as women are now occupying the public sphere without concern of their respectability. However, despite this fact, anime conventions still contain several of the criteria of a place which is deemed acceptable for women to visit when they were first beginning to venture into the public sphere alone.

I also discuss the first two major themes that contribute to the reason of why women are watching titles with male/male sexual content. The first theme is that yaoi is not viewed as pornography and the sexually explicit content is not the focus of the story. Therefore, the social abnormality of women watching pornography does not truly apply to the yaoi community. Secondly, building upon the first theme, the point of the explicit content is often to move the story line and character development forward, which makes the sexual content an integral part of the story. The plot of yaoi titles is not solely focused on the explicit content, as in pornography, and the focus is on the romantic and emotional developments between the two male characters as they overcome obstacles, such as violation and social stigma, which translates to viewers as making their feelings more “real” and “authentic” since they overcome so many hurdles to be together.

In chapter three, I will discuss the third theme which focuses on the multiple mediums through which fans can access yaoi. This allows fans to integrate the fandom into their daily lives and often into their sense of personal identity. When something is part of a person's identity they are more willing to act in a countercultural way since it means being true to their sense of self. In chapter four, I will discuss the last common theme which is the sense of community that

provides a strong support system for yaoi fans. The social rituals that take place at conventions invigorate and network yaoi fans. The connections then extend into a more abstract terrain since fans maintain contact through the internet via LiveJournal communities and message boards. The knowledge that there are other women who enjoy watching yaoi as well grants members of the community a sense of place and security.

Through the blending of these four common themes, often supplemented by a personal reason, a foundation is formed for understanding what makes this particular community unique in the way that they openly disregard the normal hegemonic practices of viewing sexually explicit content. While commonly it is men who watch male/female or female/female sexually explicit content without the threat of social stigma, members of the yaoi community are challenging this notion through their open acknowledgment and enjoyment of viewing titles that depict male/male relationships, which often include explicit content. However, the explicit content itself is not truly the point of yaoi titles as most fans see it. The true meaning is the romance and emotional context of the male/male relationships and the explicit content is used to emphasize and facilitate the development of these relationships, which feel “true” and “authentic” to yaoi fans. Lastly, I discuss the subgenre of yaoi called shota and how fans of yaoi, while encouraging for the general public to be more open about alternative lifestyles (e.g. homosexuality), have certain lines that they are hesitant to cross. Some forms of shota are deemed acceptable in certain contexts, while others are deemed unacceptable. Additionally, within the yaoi community, which is relatively small considering it is a subculture of a subculture, fans will “tear apart” shota fans for their enjoyment of the subgenre.

The yaoi community is a site which represents what has previously been neglected by subculture studies. While women were previously neglected within subculture studies because

they were not in public, the same reasoning is unable to be used today as the yaoi community exists within both the domestic sphere and the public sphere. Women are engaging in subcultural practices within their homes by participating in the yaoi community online and then moving into the public domain by attending conventions. Furthermore, the reasons behind engaging in these subcultural practices are not necessarily in resistance to the mainstream, but rather about being different and distinct from the mainstream as a matter of taste rather than resistance. Subculture studies focus heavily on the spectacle and deviant aspects of subcultures. However, while some subcultures may appear to be shocking to outsiders, the participants often view them within a more mundane context. Participation within the yaoi genre appears to outsiders to be scandalous and racy with its sexually explicit content involving two men, but when viewed from the emic perspective of romantic and emotional trials which the characters overcome to be together, the shock value of the yaoi genre begins to fade. Furthermore, the women involved within the yaoi community are not passive consumers as depicted by early subculture studies, they are active consumers who continually recontextualize not only commodities, but also characters themselves through fan works. Rather than view their practices as oppositional or deviant, members of the yaoi community have instead found their preferred genre of entertainment and are establishing their place with other like-minded people who share their distinct tastes.

### CHAPTER 3 – CONSUMING BOYS’ LOVE: THE APPROPRIATION AND CONSUMPTION OF YAOI

Standing in the line for the Yaoi After Dark panel at Anime Weekend Atlanta, I chat amiably with two women I just met. As we approach the door to the panel, I pull out my driver's license in advance to be ready and show the convention staff member who is checking identification to make sure the attendees are at least eighteen years old. The Yaoi After Dark panel is the portion of Anime Weekend Atlanta which is devoted to the yaoi genre of anime and manga. Due to state laws, minors may not be exposed to sexually explicit content and thus, as the Yaoi After Dark panel may include such content, attendees must validate their age before entering.

Anime Weekend Atlanta is held annually at the Renaissance Waverly Hotel and Cobb Galleria Centre in Atlanta, Georgia. While specifically attending the Yaoi After Dark panel for research purposes, I am pleased to encounter two women, Jordan and Monica, who are kind enough to let me participate in their conversation prior to the panel. Jordan, a woman in her early twenties with long brown hair, dyed pink at the tips, hands me a card with characters from a yaoi title *My Paranoid Next Door Neighbor* on it. Flipping the card over, I am bemused by the tip chart listed on the back and intrigued as to why Jordan insists that I accept the card. Jordan explains that, when I enter the panel, I will show the card to the AWA staff member and I will receive two tickets for the raffle rather than just one. This brief interaction with Jordan regarding the yaoi card appeared inconsequential to me at that time. However, hindsight would soon illuminate an analysis of this interaction regarding how commodities are utilized by the yaoi community to facilitate social interactions and build relationships.

At the end of the three hour long Yaoi After Dark panel, the door prizes are distributed based upon a random drawing of the raffle tickets received at the door. Quickly memorizing the two numbers of my tickets, I attentively listen to find out if I have won any of the products sitting on the table at the front of the room. While my ticket number is not called, the woman running the Yaoi After Dark panel, Violane, deviated from picking random ticket numbers to a more interactive strategy. Violane then asks the audience if anyone is a fan of *InuYasha*, a popular anime series. Holding up a dvd case, she asks if anyone needs the first dvd of the series. Violane comments while smiling, "First person to the front gets it!" At 1:00 in the morning, I am quite tired by this point and surprised when several young women enthusiastically rush to the front of the room to claim the *InuYasha* dvd. While I knew that commodities and products had a definite role within the anime community, I was surprised by the emphasis placed on the items within the yaoi community. Later that evening while interviewing Monica, who is also in her early twenties, she refers to the shirt she is wearing as "lingotastic" and comments on how it refers to things only yaoi fans will understand. The t-shirt makes reference to numerous things that yaoi fans engage in that other people may not fully understand even when reading the t-shirt. For example, one statement on the t-shirt is "You read more between the lines than you read the lines themselves, and you roll your eyes at your friends when they don't." Monica encourages me to take a picture of the back of her shirt as it may be important for my study of yaoi. Again, in hindsight, I was struck by how yaoi fans use commodities to display identity, foster relationships, and emphasize their distinctive tastes.

Thus, commodities and products are used by the yaoi community not only for private consumption, but also to make connections with other fans. However, how do these women go about making their purchasing decisions? What factors influence these decisions? Furthermore,

why are tangible yaoi products purchased when virtual commodities are provided via the internet for no monetary charge? How are these commodities used to display their membership within the yaoi community? How is this message obscured by the fact that the general public does not understand it and what does this mean for the yaoi community? Lastly, how do yaoi products function within the yaoi community as a tool to facilitate social networks?

### **Youth Subcultures and Consumption**

Subculture studies often address how commodities are utilized by people within the community. John Clarke adopted Claude Levi-Strauss' concept of bricolage to examine the style of subcultures and how the mainstream meanings of the commodities are altered by the subcultural groups (Clarke 1993). Clarke asserted that the alteration of the commodities and their meanings was primarily related to class as the working class community began to merge into the “class-less realm of consumer culture and mass communication” (Gelder 2007:90). Dick Hebdige also focused on subcultures and their sense of style by asserting that subcultures were, in fact, primarily focused on consumption and aesthetics. Subcultures appropriate commodities, strip them of their hegemonic meaning, and assign a new message to the product (Hebdige 1979:94-95). Thus, the “mainstream” meaning of the commodity is discarded by subcultural groups and the item is given a new subcultural context, such as the use of safety pins as a fashion accessory rather than a functional tool (Storey 2003:135). By assigning new meanings to commodities, youth subcultures are symbolically resisting the mainstream culture and its ideological implications which are transmitted through commercial commodities (Storey 2003:135-136).

David Muggleton's research of subcultures deviated from Hebdige's in the way that he focused on the idea of individuality within consumer culture. Muggleton argued that people are

able to show self-expression and diversity through their consumption (Muggleton 2000). In contrast to early youth subculture studies, a lack of division between subcultures and popular culture were no longer viewed negatively (McRobbie 1994:156). Thus, subcultures were viewed to use and appropriate items from popular culture and redefine them in terms of their individual views.

While Clarke, Hebdige, and Muggleton focused mainly on tangible commodities, contemporary subcultures are not limited to appropriating physical commodities. Michel de Certeau theorizes readers as nomadic travelers who through their active reading of texts are engaging in “poaching” as they either only retain what is pleasurable or “retool” the text into something different (Jenkins 1992:24). Henry Jenkins builds on de Certeau’s work and argues that fan subcultures are unorthodox users of cultural texts through “poaching” (Jenkins 1992:32). Textual poaching is an actively negotiated site where fans and producers approach a text with oppositional meanings (Jenkins 1992:33). While youth subculture studies focus on consumption of goods, the focus remains on how youth appropriate the goods and give them new meanings. The concept of the fan as an amateur producer facilitates a subcultural understanding as this production of “alternative” items is often in response to either lack of “mainstream” attention or disagreement with “mainstream” representations (Gelder 2007:145).

Mark Liechty addresses why youth are encouraged to think in terms of consumerism and discusses how modernity has influenced the way in which youth construct their identity via consumption. Liechty states that “the logic of consumer modernity promotes a material conception of self such that persons are encouraged to purchase their identities in the form of consumer goods” (Liechty 1995:169). However, “an identity built on consumer goods is one that needs to be purchased again and again” (Liechty 1995:191). These consumer goods are

frequently imported from foreign countries and are non-traditional. Thus, consumer capitalism and the accompanying ads, which market the commodities, influence how youth construct their individual identity through consumption (Liechty 1995). The yaoi community is not immune to the use of consumption to construct identity, but their use of consumption and appropriation is not limited to the purchasing of a mainstream identity through consumerism.

With the forces of globalization, American youth are now consuming foreign products with an increasing frequency as forms of entertainment from other countries flow into the U.S. via mediascapes (Appadurai 1990). Anne Allison discusses the rise of Japanese fantasy goods within the U.S. and the preference amongst American youth for these “cool” Japanese products (Allison 2006). While many factors operate within discerning why American youth prefer Japanese fantasy products, Allison cites the way an “animist sensibility percolates the postmodern landscape of Japan today in ways that do not occur in the U.S.” (Allison 2006:12). Commodities are imbued with “life” which continually enchants American youth (Allison 2006:12-13). Furthermore, products like *Pokemon* facilitate “consumer fetishism” as they transcend multiple territories and become polymorphously perverse (Allison 2006:16). Consumers are encouraged to collect all the *Pokemon*, but these enchanted commodities are beyond full capture as more and more products are continually released. While this fascination with Japanese commodities may appear to be fueled by commercialism, Allison argues that these commodities are powerfully speaking to American youth and becoming “a currency for multiple things (identity, closeness, coolness, comfort)” (Allison 2006:17,30). Thus, the consumerist aspects of commodities are not the only factors which determine the meaning of a product.

Yaoi fans are not only consuming material commodities for their intended message, but are also appropriating mainstream products and assigning them new meanings. For example,

fans often engage in textual poaching by reading into an anime series a “yaoi reading” and then produce fan works to support this pairing. In this way fans are not only consuming yaoi, but also becoming amateur producers of it. Subculture studies focus on aesthetics and consumption as the primary focus of subcultures with early studies leaning on the group aspect and later studies emphasizing the individuality involved. However, I argue that the yaoi community, while concerned with aesthetics, does so in part out of the desire to see their preferred character pairings validated. Additionally, while commodities and textual poaching are often engaged in at an individual level, this alone does not encompass what is occurring within the community as women use commodities to “flag” down other fans.

### **Polymorphous Perversity and Accessing Yaoi**

Allison highlights the role of polymorphous perversity within Japanese fantasy commodities and play products in her book *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Sigmund Freud's concept of polymorphous perversity is defined by Allison as “pleasure that...extends over multiple territories, can be triggered by any number of stimuli, is ongoing rather than linear, and invites a mapping of gendered identity that is more queer than clear” (Allison 2006:10). Polymorphous perversity can be applied to yaoi, in that most yaoi fans engage with the genre through numerous mediums, which often overlap or build upon each other. These mediums are both official products (anime and manga) and fan products (fanfiction and doujinshi). The ability to access yaoi through multiple mediums is cited by my informants as a factor in why yaoi, and other anime genres as well, are so popular and bring such pleasure to fans.

The official products and fan products of yaoi are often intertwined with each other and blend together to form the base of the yaoi fandom. Most fans access official yaoi products

through anime, manga, and drama cds. While these official products generally constitute a starting point as the medium for fans to access yaoi, often fans take the official products and morph them into something that belongs to them. Many times an anime series that is not outwardly a yaoi title will be appropriated by yaoi fans. For example, as Monica comments, “I’m a lot more into reading into the subtext of titles that aren’t focused on the yaoi.” Yaoi fans will read into the subtext of a series, such as *Tsubasa Chronicles*, and see a relationship between two male characters, Fai and Kurogane. From there, fans will create products for this yaoi pairing through doujinshi, fanfiction, and fanart. This view of yaoi often extends beyond the scope of Japanese products. As Monica states, “Whenever I’m watching any kind of entertainment it tends to slip in.” Sydney also comments that many people recognize pairings from science fiction or cult shows as classified under the genre of yaoi, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Angel*.

The ability to engage yaoi through multiple mediums, several of which allow the fans to become actively involved with yaoi, is a large part of the reason why the yaoi community and other fan communities have expanded. The internet has a significant role in how fans access yaoi. Scanlation communities are created by fans to translate titles into English that are not licensed in the U.S. yet. A scanlation is when an electronic version of a comic is translated by fans. These communities are non-profit and people volunteer to help translate the text into English and edit the word bubbles. Their importance among the yaoi community is substantial since a lot of yaoi titles were not licensed in the U.S. until recent years. Additionally, message boards for scanlation communities and Yahoo groups provide a consistent method for fans to engage with yaoi. Jordan comments that part of her daily routine is to check a LiveJournal daily community that is devoted to yaoi fanfiction, fanart, and general discussion. At this level of integration yaoi often becomes a part of how people define themselves. As Sydney comments,

“It's more than just something I'm a fan of, it's something I am. That fan is who I am and so it does become easy to integrate it into your daily life.” In addition to the comics and fanfiction, there are material commodities, such as shirts, buttons, and bumper stickers, that are used by yaoi fans to proclaim their membership within the genre. These commodities are yet another territory through which yaoi fans enjoy the fandom.

Each yaoi fan has a different medium which may be their favorite, but the fact remains that there are a plethora of ways to interact and view yaoi, many of which directly involve the fan and allow them to become personally invested with the characters, such as through depicting them in fanfiction and fanart. Being able to access yaoi through numerous mediums creates a deeper connection to the characters. In particular, fanfiction allows fans to appropriate the characters and place them in a story that brings the author pleasure by depicting the characters in a fashion exactly to their liking. Additionally, the more a fan can engage with a fantasy product, the more a personal connection is forged between the fan and the fandom. The stronger the connection, the more the fandom is incorporated into the fan as a part of their identity. Being able to access an unconventional fandom, such as yaoi, through multiple mediums, allows fans to distinguish their preferred method of engaging with the product, whether it be through pictures or text. Furthermore, when something becomes incorporated within a person's identity that person is more willing to ignore societal norms in order to be true to their sense of self. Sydney and Monica both wear shirts that announce their participation in the yaoi community while Jordan has her bag decorated with pins that have pictures of yaoi characters. Each woman outwardly displays their identity as a member of the yaoi community, thus forming a way of engaging others in dialogue regarding yaoi.

### **Consumption Practices: The Logistics of Purchasing Yaoi**

Before fully delving into how commodities operate within the yaoi community, I first want to discuss the logistics involved in procuring Japanese products and commodities. While the internet plays a large role in the proliferation of information regarding Japanese anime and manga, the commodities I refer to within this section are the tangible products purchased by yaoi fans (Leonard 2005). Thus, while the internet may be utilized to facilitate the purchase, the product itself is a physical commodity, such as a dvd or poster. As it is not feasible to address all logistics surrounding the purchasing of yaoi, I will predominantly focus on how the commodities are purchased at anime conventions and what factors play a role in the decision making process while shopping.

As all of the women I interviewed in person attend anime conventions, a common theme amongst the interviews is the purchasing of yaoi at anime conventions. In particular, while at Animazement, Jordan and I spent time shopping in both the dealer's room and artists' alley. As I had not attended Animazement before, Jordan guided me through the rooms pointing out various booths which had items with yaoi products. Animazement has grown quickly the past few years and is spending its last year in the current hotel as the occupancy level is close to being exceeded. This problem was evident as Jordan and I navigated the cramped and crowded hallway that artists' alley occupied. People wait patiently, or impatiently perhaps, behind other shoppers for the chance to approach some booths. Images of popular characters rendered by fan artists hang on boards and strings above the tables. Jordan points out certain artists which have yaoi images and are known for their quality artwork. While I do not recognize all the characters in the images, I take notice of several subtextual yaoi pairings that are pictured. For example, the anime series *InuYasha*, which Violaine had people compete for the first dvd at AWA, had several

pictures of its characters. In one image, InuYasha, the main character, is shown in an intimate embrace with his half-brother, Sesshomaru. As I will argue later in this chapter, yaoi commodities and subtextual pairings share an interesting connection for fans. As Jordan and I near the end of the hallway containing the artists' booths, we approach the small doorway to the dealer's room. The doorway is small and traffic into the dealer's room has slightly bottlenecked outside the door. Finally making it through the doorway, Jordan and I make a sweep throughout the small dealer's room as she points out key booths with yaoi items. However, as we wind our way through the room and amongst the crowded booths, I'm surprised to see a lack of overt advertising for yaoi.

Jordan ironically comments that many people will purchase a badge at Anime Weekend Atlanta simply to gain access to the dealer's room in order to purchase products and thus, spending money just to spend more money. I approached the dealer's room at AWA in September 2008 and flashed my badge to gain entrance. In contrast to Animazement, the dealer's room at AWA is held in a large, warehouse style room and filled with vendor booths where attendees may purchase products related to Japanese anime and manga. I have been in the dealer's room at AWA many times before, but on this trip I wandered with the primary goal of looking for yaoi products and how they are displayed. I heard from my informants that in 2007 the AWA dealer's room had a large amount of yaoi items, much more so than the previous year. Intrigued by this information, I set about looking at how prevalent the yaoi booths would be. While the yaoi commodities displayed did not represent a majority of the items for sale in the dealer's room, there was a noticeable presence of yaoi with at least three booths devoted solely to the yaoi genre. Additionally, numerous booths had yaoi themed products for sale along with their other anime products, such as with t-shirts, manga, or dvds. Drawn in by a large, rainbow

colored flag with the word “Yaoi” written in bold font, I approached a booth and saw numerous lapel pins displayed. In particular, the one that read “Please don't tell my father what yaoi is!” elicited a chuckle from me. Unable to resist, I paid for the pin, which was thankfully an inexpensive impulse buy. As opposed to Animazement, I did not need a guide to the dealer's room at AWA to locate yaoi products. Rather they were overtly displayed with large, colorful banners that drew my attention.

A common theme regarding consumption practices at anime conventions centers around setting a specific monetary limit to spend in the dealer's room. Jordan comments, “The dealer's room is depressing when you have no money!” Sydney and Jordan both describe bringing cash to anime conventions and leaving their credit cards at home. Having a credit card in the dealer's room is viewed as “bad” since it does not limit monetary expenditure in the way that cash does. Jordan comments, “This is all I spend my money on...other than computer parts...I usually make a list beforehand of the things I need to buy...because you can walk two steps into [the dealer's room and] you've spent all your money without getting anything you really wanted. It's a candy store!” While the average amount of money spent at a convention fluctuates (from around \$50 up to the \$300 range) between the women, each referred to conventions as a place to find difficult to locate products and allocating a specific amount to spend beforehand. Sydney comments:

I kind of just swing through...and see if there is anything that freaks me out and makes me go 'Ahh!'...When you have a fangirl moment that's when you pull out the wallet...I'll go home with a pencil board or a plush toy or something because I just absolutely flipped my shit when I saw it. That's kind of how I decide if I really want it or not is how much it makes me squee on the inside.

Claire describes her purchasing habits at conventions:

I've gotten a little bit smarter about shopping at conventions, I like to think. If I can get something at a convention I usually go in now knowing what I want to buy and knowing what price it is online.

So if I see something and sometimes it's just a matter of two bucks then it's worth it, but usually I know what I want to buy and I have a certain budget in mind and if I can save twenty dollars by buying it online then that's what I'm going to do. And sometimes there are just random finds that I wouldn't know how to search for on eBay...but I find it in the eighteen and over box and it looks pretty amazing so I just have to get it...I will buy anything associated with my favorite show of that time. That's generally how I work. However, I usually pick such obscure shows as my current favorite...that finding stuff for it is close to impossible. I bought a *Gankutsuo* keychain and I bought a *Gankutsuo* artbook online because I couldn't it at a convention.

Thus, my informants comment that it is important to set a monetary limit so that they are able to purchase items they really want instead of spending money fast and not getting items they really desire. This tendency to get carried away in the dealer's room is not limited to the yaoi genre and, in fact, I have fallen prey to impulsive spending in previous years.

The “fangirl” moment seems to be an indication of when a commodity has been located which makes a deep connection with the fan. As Sydney described, when she finds an item that makes her have a visceral reaction she knows that she really wants the item. This fangirl moment is something that is often criticized and nostalgically discussed. The yaoi genre has a reputation at anime conventions, cited by yaoi fans and non-yaoi fans alike, for the frequent fangirl reactions which happen in the dealer's room and are sometimes noticeable. Nuriko describes a situation when she had an emotional reaction to finding a yaoi product, “When I first beheld the first volume of *Kizuna* in English, I'm afraid I squealed like those vapid twits I normally despise. But normally I'm much more sedate...but you'd be excited too, if you'd have been waiting for something for over six years.” Jessie states, “I get really giddy and jump up and down and squeal. This reaction is usually if I find something I have been looking for or see something by one of my favorite authors.” While a lot of fangirl moments are demonstratively excited displays, some people describe more contained situations. For example, Blair explains, “I get

very happy and excited when I find a manga I really love available in the bookstore, through it's a fairly quiet and contained...kind of excitement." Thus, these commodities are important to fans and forge a connection on a personal level and are not meaningless items without forethought and meaning attached.

Additionally, Claire comments on how she often purchases items in the dealer's room at conventions for friends:

If one of my friends couldn't go to the convention...normally they're, of course, a fan of yaoi so I'll try and find something for them and give it to them. I found this amazing drawing of a naked Sesshomaru for Ann at this one convention that I just had to buy her. She wasn't able to attend and she like profusely thanked me for like an hour. It was really provocative and really well drawn...If I know someone likes a certain pairing....I will pick something up for them if they're not there already. But I don't do that much anymore because most of the time if I'm at a convention my friends are able to attend.

Thus, while most commodities are purchased at conventions for personal consumption, there are situations where fans will purchase items for friends as a sort of souvenir for not being able to attend the convention. Claire also describes how she will often spend more money on a product if it for a friend rather than for herself. A yaoi commodity rendered as a gift is then not subjected to the same set of rules per say as a commodity intended for the self.

However, the dealer's room is not the only place within an anime convention to purchase commodities. Artists' alley is a section of the convention where people may rent tables and sell their artwork. Monica and Jordan describe artists' alley as a place to find commodities for less popular Japanese anime and manga titles. Commodities which are less likely to be merchandised by larger companies, such as bumper stickers, may also be found in artists' alley. Commodities which are purchased at conventions for these women are frequently manga titles and rare items, such as lapel pins. Conventions are cited as a place to purchase manga titles that are difficult to

locate since the publishing companies have booths and often have older titles in stock. Thus, the women I interviewed have specific types of commodities which are purchased at anime conventions and plan the shopping trip. Jordan utilizes a list composed before the convention to prevent spending too much money. While Sydney will bring cash into the dealer's room and once it's spent, she will refrain from entering the dealer's room again. As anime conventions only occur once a year, money is often set aside and saved with the intention of purchasing commodities at the convention which cannot be found elsewhere or for a lower price. Consumption practices at anime conventions are planned and organized beforehand by consumers to prevent overspending and to ensure that valued commodities are procured over less personally valued products.

The women I interviewed did not describe their consumption of commodities as mindless and without restraint. Rather shopping is a thought out process which takes into consideration numerous factors. In particular, the change in disposable income influences consumption practices. Monica comments, "I'm out of the stage now when I have disposable income" so the items she purchases are selective and thought out. Another factor taken into consideration is the space which the commodities will occupy. Jordan states, "I love getting the plushie things [similar to stuffed animals]. I try not to anymore because it will take up so much space on my bookshelf. You have to think about the space in your house." Thus, women within the yaoi community are not consuming commodities without considering factors such as monetary expenditure, disposable income, spatial occupation of products, and personal preference. These commodities are utilized by yaoi fans to construct identity and facilitate socialization and thus, in most situations, are thought out, planned, and rationalized before consumption. While the commodity may be purchased based on a personal reason (e.g. love of a manga series), the

product may then be used to socialize with friends through lending and group events, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

In addition to anime conventions and the internet, yaoi products are now available at large bookstores, such as Borders. This increasing availability of yaoi is met with positive and also hesitant responses from my informants. While many are pleased with the relative ease of purchasing yaoi manga at their local bookstore rather than waiting for a convention or buying it online, many also have reservations about the trustworthiness of the translations. Sydney states:

Some publishing companies we just don't want to buy from because they're terrible. They're not doing it right...[by] altering the manga and removing pages...Some of the companies when they first started out were mosaicking sex scenes or removing them completely like a bondage scenario or something the mainstream wouldn't like so they were removing those pages...No one does that anymore. If they did their heads would be on stakes, you know? And the authors will get up in arms about it so now the fans feel really comfortable saying we're going to boycott you.

Monica cites a lack of faith in translations as a primary reason she purchases manga in Japanese and prefers to read them in the original Japanese. However, untrustworthy translations may often fulfill a comedic role for yaoi fans in a social setting, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Alexis comments that “more exposure is good because the social mores in this country definitely need to [be] more flexible and open. Having books that could do that be more openly available is definitely a start.”

Translations and edited content are not the only comments women have regarding yaoi in local bookstores. Lisa comments on the increasing availability of yaoi at Borders, “I believe it is relatively good, as it exposes others to it. But they should put bigger warnings on the back.”

Blair also comments, “It is a good thing I think. The more exposure they have the more it will be bought. But Borders' staff needs to learn to start carding people based on the ratings of these

books.” Catherine also expressed concern about underage readers picking up yaoi manga with sexually explicit content:

A lot of titles feature very explicit content, which I don't believe should be made available to readers below a certain age. In some cases (especially of manga), these volumes are plastic-wrapped (although I'll note that titles of the non-yaoi variety with similar sexual or explicit scenarios do not receive the same treatment), but that does not stop an unwary bookclerk from selling the book to a too-young reader.

Sydney also comments on the need to wrap some manga in plastic since they display graphic images, “I think that is important...I think there is an especially good need for those titles to be wrapped because the parents don't know and the kids are going to go pick up this title and open it up to see raging sex on a two page spread. Not a good idea...Sometimes it aggravates me because I can't see what it's about and I want to see what the art looks like...but I see the need or it.” As mentioned in chapter two, women within the yaoi community will set some “boundaries” while pushing others. The women I interviewed identified the need for “hardcore” yaoi titles to be wrapped so that people who are “too young” will not accidentally open one. Despite most of the women I interviewed discovering yaoi at an early age (e.g. twelve years old), they view some of the content as too mature for young viewers. In hindsight, they reflect that perhaps they should not have read or watched such mature yaoi titles, but were able to since others (e.g. parents) did not understand what it was they were viewing. As these women matured and transitioned into adults, they are able to look back and acknowledge that explicit content should be monitored more closely when available to adolescents. It is worthy of note that when these women were at the age they deem inappropriate for viewing hardcore yaoi, it was before yaoi manga and dvds were readily available in the U.S. Most of their exposure was through imports from Japan and the internet. Therefore, their exposure to hardcore yaoi at an early age looks differently than the

exposure of contemporary youth to these titles (e.g. easily purchased at Borders).

There are reservations about the quality of yaoi titles published in English (the authenticity of the translation and content) and the need for stores to be aware of what they are selling (plastic wrapping manga with sexual content and only selling titles to age appropriate individuals). However, the benefits of having yaoi manga readily available and gaining exposure seems to outweigh the reservations as every participant cited the increasing availability of yaoi titles in bookstores like Borders as a beneficial and desirable move.

### **Why “Consume” Tangible Yaoi Products?**

While the internet plays a large role in the expansion of the Japanese anime and manga community within the U.S., there remains a dedication to the purchasing of tangible products amongst some yaoi fans. Copyright infringements and the distribution of anime and manga titles which are translated by fans had a large role in the proliferation of titles within the American market (Leonard 2005). Then why spend money to purchase a product when it may be available online for free? Many anime series and manga are available online for download, albeit some of these are copyright infringements once the series has been licensed in the U.S. Sydney states, “The scan is nice and all, but there's just something about having the physical product.” The purchasing of tangible yaoi commodities rather than simply downloading items, such as image scans of manga, is conceptualized by some fans as supporting the author and, in some situations, as a physical validation of a subtextual yaoi pairing.

Sydney describes how some yaoi authors in Japan are highly sensitive to their fans and foster a loyal following through their respectful and friendly treatment of fans. A yaoi author, Miyamoto Kano, “wrote a short story about two of her characters after the manga ended and she posted it online for all the fans to read.” Sydney views her purchasing of yaoi products as

“showing support to the author who you consider to be kind of like a friend.” Thus, through her purchasing of yaoi products, Sydney is facilitating the proliferation of more yaoi titles by the author. Additionally, due to the reciprocal relationship which the fans and the authors engage in, the fans are encouraged to purchase the commodities to show their support and financially allow the author to continue creating yaoi titles. Jordan agrees with supporting a series: “I do try to make a point to go out and buy the things I think are so amazing. So I can say this is amazing, I have it, and you should watch it.” In this way the purchasing of tangible yaoi products is used to facilitate and recruit fans by lending titles to others. While Sydney feels a personal connection to the author that motivates her to purchase their work, Jordan believes in supporting a good series by purchasing the product and raising awareness of it by lending items to others. While these are different reasons for purchasing tangible yaoi commodities, both still operate under the idea of “supporting” the yaoi genre, be it through the author or the series. However, this does not ring true for all yaoi fans. Monica comments, “Unlike Jordan, I don't feel that loyalty to support the series.” While Monica's motivations regarding the consumption of yaoi products is not to support the author, she does purchase tangible products just for reasons individual to herself that are not dependent upon the series or the author and more so about her personal preference.

As I mentioned earlier, subtextual yaoi pairings and tangible yaoi products share an interesting connection. Since many yaoi titles are subtextual readings of popular series, finding tangible products which promote that subtextual yaoi pairing are viewed as a way of validating the pairing. The subtextual and unorthodox reading of a title is enhanced when fans become amateur producers of media themselves (Jenkins 1992). Sydney comments, “You watch [subtextual yaoi titles] and you're like 'Come on! Just make out. It'll solve all your problems if you just make out.' Then they do in a doujinshi and you're like 'I knew it!'” Thus, the purchasing

of a tangible yaoi commodity may act as a form of validation regarding a personal perspective. This also facilitates a sense of camaraderie amongst yaoi fans as their interlocking views regarding subtextual yaoi pairings build a sense of authority and validity about the authenticity of the pairing. Some titles are less popular and lack merchandising which makes finding tangible products difficult. Monica enjoys the series *Haru Toki*, but is usually unable to locate merchandise as it is not terribly popular. However, at Anime Weekend Atlanta, Monica found a woman in artists' alley who draws fanart for the series. Excited at the discovery of a form of tangible merchandise for the series, Monica commissioned a drawing from the artist of her preferred pairing in the title. Even when confronted with difficulties in locating tangible products, fans are able to find ways to locate physical products which represent their preferred yaoi pairings.

In addition to these reasons, physical commodities are used to “show what kind of fan” people are in regards to specific series, characters, and authors. Tangible yaoi products allow fans to display their preferences more easily than virtual commodities which may only be viewed online. The support of an author who is viewed more as a friend than a nebulous, removed authority and the validation of subtextual yaoi pairings facilitate the purchasing of yaoi products for some fans. While the consumption of yaoi commodities is often tied to personal and unique preferences, these themes highlight why some yaoi fans prefer to purchase tangible commodities rather than only collecting online items at no monetary charge.

### **The Social Skin: Yaoi Commodities as Demarcating the Self**

On the day I interviewed Monica and Jordan we met for an early dinner near Monica's apartment. Leaving the restaurant, I got into my car to follow Jordan to Monica's apartment in order to conduct the interview in a quiet setting. I flicked on my rear windshield wiper because

of the light rain and noticed in my rearview mirror that the rear bumper of Jordan's car displayed numerous bumper stickers. While driving behind her, I was excited to see that most of the bumper stickers pertained to yaoi. Terence Turner describes the skin as a natural boundary between the self and the social sphere. Furthermore, the adornment of the body may be read as a text by other people which marks identity and membership within a social group (Turner 1993). I argue that yaoi commodities are used by fans to distinguish their participation within the yaoi community.

However, the “social skin” which Turner discusses is not limited to the body within the yaoi context as evidenced by Jordan's vehicle. Jordan comments, “Now that I have a car I'm like 'I need to deck out my car!' So I got all my bumper stickers at artists' alley.” Within this context the social skin which communicates identity and marks membership within a group is not limited to the physical skin, but can be expanded to encompass the vehicle in which a person may spend large amounts of time. Thus, membership within the yaoi community is continually communicated via the adornment of the vehicle, with or without Jordan's occupation. When discussing the ways in which women within the yaoi community use commodities to mark their status within the social group, it is important to note that doing so is not limited only to the physical body, but may also encompass sites such as vehicles and even internet profiles on websites.

Mendoza-Denton's study concerning cholas, Latina gang girls, discusses how commodities such as make-up are used to mark their difference from the mainstream culture and display membership within a community (Mendoza-Denton 1996). Commodities are utilized by the yaoi community within a similar method. However, the intention of the display is less about promoting an opposition to the mainstream and more centered around utilizing commodities in a

way that allow yaoi fans to identify each other. In particular, lapel pins have a strategic role in facilitating the identification of fellow yaoi fans. Sydney describes the use of buttons (lapel pins) within the area of conventions and outside:

That stuff is really cool like those little buttons with the corncob on it...Those especially when worn outside a yaoi convention [will not be understood]...The general convention isn't going to realize what it is [and]...you'll be surprised at how many people have no idea what yaoi is...even hardcore anime fans. But finding another yaoi fan, like a blatant yaoi fan with buttons and bumper stickers, they'll just congregate together and be like 'Oh my god, I have that button!' or something like that. They will pick each other out of a crowd and approach...based on pins...which is like a badge. In the general population, you just wear the button or have the bumper sticker just because...[since] it's highly unlikely that you're going to be in the supermarket and someone is going to be like 'Oh, I totally love that series' or 'Oh, the corncob scene! That's a classic!' I never have. Mostly it's for conventions.

Thus, while the buttons are used to mark status as a yaoi fan, the message is obscured in translation to the general public as the “lingotastic” language of yaoi is not understood. The text which the body communicates is not fully understood by the outside culture and this miscommunication is recognized by yaoi fans. Therefore, while the buttons display difference and mark yaoi fans as part of a social group, this is not fully transmitted and consequently loses part of Mendoza-Denton's arguments regarding the demarcation of difference. The marking of the body via buttons as part of a different social group is not fully about opposition to the mainstream as the dominant culture does not understand the message and thus, may not recognize yaoi fans as “oppositional.” For example, Claire describes how she put a pin of a yaoi character, Ray, on her employee nametag:

My Ray pin, one that I really liked a lot, I actually...we had these plastic, like really thick, nametags at work, where I used to work at Eckerd....and I actually forcefully embedded my Ray pin into my employee nametag...Just because I felt like it gave me something...it gave me a different look than just the Eckerd shirt

and the khaki pants and the nametag. I did feel like it was a way to show 'Hey, I like anime' without anyone really questioning it probably. They'd probably just be like 'What is that?'...I actually did have one or two customers know what it was. They were like 'Oh, that's Ray isn't it?' and I was like 'Yeah, how do you know?!' I was very shocked anytime anyone recognized it. It only happened like twice.

While the specific message may not be transmitted to the mainstream public, there is still an awareness that the pins and physical demarcations are “speaking” in a language which non-yaoi fans do not understand. However, Sarah describes one experience she had where her yaoi t-shirt caused her social discomfort when its message was “discovered” by non-yaoi fans:

So one friend of mine bought me a t-shirt that...has the kanji for 'watashi' [I in Japanese] and a big heart and then it says in kana 'yaoi' and it's funny on two levels, which is why he bought, he's a linguistics major. It's funny because 'ha, ha' I love yaoi, but it's funnier because Japanese word order doesn't work anything like that so it's entirely nonsensical is Japanese...So it's funny. So one day I had like no laundry clean. I have just this shirt and I'm in this one class with seven people and I figure 'There are seven people in that class, no one is going to be able to read my shirt.' Yeah, someone read my shirt...So, someone read my shirt and then someone else was like 'What does that say?' and it just came out. I wasn't going to say anything, but the other person told him what it was and everyone was just like [Sarah has a look of shock with her jaw dropped]...I'm sorry that my facial expression can't be recorded, but it was looks of horror and 'You're clearly the world's largest pervert. I wish I didn't have to sit this close to you in case I catch huge pervert from you.' And I had to continue to take that class until the end of the semester...I had made a point of never wearing that shirt anywhere, it just hangs in my closet, and it's funny, [because] I don't wear it, but the one day because of laundry that I end up wearing it...someone knew.

While it is not often that yaoi commodities are “read” by the public, it occasionally happens and can have positive or unpleasant side effects. Sarah had made a point to not wear the shirt in her daily life since she did not want to advertise her preference for yaoi to the general public.

Ironically, the one time she wore the shirt in public its message was discovered and conveyed to

the whole classroom, which caused her social discomfort. Thus, some yaoi fans do not want to display their participation within the community in all social contexts while others enjoy doing so. In this way, yaoi fans are able to distinguish themselves as distinct from the mainstream through physical demarcations while still operating within the public sphere.

Jordan is motivated to display pins and buttons for explicit reasons: "I call them flags. My pins are just like flags [and used] to flag people down who are also into [yaoi]...One of my friends said, 'You make a lot of friends very easily...because you wear your interests very overtly.' When people are like, 'Oh! Your purse is awesome!' I'm like, 'Yeah, it is. We should talk!'" When a person positively comments on Jordan's yaoi pins she is able to ascertain that they are most likely familiar with yaoi and, additionally, a fellow fan. Through her display of pins, Jordan is able to find other yaoi fans both inside and outside of anime conventions. Blair comments, in regards to pins and t-shirts, that she will "usually only see those things at conventions." Cali states, "They play the role of an out-loud statement, like when a girl or boy are wearing a yaoi shirt at an anime con. They can know another yaoi-lover by the commodity." Rose reflects that certain commodities have roles in certain contexts, "It depends on the place. I think t-shirts, pins, etc. are more obvious at cons because more people are comfortable showing off their interests. Yaoi pins, or other small items, however, are useful to have around so other fans can find each other outside of cons." Lisa also comments, "I make my own pins and wear them on my purses and coats. They are discrete, so I wear them everywhere." Additionally, Nuriko discusses the different contexts in which various types of commodities are used:

T-shirts are popular at conventions...but not as popular as they could be, since people tend to be embarrassed to wear ones with yaoi images on them in public. I do it all the time, but I'm pretty secure with myself and my perversions. Strangely enough, t-shirts with slogans tend to be way more popular than picture t-shirts. Don't ask me why these should be less embarrassing, but

apparently they are. I've never seen any enamel lapel pins of a yaoi bent for sale, but if I ever did (and the skies fell and it was of a character from a series that I actually like), I would snatch it up so fast it would make your head spin. I've sold slogan buttons at conventions before, and they actually sell very well. And then, of course, there are the iconic 'Seme' and 'Uke' shirts and buttons. I have multiples of these...and I'm sure I'm not alone.

The commodities that are used to demarcate the body as a yaoi fan are dependent upon the social context and the style of the commodity itself. As Nuriko comments, the difference between images versus text is considered by fans before purchasing, or wearing, products.

While Monica, Jordan, and I were at Animazement, we spent time in a viewing room that showed yaoi titles, both subtextual and official. During one of the breaks, while we waited for the convention staff to set up the projector and start the show, we moved seats as the front row was vacated. Settling into our seats at the front, I noticed that several people were sitting on the floor at the front of the room. The show we had just finished watching, *Vampire Knight*, is a subtextual yaoi title and the show the staff was prepping was *Junjou Romantica*, an outwardly and explicitly yaoi title. Thus, not all people located in the viewing room were necessarily yaoi fans. Jordan wore a yaoi-themed t-shirt and as we waited, a young woman sitting on the floor close to Jordan noticed her shirt and asked what it said as only half the lights in the room were turned on. Jordan and the woman chatted amiably while waiting for the show to start, discussing yaoi purchases from the dealer's room and artists' alley. In this situation, Jordan's shirt served as a conversational ice breaker which allowed the woman to identify Jordan as a fellow yaoi fan and thus, strike up a conversation.

Despite the positive effects of displaying membership within the yaoi community through commodities and the social skin, not all experiences are beneficial. Monica expresses discomfort with displaying her membership within the yaoi community to the general public: "I don't really

like displaying myself out there. In high school I had this great purse and it had pins all over it and they were awesome, but I got a lot of flak for it...and so they were constantly harassing me for all my pins because they were all subversive and so I don't really like being harassed for things like that." High school was three years ago for Monica and she now attends a college where it "is the perfect place to wear that sort of stuff." However, she still refrains from displaying her status as a yaoi fan: "I get paranoid that people look at my pins and bumper stickers...So I try not to put myself out like that...[and] I don't really buy a whole lot in the way of pins anymore because I don't have any place to put them now that I don't use that purse." Monica's consumption practices regarding yaoi are shaped and influenced by the larger social context within which she lives. Negative reactions from classmates in high school prompted her to discontinue the use of "flags" outside of anime conventions and consequently prompted a shift in her consumption practices.

While some yaoi fans, such as Sydney and Jordan, outwardly display their membership through commodities used to decorate the social skin, other fans like Monica refrain from doing so in reaction to previously negative encounters. Thus, it is important to realize that displaying membership within a community via the social skin may leave a person vulnerable to the general public. The reading of the text created by the social skin may be misinterpreted by outsiders and cause social conflict which then influences how a participant will code their membership within the community. Furthermore, Sydney comments, "I have a tattoo of *Fullmetal Alchemist* [a subtextual yaoi title] on my back...[that] people can see so I don't really care if they know." Different yaoi fans have varying degrees of comfort with displaying their membership via commodities and the social skin. However, each woman I interviewed acknowledges the use of commodities to adorn the body and its accessories to demarcate their status within the yaoi

community. The larger context of how and when these commodities are utilized to adorn the social skin is the conditional and personal aspect of the display.

### **Socializing Through the Consumption of Yaoi**

The consumption of yaoi products is not a solely individualized and isolated practice. As Miller argues, shopping may be a way of not only forming self identity, but also a way of building relationships through commodities (Miller 2001). The consumption of yaoi products facilitates relationships and often the act of “shopping” may be collectively engaged in. While discussing the role of the internet in procuring yaoi titles, Jordan and Monica reflect on how they collectively work together to accumulate all the episodes in a series. BitTorrent and IRC are computer programs which are utilized by fans to download Japanese anime and manga on the internet. Monica comments, “I’m the BitTorrent fiend and she’s the IRC fiend. So between the two of us we manage to get an entire series.” Thus, even the collection of virtual commodities is engaged in collectively.

While watching *Kyo Kara Maoh!* with Jordan and Monica after the interview, I was surprised at how much discussion and laughter occurred during the episodes. Monica's roommate, Brad, even wandered into the living room and joined in watching the episodes despite not being a yaoi fan himself. Within the first few minutes of the show, Monica and Jordan began stating “Tally!” and laughing extensively during specific moments in the plot. Confused, I inquired as to what they were referring to. *Kyo Kara Maoh!* is a subtextual yaoi title and each time the characters engage in a subtextual moment of homosexuality a tally is added. Laughing, Monica and Jordan discuss how at one point they watched the *Kyo Kara Maoh!* dvds and kept track of how often the characters engage in subtextually homosexual scenarios. In this way a subtextual yaoi title is enjoyable to fans as they are able to engage with the commodity and

series together and thus, facilitate discussion. Sydney comments, “One of the pleasures that yaoi fans have is watching a shonen (subtextual or non-hardcore) series or whatever and seeing that possibility for them to be gay...That is a lot of fun because you just go 'Oh my god, they're so gay' and your friend will say 'I know!' and you can go on and on and on.” Thus, subtextual yaoi titles facilitate relationships and through the commodities people engage with each other regarding a mutually enjoyed topic.

Furthermore, the consumption of yaoi products is done not only for the self, but also in terms of gifting. During the interview, Monica and Jordan listed numerous commodities which were given to each other as gifts. Even beyond gifting, the lending of commodities is another aspect in which consumption operates within the sphere of relationships. Jordan makes a comment regarding a *Tsubasa Chronicles* artbook which she purchased at Anime Weekend Atlanta, to which Monica expressed surprise at not having known about. Jordan then replies, “You didn't see that?...Aw, man. I'll bring it next time!” While not an explicit gift, the exchange of the *Tsubasa Chronicles* artbook represents a relationship which incorporates a sharing of mutually enjoyed commodities.

Even commodities which are less valued are used to facilitate relationships and communication. Jordan comments that the “bootleg” subtitles of anime series are “hysterical.” Another subtextual yaoi title, *DNAngel*, was purchased bootleg (e.g. subtitled in China in most situations) and the translation was so horrible that Monica and Jordan created a list of the “ridiculous” statements. “Send the pretzel letter to the unexist thing” translates to actually mean “Send the letter of notice to the police.” While the translation itself is not the important part, it is the amusement and enjoyment even a less valued yaoi commodity brings to the two women as they laugh together. Knowing *DNAngel* myself, I too join in laughing at the amusing and

incorrect translation. Thus, even an inaccurately translated yaoi commodity may be recontextualized and interpreted by fans to facilitate relationships and bonding. As Jordan comments, “The reason you go to conventions is to see other people and be like, 'Hey, I'm not alone!'” Therefore, it is a logical conclusion to acknowledge that the commodities purchased at conventions are utilized to further strengthen and facilitate those human connections.

### **Conclusion**

Literature regarding youth subcultures emphasize a focus on a symbolic resistance through commodities. Individual identity is facilitated through consumer practices and also marks membership within a social group. Furthermore, fans may become amateur producers of media to validate an unorthodox reading of a cultural text. Liechty comments that a consumerist identity must be repeatedly purchased via commodities and, while this rings true, it is not as negative as it may appear. Consumer and commodity fetishism discussed by Marx and Allison facilitate an understanding of the desire of material objects. However, this desire for material commodities and the purchasing of identity via those commodities is not a result of mindless and unchecked consumption. With the productive aspects of textual poaching, yaoi fans are actively engaging in the processes of consumption and appropriation.

Rather, the consumption practices of yaoi fans reflect specific ideas and reasons behind their purchasing decisions. Commodities are utilized within the yaoi community not simply as products to collect, which is promoted by consumerism, but act as ways in which members of the community socialize and “flag” each other down at conventions. Through the social interactions which the commodities facilitate and the identity that is constructed through their purchase and display, commodities are conceptualized by yaoi fans more than mere tangible products. Furthermore, their consumption of these products is positively viewed as it helps to financially

support the authors and facilitates the proliferation of additional yaoi titles. In this way, even consumption may be conceptualized as a form of a relationship. While the commodities are not used to necessarily define in opposition to the mainstream, tangible products are used to locate other fans through the display of an identity that is predominantly only understood by others within the community, while still communicating to the public a preference for something distinct. Through these multifaceted and complex interactions, commodities are utilized by participants within the yaoi community in ways that are highly thought out and serve intentional purposes. The consumption and appropriation of yaoi items allows fans not only to engage with the products on a personal, and often emotional, level which fulfills an individual desire. Fans also use the yaoi commodities, virtual or physical, to establish and maintain friendships that incorporate a shared distinct preference for the yaoi genre. As mentioned before, the yaoi community is less about opposing the mainstream and more about locating a personal and distinct taste (Bourdieu 1979). Thus, consuming and appropriating yaoi items helps women to carve out a place for their preferred taste, both as an individual and as a member of a social group.

## CHAPTER 4 – SOCIALIZING THROUGH YAOI: WOMEN’S SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

While at work one day a coworker, a gentleman in his early 60s, inquired about my research, to which I began to describe what an anime convention is and what aspects I was researching. To my surprise, my coworker then told me a story about how, while on a business trip to Chicago, he checked into a hotel and saw lots of people wandering around in costumes with brightly colored wigs. Chuckling, I commented that he had inadvertently wandered into my research area. Pausing, my coworker smiled and commented that it was definitely an interesting experience. While my coworker was unaware of exactly what was occurring at the hotel at the time, he was able to identify that he had entered a unique space which was being utilized in a less conventional way.

Upon entering the Renaissance Waverly Hotel at the Cobb Galleria Centre in Marietta, Georgia, guests visiting in late September recognize immediately that something is different from the usual hotel atmosphere. From the costumes to the large numbers of people, walking into a hotel where an anime convention is held is a noticeable experience. Expecting the traditional hotel experience of anonymity and quiet, guests are instead greeted with unfamiliar sights of people in costumes and unusually large crowds gathering in the hotel lobby. If bold enough, the hotel guest may ask one of the costumed individuals what event is occurring and learn that people are attending a convention devoted to Japanese anime and manga called Anime Weekend Atlanta. Perhaps this appears unlikely to happen to most people, but with the increasing amount of anime conventions in the U.S., the chances of stumbling upon an anime convention are increasing.

The yaoi community operates on the both the group and the individual level, in that fans socialize with each other and yet still maintain an individual preference and practice for

engaging with yaoi titles. In this chapter I will focus on how yaoi fans socialize with each other, paying particular attention to the role conventions play. I argue in this chapter that an anime convention is an example of Foucault's heterotopia through its fulfillment of the four principles Foucault outlined. Foucault describes a heterotopia as an “other place” which compensates for a lack of something, in this case socialization regarding anime and yaoi, in daily life (Foucault 1984[1967]). Additionally, these conventions also act as places of social rituals, as described by Durkheim, which generate a sense of community through the effervescence the attendees create.

While the yaoi community is a fan community centered around products, such as anime and manga, I continually heard stories during my interviews about how women connected with each other through their enjoyment of yaoi. I will discuss in depth in this chapter the ways in which women socialize through the yaoi. However, this is heavily influenced by the women I interviewed in person as I met them through these social events. As a note, the women I interviewed in person were contacts I made either at conventions or through other informants. Thus, these women were already actively participating within the yaoi community as a social activity.

I received a wide range of responses from my online participants in regards to socializing with other yaoi fans. While many would engage with other fans through message boards and other internet websites, some did not view this as an active form of engagement as they may have been “lurking” or the exchanges fleeting. While I will briefly discuss the role of the internet in facilitating social relationships through yaoi, I will predominantly focus on person-to-person communication between fans, such as at conventions, in person, or through direct communication (e.g. emails or instant messenger). As mentioned earlier in chapter two, it is often when yaoi fans connect with each other on a level of friendship that the genre becomes a

“big deal” in their lives. Thus, I will aim to address the question of how women are socializing within the yaoi community. How do different atmospheres (e.g. conventions or daily life) influence how women engage with each other over yaoi and what does it mean to the participants to socialize with other people regarding the yaoi genre?

### **The Yaoi Community: Imagined or Real?**

Identifying a “community” is a difficult task, which rarely exists in terms of black and white. While I often refer to a “yaoi community” within my research, just what does this mean? Do participants view their personal engagement with yaoi as part of a larger social context? I received a wide range of responses to this question, which varied between a solid “yes” to “not really.” An interesting distinction between whether or not yaoi qualifies as a community is the view of what makes a “community”: a few people having personal conversations or a large group? For the women I interviewed, identifying yaoi as a community appears to largely depend on whether or not online interactions are permissible as a community activity. However, I also received many responses which identify that the yaoi community exists in a larger, more ethereal sense in that while two yaoi fans may not meet or interact personally, they are both engaged in the “community” through the internet, anime conventions, or other social interactions. In these ways the yaoi community may be viewed as a form of Anderson's “imagined community” (Anderson 1991[1983]).

Catherine responded, “Yes. Really, any group of people with a common interest can develop a sense of community, and that is certainly what yaoi fans do. They have varying degrees of interest and enthusiasm, and not everyone has the same tastes in titles, but there is a bond in their love or interest in the genre. There are some exceptions, but most everyone involved is an open, welcoming person, and that makes it very easy to develop a sense of

camaraderie.” Kalloway's definition of a community differs from Catherine's and she views yaoi as “sometimes” being a community as “it's not an encompassing 'yaoi community.' It's still divided by fandoms or pairings or creators.” Additionally, as the yaoi genre becomes more visible and popular, some fans may argue that it becomes less of a community. In response to if she feels there is a yaoi community, Nuriko responds:

Not really anymore. It used to, when the yaoi fans were skulking along the edges of the internet and constantly being called freaks...but now every prepubescent girl and her mother are into it. On the one hand, the increased popularity means I can get more manga in English, which is a definite plus. On the other hand, yaoi has now gained a reputation on the internet of only consisting of screeching teeny-boppers...and the sad thing is that the reputation isn't wholly undeserved. So now I mostly just sit in my own little corner of the world, enjoying what I enjoy, and largely ignoring the rest of the now massive yaoi community.

Nuriko's view of the yaoi community becoming less like a community as it expands addresses an issue that I have heard from my interviewees as we discuss *Borders* and the expanding availability of yaoi products. While yaoi commodities are now more easily accessible, there is a sense of partial loss among fans who engaged in the genre before it became more well known. People can easily walk into a local *Borders* store, visit the graphic novel section, and find a yaoi manga. While this does not lessen the affection and dedication my informants have for yaoi, it does make the yaoi experience less exclusive and perhaps, with time, will render the distinction with which fans identify less noticeable. However, while the community at large may feel less accessible, or “tight-knit,” as the fandom grows, the women I interviewed continually spoke of several close social relationships which were fostered and facilitated via the yaoi genre. I heard numerous stories about friendships which began on the internet or at a convention and then continued into “real” life. As mentioned earlier, I will focus primarily on conventions as sites of facilitating personal relationships and a sense of a larger community. I argue, through the theory

of Foucault's heterotopia, that these conventions act as a place of compensation in regards to a lack of face-to-face interaction with other yaoi fans on a daily basis. Furthermore, the effervescence generated at yaoi events, such as the Yaoi After Dark panel, creates a sense of enthusiasm amongst fans and contributes to the building of new friendships and the feeling of solidarity with other fans in a larger community.

### **Anime Conventions: Auge's Places and Foucault's Heterotopias**

Before addressing the space of anime conventions as a heterotopia, I want to first discuss how the space of the hotel is normally conceived and how the occurrence of anime conventions destabilize these views and renegotiate how the space is conceptualized by guests. The Renaissance Waverly Hotel is an example of Marc Auge's "non-places" in that guests are simply passing through the space on their way to a destination. Most hotels do not have a sense of history or community attached. Furthermore, a hotel is a non-place because it "creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude" (Auge 1995:103). However, a place is comprised of historic depth, traditions, and relations. Thus, when Anime Weekend Atlanta arrives each September it transforms the Renaissance Waverly Hotel from a non-place to a place for guests. Places are "concerned with identity" and attending an anime convention is a way of constructing identity for attendees (Auge 1995:77). Before approaching Foucault's theory of the heterotopia, understanding the hotel in which the convention resides as a place during the time of the convention rather than a non-place is an important distinguishing factor.

Foucault argues that all cultures contain heterotopias and thus, are "a constant of every human group" (Foucault 1984[1967]:240). A heterotopia is a site where "other real sites...found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1984[1967]:239). Foucault uses the metaphor of a mirror to explain the theory of heterotopias in

that the mirror itself exists in reality, but the reflection is an inverted and unreal image of the self and of the mirror. Heterotopias are a tangible site, but also invert principles and behaviors of “normal” culture into counteractions which provide an inverted view of those “normal” practices. Foucault's heterotopias are constituted based on four predominant principles. A heterotopia is a site which embodies and intensifies meanings and beliefs that are circulating within a society, but are not sufficiently embodied in other places. Heterotopias are also identifiable by their heterochronic status in that time is non-linear and measured differently than in “normal” life. Heterotopias also contain a juxtaposition of difference which refers to the containment of multiple incompatible sites within a single place. Lastly, heterotopias contain symbolic openings and closings which trigger a switch in practice and behavior (Foucault 1984[1967]:240-243). Through these four principles, I will explain how Foucault's theory of the heterotopia is applicable to anime conventions.

Japanese animation and comics are increasingly apparent within American popular culture from *Sailor Moon* to *Pokemon* and there is a growing level of awareness among “mainstream” culture in regards to anime (Allison 2006). Thus, the theme of anime conventions which is an emphasis on Japanese animation and comics is already circulating within society. Despite the growing awareness of anime within the dominant culture, as Sydney conveyed to me, it is still possible to be the only anime fan within a group of friends. While there is knowledge about anime, there is not necessarily a corresponding level of participation. In this way anime conventions act as a site where the meanings and ideas regarding Japanese animation and comics are intensified in response to an insufficient amount of focus on these topics within everyday life. Sydney comments, “When you go to conventions it's like an acceptance...and I can just geek out. This is my one or two times a year to just geek out hard.” Anime conventions act

as a place where interests which are unable to be fully explored with others in everyday life are emphasized and encouraged in a social context. Monica states that “everyone [at an anime convention] is very friendly. We're all there for the same reason and even if we like different things we're all family kind of.” The socialization at conventions compensates for the lack of face-to-face interactions with other anime fans during “normal” life and facilitates social interactions. Jordan comments, “I can just talk to this person or this person feels like they can talk to me and I will probably answer them without punching them in the face or looking at them weirdly, which is kind of cool.”

As most anime conventions occur for approximately three days on an annual basis, some attendees will only frequent one anime convention a year due to monetary and logistical limitations, such as travel distance. Thus, the three days during which the convention takes place is further intensified. Sydney states that “for three days these convention goers can just get together and it's like tears of joy [because] they can talk about anime all weekend and just get it out of their system.” Attending an anime convention and the socialization which occurs there in regards to Japanese animation and comics is intensified due to being restrained throughout the year and acts as a sort of pressure release. As Sydney comments, anime is “one of those things you don't get enough of in normal everyday life.” With this understanding, anime conventions fulfill one of Foucault's principles regarding heterotopias in that an anime convention is an intensification of ideas and meanings that are not fully articulated within everyday life.

Another of Foucault's principles regarding heterotopias centers around the idea of heterochronic time that is non-linear and measured differently than in everyday life. In regards to anime conventions the first distinction between how time is measured breaks down to whether a person is at the convention as an attendee or as a staff member. Sydney works at Anime

Weekend Atlanta as a “staffer” and views time for herself differently than how she views time for the convention attendees. As a working attendee of the convention, Sydney measures time by “hour long breaks” which differentiates between her assignments at the convention. For convention attendees time is measured less intentionally and is not comprised of hours or breaks. Monica comments, “I never feel like there's enough time” at anime conventions. This sense of not enough time and not wanting to miss events causes people to forgo their normal practices of eating and sleeping at designated times. In discussing time at conventions, Jordan comically stated the question she often asks herself while at conventions of “Why am I suddenly tired?” Monica chimes in to answer, “Oh yeah! I've been up for the past 28 hours. Yet even when you're up for one or two days straight you're still hyped up. It's all adrenaline.” For three days, normative practices are placed on pause as engaging in these normal activities such as sleeping may cause an attendee to “miss” something. As conventions only occur annually, attendees attempt to make the most of the experience and thus, often forsake physical comfort such as getting a full night's sleep. Jordan comments that “some of the coolest stuff goes on at two in the morning” and sleeping during normal hours would be missed. To counteract the lack of sleeping during standard hours, Monica states that “it's always a good idea to take a nap during downtime.” Furthermore, Jordan states that anime conventions are similar to “a big vacation. There's really no when should you sleep, when should you eat. We'll eat when we're starving.” Hence, time is not measured by standard units and normative practices are displaced from their usual time appointments and scheduled around the events occurring at the convention. Rather attendees shape their day and measure time “by events [and] by panels” at anime conventions.

When confronted with time gaps between events, attendees will decide how to fill the time. Jordan comments, there are “five hours between this one [event] and the next one. Where do I go? Let's check out the dealer's room or artists' alley!” Both of which involve a measure of consumption and commodities. Thus, convention attendees are often confronted with awkward units of “open” time which are frequently filled with consumption as a large part of convention activities facilitate the purchasing of commodities. Despite attending numerous events and forsaking sleep to engage in convention activities, attendees often feel that nothing has been done. Monica comments, “We never feel like we do anything despite the fact that we do everything...I think part of it has to do with the fact that basically a lot of things we do are always in the same room...so for half of the day we're in one room...[and] we kind of lose that time because we're not going anywhere.” During anime conventions time is not measured by standard linear units, rather it is measured in terms of activities. These events do not have a linear progression and may occur at late hours which causes the attendees to deviate from their normative sleeping and eating practices. While multiple events may be attended, frequently there is a lacking sense of time as most activities may occur within the same room. Expanding beyond a singular room, the convention events are located within a bounded geographic location which facilitates the lack of notice regarding linear time progression as participants are moving about within a structure rather than from one structure to another.

An anime convention is a juxtaposition of difference through multiple methods. From the different people conventions bring together to the events hosted, anime conventions are a site where multiple incompatible places are brought together. Anime Weekend Atlanta draws approximately 10,000 people from numerous geographic locations. The fact alone that Anime Weekend Atlanta contains a juxtaposition of different people who would not otherwise meet

makes it eligible for this principle of Foucault's heterotopia. However, the juxtaposing of difference does not end there. Within the boundaries of the convention, numerous incompatible sites are visible. Events at Anime Weekend Atlanta include video screening rooms, discussion panels, workshops, concerts, tables for artists to sell their work, a dealer's room for companies to sell products, and contests, such as the costume contest. While together these events create the larger juxtaposition of difference which comprise the convention, they may also be broken down individually for the numerous incompatible sites that are located within each. However, due to limitations I will focus on the hotel lobby as a specific site of juxtaposition.

The hotel lobby of the Renaissance Waverly Hotel is appropriated by attendees of Anime Weekend Atlanta during the three days the convention occurs. People dressed in their costumes are referred to as cosplayers which is a combination of the words "costume play." Cosplayers will often congregate in the hotel lobby which itself is a gathering of difference as the costumes are individually crafted and often from different anime titles. Thus, "characters" which are normally two-dimensionally rendered are brought into the third-dimension by people. Furthermore, these three-dimensional characters from different series interact within a single site. Cosplayers are not the only social group which venture into the hotel lobby. Jordan comments that she will "just sit in the lobby and watch the cosplays" at Anime Weekend Atlanta. Monica also enjoys sitting in the lobby "because that's where all the cosplay groups meet for photoshoots." In addition to the convention attendees who sit in the lobby and watch the cosplays, guests at the hotel also pass through the lobby to get to their room. The guests who are not aware that Anime Weekend Atlanta is occurring will often appear slightly bewildered at the people walking around in costumes. Due to the juxtaposition of different people and representations of characters through cosplay, Foucault's principle regarding heterotopias can be

utilized to analyze the hotel lobby and its juxtaposing of multiple incompatible sites within a single space.

Another one of Foucault's principles which is used to distinguish a heterotopia is the symbolic openings and closings that trigger a change in behavior. Jordan comments, upon entering a convention "the first thing I notice is...the people who talk very loudly...and people who think they know Japanese." Thus, simply walking into the convention triggers a change in behavior. At anime conventions standard practices of talking at a "reasonable" volume in public are discarded as the convention provides a space for exuberant behavior. The first ritualized opening that convention attendees engage in is procuring their badges from the registration booth of Anime Weekend Atlanta. Jordan states that "the first thing you do at a convention when you first walk in...well other than going to the hotel and putting on your cosplay...is to go stand in the line for getting your badge." This is a symbolic activity which signifies the official beginning of the convention. Beyond simply representing the beginning of the convention, standing in line is "a big bonding experience...for congoers because standing in line takes an hour."

Sydney views the attainment of the convention badge as symbolic of the experience of attending an anime convention. Sydney states, "You put on that badge and this weight just comes off the shoulders and people just light up." Wearing the badge is symbolic of being amongst people who are like-minded in the sense of appreciating Japanese animation and comics. Furthermore, this signifies a change in practice among convention attendees. Monica comments, "I'm a generally friendly person outside the convention area, but I find myself more apt to talk to strangers" while at an anime convention. The end of a convention is symbolically marked by attendees differently. Monica and Jordan both comment that visiting the dealer's room at the end of the convention is a standard practice since the prices will be marked down.

Additionally, leaving the convention is identified by the return to normative practices, such as work or school. Thus, anime conventions are marked by symbolic and ritualistic openings and closings which trigger a change in behavior and practices.

### **The Effervescent Effect: Conventions as a Social Ritual**

In order to enter the Yaoi After Dark panel, I must show my driver's license to verify that I am over 18, a rule established by the convention to prevent minors from being exposed to adult content. Upon stepping through the door, there is another AWA staff member handing out raffle tickets. I flash the card that Jordan gave me and am handed two raffle tickets. Nine rows of 24 chairs are set up facing the front of the room, which has a projector screen set up to the right and a long table at the center for the people running the panel. People file into the rows, sitting as close to the front as possible. Monica, Jordan, Lindsey, and I sit in the fourth row along the right side, near the projector screen. The beige wallpaper and white ceiling gently reflect the amber lighting, casting the room in an inviting glow. Even with 216 chairs available, people are standing along the back and side walls of the room. Once the audience is settled, Violane takes the stage. While waiting in line I heard excited whispers regarding Violane, from what she would be wearing to how she would structure this year's panel. Violane wears a white, loose blouse with a black underbust corset on top of an army green skirt. She tops off her shoulder length brown hair with a green hat that has goggles perched upon it. Her charismatic nature easily takes charge of the energetic room and quiets the crowd. The lights go down and the audience begins cheering "What do we want? Yaoi! When do we want it? Now!" The projector is then turned on and an introductory video montage is played, which focuses predominantly on displaying popular characters from yaoi titles. The yaoi characters are depicted, surprisingly at the time to me, in mostly uncompromising positions. The crowd responds enthusiastically to the

images with cheering, the volume of which depends upon the popularity of the character or pairing.

Before fully delving into the role conventions play within the yaoi community, I first want to address Emile Durkheim and his theory regarding social rituals. Durkheim states that when people engage in social rituals with other group members they experience a sense of effervescence (Erickson and Murphy 2003:90-92). Once the ritual ends and people return to their separate normal lives, there is a sense of longing for the shared sense of community that was enjoyed during the ritual (Durkheim 2004[1912]:92-93). I argue that the yaoi panel at AWA acts as a social ritual for the yaoi community, during which members from the same group converge and create a sense of enthusiasm that transcends the individual level. The yaoi panel is broken up into different segments, which I identify and categorize as either effervescent or not depending upon the level of engagement the segment extracts from the audience. Effervescence, after all, is created through group involvement.

The first portion of the panel is devoted to the “Yaoi After Dark Spankings.” Members of the audience form a line to be spanked with the “Yaoi Paddle.” Gary, a man with close-cropped dark hair, wields the paddle and asks each audience member if they want to be paddled hard or soft. The first few audience members simply request hard or soft, but before long people are replying to the question with comments of “You can't spank me hard enough” or “Surprise me.” The reaction of the audience is a direct factor in this exchange because when a person endures a particularly hard paddling or makes a provocative comment, the crowd responds with an empathetic “ouch” or supportive cheer. The reaction of the audience then appears to influence the paddling participants because once the crowd begins giving an enthusiastic reaction a majority of the participants request a hard paddling or make provocative comments. During this

portion of the panel, the audience is engaged and enthusiastic. Additionally, I felt myself being swept up in the emotions with the rest of the audience, wincing in sympathy and adding my voice to the cheers.

Another segment of the yaoi panel, called the “Dating Game,” is an example of a failed social ritual since it lacked audience involvement and failed to generate effervescence. Four audience members are chosen for this game, three contestants and one “bachelorette.” The four participants are given specific yaoi characters to portray throughout the game, with the “bachelorette” not knowing the contestants' characters. The “bachelorette” asks questions and the contestants answer as their character would. At the end of the game, the “bachelorette” chooses a contestant based on how the character she is portraying would select. The audience during this segment is sedate and unenthusiastic. Most audience members seem skeptical and unconvinced of the participant's character portrayals. Additionally, there is a distinct lack of verbal or visual communication between group members, aside from the four participants. The lack of effervescence is especially recognizable in this portion of the panel after the enthusiasm of previous segments.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable lack of explicit content throughout a majority of the yaoi panel. At the end of the panel, a short clip of sexually explicit content is shown on the projector screen. However, the overall content of the montage is not particularly shocking or lewd. The audience appears unimpressed with the clips and a man sitting near me amusingly comments, “I don't even like yaoi and that was weak!” For a panel devoted to a community that engages in viewing sexually explicit male/male content and, in particular, is known among other anime convention attendees for that content, the video clip and panel are both less focused on the explicit content and more on the community aspect. As Monica comments of the yaoi

community, “I don't know if it's necessarily tight knit because it's so big, but in general when you meet other people who like yaoi...you tend to like those people.” Several women that I interviewed commented on how enjoyable the Yaoi After Dark panel is, in part, due to the other people attend. Claire comments that the people who attend the panel are a “fun crowd” and she often looks forward to the panel because of this view.

This effervescence of social rituals and easy camaraderie that occur among members of the yaoi community at conventions is indicative of a supportive community. Jordan states, “I feel comfortable since now there all these people who like it [yaoi] too.” Viewing nontraditional content is made easier and facilitated by a strong community, which supports recruiting new members. As Jordan explained to me, yaoi fans who begin watching yaoi at an early age may do so because it represents the “ultimate no-no” and initially becomes attractive due to its transgressive nature. While some yaoi fans may have previously viewed their enjoyment of yaoi as a “guilty pleasure,” there is now a thriving community, both in real life (panels at conventions) and in a more abstract sense (through the internet). The community building that occurs at conventions continues into the abstract sense since many yaoi fans will meet at conventions and maintain contact through the internet. A sense of security and support resonates within the community, which makes the socially normative practices of viewing explicit content easier to transgress. After all, as Jordan comments, there is “safety in numbers.”

I looked forward to the excitement that the Yaoi After Dark panel cultivates amongst fans at Anime Weekend Atlanta 2008. Upon entering the room where the panel is held, I am greeted by the first change, which is a new room layout. Although the panel is held in the same meeting room at the Renaissance Waverly Hotel, the chairs have been rearranged to face the short wall instead of the long wall. This creates two sections which each have roughly ten chairs in each

row, with about fifteen rows. With just over 300 chairs in the room, all chairs are occupied when the panel begins and people are standing along the side walls and in the back of the room. The audience faces a long table with six chairs, occupied by staff members. To the right of the table is a large projector screen and a dry erase board. Projected onto the screen is an image of a cat, later dubbed “Yaoi Cat” by the audience, and the words “Yaoi After Dark 2008.” As the crowd waits for the panel to begin there is a rambunctious and energetic atmosphere as people periodically shout things, such as “Penis!” which elicits laughter from audience members.

The lights are cut off as a slideshow begins on the projector screen. The crowd enthusiastically cheers as images of yaoi are displayed. In particular, images of popular characters (e.g. Shuichi and Yuki from *Gravitation*) receive loud cheering and images of comedic or unrealistic yaoi pairings (e.g. George Washington's head electronically placed on top of a yaoi image) also receive widespread cheers from the crowd. At the end of the slideshow, the Yaoi Cat is shown reclining and smoking a cigarette, which elicits laughter and cheers from the audience. This slideshow, as in 2007, contained the only yaoi images actually shown during the panel. However, this slideshow received a much louder response from the crowd, contained more images of the characters engaged in sexually explicit acts, and appeared to simultaneously be making a joke with the inclusion of comedic images. This slideshow appeared to generate more enjoyment from the crowd as people laughed together at the comedic images and showed support of favored pairings through cheers.

As with the previous year, some of the party games failed to capture the effervescence that others garnered. Violaine introduced a round robin fanfic game where audience members would create a story using characters from a yaoi pairing, Yohji and Aya from *Weiss Kreuz*. Violaine would then choose a participant from the audience and give them a word to incorporate

into their contribution (e.g. lollipop or pillow). While audience members were able to participate in this game, for the most part the audience at large remained sedate despite the often racy contributions to the story. For example, when given the word lollipop, a woman had a male character proposition Yohji with the comment “Do you want to suck on my lollipop?”

Ironically, the game which seemed to garner the most enthusiasm from the crowd was a skit game based on the television show *Whose Line Is it Anyway?* and did not involve many people. The game entailed two people acting out a scene as two yaoi characters, Heero and Duo from *Gundam Wing*, and changing the film style as Violaine calls out different styles, such as horror or romantic comedy. While this game only included two audience members, it received a huge response from the crowd throughout the skit. However, while the characters from *Weiss Kreuz* are popular, many yaoi fans cite the show *Gundam Wing* as being their first introduction to yaoi and thus, remains very popular among fans despite not being an outwardly yaoi show. Additionally, the woman who portrayed Duo was dressed as the character, which added another level of enjoyment for the audience as they were able to see the character act out the pairing. The characters engaged in fast paced and amusing dialogue during the skit. When Violaine threw out the style of “film noir” the woman portraying Heero stated, “When he walked in I knew he was trouble.” To which the woman playing Duo contributed, “That was when I took my pants off!” Towards the end of the skit, the woman acting as Duo commented, “It was the beginning of a beautiful partnership.” The woman playing Heero quipped back, “I was in it for the sex.” The crowd continually cheered for the characters and laughed uproariously.

Perhaps rather than needing large numbers of audience members on stage to create effervescence, what is needed in this social ritual is for the audience members involved to show an energy and dedication that the crowd can tap into and thus, respond to with cheers. While the

skit did not involve the crowd conversing with the actors, it did create a conversation between the two parties. As the actors acted in an enthusiastic manner, the crowd responded by laughing and cheering, which in turn encourages the actors to push their performance even further.

Debord argues that in a spectacle the audience has a disempowered view because the performers are in control and convey information (Debord 1999). However, in this particular spectacle the audience does not have a disempowered view as their response is what encourages the actors and conveys if their performance is acceptable or not. Unlike the skit with Heero and Duo, the round robin fanfic game did not engage the audience in a conversation and instead fell flat, failing to generate the effervescent effect which Durkheim describes. What appears to be the main difference between the two panel segments is the enthusiasm shown by the participants. During the round robin fanfic game, the story contributors were fairly sedate in their delivery of the story lines. While this does not mean that their intention was not enthusiastic, I simply point out that the delivery lacked the “punch” that the Heero and Duo skit contained. The audience members portraying Heero and Duo acted energetically throughout the skit, delivering lines in an exaggerated fashion and running around the front of the room. Thus, perhaps the audience felt more so inclined to respond to the Heero and Duo skit because of the level of dedication displayed by the participants.

A new contribution to the panel was a discussion about a yaoi author, Yoko Nitta, who is currently engaged in a plagiarism scandal in Japan. The author used popular ads, such as from Diesel, as “templates” for her manga covers (i.e. her characters would be shown in the poses of the models in the ads with highly similar backgrounds). Audience members were able to add their views on the situation and people appeared engaged in the conversation while remaining fairly quiet while others spoke. Thus, rather than being about laughing and fun, this segment was

about conveying information and finding out what people think about the situation. Sydney, who moderated this segment, encouraged the panel attendees to write Yoko Nitta and encourage her to continue producing yaoi titles despite this scandal. I argue that, while this segment was sedate by comparison to other parts of the panel, it still became a social ritual through the way that it connected the attendees and contributed to the larger discussion of the yaoi genre. While not all segments generate the same level of effervescence, the panel as a whole is social ritual in the way that it connects people in an otherwise often physically isolated community and creates emotions which transcend the individual level. After the panel people are left with a sense of longing for the shared community which occupied that space. As Sydney comments about conventions, “It's one of those things you don't get enough of in normal everyday life.” I myself looked forward immensely to the panel in 2008 as I fondly recalled how enjoyable and welcoming it had been in 2007.

### **Animazement: An Intimate Social Space Created by Yaoi Fans**

My interest in Animazement was initially sparked during Anime Weekend Atlanta in 2007 when Monica told me that while the convention does not hold an official yaoi panel, fans gather unofficially each year late Saturday night for discussion about yaoi. Monica described the unofficial panel as being less concerned with “party games” like the Yaoi After Dark panel and more interested in substantive discussion amongst fans. She also mentioned that her understanding was that the convention was not allowed to host a yaoi panel because it was too controversial. Animazement is held annually in May in Durham, North Carolina. I contacted the convention staff to request permission to conduct research at Animazement and conveyed my interest in the unofficial yaoi panel. I was directed to the convention director who stated that he was unaware of any unofficial yaoi panel. Furthermore, Animazement did not prohibit a yaoi

panel, but rather there was a lack of interest. He commented that the convention held a yaoi panel years ago, but it was met with an unenthusiastic response and thus, not held again since it did not fully mesh with Animazement's family friendly atmosphere. He then stated that he was not familiar with the people who organized the panel and I was welcome to conduct research as long as I followed the convention rules and regulations.

Confused by this response, I traveled to Animazement in May with the hopes of attending the unofficial yaoi event. Upon reaching the convention I met up with Monica and Jordan who told me they had yet to see any flyers for the panel, which usually occurred late Saturday night. However, both women had attended the panel previously and commented that it was always on Saturday night at 10:00pm and by the pool. A few minutes before 10:00pm, Jordan and I headed out to the pool area in search of the panel. Standing awkwardly, trying to figure out if the people sitting by the pool were there for the yaoi panel, Jordan and I conversed as we “scanned” the crowd. Turning to me, Jordan stated that she didn't think any of the people were here for yaoi as they did not have an indicators of being yaoi fans, such as t-shirts or buoyant behavior sometimes exhibited by yaoi fans when together. We waited around for a while and walked around the pool. Disappointed, we left the pool area and headed back into the hotel. I heard from Monica and Jordan that a man usually moderated the panel who dressed up in a Jack Sparrow costume from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. As we were walking through the hotel, Jordan caught sight of the “Jack Sparrow” and headed over to ask him about the panel. He informed us that the panel was going on right now on the grassy area to the right of the pool. Jordan and I took off jogging back towards the pool, enthusiastic at the prospect of finding the panel.

Upon returning to the pool area we headed towards the fence on the right and passed through the gate, which separated the pool area from a grassy area with a few large trees. Settled

on the grass by one of the large trees were roughly thirty people, sitting in a semi-circle that faced three people who were standing. The two women were in their early to mid-twenties and wearing jeans and t-shirts. Both had brown hair, although the slightly taller woman, Erika, had darker brown hair and wore glasses. Cameron, the shorter woman, had her medium brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. Standing next to them was a young man dressed in a gothic lolita style dress. Standing slightly to the right of them was a tall man in his late twenties, holding a handmade sign which said “Yaoi Panel.” The crowd was comprised predominantly of women, but a handful of men were scattered about. The age range was fairly wide, as some of the attendees appeared to be in their mid-teens or twenties while others looked to be in their mid to late thirties.

Jordan and I made our way through the loosely crowded area and sat in the middle of the group and towards the front. I was immediately aware of how different this panel was from the Yaoi After Dark event. While Violaine had the help of a microphone to keep control of the crowd, the three people leading this panel had no such aid. Furthermore, there was more discussion amongst the attendees rather than party games intended to entertain. Discussion was difficult due to people being dispersed and difficult to hear, which lead to multiple conversations often occurring at the same time. While Erika and Cameron attempted to keep control of the crowd, the informal setting created several issues as people vied for the spotlight. Additionally, as the panel is unofficial it is not subject to the behavioral rules that accompanies officially sanctioned panels. For example, if people act in a disruptive manner, Erika and Cameron did not have authority to have the people escorted out. Despite these challenges most attendees seemed pleased to simply be in a setting where yaoi was the topic of discussion.

I took fieldnotes during the Yaoi After Dark panel and did not feel awkward or out of place. However, upon sitting down, I immediately felt that taking notes in such an intimate and friendly setting would seem rude. Thus, as I pulled out my notebook, I decided to only jot down websites and other information that people discussed about where to locate yaoi as I felt that was acceptable. These were the first few changes that struck me between the two different yaoi panels. While the Yaoi After Dark panel generates a feeling of enthusiasm through party games and excitement, the Animazement event cultivates a different sense of effervescence. People shared stories about their experiences with yaoi and the panel seemed to function as a support group. There were multiple stories which had similar themes. For example, the person's parents discovered their yaoi collection and responded by sending them to a religious camp to purge them of their deviance or threw out the yaoi products. Other stories focused on efforts to hide their participation with yaoi, such as by printing fan stories from the internet and hiding them under the mattress or having purchases shipped to a friend's house. The specifics of the stories were different, but each appeared to have a theme of relief at finding others who enjoyed the yaoi genre as well. Although some discussion was met with numerous conversations, such as where to find yaoi, most personal stories were met with quiet listening and sympathetic nods.

Jordan leaned over and pointed at a woman in her early twenties who was sitting up front, close to Erika and Cameron. Jordan commented that her name was Claire and she knew her from college. Claire had shoulder length dark blonde hair and was also casually dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. She seemed to know Erika and Cameron as they engaged with each other frequently during the panel in a casual way. Jordan offered to introduce me to Claire, although she had left by the time the panel dispersed. However, Jordan was also vaguely familiar with Erika and Cameron from school and accompanied me when I introduced myself after the panel.

At this point it was after midnight and I chatted casually with Erika, Cameron, and their friend, John, who was holding the “Yaoi Panel” sign. Before long we all decided to call it a night and I was able to set up a time to talk further with Erika and Cameron on Sunday.

The next afternoon, Erika, Cameron, and I were again poolside as we discussed yaoi. Just as we began talking, Claire arrived and joined in for the interview. As I had not attended the Animazement yaoi panel before, I asked the three women how it was different this year as it was the first time Erika and Cameron ran the panel. Erika responded, “Well, we deliberately set out to be different from previous years.” Cameron added, “It seemed like the last couple of years the guys running it...they're not really into yaoi. They just were there because someone wanted to have a panel. You know, to meet other people that were into it I guess.” Erika commented, “It always started out with 'why yaoi?' and we had to be on that forever because they don't get it.” Cameron chimed in, “I mean if you're not into it [and] obviously if it doesn't click with you, it's a little bit more difficult to understand it...It just got to a point where I was defending my like of this to someone who didn't like it and...I didn't come to this panel to defend my likes and dislikes.” To which Erika added, “I came to share my likes with like minded people...We also thought [since]...we've seen fliers for the yaoi panel in previous years and we saw nothing...We figured that maybe they stopped doing it, maybe they're not here this year, [and]...if they're not going to do it...someone needs to step up and, well, why don't we? Basically, since we've been frustrated with the panel in previous years it added impetus.”

Erika and Cameron commented that the panel often became a discussion about politics and gay rights in previous years. While both agreed that the issues were important, they expressed frustration that the panel was less about yaoi and more about politics. During the panel they moderated there was a good deal of discussion about where to find yaoi online. The third

moderator, who I learned was not affiliated with Erika or Cameron, occasionally interrupted the discussion, such as with references to how he was wearing a dress. In reference to his interruptions, Cameron commented, “I think he wanted a little attention.” As he did not watch yaoi himself, Erika and Cameron theorized that he most likely found the discussion of how to locate yaoi boring. However, many attendees most likely did not find the discussion boring as Erika commented, “We kept having requests 'Repeat that,' 'Spell that for me,' 'I want to write that down.'”

We discussed the topics Erika and Cameron had brainstormed for the panel and I learned that one of the most in depth conversations regarding parents had not been planned. Cameron commented, “That wasn't one that we had written down, but I thought that was a pretty good discussion. Everyone was interested in sharing their stories and being sympathetic to each other.” Erika added, “That's one...of those bonding things.” Referencing the themes from the stories, Cameron commented. “You know there's always the mother who...helps out and watches anime and then there's the father that sends you to military school or something.” Several of the women I interviewed spoke of the openness and acceptance their parents had for yaoi and homosexuality, as I mentioned in chapter two. However, not all yaoi fans experience that level of support from their family. Due to this lack of parental support, it appears that the panel at Animazement is able to serve as a way for fans to connect with others who like yaoi and discuss their experiences in a welcoming environment. While sitting on the grass at the panel, I would not describe the effect as the same as the Yaoi After Dark panel, but I do argue that it was a social ritual nonetheless in the way that it connected people through a shared enjoyment of yaoi and a sense of group support.

Rather than using crowd involvement to generate effervescence, the Animazement panel operates on a different level, which generates understanding and connection through dialogue. While Animazement lacked the uproarious laughter of Yaoi After Dark, it served to connect participants through personal stories and helpful tips on where to find yaoi. As Monica and Jordan had commented to me before I attended Animazement, the panel is a much different atmosphere, but it still brings people together with a common interest and lets people know they are not isolated in their enjoyment of the yaoi genre. Thus, both panels devoted to yaoi serve as social rituals, albeit in very different respects, and allow fans to make in-person connections with other fans in a community that is otherwise predominantly located in a virtual setting.

### **Socializing Through Yaoi Outside of Conventions**

While people come together at conventions and engage with each other about yaoi at panels, socialization via yaoi is not limited to these annual encounters. Based upon my interviews, it appears that conventions and panels are sites of social rituals where many people come together about yaoi. However, women continue to socialize about yaoi throughout the year by maintaining a small network of friends. Monica and Jordan often get together to watch yaoi titles, as I mentioned in chapter three, and use this time to have fun as friends and enjoy the genre. Conventions operate on one level to let people know they are not alone and often connect fans. For example, I have met most of my informants at conventions and now maintain contact with them through the internet. While I have focused primarily on in-person interactions, the internet community for yaoi is a vibrant place that allows fans to interact with each other and share information regarding yaoi. There are several LiveJournal groups devoted to yaoi and a particularly large website devoted to yaoi, which has a highly active message board and yaoi titles available for download. Thus, there is a synergy between online experiences and in-person

encounters as one informs the other, such as with current yaoi titles or topics of discussion.

When I interviewed Claire she mentioned a yaoi themed bachelorette party that was held for her friend, Sarah. The following weekend during my interview with Cameron, she also made reference to the bachelorette party. Later that afternoon, Cameron called Sarah and arranged for her to meet us and do a group interview. During the first few minutes of the interview, Cameron softly told Sarah, "I told her about your bachelorette party," which led to Sarah immediately laughing aloud. Claire described the events of the bachelorette party to me:

The "Pin the Penis on the Bishonen" panel at AWA inspired us to make our own "Pin the Penis on the Bishonen" for our friend's [Sarah] bachelorette party about a year and a half ago. And my friend [Cameron] drew it on this huge cardboard. She actually...was laying on it while she was drawing this naked blonde man and it looked hilarious. It looked very sexual and then she cut it out and made another separate penis out of cardboard. And we played the "Pin the Penis on the Bishonen," but three of us got really good placing on the crotch region. So for the second round we tried to place it as close to the mouth as possible. It was a lot of fun! [For] another part of that bachelorette party, we made penises out of chocolate molds and put them all on a plate because it's not gay unless the balls are touching so we arranged it so that all the balls were touching on the plate. I think we used Hershey's chocolate chips for the chocolate and we found a chocolate mold at some porn store or something...She was really pleased with the amount of gay we were able to get into her bachelorette party...We watched several yaoi things for her bachelorette party as well. We watched *Sensitive Pornograph* and like a couple others...She said she wanted to get married, divorced, and married again just so she could have a bachelorette party again.

The yaoi genre is not limited to the internet or conventions in the ways that it allows women to connect with each other on a social level. As this bachelorette party shows, yaoi is being used by women to facilitate friendships by not only engaging in a genre that all parties personally enjoy, but by using this genre to create memories which can be shared by multiple parties. This distinction for yaoi is coupled with the normal practices for a heterosexual rite of marriage by

incorporating yaoi as the theme of the bachelorette party. Thus, even while engaging in a practice that is common in mainstream society, Sarah and her friends have continued to display their distinction by incorporating their enjoyment of yaoi, which they view, in Sarah's words, "as a happy fun pit [and] really something the girls can do together." In this way yaoi acts a social bond between women that will even carry over into mainstream rites of passage.

Kalloway comments that she met a friend through a local writer's group and learned she was also a yaoi fan. The two of them would "regularly sit at Denny's (a 24 hour diner) and talk all through the night about fannish things, including yaoi." Kalloway also comments, "Most of my closest friends are yaoi fans from around the world. We met on various fandom mailing lists and stay close. We send each other holiday gifts, chat when we can, and generally have a great time." Cameron comments that upon joining the Anime Club at her college, she was able to find other women who also enjoyed yaoi. Cameron describes finding other women to talk about yaoi with, and anime in general as it was a largely male dominated fan group, as an exciting time:

So when I came to school and saw fliers for the Anime Club and...I saw other girls [it] was like "Aaaahhhhhh!" You know, basically, and I mean that's how I met Ann and Claire...and basically like 99% of my friends I stay in touch with now is through our Anime Club...It was just a really great experience to be able to hang out and share. We were always at each others dorm rooms watching anime almost every weekend and week nights...We'd go into the laundry room with our laptops and watch anime and freak people out.

Nuriko also comments that many of her close friendships were facilitated by her participation within the yaoi community. Nuriko states, "I seem to make most of my friends through roleplaying original yaoi characters. In fact, my best friend at the moment, I met her because many years ago, I commissioned her for a drawing of my roleplaying character. She invited me to play with her, and we've been fast friends ever since. Still even playing the same characters,

come to think of it.” Friendships that begin virtually through websites, message boards, and online communities often transpire into face-to-face friendships. Blair comments, “Next month I’ll be attending the wedding of a friend I met through an original fiction community with a yaoi-esque bent (similar types of stories as you’d find in yaoi but with original characters). A current close friend of mine I met through a scanlation group, and I’m friends with a number of other people I’ve met through the group.”

Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the friendships fostered within the yaoi community are not limited solely to interactions within yaoi devoted panels at conventions. These relationships extend beyond the borders of the conventions and encompass the online realm, through which many fans meet and become friends. Connections made online or at conventions may then be fostered by a shared enjoyment of yaoi and then transpire into other social encounters, such as watching yaoi together or planning a yaoi themed bachelorette party. Yaoi fans are engaging in social relationships through yaoi outside the walls of conventions in meaningful and intentional ways which forge friendships between fans and continue to establish a specialized place for yaoi fans.

### **Yaoi and “Others”: Broaching the Topic of Yaoi Outside Conventions and the Internet**

While yaoi is a social activity which is often used by people to facilitate friendships, how are those friendships embarked upon when one party is unaware if the other is receptive to the idea of yaoi? How does the unconventional nature of yaoi limit its potential to connect people outside of conventions and the internet? While I am unable to fully delve into this topic, I want to briefly address why conventions, yaoi panels, and the internet are popular ways that people connect with each other through yaoi. Within these spaces that are dedicated to yaoi, all parties acknowledge why they are there and their enjoyment of the genre. Thus, it creates a more

accepting and less stressful atmosphere for people to connect about yaoi as it is already established that both parties take pleasure in the genre. Additionally, fans are able to identify each other via yaoi commodities that are only understood by other fans.

Kalloway describes a situation of how it can be challenging to broach the topic of yaoi with people as you cannot be sure of their reaction:

I first got heavily into yaoi in college, when I was living several hours from my best friend (who happened to be into anime). Since anime and yaoi pretty much happened to me at the same time, I happily told her about the anime stuff, but held off on the yaoi because I thought she'd think I was stranger than usual. Eventually, not long before I went home for the summer, I got an email from her saying that she would have to try to get me into yaoi, unless I thought it was too strange! We were both into it...but it took a few weeks to manage to inform the other because we were afraid of the reaction.

Even with established friendships, broaching the topic of yaoi can be an uncertain conversation as the other party may react negatively and, in turn, cast a disapproving view of people who enjoy yaoi. Jessie also discusses how she negotiates who to tell about her enjoyment of yaoi: “I do tend to not tell people outside of the anime community [that] I have a remote interest in yaoi. People in the anime community are a little more understanding, but if they are close-minded it will be the same story.”

The women I interviewed had a wide range of experiences with yaoi and non-yaoi fans. Lilah has received less favorable responses from people when they learn of her enjoyment of the yaoi genre and people will respond with comments such as “That's not normal, you need a psychiatrist.” Nuriko comments, “I don't think most people care. But then, it also doesn't come up much. It's not like I pop in *Boku no Sexual Harassment* while random people are hanging out in my living room.” Blair responds, “I don't normally mention yaoi on my own until I can gauge whether a person is favorable to it. With some people I don't mention it at all, some I'll only

mention it in passing, others will jump into full conversations. Most people I've met tolerate it and don't really care that I'm a fan.”

Thus, it is important to understand that conventions and the internet provide a safe space for fans to locate other fans without the worry of whether a person will react negatively. While not all of my informants had negative experiences when they told others about yaoi, many do not bring yaoi up in everyday conversation with people. Yaoi fans often “feel out” people before mentioning yaoi, but with conventions and the internet that need to “feel out” each other is removed and people are able to socialize through yaoi more easily.

### **Conclusion**

Yaoi became a large factor for the women I interviewed when they were able to engage with other people over their enjoyment of the genre. While people will engage with yaoi titles on an individual level and derive pleasure from the genre, they also then use yaoi to participate on a group level and facilitate friendships. These encounters are often less about the yaoi title and more about the interactions which the people have through these titles. The women I interviewed spoke animatedly about experiences with friends that involved yaoi. Socializing through the yaoi genre is not limited to the examples I have listed here, but are the predominant things that I heard throughout the course of my research.

The space of anime conventions is a complex and multifaceted site which requires a critical analysis. While conventions predominantly occur in hotels which are non-places, the hotels are transformed into places with cultural and historical depth during the time of the convention. Furthermore, Foucault's theory of heterotopias may be applied to anime conventions through the way in which they compensate for an underdeveloped portion of society outside of the convention. Conventions are identifiable as heterotopias through the intensification of

meanings within a society, the juxtaposition of difference, non-linear time progression, and symbolical openings and closings which trigger a change in behavior. Conventions and panels devoted to yaoi create a physical space which allows people to come together with the knowledge that they already have at least one thing in common. Anime conventions provide fans of Japanese animation and comics with a sense of a tangible community. The social rituals which occur at anime conventions generate an effervescent effect which transcends the individual level and compensates for the lack of socializing in normal life regarding Japanese animation and comics.

While conventions convey to fans that there is a larger community of people who enjoy yaoi, it is often the few close friendships which use yaoi to socialize that are the focus throughout the year. These friendships are often facilitated by conventions or the internet as a person's reaction to yaoi may not always be positive. Thus, many fans actively negotiate who to tell about their enjoyment of yaoi and who not to tell. The safe space of conventions and the internet are easier for making friends as the issue of a negative reaction to yaoi is removed from the equation. While yaoi fans are supportive of a more widespread acceptance of homosexuality, as discussed in chapter two, it is not their intention to create conflict or “shock” in the mainstream beyond promoting a generalized acceptance of non-hegemonic tastes. Rather they are carving out a social space for people with a preference for the yaoi genre. It is important to acknowledge that yaoi fans often actively think about how they socialize through the genre and how to best do so. While each individual enjoys the yaoi genre on a personal level and has their own distinct preference for certain titles, it is the ability to then take that pleasure to another level and socialize with friends about it that makes the yaoi community a vibrant and engaging place for fans.

## CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

I argue that the yaoi community is an example of a category of subcultures which have been, for the most part, neglected by previous studies. The early approaches to subculture studies emphasized the social groups to an extent that renders the individual inconsequential. The people involved in the subcultural groups then become “the” group (e.g. the punk) rather than “a” member of the group (e.g. a punk). In reaction to this approach, post-subculture studies placed importance on the individuals within the subcultures and placed value on their individuality in deciding to become subcultural. This view makes a subculture a loosely identified collection of individuals which are atomized rather than a social group. By the ethnographic research I conducted within the yaoi community, I argue that members of this subculture are individuals who engage in the community for personal reasons and in different ways. However, they also use this personal enjoyment of the genre to interact and socialize with other like-minded people. Thus, this community is neither solely group oriented nor individually minded. Rather it occupies a blending of the two approaches.

Additionally, subculture studies have often neglected to address the role of women within these groups. Most subculture studies have focused on the sensationalistic aspects of subculture groups, which are mainly visible in public. As men have traditionally occupied the public sphere more so than women, a majority of the studies have involved the male's role within subcultural groups. These subcultural groups are usually depicted as operating in opposition to the mainstream culture in socially deviant ways. The yaoi community highlights this shortcoming of subculture studies as well since it is a group of women who gather in public places to participate in activities which show their membership within the community. While these activities may seem deviant from the outside perspective due to the incorporation of sexually explicit content

involving two men, people within the community negotiate this content differently and instead emphasize the relationships between the characters. While yaoi is not a conventional or common genre within the American mainstream, participants do not reject mainstream culture or view their activities as oppositional. Instead the importance is placed on having a preference or distinct taste for the yaoi genre and locating other people, such as through conventions or the internet, with similar tastes.

Youth studies have traditionally approached the practices youth engage in through a “problem-based” lens. While the yaoi genre may appear “transgressive” or “deviant” with its sexually explicit content between two men, this is a flawed perception and, through this ethnographic research, I have endeavored to represent the emic perspective of the community. I encourage subculture studies to not only focus on the visually noticeable and shocking subcultural groups, but to keep in mind that we are all part of different subcultures. As Narayan argues with her theory of multiplex identity, we as humans are not limited to one social group. Thus, even the mundane subcultures deserve attention and subcultural groups, which may appear shocking, must be allowed to become mundane or routine if that is how the participants view their activities. The exotic other within our own culture is often represented through subcultures and I encourage people to think beyond these limitations as we all engage in social groups which seem unusual to different people. After all, if we are all the “other,” then who is the “us”?

### **Moving Forward: Yaoi and the Future**

Statements made by my informants of how they are sometimes perceived, and received, by non-yaoi fans prompted me to consider why being a fan of yaoi makes a person an “other” in some social contexts. As I mentioned earlier, we are all inevitably part of different subcultures, from our preferences for entertainment to our daily activities. What makes one subculture more

acceptable than another? As my informants commented on how they “feel” people out before revealing their enjoyment of the yaoi genre, I was struck by regret that ethnocentric views about their practices influence the full extent to which fans are able to socialize through yaoi. If fans are using yaoi to socialize to this extent now with some limitations, or rather considerations, how will the socialization expand as the genre becomes more popular? Or will the socialization lessen as the need to band together and have strength in numbers decreases with an increased mainstream acceptance?

As the yaoi genre becomes more popular and its availability more widespread, I do wonder how the community will change, or will it change at all? I heard several of my informants echo similar sentiments about the evolution of the yaoi community and how the changes are both beneficial and, at the same time, slightly unwanted. After all, it seems that “skulking” about the internet was part of the fun for fans. Now that people can walk into Borders and purchase yaoi, the adventure of finding yaoi is less exciting. Although this makes things easier for fans perhaps some of the fun was the thrill of the hunt for yaoi titles. In addition, if yaoi is so readily available, will fans still feel the need to band together and help each other collect full yaoi anime series and share dvds or manga? Or will the accumulation of yaoi be limited to an individual activity as its availability increases?

Furthermore, will the increasing breadth of the community contribute to its own downfall as it becomes less personal? Perhaps I am merely a naïve optimist, but I believe that despite the changing size of the community that people will continue to connect with each other through yaoi. Most of the women I interviewed cited a handful of key friendships which were facilitated and enacted through yaoi. Thus, perhaps the “community” will be less personal as it expands and convention panels will be larger and less intimate, but I believe that those friendships which are

engaged in throughout the year will survive and continue to thrive despite the changing landscape of the community.

### **Yaoi and Women: Moving Beyond Gendered Expectations**

It is my intention that this research be used to help foster understanding about a subculture which often receives social stigma. As Monica states, yaoi is a “subculture within a subculture.” Jessie comments, “ I think it is wrong for someone to say two gay men, real or anime is gross when a guy is allowed to freely talk about how hot lesbians are. I think I shouldn't have to be ashamed of liking the thought of two hot guys making out, but I am because this is how society operates.” I have argued in chapter two that yaoi titles that contain sexually explicit content are, for the most part, not viewed as pornography because the emphasis is on the relationship rather than the sexual acts. Granted, some yaoi titles which subscribe to the “PWP” genre (Plot, what plot?) and only depict sexual intercourse without a storyline are viewed by fans as pornographic in nature. However, by and large, most participants view yaoi titles as tasteful forms of erotica that show the full range of romantic relationships. These relationships will, inevitably, include some form of sexuality as they do in “real” life.

However, by positing yaoi titles as focused on the relationship aspect of the characters, are yaoi fans stripping some power from their actions? I am not intending for the yaoi genre at large to be categorized as “pornographic” as that is highly inaccurate. I simply wonder if, by emphasizing the romantic relationships in yaoi titles, women are inadvertently maintaining the gender roles already in place. Thus, maintaining the gender stereotypes that women prefer emotional connections while men prefer sex. Jessie argues that she does not want to feel guilty for enjoying yaoi, but comments that is how society makes her feel. While a growing acceptance of homosexuality is key for yaoi to be perceived by society as less unusual, it also requires a

change in gendered perceptions of viewing sexually explicit material. I do not wish for yaoi fans to change their modus operandi for watching yaoi titles or enjoying them, but I do encourage all participants to question why is it that the relationship is the “key” part? Jane Juffer argues that “women as producers and consumers are increasingly entering and slowly redefining the traditionally male domain of visual pornography, but that change is happening quite slowly” (Juffer 1998:5). Perhaps the rising popularity of the yaoi genre is part of this shift that Juffer discusses. As visual pornography continues to increase in popularity with women and take a stronger foothold in society, the yaoi genre may wind up becoming more normalized. While I do not presume to know how this would change how fans view yaoi and its sexual content, I do wonder if it would lead to a more even emphasis on the emotional aspects and the sexual content.

Based upon my interviews and observations at the yaoi panels, it appears that women speak in terms of the romantic relationships between men on the individual level and address the “two men together is hot” aspect when at a group level. For example, when interviewing women one-on-one, most talked at length about the relationship aspects between the characters and briefly, if at all, commented on how two men together is hot in their opinion. Inversely, at the panels, an emphasis was placed on the sexiness of two men in sexual encounters. Perhaps then it is not that women are “buying” into conventional gender roles, but are merely operating within the “safety in numbers” mindset. According to Butler, all of gender is a performance (Butler 2004). Perhaps when in more intimate situations, a shift occurs in which a person performs a different gender identity than when in a large group. Having the backing of other people makes treading in less familiar areas more comforting. Sexuality can be a relatively difficult topic to broach with another person. Thus, when confronted with a one-on-one situation, many people

would feel more comfortable discussing other topics, such as romance. Then at the yaoi panels, when surrounded by other fans, there is less pressure on what an individual does or says, which makes it less challenging to show support for the sexual content. This is not to say that the romantic and emotional emphasis I heard from my informants was wrong, but to wonder if maybe it was only half the story due to methodological limitations?

### **Yaoi and America: Speaking to the Larger Social Sphere**

The yaoi community represents an intersection of several contemporary cultural aspects within the U.S. The fact that yaoi has even reached the U.S. represents how technologically and culturally linked the global sphere is now. Yaoi anime shows are aired in Japan and within weeks, or even days, are available to U.S. fans. Furthermore, while technology is often cited as limiting the socialization of American youth, people are finding ways to incorporate these new forms of media into their social lives just as people did when the television became popular. Thus, while the yaoi subculture represents an underrepresented portion of previous subculture studies, it also highlights the increasing prevalence of foreign entertainment products in the U.S. (Allison 2006). American youth are increasingly drawn to these “cool” products from Japan and, based on the availability of anime titles and increasing number of anime conventions, society is beginning to accept Japanese anime more easily as “normal.” While I have focused on the socialization of American women via the yaoi genre, it is important to remember that yaoi is a transcultural product which has made its way into American culture because of the forces of globalization.

Arjun Appadurai argues against the center-periphery model of globalization and encourages the idea of globalization as a flowing process. The forces of globalization occur through five different dimensions: ethnoscaples, technoscaples, finanscaples, mediascaples, and

ideoscapes (Appadurai 1990). The yaoi genre operates within the mediascapes primarily, but crosses over into the technoscapes as fans use technology to cross boundaries and enter Japan in a virtual sense. Furthermore, through the dimensions, yaoi and other products are able to reach across geographic distances and connect people over shared interests. As people and cultural products travel these scapes, they become reterritorialized once they reach their destination. The products are then recontextualized based upon the cultural context they now exist within. Thus, while yaoi may travel through these flows to another country, it will not be interpreted the same way as it is in the U.S. or any other place. Yaoi then represents an example of how, with the increasingly linked world, people are accessing cultural products from around the world with relative ease. Beyond simply consuming though, these products are received, recontextualized, and then that message is communicated to the global sphere as well via Appadurai's scapes. While this serves the agenda of increasing awareness of other cultures and their products, the process may have "issues" as it creates multiple and, perhaps, competing definitions for what a product "is," such as yaoi. This can potentially create communication break downs as two people from separate parts of the world may be familiar with the same cultural product (e.g. yaoi) and have completely different understandings of what the product means.

### **In Closing**

The yaoi community is a group of people who have established a form of an imagined community centered around their distinction as consumers (Anderson 1991[1983]). Located on the fringes of the mainstream, they carve out a vibrant niche for themselves to locate other fans and collaborate over their shared enjoyment of yaoi. Bourdieu argues that taste is not inherent and is something developed and learned throughout a person's life (Bourdieu 1979). Thus, the tastes displayed by yaoi fans are not any less "natural" than any other taste. The yaoi taste is

simply, for the time being perhaps, less legitimized than other forms of distinction. Fans operate within other spheres and have a multitude of other tastes as people are not limited to one identity. Due to this, fans are not wholly rejecting mainstream culture, but instead are locating spaces relevant to their distinctive tastes, such as yaoi, and enjoying it with other like-minded people in their “corner of the world.”

After interviewing Sydney one night, we were in my car and I was driving her back to her apartment. She was energetically telling me about how she and online friends discuss how they “convert” people into yaoi fans. She stated that upon converting someone, they are given a high five (verbally or physically) for joining the club. I had received my own high five earlier that evening, during the interview, when she had turned the questions on me and inquired if I had any pairings between men that I enjoyed in the shows I watch. Upon my disclosure of liking a male/male pairing in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for years, Sydney laughed and commented that she knew it. I was already a yaoi fan. I simply hadn't known it. Thus, I hope that others may read this and discover, as I did, their inner yaoi fan or, at the very least, have widened their horizons to encompass the subculture of yaoi.

Ironically enough this project has, in a way, proven itself through the process. While interviewing Claire I asked if she could describe a situation where yaoi had facilitated a friendship. The words had barely escaped my mouth, when I looked up at her and we both laughed. She jokingly went along with the question and began, “I met this girl her name is Amy and she was really cool. We met at this Animazement... convention and it was totally awesome...” Through this research project I have forged many new friendships via the yaoi genre and have been met with acceptance and openness by the people I encountered along the way. Furthermore, a number of the women I met did not visually fit my mental picture of a yaoi fan. Thus, I

encourage those reading this to remember that belonging to a subculture does not necessarily mean being visually distinguishable from the “average” person. After all, the woman you see walking down the street, converse with at work, or even know as a personal friend may in fact be a yaoi fan and is simply feeling you out before she chooses to divulge that information.

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## APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY

Animazement – An annual convention devoted to Japanese animation and comics held in Durham, North Carolina.

Anime – A term that refers to an animated show from Japan.

Anime Weekend Atlanta (AWA) – An annual convention devoted to Japanese animation and comics held in Marietta, Georgia.

Artists' Alley – The area of an anime convention that contains the artists' tables where they sell their artwork and other items.

Boys' Love – A term which is usually synonymous with “yaoi.” Refers to the genre of Japanese animation and comics that depicts romantic relationships between two men and may include sexually explicit content.

Cosplay – Shortened version of “costume play.” People dressed in costumes, usually at conventions, are referred to as cosplayers.

Dealer's Room – The area of an anime convention that contains the vendors' booths where they sell items. Most of the booths in the dealer's room are maintained by companies.

Doujinshi – A term that refers to self-published Japanese works, usually manga or novels, by amateur artists (i.e. outside the publishing industry).

Fanart – A term that refers to artwork that is based on a character or a story (e.g. an anime title) that was originally created by someone else.

Fandom – A term used to refer to a group of fans brought together by a shared common interest (e.g. a television show).

Fangirl – A term that refers to a girl's obsession with something. The term often has negative connotations due to the exuberant behavior displayed by some fangirls.

Fanfiction – Also referred to as “fanfic.” A term that refers to fan writings based on a character or a show that was originally created by someone else.

Fanfiction.net – A popular website for fanfiction that was one of the first large collections of fanfiction online.

LiveJournal – A virtual community where internet users can maintain a blog or journal. Users are able to create LiveJournal groups devoted to a common interest (e.g. yaoi).

Manga – A term that refers to comics from Japan.

PWP – An acronym for “Plot? What plot?” Refers to a genre of titles that lack a strong storyline and focus primarily on sexual content.

Scanlation – An electronic version of a comic that is translated by fans and the word bubbles are edited to contain the translated content.

Shonen-ai – Translates to “boys' love.” Used in the U.S. to indicate a yaoi title that is “softer” and less sexually explicit.

Shota – A term that refers to a subgenre of yaoi, which involves romantic relationships between prepubescent boys and older men.

Slash – A term that refers to a genre of fanfiction, largely written by women, that focuses on the depiction of romantic relationships between two male, or two female, characters. These are often sexual relationships that are not engaged in within the canonical universe.

Yaoi – A term that refers to the genre of Japanese animation and comics that depict romantic relationships between two men and may include sexually explicit content.

Yaoi After Dark – A panel/event held at Anime Weekend Atlanta devoted to the yaoi genre and its fans.

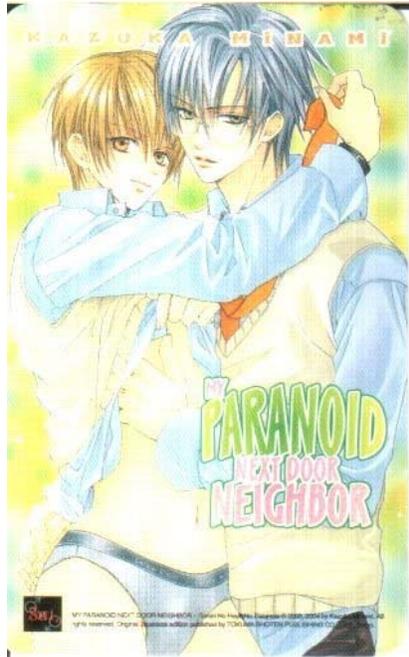
Yuri – A term that refers to the genre of Japanese animation and comics that depict romantic relationships between two women.

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What can you tell me about yaoi?
2. Can you define yaoi in English terms?
3. How long have you watched/read yaoi?
4. How did you learn about yaoi?
5. Why did you initially begin watching yaoi?
6. What appealed to you about it?
7. Why do you personally enjoy the yaoi genre?
8. Is yaoi part of your daily or weekly routine?
9. How often do you watch it? Or talk to others about it? Or spend time getting it?
10. Where do you get yaoi? (e.g. bookstores, conventions, online, internet downloads, etc.)
11. Who has the best yaoi? And what does that mean to you?
12. Through what mediums do you view yaoi? (e.g. comics, animation, fiction, etc.)
13. Do you interact with other yaoi fans very often?
14. Does this happen mostly at conventions, or in other media/locations/etc.?
15. Do you tend to see/chat with a few of the same people all the time, or is it more random?
16. Does it feel like a “community”? In what way?
17. Would you describe some memorable experiences at conventions which involve yaoi?
18. Yaoi has explicit sexual content; do you view yaoi as a form of pornography?
19. Why or why not? How is it different from/the same as pornography as you understand it?
20. Do you, or would you, watch live action pornography? Why or why not?
21. Would you watch yaoi that does not originate from Japan? Why or why not?
22. What is your favorite yaoi title? What is it about this particular title that makes it your favorite? (e.g. personal connection to story, identify with a character, etc.) Could add something like:
23. Is this a long-time favorite, or do your favorites shift a lot over time?
24. How does the author of the titles factor in to your yaoi selections?
25. How do you feel yaoi is perceived by people outside the community?
26. How would you describe the reaction you receive from other people when they learn that you watch sexually explicit content between two men? Maybe add something like:
27. Do they “get” it? If not, does this bother you? Is the reaction different when it comes from other friends your age vs. your parents or your teachers? Who knows that you are into yaoi?
28. How would you describe the conventional standards between men and women in watching sexually explicit content between two people of the opposite sex?
29. How do you think gender is represented within yaoi titles?
30. Are there any typical roles played out by the members of the pairings? (in terms of how they treat one another, what kind of qualities they represent, etc.) If so, would you say these roles are similar to ones you would see in mainstream films and TV, or different? How so?
31. What motivates you to continue watching yaoi? (e.g., is it the films, the community, or something else?)
32. Do you think there is any social stigma associated with yaoi? If so, how does it influence the way you participate in the yaoi community?

33. Have you met new friends through yaoi? If so, would you describe a situation where yaoi has facilitated a friendship?
34. Do you think your participation within the yaoi community has impacted your life in general or helped shape who you are (e.g. personal identity, views on sexuality, etc.)? If so, how?
35. Would you describe how you purchase yaoi commodities? (e.g. at conventions, online, etc.)
36. Have your purchasing habits changed over time? If so, how?
37. Can you describe an experience when you found a yaoi product and had an emotional reaction? If so, what was it about the product that caused the response?
38. How do commodities, such as t-shirts and lapel pins, play a role in the yaoi community?
39. How are the yaoi commodities you purchase displayed? (e.g. only at conventions, at home, etc.)
40. What is your opinion on the availability of yaoi titles in bookstores like Borders?
41. What are the differences between these titles and titles imported from Japan? How do you decide which to purchase?

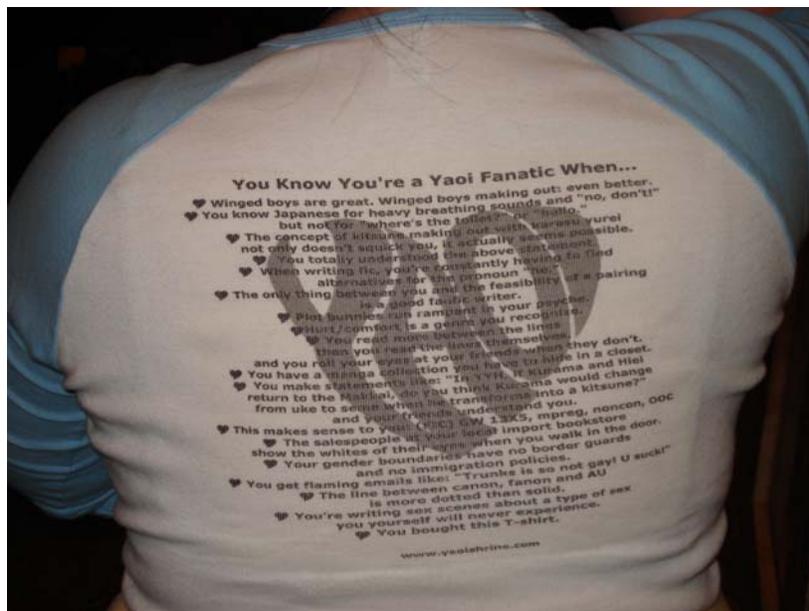
## APPENDIX C: IMAGES



The card Jordan gave me at AWA 2007. Image property of Kazuka Minami (author) and 801 Media, Inc. (publisher).



Lapel pins purchased at AWA 2008. Photo by author.



Monica's "lingotastic" shirt. Photo by author.



Dealer's Room at AWA 2008. Photo by author.



Dealer's Room at AWA 2008. Photo by author.