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# The World of Yaoi: The Internet, Censorship and the Global “Boys’ Love” Fandom

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# THE WORLD OF YAOI: THE INTERNET, CENSORSHIP AND THE GLOBAL 'BOYS' LOVE' FANDOM

Mark McLelland\*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As Arjun Appadurai has noted, the ease of information sharing enabled by the development of new media, most prominently the internet, has resulted in the proliferation of 'communities of imagination and interest' among people who are otherwise geographically 'diasporic'.<sup>1</sup> Mathews, too, notes that individuals are now able to choose 'information and identities from the global supermarket' on a scale not seen before.<sup>2</sup> One result has been a proliferation of subcultures and an increase in diversity, what Giddens refers to as 'lifestyle sectors'.<sup>3</sup> Many of these communities are now truly global and involve participation from people of diverse backgrounds from many parts of the globe. However, alongside the creative and enabling effects of increased interpersonal and inter-cultural communication, there is also a dark side – an increase in criminal and harmful activity conducted online.

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<sup>1</sup> Appadurai Arjun *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press 1996 p 195.

<sup>2</sup> Mathews Gordon *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket* London & New York Routledge 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Giddens Anthony *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* Cambridge Polity 1992.

In tandem with the rise of the internet as a new medium of global communication, there has been ‘an explosion of cultural concern, a veritable incitement to discourse’<sup>4</sup> regarding pedophilia and child sex-abuse more generally. As Lumby points out, media treatment of child sex-abuse is somewhat paradoxical since on the one hand it is, ‘characterized as a practice so aberrant that its practitioners are monsters who by definition live entirely outside the mores of ordinary people; on the other, it is depicted as so pervasive that it has rotted the core of our most important institutions—the family, the church, the police force, our schools’.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, child sex-abuse ‘attains a phantasmic status;’ its ‘effects are seen everywhere but its source is impossible to locate’.<sup>6</sup>

In recent debate, the internet has been identified as the primary medium through which previously isolated individuals (almost invariably men) with pedophilic interests have been able to contact each other and distribute child pornography text and images.<sup>7</sup> A number of themes has run throughout reports about child sex abuse on the internet – that erotic interest in children is overwhelmingly a male preserve, that exposure to child sex-imagery is a step toward performing child sex-abuse and that any erotic interest in children is deeply pathological and entirely outside the range of acceptable normal, healthy sexuality. Hence, any expression of sexual interest in children communicated via any medium is in need of surveillance, censorship and prosecution.

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<sup>4</sup> Angelides Stephen ‘Paedophilia and the Misrecognition of Desire’ (2004)<sup>8</sup>

*Transformations* Retrieved on 6 April 2005 from

[http://transformations.cqu.edu.au/journal/issue\\_08/article\\_01\\_print.shtml](http://transformations.cqu.edu.au/journal/issue_08/article_01_print.shtml).

<sup>5</sup> Lumby Catherine ‘No Kidding: Paedophilia and Popular Culture’ (1998)<sup>12</sup> *Continuum* 47.

<sup>6</sup> Lumby note 5 above at 48.

<sup>7</sup> Krone Tony ‘A Typology of Online Child Pornography Offending’ (July 2004) *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* Retrieved 15 July 2005 from

<http://www.aic.gov.au>; Stanley J ‘Child Abuse and the Internet’ (2001) Published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies Retrieved 15 July 2005 from

<http://www.aifs.org.au/nch/>.

As Josephine Ho points out, ‘the cultural imaginary of the child’ has exerted ‘immense power’ over how legislation for child protection has been framed.<sup>8</sup> In narratives about child protection, the state of childhood is discursively positioned as ‘supreme innocence’<sup>9</sup> thus making it extremely difficult to question the broad sweep of new legislation designed to censor and control representations of young people’s sexuality on the internet. Any attempt to suggest that young people have a right to sexual experimentation or fantasy or that fantasy representations of child sex might be about something other than child abuse run the real danger of being reduced to what Janice Irvine describes as ‘depravity narratives’ in which the worst possible interpretation and outcome are attached to these arguments by their opponents.<sup>10</sup> As Kincaid argues, the discourse of child sex-abuse represents a ‘gothic narrative’<sup>11</sup> in which there are only two sides – absolute good and absolute evil – and it is extraordinarily difficult for an individual to speak out against censorship without her or his motives being given the direst of interpretations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ho Josephine ‘Is Global Governance Bad for Asian Queers?’ Keynote address at the Sexualities, Genders & Rights in Asia: 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference of Asian Queer Studies Bangkok Thailand 7-9 July 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Ho, note 8 above.

<sup>10</sup> Irvine Janice *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* Berkeley University of California Press 2002 p 54.

<sup>11</sup> Kincaid James *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* Durham Duke University Press 1998.

<sup>12</sup> In support of this point, the reader may like to look at Amazon.com’s online reviews of Kincaid’s book alongside other anti-censorship texts such as those by Levine and Heins discussed below. Kincaid, for instance, is accused of ‘projecting his desires’ for children and it is claimed the book is ‘a long-winded attempt to normalize the author’s proclivities’. Levine, in turn, is accused of having been a sexually abused child herself whose motivation in writing the book is to expiate her guilt.

In the past decade child pornography and child-abuse legislation has been extensively redrafted in order to counter the opportunities that the internet offers to pedophiles and their audience to perpetrate child-sex offenses.<sup>13</sup> The main thrust of this legislation has been to prevent the dissemination (and thereby reduce the production) of visual representations of actual children engaged in sexual acts or placed in sexual contexts. However, there have been attempts (in Australia successfully) to extend the law to render illegal *all* sexual representations of ‘children’ (variously defined as under the age of 18 or 16) in any medium, including purely fictional representations, graphic, textual or otherwise.

This legislation commonly subdivides child-pornography images into three kinds: (a) real child pornography; (b) pseudo child pornography; and (c) virtual child pornography. The necessity of prohibiting the first category is seemingly clear and unambiguous – sexual representations of actual children are records of criminal acts and both the acts themselves as well as the dissemination of these images are in violation of the rights of the children in question. ‘Pseudo’ child pornography, that is, digitally manipulated images of actual children that sexualize them, are also harmful as they violate the individual child’s right to privacy. However, there are cases when young people themselves have been caught by the very legislation that is supposed to protect them. For instance, depending on the jurisdiction, it can be an offense for a 17-year-old young person to take and then send a sexualized picture of her or himself to their own boyfriend or girlfriend via a mobile phone. Indeed, young people under the local age of consent (or in some cases the age of majority) have very few rights to sexual expression, leading sexual-rights activists such as Jessica Fields to label current legislation ‘adultist’ since the rights to privacy and to control one’s own body – factors taken for granted in the case of

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<sup>13</sup> Walton Michael ‘Possession of Child Pornography’ (2005) NSW Council for Civil Liberties background paper retrieved 15 July 2005 from <http://www.nswccl.org.au/docs/pdf/bp2%202005%20Possess%20Child%20Porn.pdf>; Krone note 7 above.

adults, do not apply to young people.<sup>14</sup> As Levine points out, it is impossible to identify an age at which young people become ‘sexually agentic’<sup>15</sup> and consequently they are subject to arbitrary age-of-consent and majority laws that differ over time and across regions, the end result being that ‘young people have no legitimate claim to sexual expression, desires, or identities’ in the eyes of the law.<sup>16</sup>

Issues related to freedom of sexual expression are also raised by the criminalization of the third category of ‘virtual’ child pornography – that is text and images that are purely imaginary and fictional. Although the need to prohibit actual child-pornography is a clear requirement, a growing body of academic commentary has shown that the manner in which some laws are framed reflects an agenda that is much broader than concern about the protection of children. As Marjorie Heins, former director of the American Civil Liberties Union’s Art’s Censorship Project notes, “‘harm to minors’ has become the primary justification for censorship and classification schemes in the United States’.<sup>17</sup> In the US context, numerous studies have shown that the potential of ‘harm to minors’ is strategically invoked by conservative and Christian groups in an attempt to restrict the circulation of any material that they disapprove of on moral grounds.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as Rubin points out ‘no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children’ and she goes on to argue that many child-pornography laws are ‘ill-conceived and misdirected’ and that ‘They represent far-reaching alterations in the

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<sup>14</sup> Fields Jessica ‘Same-Sex Marriage, Sodomy Laws, and the Sexual Lives of Young People’ *Sexual Research & Social Policy*, (2004)1 retrieved 20 June 2005 from <http://nsrc.sfsu.edu> at 12.

<sup>15</sup> Fields as above at 16.

<sup>16</sup> Fields as above at 15.

<sup>17</sup> Heins Marjorie *Not in front of the Children: ‘Indecency,’ Censorship and the Innocence of Youth* New York Hill & Wang 2001 p 13.

<sup>18</sup> Levine Janice *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press 2002; Irvine as above note 10; Kincaid as above note 11.

regulation of sexual behavior and abrogate important sexual civil liberties'.<sup>19</sup> Taiwanese academic Josephine Ho, whose own sex-information website was driven off an academic server by Christian groups using 'protection of children' as a tactic, has also drawn attention to the normalization inherent in global attempts to codify laws to regulate suspect sexualities. She is particularly concerned by the 'sweeping criminalization of internet erotic exchanges', measures sponsored by a variety of conservative NGOs.<sup>20</sup>

Hence, the manner in which anti child-porn legislation has increased its breadth annually is of particular concern to free-speech advocates and, as Levine points out, 'Legislation that was first justified as a protection of real children has evolved to statutes criminalizing the depiction of any person engaged in sexual activity who is *intended to look like a minor*' (emphasis in the original).<sup>21</sup> It therefore needs to be questioned, whose interests, exactly, are being served by this development? Since no actual child is harmed in any way as a result of the creation and dissemination of fictional images, issues of freedom of expression and thought come to the fore when legislating against this material.

In drawing out some of the problems resulting from the criminalization even of sexual fantasies involving children (as well as young people's own sexual fantasies), I focus upon a non-pedophile network of predominantly female fans who participate in a growing global fandom celebrating fictional accounts of 'boys' love' (also known as yaoi),<sup>22</sup> that is, illustrations and stories depicting same-sex love affairs between boys. I do

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<sup>19</sup> Rubin Gayle 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' in Nardi Peter and Schneider Beth (eds) *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies* London & New York Routledge 1998 p 103.

<sup>20</sup> Ho as above note 8

<sup>21</sup> Levine as above note 18 at 38.

<sup>22</sup> There is a similar but much smaller global fandom associated with 'girls' love', also known as yuri, which likewise faces problems relating to current child-pornography legislation but space does not allow me to go into this here. An outline of the yuri fandom can be found in Charlton Sabdha 'Yuri Fandom on the Internet' (no date) published by

this to emphasize that, despite popular stereotypes,<sup>23</sup> interest in the sexuality of the young is not specific to a narrow band of male pedophiles but that a large online community of women is also interested in creating and disseminating *purely fictional* accounts of romance and sex between boys. There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that these women have any connection with pedophile networks, or, indeed, that actual pedophiles evince any interest whatsoever in these highly scripted and aestheticized accounts of the sexual exploits of ‘beautiful boys’. Hence there is no utilitarian benefit resulting from their prohibition.

## 2. COMPARISON OF US AND AUSTRALIAN LEGISLATION

Before continuing with an account of the history of this online community, I will outline the very different manner in which US and Australian legislation deals with the issue of ‘child pornography’. Legislation throughout the developed world is unanimous on the clear need to prohibit and prosecute the creation and dissemination of both real and pseudo child pornography since the production of these images involves actual harm to real individuals. However, there is much less uniformity in the treatment of ‘virtual’ images and text-based descriptions that are purely fictional. US legislation in particular draws a clear distinction between real and ‘virtual’ child-pornography. In several recent test cases, the US Supreme Court has found it unconstitutional to prohibit the possession and distribution of child-pornography when the images are purely ‘fictional’, since such a

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Yuricon retrieved on 14 June 2005 from  
[http://www.yuricon.org/essays/yuri\\_fandom.html](http://www.yuricon.org/essays/yuri_fandom.html).

<sup>23</sup> Research in the US suggests that the typical person arrested for child pornography offenses is a Caucasian male over the age of 26 (see Krone above at 5) and Australian research also reports that the ‘overwhelming majority’ of child-sex offenders are ‘mature-age males’ (see Stanley above at 3). The purpose of this article is to point out that *fantasy* interest in child sexuality is more widespread than the criminological research suggests and need not always be interpreted as pathological.



ban would violate an individual's First Amendment right to free speech.<sup>24</sup> In accounting for its decision, the court explained that the government may not legislate to control people's thoughts: 'The government cannot constitutionally premise legislation on the desirability of controlling a person's private thoughts'.<sup>25</sup> The dissemination of these fantasy narratives via the internet is thus not legally prohibited in the US providing the authors are over the age of 18 and have taken steps to ensure that their material cannot be accessed by minors (i.e. they are treated in the same manner as other pornographic text/images).

The Australian legislation is different from that of the US for two reasons. Firstly, Australian legislation relating to child pornography is informed by a 'zero tolerance' policy that is extremely wide-ranging. The drawback to this approach is that 'zero-tolerance makes no concession to freedom of speech or the right to privacy'.<sup>26</sup> In addition, Australia has no citizen's charter or bill of rights guaranteeing the right to privacy and free speech which means that citizens have no recourse to challenge legislation that infringes on these rights.<sup>27</sup> One of the ironies of the zero tolerance approach is that it effectively criminalizes much sexual communication that takes place between teen-agers, one of the constituencies the laws are designed to protect. For instance, a 15-year-old<sup>28</sup> who writes about her or his sexual encounters and then posts this information on the internet is both a producer of and possessor of child pornography under Australian law and is liable to ten years imprisonment.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Specifically *Ashcroft v Free Speech Coalition* (2002) 535 US 234. See also Walton note 13 above at 8.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Walton note 13 above at 8.

<sup>26</sup> Walton note 13 above at 19.

<sup>27</sup> Walton note 13 above at 25.

<sup>28</sup> The age of consent for both same- and other-sex sexual activities in most Australian states is 16.

<sup>29</sup> Walton note 13 above at 14.

Of particular concern to freedom-of-speech activists, is the manner in which Australia's zero-tolerance approach to child pornography compromises written text. Different states differ slightly in the manner in which they codify child pornography. In New South Wales<sup>30</sup> the definition of child pornography is:

91H(1)<sup>31</sup> Definitions

...material that depicts or describes, in a manner that would in the circumstances cause offense to reasonable persons, a person under (or apparently under) the age of 16 years:

- (a) engaged in sexual activity, or
- (b) in a sexual context, or
- (c) as the victim of torture, cruelty or physical abuse (whether or not in a sexual context)

The above refers not simply to visual (depictions of real or imagined children in any graphic medium) but also to text as clause 91C<sup>32</sup> makes clear, classes of offending material include 'any film, printed matter, electronic data or *any other thing of any kind* (including any computer image or other depiction)' (emphasis mine). The clause 'any other thing of any kind' leaves no space for fantasy outside the law and could, conceivably, be applied to diary entries or other transcribed thoughts – in essence, it equates to a kind of 'thought crime'. Human-rights advocates have pointed out that since the Australian legislation applies equally to *written* as well as visual depictions of child sex, it exceeds by far, international human rights standards.

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<sup>30</sup> New South Wales is the jurisdiction under which the present author resides. Other states have similarly worded legislation. For an overview of State vs Federal laws see Walton note 13 above.

<sup>31</sup> Extracted from *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 91H(1) inserted by *Crimes Amendment (Child Pornography) Act 2004* (NSW) Sch 1 cl 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 91C.

Also of concern in the above legislation is the lack of definition of the term ‘cause offense’, it being decided in reference to a vague and abstract collective of ‘reasonable persons’. The decision as to whether or not the material in question would cause offense to ‘reasonable persons’ is, in the first instance, made by the police or other investigating officers and ultimately, if the perpetrator is brought to trial, by a magistrate or jury. This notion of appeal to the sensibility of a ‘reasonable person’ is particularly problematic in the case of the boys’ love fandom given that these stories and illustrations concern homosexual, not heterosexual romance between the characters. As studies have shown,<sup>33</sup> community values regarding homosexuality and other ‘queer’ sexual acts consistently view these acts more negatively than heterosexual acts. It would not be an overstatement to say that for many people, homosexual activity, whatever the context, is *ipso facto* ‘offensive’ behavior.

### **3. BACKGROUND TO THE ‘BOYS’ LOVE’ FANDOM**

Before outlining the particular problems that boys’ love fans have encountered in creating and disseminating their work in Australia, it is necessary to outline the history and characteristics of the genre. Boys’ love, also commonly known as yaoi, is a literary genre (comprising manga, that is, graphic novels, as well as illustrated stories and poetry) dedicated to highly romanticized depictions of *bishōnen* or ‘beautiful boys’ which first arose in Japan in the 1970s. Created largely as a reaction against the contrived and formulaic heterosexual love stories marketed at a female audience at that time, ‘boys’ love’ (*shōnen’ ai*) detailed romantic, erotic and sexual relationships between boys and young men.<sup>34</sup> Production of these stories gathered pace throughout the 1970s and many

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<sup>33</sup> Irvine note 10 above at 176-86; Wilcox C and Wolpert ‘Gay Rights in the Public Sphere: Public Opinion on Gay and Lesbian Equality’ in *The Politics of Gay Rights* Rimmerman Craig Walde Kenneth and Wilcox Clyde (eds) Chicago Chicago University Press 2000.

<sup>34</sup> McLelland Mark *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities* London RoutledgeCurzon 2000.

of Japan's most famous female manga artists have contributed to the genre. Fujimoto notes that 'boys' love' stories, many of which have achieved canonical status, are the 'greatest achievement' of the girls' manga genre.<sup>35</sup> Whereas in anglophone culture homosexual narratives are highly segregated and excluded from children's media, in Japan, homosexuality is an 'essential feature' and 'part of the everyday landscape' of girls' comic books. Fujimoto goes on to argue that 'not only have girls broadly accepted male homosexual love, but they have actively chosen it as the means for their own self-expression'.<sup>36</sup>

Although 'boys' love' in the anglophone context may conjure up images of adult male pederasty (one may recall the now defunct North American Man/Boy Love Association), Japanese researchers into boys' love comics point out that 'The yaoi phenomenon is... a female gendered space, since its participants—writers, artists, readers, and the majority of editors—are female'.<sup>37</sup> Given yaoi's 'overwhelmingly female' readership,<sup>38</sup> the pornographic nature of these stories and illustrations may come as a surprise to those not familiar with Japanese culture, but despite the fact that much of the debate about pornography in an anglophone context assumes a generalized male consumer, in Japan there are numerous pornographic print media created and consumed by women and girls; as Jones points out 'In Japan, visual pornography is not for men only'.<sup>39</sup> Yaoi stories and

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<sup>35</sup> Fujimoto Yukari 'Transgender: Female Hermaphrodites and Male Androgynes' (2004)27 *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 76 at 83.

<sup>36</sup> Fujimoto note 36 above.

<sup>37</sup> Mizoguchi Akiko 'Male-Male Romance by and for Women in Japan: A History and the Subgenres of Yaoi Fictions' (2003)25 *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 49 at 65.

<sup>38</sup> Nagaike Kazumi 'Perverse Sexualities, Perverse Desires: Representations of Female Fantasies and Yaoi Manga as Pornography Directed at Women' (2003)25 *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 76 at 76.

<sup>39</sup> Jones Gretchen "'Ladies' comics": Japan's Not-So-Underground Market in Pornography for Women' (2003)22 *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal English Supplement* 3 at 5.

illustrations do not shy away from explicit sexual references; as Nagaike notes, yaoi is ‘an example of narrative pornography directed at female readers’<sup>40</sup> and ‘Yaoi narratives include all kinds of sexual acts, such as hand jobs, fellatio, digital penetration of the anus and S/M’.<sup>41</sup>

That such content is widely available even in media consumed by women and young people may seem strange from a western perspective but, as Sharon Kinsella points out, ‘pornography has not been as strongly compartmentalised in post-war Japan as it has in post-war America or Britain...Pornographic images have tended to appear throughout the media as well as in specifically pornographic productions’.<sup>42</sup> Censorship laws, albeit restrictive, are also extremely specific, forbidding explicit depictions of the genitalia but ignoring the general context. Hence, Japanese manga, in particular, have been able to depict a variety of sexual scenarios so long as undue emphasis on the genitalia is avoided.<sup>43</sup> Japanese law relating to child pornography<sup>44</sup> is also similarly specific and relates solely to representations of actual children, thus allowing the depiction of purely fictional ‘*rorikon*’ (Lolita Complex)<sup>45</sup> and other images of young people. Hence, sexualized depictions of children in manga or animated format have so far eluded regulation.<sup>46</sup>

Boy-love stories have proven particularly popular among female amateur-manga fans who create and disseminate their own stories and illustrations via the large comic markets

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<sup>40</sup> Nagaike note 39 above at 77.

<sup>41</sup> Nagaike note 39 above at 80.

<sup>42</sup> Kinsella Sharon *Adult Manga* London Curzon Press 2000 p 136.

<sup>43</sup> Schodt Frederick *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* Tokyo Kodansha International 1983 p 136.

<sup>44</sup> See the 1999 ‘Law for Punishing Acts Related to Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, and for Protecting Children’. An English translation of this legislation is available on the Interpol website at <http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/SexualAbuse/NationalLaws/csaJapan.asp> (accessed 7 October 2005).

<sup>45</sup> Schodt note 43 above.

<sup>46</sup> Nakamura Akemi ‘Child Porn, If Animated, Eludes Regulators’ 18 May 2005 *The Japan Times* available online <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/news/nn05-2005/nn20050518f1.htm> accessed 7 October 2005.

held annually in Japan.<sup>47</sup> Popular, commercially produced boy-love comics such as *June* solicited work from these amateur artists and enabled many to cross-over into mainstream publishing. As the boys' love genre developed, it saw an increased sexualization of its characters, leading to the development of the acronym YAOI – YAmashi, Ochi nashi, Imi nashi – officially made up of the first letters of the phrase 'no climax, no point, no meaning', emphasizing that the plots were little more than vehicles to stage the sex scenes between the youthful male characters. Indeed, the highly sexualized nature of some of these depictions is emphasized by an alternate derivation – YAmete Oshiri ga Itai (Stop, my ass hurts).<sup>48</sup> This playful derivation is not far off the mark for, as Mizoguchi points out, 'in the "boys' love" genre, virtually all the protagonists engage in anal intercourse'.<sup>49</sup>

By the late 1990s researchers in Japan speculated that there was a core readership for boys' love material of about half a million. In 1998 there were 9 literary magazines, 12 comic magazines and approximately 30 paperbacks being published each month that specialized in boys' love, with estimated total sales of 1,275,000.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the US where this material is restricted to an adult audience or in Australia, where much of it is illegal, boys' love comics are openly sold in designated sections of large bookstores throughout Japan and their primary readerships are young women and schoolgirls. Indeed, commercially produced yaoi in Japan is big business and 'has generated enough jobs for hundreds of women to be economically independent by providing products to female customers'.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Mizoguchi note 38 above at 54-5.

<sup>48</sup> Fujimoto note 36 above suggests an even more extreme derivation: YArui, Okasu, Ikaseru (Fuck, rape, make come).

<sup>49</sup> Mizoguchi note 38 above at 65.

<sup>50</sup> Mizoguchi note 38 above at 57.

<sup>51</sup> Mizoguchi note 38 above at 66.

While yaoi grew out of Japan's manga fandom and is historically related to specifically Japanese tropes of romance,<sup>52</sup> it has proven to be widely popular among women readers overseas who use the internet both to access amateur yaoi websites as well as purchase and trade in printed yaoi material. In April 2005, a google search for yaoi produced the following number of hits – 785,000 English, 49,000 Spanish, 22,400 Korean, 11,900 Italian and 6,900 Chinese sites. Unlike Internet pedophile sites, Yaoi sites do *not* contain representations of actual children. Rather, they contain fictional stories and hand-drawn and computer-generated artworks of both teen and pre-teen boys engaged in a variety of romantic and sexual interactions both with each other and with older men. However, the text and illustrations can be explicit and, as Mizoguchi points out, many stories feature 'rape as an expression of love'<sup>53</sup> which means that when the characters depicted are under the age of 18/16 (as they usually are *or often appear to be*) these illustrations and stories, as well as the websites on which they appear, can be classified as 'child-abuse publications' according to legislation in Australia and elsewhere. Also, the fact that yaoi is characterized by its emphasis upon *sexual* scenarios and interactions means that this form of expression cannot avail itself of any 'artistic merit' clauses that exist in some legislation since such clauses refer only to material where there is no 'undue emphasis on...indecent or offensive aspects'.<sup>54</sup> As the very acronym YAOI makes clear, sexual scenarios are at the heart of these narratives. This point is not lost on yaoi producers, as one poster to a discussion commented:

Demonstrating 'the literary, artistic or educational merit (if any) of the material' might be beyond our resources or our abilities, just given the widely held

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<sup>52</sup> McLelland Mark *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age* Lanham Rowman & Littlefield 2005 p 145.

<sup>53</sup> Mizoguchi note 38 above at 56.

<sup>54</sup> Krone note 7 above at 3.

misconceptions about fan fiction, never mind any frothing at the mouth about slashing or sexualising ‘child’ characters.<sup>55</sup>

While most yaoi deals with older teen-age characters, a subgenre of yaoi known as *shōtakon* (Shōtaro<sup>56</sup> Complex – a play on *rorikon* or Lolita Complex) specializes in stories about and depictions of the sexual adventures of younger boys. In the English-language fandom, these stories are often designated ‘chan fics,’ –*chan* being a diminutive suffix commonly appended to children’s names in Japanese. Chan is a comparatively small and controversial genre within the fandom but the wider body of fans does not seem particularly anxious or panicked by the presence of authors whose fictional characters are clearly ‘under age’. The highly stylized nature of the illustrations and conventional plot lines of the narratives in most yaoi and chan fics militate against any kind of realistic interpretation of these stories. However, despite the fact that these illustrations are highly figurative in nature and are purely imaginary, producing, disseminating or even accessing them via the internet is illegal in Australia and is subject to various strict limitations in other jurisdictions.

International yaoi fans have been proactive in creating both on- and offline communities and share, sell and swap their boy-love animations, illustrations and stories globally. There is a growing international market for commercial yaoi products (produced mainly in Japan but recently published in English translation in the US) via online sites such as Amazon.com and E-bay.<sup>57</sup> However, many of these stories, which in their original

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<sup>55</sup> I have not listed the url of this yaoi discussion site in order to protect the identities of its participants. I must stress here that this site is for discussion of issues relating to the yaoi fandom and is not a site that archives fiction or illustrations that may be illegal under Australian law.

<sup>56</sup> A common boys’ name; but more particularly in this context, the name of the boy character in a famous Japanese SF manga.

<sup>57</sup> Cha Kai Ming ‘Yaoi Manga: What Girls Like?’ (7 March 2005) *Publishers Weekly* p 44;



Japanese versions are situated in a high-school environment, have, in their American versions, been transposed to college – despite the fact that this ‘ageing up’ of the characters is not always convincing. There is even an international convention for yaoi fans and authors which takes place in San Francisco (now in its fifth year).<sup>58</sup> As in Japan, in the US the genre attracts a mainly heterosexual female readership. As one organizer of ‘yaoicon’ comments, ‘convention membership is about 85% female’ and attendees are ‘predominantly straight’.<sup>59</sup> The facts that registration at the conference is open only to those over the age of 18, and that the translated boy-love novels feature Explicit Content warnings restricting them to readers 18 and over, is an acknowledgement of the pornographic nature of the genre and a source of considerable disappointment to younger fans.<sup>60</sup> As its visibility increases, concern about the genre is growing, for instance, a recent article in *The New York Times* on the popularity of boys’ love manga noted that some librarians and book sellers are worried that the emphasis on ‘nudity, sex and violence’ makes the genre inappropriate for teen readers.<sup>61</sup> Despite these worries, however, major chains such as Barnes & Noble and Borders continue to stock these titles.

This growing popularity of yaoi narratives among girls and young women worldwide is, then, an important challenge to the taken-for-granted view that interest in childhood

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Valeti Kristy ‘Stop! My Butt Hurts: The Yaoi Invasion’ (n.d.) no. 269 *The Comics Journal* Retrieved 16 August 2005 from [http://www.tcj.com/269/e\\_yaoi.html](http://www.tcj.com/269/e_yaoi.html); Thai versions of Japanese boy love manga have been available since the mid 1990s, see Keenapan Nattha ‘Japanese ‘Boy Love’ Comics a Hit among Thais’ (2001) *Japan Today* retrieved 25 August 2005 from

<http://www.japantoday.com/e/tools/print.asp?content=feature&id=93>

<sup>58</sup> See their website: <http://www.yaoicon.com/> (accessed 20 July 2005).

<sup>59</sup> Cha note 53 above.

<sup>60</sup> Cha note 53 above remarks that as an additional measure, US publisher CPM certifies on the cover of its translated yaoi manga that all fictional characters are over the age of 19.

<sup>61</sup> Glazer Sarah ‘Manga for Girls’ *New York Times* 18 September (2005) p 16.

sexuality is primarily a male preserve, that homosexuality is of concern primarily to gay men and that ‘virtual child-pornography’ is solely a genre created by and for adult males that harms the interest of children.

#### 4. MOTIVATIONS OF YAOI FANS

It is not the purpose of this paper to speculate as to why so many women fans in so many different countries around the world appreciate and participate in this global boys’ love fandom. Different factors are liable to be at work in different social contexts, regions and language groups and there is simply no research in place that might enable us to answer this question. Indeed, such research (which would necessitate the accessing of yaoi websites) would face severe legal restrictions in Australia. Also, given that many participants in the fandom are themselves ‘under age’, there would likely be complex ethical and legal issues to be negotiated in other jurisdictions.

However, in an attempt to depathologize the genre and demonstrate its distinction from pedophile activity on the internet, it is possible to place yaoi fandom in the context of women’s fandom more generally and to refer to some of the findings of Japanese researchers who have studied the yaoi phenomenon in Japan. Yaoi clearly invites comparison with ‘slash fiction’, another predominantly female fandom which imagines same-sex scenarios between the male leads of popular TV dramas and action movies. Slash developed out of the *Star Trek* fandom in the mid 1970s (the epithet ‘slash’ refers to the ‘/’ mark in Kirk/Spock stories that imagine a sexual element to the relationship between the captain and the Vulcan) and slash now comprises a similarly immense online fandom.<sup>62</sup> Academic commentary on slash is extensive,<sup>63</sup> with most commentators taking

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<sup>62</sup> For an introduction to slash fandom consult the ‘slash’ entry in the *Wikipedia*: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slash\\_fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slash_fiction) (accessed 20 July 2005).

<sup>63</sup> Cicioni Mirna ‘Male Pair Bonds and Female Desire in Fan Slash Writing’ in Harris Cheryl and Alexander Alison (eds) *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity* Cresskill Hampton Press 1998; Bacon-Smith Camille *Enterprising Women: Television*

an ethnographic approach to the analysis of slash communities, drawing upon paradigms created by John Fiske that stress fans' 'active, enthusiastic, partisan, participatory engagement with the text'.<sup>64</sup> Jenkins notes that 'most slash fans concede that erotic pleasure is central to their interest in the genre'<sup>65</sup> and other work emphasizes the therapeutic role that involvement in the community offers women in developing an independent fantasy life outside of patriarchal limits and control. Indeed 'reconfiguring male identity' in terms of female desires is a central preoccupation.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the slash fandom (which now increasingly overlaps with that of yaoi), is 'highly self-reflexive and self-critical'<sup>67</sup> (Penley 1992: 484) resulting in a space very supportive of critical and deconstructive analyses of mainstream, patriarchal notions of gender and sexuality. To this extent, women's slash fandom constitutes what Warner describes as a 'counterpublic' in that 'discussion within [this] public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large'.<sup>68</sup>

Despite some cross-over, yaoi differs from slash to the extent that it fantasizes about 'beautiful boys,' not adult men, thus rendering it more problematic in relation to online

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*Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press 1992; Jenkins Henry *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* New York Routledge 1992.

<sup>64</sup> Fiske John *Understanding Popular Culture* London and New York Routledge 1992 p 146-47.

<sup>65</sup> Jenkins note 59 above at 191.

<sup>66</sup> Jenkins note 59 above at 191.

<sup>67</sup> Penley Constance 'Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Study of Popular Culture' in Grossberg Lawrence and Nelson Cary (eds) *Cultural Studies* New York Routledge 1992 p 484.

<sup>68</sup> Warner Michael *Publics and Counterpublics* New York Zone Books 2002.

ensorship.<sup>69</sup> Compared with Japan where depiction of the ‘beautiful boy’ (*bishōnen*) has long been a romantic and sexualized trope for both sexes,<sup>70</sup> the youthful male body has been downplayed as an object for the erotic gaze in recent western culture.<sup>71</sup> Germaine Greer, in her study of ‘the boy’ in Western art points out that despite a tradition of representing the charms of boys in classical and renaissance art, in the late twentieth-century fears about pedophilia resulted in a ‘criminalization of awareness of the desires and charms of boys,’ the effect being that ‘they are now considered attractive only to a perverted taste’.<sup>72</sup> Greer’s book *The Boy* is an attempt to reclaim the pleasures of the youthful male body for a female gaze. In placing the charms of the ‘beautiful boy’ at its heart, the yaoi genre clearly resonates with women all over the world who delight in expressing their attraction to the youthful male form. Even a cursory reading of chat sites dedicated to yaoi fandom shows that the female audience derives both narrative and visual pleasure from the genre, nicely captured in the often-used phrase ‘eye candy’. It is possible, then, to suggest that part of the appeal of yaoi is that it allows women to express (and, importantly, share) their interest and enthusiasm for the youthful male body in an uninhibited manner, an interest that, according to Greer, is not endorsed by the wider society and is difficult to acknowledge.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Although this distinction is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as slash fandom, partly under the influence of the yaoi aesthetic, is increasingly addressing ‘under-age’ characters, most notably those featured in the Harry Potter series of books and movies.

<sup>70</sup> McLelland note 48 above.

<sup>71</sup> Indeed, even the exhibition of non-erotic art photographs of nude boys is problematic. See for instance, Rubin’s account (note 19 above at 103) of the harassment of art photographer Jacqueline Livingstone ‘for her efforts to capture on film the uncensored male body at different ages’.

<sup>72</sup> Greer Germaine *The Boy* London Thames & Hudson p 10.

<sup>73</sup> It is important to stress that the recent popularity of boy bands among young women is a slightly different phenomenon in that ‘boy’ bands are almost invariably made up of young-looking adult men. Yaoi deliberately emphasises the youth of its characters, many of whom are represented as (and are described as) under 16 in the narratives.

Research into yaoi culture in Japan may also give us some hints as to the psychology at work among the fandom. While the very different sexual cultures that pertain in Japan and the anglophone west make it problematic to generalize too much about these findings, it is clear that many women find the manipulation of male characters in a sexual fantasy setting empowering. Nagaike suggests that part of the attraction of yaoi narratives is that they provide female readers with access to the phallus. She suggests that readers identify with the male characters and delight in the characters' performance of 'transgressive' acts such as 'anal sex, S/M, rape, the use of sexual apparatuses [and] fellatio'.<sup>74</sup> Among her informants, some point out how they identify with the penis of the male characters and enjoy the sexual agency this gives them in fantasy but, at the same time, since all the bodies involved are those of males, they feel distanced from 'their shameless sexual ecstasy', thus enabling them to enjoy these transgressive scenes without guilt. Since the bodies involved are different from those of the female readership, male homosexuality acts as a 'safety device' allowing girls to negotiate the 'dangerous weapon of sexuality'.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, the fact that the bodies are male makes it safer for women to 'play with' scenes of sexual violence that are usually performed with women as their targets. As Fujimoto argues, 'No matter how much those rape or gang-rape scenes (and there are truly a lot of them!) resemble male-on-female assaults, if it is men depicted, then [the female readers] cannot get pregnant, lose their virginity, or become "unsuited for marriage"'.<sup>76</sup>

While much research has assumed that the yaoi fandom is made up primarily of heterosexual women, some studies,<sup>77</sup> as well as biographical comments,<sup>78</sup> suggest that

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<sup>74</sup> Nagaike note 39 above at 85.

<sup>75</sup> Ueno cited in Fujimoto note 36 above at 86.

<sup>76</sup> Fujimoto note 36 above at 87.

<sup>77</sup> Welker James 'Lilies of the Margin: Beautiful Boys and Queer Female Identities in Japan' in Jackson Peter McLelland Mark Martin Fran and Yue Audrey (eds) *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Gender and Sexuality in the Asia/Pacific* Urbana University of Illinois Press (in press).

yaoi has an extensive readership among girls questioning their sexuality and among lesbian women in Japan. Feminist commentators such as Ueno Chizuko have noted that ‘These beautiful boys are “the idealized self-image” of girls, and they are neither male nor female. They belong to a “third sex”’.<sup>79</sup> Hence Mizoguchi concludes that the characters are ‘meant to act as agents for the readers of these stories’;<sup>80</sup> in other words, they are ‘the alter egos of young women’.<sup>81</sup> It is the indeterminate nature of these fantasy characters that makes them amenable to diverse appropriations by women with a range of sexual orientations. To this extent, then, yaoi characters cannot be understood as ‘children’ nor should they necessarily be read as ‘male’ or even ‘homosexual’; they represent instead a *third* gender that has little to do with the activities of actual male homosexuals<sup>82</sup> or depictions of real children.

Nagaike stresses the ‘multiple, shifting, and synchronic process of identification experienced by female readers during the act of reading yaoi manga’.<sup>83</sup> The process of identification involved in the production and consumption of yaoi is thus obviously very complex, differs according to the sexual orientation of the reader, and different factors

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<sup>78</sup> Mizoguchi note 38 above.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Mizoguchi note 38 above at 54.

<sup>80</sup> Mizoguchi note 38 above at 53.

<sup>81</sup> Fujimoto note 36 above at 86.

<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the genre has come in for some fierce criticism by gay men in Japan who find the manner in which gay sex is represented in yaoi fiction distorted. However, fans of the genre point out that yaoi fiction is not written for gay men but for women. For a discussion of this debate see Lunsing Wim ‘*Yaoi Ronsō*: Discussing Depictions of Male Homosexuality in Japanese Girls’ Comics, Gay Comics and Gay Pornography’ *Intersections* (2006)12 special ‘Queer Japan’ edition available online <http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/>.

<sup>83</sup> Nagaike note 39 above at 88.

may also be at play in the context of different yaoi language communities.<sup>84</sup> That the process of identification *is* extremely complex challenges blanket legislation in Australia that collapses yaoi into other categories of child pornography and prohibits yaoi on the understanding that it is about the sexual objectification of children. On the contrary, I am suggesting here that yaoi needs to be theorized from a feminist perspective as a potentially feminist enterprise.

## 5. FAN ANXIETIES

Although by no means an exhaustive investigation into the dynamics of the online English yaoi community, in a previous article based upon fan discussions, I suggested that the differing ‘rhetorical space’ surrounding male homosexuality in the anglophone west and in Japan has had a decisive effect upon the presentation (not so much the content) of English-language yaoi websites.<sup>85</sup> I noted that in the Japanese context, pornographic representations are less segregated than in the anglophone world, purely fictional representations of childhood sexuality often fail to register as pornography and that homosexual love stories are a staple of Japanese schoolgirl romance, not just in the yaoi genre, but throughout popular culture generally.<sup>86</sup> As a consequence, yaoi fans are an ‘unpanicked’ community – yaoi is created and consumed by its fans much as any other genre of popular culture. However, in the anglophone west, I argued that since homosexuality is commonly understood to be a pathological condition, particularly when

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<sup>84</sup> For instance, I hear from fans that the boys’ love fandoms in Chinese and Russian are considerably less sexualized than those in either Japanese or English (yet) but there is as yet no published data to confirm this.

<sup>85</sup> McLelland Mark 'Local Meanings in Global Space: a Case Study of Women's "Boy Love" Web Sites in Japanese and English' *Mots Pluriels* (2001)19 available online <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1901mcl.html>.

<sup>86</sup> McLelland note 35 above; Solomon Charles ‘Anime, Mon Amour: Forget Pokemon— Japanese Animation Explodes with Gay, Lesbian, and Trans Themes’ (14 October 2003) *The Advocate* p 86.

conjoined with youthful or child sexuality, western yaoi fans are necessarily precipitated into a defensive position regarding their activities. I showed how most English yaoi websites are prefaced by ‘warnings’ (as if the contents were somehow dangerous) and how disavowals and disclaimers are common.

For instance, the tone of many warnings is confrontational; one of the banners for the *Boys' Heaven* webring<sup>87</sup> reads ‘This site is yaoi full—deal with it’ which seems to echo the gay liberation chant ‘We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!’ Alexiel, the ‘goddess’ of *Alexiel's Sanctuary* writes on her warning page: ‘I'll say it once and leave it at that. This site contains lots of YAOI...So, if you are a homophobic [sic], a bitchy queen that hates girl-written smut, or just generally PMSing...Here's your ticket out’ (link to XOOM.COM online shopping). Vixen, the owner of *Garden of Desire* writes: ‘YAOI...is a genre of anime and manga dedicated to male relationships of an idealized homoerotic nature...love stories of a darker, more intense nature...If the idea of this stuff truly offends you, you'd better go here quickly instead’ (link to Fred Nile's Christian Democratic Party's ‘Defending our community against destructive sexual perversion’ website).

Many site owners seem to anticipate a negative public response and view their sites as small islands of fantasy in an unsympathetic and antagonistic world. Miss Nightfall gives her ‘The Why of Yaoi’ section the alternative title of ‘In Response to Stupid Accusations’ where she tells us that ‘Yaoi fans are not demented sickos, or if we are then there are enough of us that we're at least a BIG group of demented sickos!’ Implicit in many site owners' defense of their fantasies is the right to imagine sex which is not politically correct: that is sex which derives its interest from imagining power differentials, not equality. On the whole, YAOI writers are rejecting a definition of sexuality in which ‘lovemaking should be beautiful, romantic, soft, nice, and devoid of messiness, vulgarity,

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<sup>87</sup> The urls for all the websites mentioned in this section are now defunct. Please refer to the original article for citation details. These websites were accessed during the author’s research trip to Tokyo, not while resident in Australia.



impulses to power, or indeed aggression of any sort', a position that Willis says characterizes the Western anti-pornography movement.<sup>88</sup> As Leo Bersani has commented 'human bodies are constructed in such a way that it is, or at least has been, almost impossible not to associate mastery and subordination with the experience of our most intense pleasures'<sup>89</sup> and yaoi writers are interested in exploring, not repudiating, the dynamics of inserter and insertee. The appeal of homosexuality in these narratives is not its potential for equality but the thrill of transgressing masculine privilege: of displaying the male body as passive, inert and insertable for the pleasure of a female gaze, or, as Val puts it, women's 'eye candy'.

The *deliberately* transgressive nature of these sites should therefore not be underestimated and it is clear that some women see their participation in the yaoi fandom as an attempt to challenge normative codes conditioning femininity and the expression of female desire. Women's participation in the yaoi community, now conducted on a global scale, constitutes a 'counterpublic' in Warner's terms since its participants 'are marked off from persons or citizens in general' given the manner in which fantasies conjoining homosexuality and child sex are pathologised in the wider community.<sup>90</sup> Within the yaoi fandom, however, speech (and writing/artwork) is 'structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said'.<sup>91</sup> One effect of participation in this counterpublic is that hegemonic (patriarchal, masculinist, heterosexist) codes governing the public expression of gender and sexuality can be interrogated and overturned, and hence, the fandom 'can work to elaborate new worlds of

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<sup>88</sup> Willis Ellen 'Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography' in Snitow Ann Stansell Christine and Thompson Sharon (eds) *Powers of Desire: the Politics of Sexuality* London Virago 1984 p 84.

<sup>89</sup> Bersani Leo 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in Douglas Crimp (ed) *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* Cambridge and London The MIT Press 1988 at 216

<sup>90</sup> Warner note 64 above at 56.

<sup>91</sup> Warner note 64 above at 56.

culture and social relations...including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment'.<sup>92</sup>

However, despite the fact that yaoi fandom is more about elaborating 'new shared worlds and critical languages, new bodies, new intimacies, and new citizenships'<sup>93</sup> among women fans than it is about the objectification of 'children', participants in the global fandom have inadvertently been positioned as readers and producers of 'child-abuse publications'. Given the almost impossible task of representing this fandom to a mainstream public ignorant of its styles and genres, fans themselves experience their position as one of both vulnerability and defiance. As Josephine Ho points out 'With the help of shame and stigmatization, legal regulations of sex and the body help produce other power effects, including an increasingly conservative social milieu and a chilling silencing effect over sexual dissidence'<sup>94</sup>—thus emphasizing the fact that apparently unobjectionable 'child protection' legislation, when handled badly, has serious ramifications for adult communication, particularly that conducted between sexually nonconformist individuals and groups—even when that communication involves *fantasy alone*. To the extent that yaoi fans are discursively (and legally) aligned with pedophiles and their communication is pathologised as a particularly perverse form of pornography, the yaoi community remains extremely vulnerable to state surveillance, intervention and prosecution, a fact that is the cause of great anxiety on yaoi discussion sites.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Warner note 64 above at 57.

<sup>93</sup> Warner note 64 above at 57.

<sup>94</sup> Ho note 8 above.

<sup>95</sup> In April 2005, an Australian server home to numerous fan sites (not just yaoi) unilaterally closed down all yaoi and boys' love related sites until the owners had removed potentially offending material and rewritten their fiction so as to explicitly 'age up' their characters. Apart from fan angst over this intrusion into their self expression and artistic integrity, numerous fans worried about the implications of being investigated by the authorities for their jobs, their marriages and the custody of their children.

## 6. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF LEGISLATION FOR THE YAOI COMMUNITY

Of particular concern for the yaoi community in terms of the Australian legislation are the clauses ‘(apparently under) the age of 16’ and ‘reasonable persons’. As discussed, manga in general and yaoi in particular are known for the extremely youthful depiction of their characters; many characters who we know from their histories in the narratives are adult, may well *appear to be* under the age of 16 to those unfamiliar with the visual tropes of the genre. Also, yaoi deals with homosexual and not heterosexual interaction; given the broadly homophobic nature of society in general, homosexual interactions are held to be inherently offensive by many. Thus, a yaoi story which simply depicts two boys showering, sleeping or kissing together may well be deemed ‘offensive’ by a ‘reasonable person’ whereas similar representations of a heterosexual nature would cause no offense.

Consequently, pretty much the whole of the ‘boys’ love’ fandom is caught up in this definition of child pornography since:

1. Illustrations of beautiful boys, irrespective of their official ages in the narrative can easily be construed to be under age 16;
2. No actual sex needs to take place, even more romantic boy love stories and illustrations in which the sex is suggested but not detailed are caught by the legislation since the stories place the characters in a ‘sexual context’.
3. In a heterosexist and homophobic society, ‘reasonable persons’ are more likely to find homosexual interaction of any degree or kind ‘offensive’, especially where children and young persons are concerned.

It is this latter point concerning representations that might ‘cause offense to reasonable persons’ that is at the heart of the concerns about freedom of speech raised in this paper. As discussed above, the motivation behind much yaoi fan involvement is *precisely* to

push the boundaries of acceptable representation, to challenge narrow and hypocritical social constraints on femininity, sexual exploration and representation, and to explore issues of self-identity and sexual expression outside of state-sanctioned monogamous, heterosexual and ‘family friendly’ bounds.

Furthermore, yaoi is, to a certain extent, a project which seeks to normalize transgressive desire, precisely a result that child-pornography legislation is designed to prevent. Criminological analyses of the impact of the internet upon the circulation of child pornography and its creators/audience understandably pathologize the creation, circulation and reception of child sex-abuse imagery and narratives. However, *precisely* those same factors that are a cause of concern in the case of pedophile interaction via the internet can be given a very different reading when applied to women’s yaoi fandom. Krone, for instance, in a report on online child pornography offending, notes a range of adverse effects that increased internet use has had upon agencies’ attempts to stop the production and trade in child-abuse imagery.<sup>96</sup> He notes that:

- (a) The internet has been used to create a self-justifying online community for child pornography users and that;
- (b) The internet creates an apparently private sphere for the expression of sexual fantasy that may lead to:
- (c) Accessing material supporting increasingly extreme sexual fantasies.

These factors also apply in the case of the yaoi community but in this case, rather than understanding this community’s internet use in terms of pathology, these factors can be understood as advantageous for community members. For instance, in a sexist, heterosexist and homophobic society where women have traditionally had little opportunity to develop and share sexual fantasies in community with other women, the internet clearly offers scope for such community development. Indeed the massive woman-driven slash-fiction community on the internet is a clear instance of this function

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<sup>96</sup> Krone note 7 above.

and need. Much of the discussion that takes place on yaoi chat sites is, in fact, self-justifying (and mutually supportive). Furthermore, the (illusion) that the internet gives of providing a free and safe space for the development of communal fantasy does indeed encourage a great number of women to express (and access) increasingly extreme sexual fantasies, if by ‘extreme’ we understand fantasies that do not respect state-sanctioned monogamous models of same-generation heterosexual companionship.

In conclusion, current legislation in Australia places unreasonable limits on the ability of young women and girls to create mutually supportive online networks that challenge sexism, heterosexism and homophobia. I believe that more studies need to be undertaken into the ‘boys’ love’ fandom in all its cultural contexts (not simply in Japanese and English, but in other languages in which it is conducted). Following Angelides, I agree that ‘We ought to be conducting studies that are not driven solely for a search for “difference” or “deviant” identities, but by the desire to appreciate the diversity (and perversity) of that which goes by the name of “sameness” or “normality”’.<sup>97</sup> The yaoi community, constituted as it is of primarily heterosexual female fans from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds, and conjoining as it does male homosexuality with images of child sexuality, has much to teach us about the inherent perversity of sexuality, the complexities of identification and the very impossibility of conjoining sexual fantasy to the limited range of sex and gender roles currently endorsed by mainstream society.

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<sup>97</sup> Angelides note 4 above.