Local meanings in global space: a case study of women's 'Boy love' web sites in Japanese and English

Mark McLelland
University of Queensland

Much academic writing about the Internet has been liberatory in tone. Hockenberry, for instance, argues that 'today it is possible to address the world without having to show a passport that defines you culturally, ethnically or religiously'.[1] But this is a very Anglo-centric statement, for, given the language bias of the Internet,[2] any address to 'the world' must necessarily be in English, and an individual's use of English will send out clear signals about his or her cultural as well as educational background. The very notion of the individual 'addressing the world' is also part of the 'globalisation' discourse which still structures much Internet analysis and rests upon a rather culture-specific notion of 'identity'.

Despite the fact that we are into the second decade of Web Studies, the vast majority of research into the Internet has been conducted in English into English-language sites. After English and Chinese, Japanese is the third most widely represented language on the Net, but there exist no studies in English of Japanese Internet use.[3] Would a detailed analysis of Internet use in Japanese confirm or question the 'globalising' impact of the Internet? For, as Kondo points out, unlike in English, there is not a single pronoun for 'I' in Japanese which 'has already been registered in discourse and remains a constant irrespective of the peculiarities of a given situation'.[4] Therefore, in Kondo's terminology, any statement in Japanese is 'always already' inscribed in a specific context which gives information about the relative statuses of both speaker and interlocutor. To speak (or write) in Japanese inescapably 'directs attention to levels of hierarchy, intimacy, distance and contextuality'.[5] This would suggest that when writing in Japanese on the Net, the individual is not as culturally unmarked as Hockenberry states. Gottlieb has also pointed to potential differences in Internet communication arising out of the difference between Japanese scripts (there are three) and the Roman alphabet (which is used to write most European languages as well as to 'romanise' non-European ones). Japanese is not an international language and, as Gottlieb argues, the close association of the Japanese language with Japanese people results in 'none of the disjunction between culture and locale' which might be expected in a globalised world; consequently 'in the case of the Japanese script, geographical location remains very much a predictor of social practice and preference'.[6]

The developing field of Web Studies has so far failed to analyse Internet communication in terms of specific language use. The trope of 'the global' which has structured much of the rhetoric surrounding Internet research has also tended to distract attention from how ideas circulating in 'global space' may, in fact, be read in terms of very specific local belief systems which may differ in important ways from those characteristic of 'the West'. As Appadurai has stressed, it is necessary to study the cosmopolitan...cultural forms of the contemporary world without logically or chronologically presupposing either the authority of the Western experience or the models derived from that experience.[7]

In this paper, I attempt to do just this. I propose to look at what happens when certain images and narratives that have a very specific history and place in Japanese culture are, via the Internet, circulated in global space and picked up and consumed by non-Japanese speakers in the West.

I have chosen to focus on pornographic images because so much of the negative reporting about the Internet that appears in the popular press in English is concerned with the apparent threat pornography represents, particularly to children. The anxiety constantly rehearsed in this literature is that contact with pornographic images via the Internet will somehow corrupt children,[8] or, worse, that the Internet is being used to traffic in pornographic representations of children. For
Despite over a century of legislation against images and narratives that have been judged to be pornographic, no satisfactory definition has yet been offered as to what pornography, or, more particularly, 'obscenity' is. Recent legislation has acknowledged the subjectivity of these designations when it makes 'community values' the arbiter of the obscene. This has not proven very satisfactory since communities are not homogeneous entities and differ in their values not only geographically but also over time. In the 1980s, arguments over what constituted pornography were further confused, particularly in the US, but also in other Anglophone countries, by radical feminist rhetoricians such as Andrea Dworkin[11] and Catharine MacKinnon, who argued that pornography was analogous to hate crime against women. This led, particularly on university campuses, to a wave of 'political correctness' in which any representation of the female form became problematic, causing Nadine Strossen to label this a period of 'sex war' and 'sex panic'.[12] In Japan, however, arguments over pornography have taken a different trajectory due to the absence of both fundamentalist Christian and feminist lobby groups. Arguments about what does or does not constitute pornography are common but one very broad difference between definitions prevalent in Japan and Anglophone countries has been that Japanese censorship has tended to focus almost exclusively upon the visibility of genitalia and pubic hair, while being generally lenient on sexually suggestive situations as well as images featuring violence and young people.[13]

The fact that very explicit sexual images have tended to attract censorship in Japan has meant that interest is often generated in other ways: through 'perversity' and violence as opposed to depictions of genitalia. This has led in the West to a genre of popular journalism that stresses Japan's otherness, particularly in relation to sexuality. Japanese sexuality is presented as not only unlike anything to be found in 'the West', but also as utterly unique, even in 'Asia'. For instance, a recent Time article entitled ‘Sex in Asia' refers to ‘that unique floating world called Japan'.[14] Some Westerners who have travelled to Japan have felt assaulted by the widespread sexual images they come across on TV, billboards and in the press. For instance, one American journalist writes in an Atlantic article, tellingly entitled ‘The Japanese are Different from You and Me',[15] that

In the United States, pornography did not enter my life unless I invited it in, and I had no trouble keeping it from my grade school children. Here it enters unbidden all the time.

Predictably, this author, like many others, focuses upon Japanese ‘comic books' (manga). The popularity of manga with commuters means, according to this writer, that 'the trains and subways are awash in pornography.' As Kinsella points out, the treatment of manga in articles such as this, is characteristic of English-language reporting on Japan. She comments that 'images from Japanese animation and manga presented in television shows and magazine reports on the phenomenon in Europe and America have... generally been edited to emphasise violence, sex and strangeness' which fit snugly into ‘pre-existing notions of Japan as a cruel, sexist, strange and repressed society'.[16]

The Atlantic article, like countless others, betrays a typical Orientalist agenda, berating the Japanese for failing to observe the same conceptual schema regarding sex and pornography that seem obvious to 'you and me'. Such articles occur frequently in both the British and American press and are generally brief, titillating accounts of 'Japanese weirdness' entirely devoid of analysis or social commentary.

Other headlines include ‘Schoolgirls as Sex Toys'[17] 'The Darker Side of Cuteness' [18] and 'Japan's Shame';[19] Time, the source of the last headline, comments that

the exposure of Japan's child porn on the Internet may serve a useful purpose for cracking down on this shameful trade, for it has brought the smut out of the insular world of Japan for all the world to see.[20]

This is an interesting comment, not least for its Orientalist depiction of Japan as an 'insular' society characterised by its obsession with smut, but also for its recognition that the Internet puts into global circulation cultural artefacts with very specific local meanings.
Japanese media do not segregate sexually explicit material from non-sexual material in the same manner as is characteristic of publications in English. This means that images of a sexual nature, or references to sex, can appear in media that would be considered 'inappropriate' in Anglophone societies, such as comic books and animation aimed at young people. Also, Japanese society has not traditionally made sex appear in media as severe a distinction between 'adult' and 'under-age' sexuality as has the West; in fact, Japan's rather narrowly interpreted obscenity laws which, as mentioned, focus almost exclusively on the depiction of genitalia and pubic hair have encouraged sexualised depictions of children. Schodt points out that 'since the law tends to overlook nude scenes of children, several artists have pioneered the rori-kan [Lolita Complex] genre, drawing little girls as sex partners for grown men'. When Japan is described in Western reports as 'awash in child pornography' it is seldom pointed out that the vast majority of the images referred to are nothing more than highly figurative, unrealistic manga depictions of schoolgirls in their underwear. Moreover, I have never seen it mentioned that there is a genre parallel to rori-kan that is immensely popular with Japanese women. Known as shootakon or 'Shootaro Complex', this genre of manga imagines graphic sexual interactions taking place betweenbishoonen (beautiful boys) and is potentially far more disturbing to Western sensibilities than is rori-kan because it conjoints not heterosexuality but homosexuality with child sex.

Given the amount of negative attention that the heterosexual manga depicting young girls have occasioned in Western media, it is odd that the shootakon genre has so far been ignored. This is not because the genre is unknown to Western fans, since there are many manga fan sites on the Internet that depict all kinds of sexual interactions including both rori-kan and shootakon. Indeed, as will be described later, there is a large and growing community of English-speaking women who both consume and create shootakon narratives and illustrations. One reason may be that a pornographic genre created by women for women centred on the homosexual fantasies of young boys falls outside our received notions of who pornographers are, what pornography is and who makes up the audience for pornography. Japanese men's fantasies about schoolgirls play into Western stereotypes of sexist Japanese males but Japanese women's interest in graphic and at times violent homossexual interactions between boys hardly supports Orientalist notions of the passive and compliant Japanese woman.

Japanese women have long been avid consumers of popular entertainment that would seem to disrupt sexual and gender boundaries, while at the same time being committed to normative gender performances in their daily lives. In the early modern period, onnagata (female-role players) in the kabuki theatre were popular role models for many townswomen who followed the fashions pioneered by men performing as women on stage. Later, in the Taisho period (1912-1927), the otokoyaku (male-role performers) in the all-woman Takarazuka revue became national celebrities to their all-female audience. Both kabuki and the Takarazuka continue to be popular today and gender play on the Japanese screen and stage is still widespread. For instance, a number of Japan's most popular male teen idols such as Gackt and IZAM often appear cross-dressed as women.

In the early 90s, Japanese media underwent a 'gay boom' (geibuumu) wherein Japan's previously clandestine homosexual subculture was suddenly exposed in a wide range of media, from newspaper and magazine articles to documentaries, TV dramas and movies. Much of this material was clearly pitched at a female audience, including two of the most popular 'gay boom' movies: Okoge ('Fag-hag') and Kira Kira Hikaru ('Twinkle'). Both movies star female leads who fall in love with, and eventually marry, gay men. But perhaps the most intriguing and consistent evidence for Japanese women's fascination with transgender/homosexuality occurs in girls' comics (shojo manga) featuring stories of 'boy love' (shoonen'ai). Academics commenting on this genre have tended to try to explain it by referring to the extremely narrow and restrictive gender roles available to women in Japan, and the fact that women's sexuality is only endorsed in its reproductive capacity within the family. Yet this explanation tends to set up a rather hegemonising and static view of 'Japanese women' and fails to explain the continued popularity of the boy-love genre among contemporary young women who are far less constrained in their lifestyle or relationship choices than the women of their mothers' generation.

Romantic stories about 'male love' (nanshoku) actually have a long tradition in Japan, usually
focusing on the attraction between a priest or samurai lover (nenja) and his acolyte (chigo) or page (wakashu). However, these early stories were written by men for an anticipated male audience; women manga artists and writers did not begin to feature love stories between 'beautiful boys' (bishoonen) until the early 70s. These early romances, aptly described as 'Bildungsromaner' by Midori Matsui,[38] were long, beautifully crafted tales, often set in private boys' schools at the beginning of the last century. In the early 80s, amateur women manga artists began to create their own boy-love comics and fictions and circulate them at komiketto (comic markets) held all over Japan.[39] As well as original (oriinoru) works, these women also produced 'parodies' (parodi) which appeared in fanzines (doojinshi) based on mainstream boys' manga. Like Western slash fiction writers, the authors took heterosexual, heteronormative narratives and 'queered' them by imagining sexual relationships between the male characters. These amateur manga tended to focus on the sex and contained less well-crafted stories, leading to the acronym YAOI, made up of the first characters of the phrase Yama nashi (no climax), Ochi nashi (no point), Imi nashi (no meaning). The sexually explicit nature of many of these stories is made clear in another suggested derivation for the acronym: Yamete, Oshiri ga Itai! (Stop, my ass hurts!). Demand for these privately produced texts was such that mainstream publishers began to sign up the most talented of their creators and make them commercially available. YAOI manga are now big business and hundreds of new titles are released each year. One of the earliest 'boy love' monthly magazines was June (pronounced ju-neh), first published in 1978. In 1995, June was still being published, now in a 300-page bimonthly format, and with a circulation of between 80,000 and 100,000.[40] This may not seem a large circulation but it is twice that of the readership for Japan's best-selling gay magazine, Badi. June was so successful in pioneering a new style in boy-love stories that the term June-mono (June stuff) now refers to boy-love stories in general. However, most YAOI manga are self-published and promoted as doojinshi by 'circles' (saakuru) of female fans who publicise their work at komiketto. Such is the interest in amateur-produced manga that there are commercially published magazines dedicated to doojinshi. One such magazine, Pafu (February 1999), recently brought out a 'Boy's [sic] Love Special' containing synopses and illustrations from a wide variety of amateur boy-love comics organised according to genre, including 'sexual love'.

The cost of creating and copying doojinshi can be considerable, particularly when the costs of admittance and travel to comic market events are factored in. The advent of the Internet, however, provided amateur manga creators with an opportunity to disseminate their work more cheaply and more widely and also, through manga fan web sites, gave international exposure to the genre. In May 2001, a search for YAOI on Yahoo Japan produced 3,430 individual web pages as well as many links sites. Creative Girls' Home[41] had 801 sites listed, all connected in some way with 'YAOI, boys' love (boozurabu) and June', whereas Yaoi Intelligence Agency[42] provided a choice of 43 different categories of 'June and boys' love' pages. These included 814 'original', 609 doojinshi (fanzines), 80 'games' (where players role-play as boys), 786 'parody', 1712 'short stories', 385 'adult', 123 'SM', and 84 shoota (of which 29 were classified as 'adults only').

The number of boy-love sites is so large that it is difficult to make generalisations about them. Some sites consist only of illustrations, either created by the site owner herself or by her guests, friends or members of the circle to which she belongs, whereas other sites are exclusively text-based, consisting of shoosetsu (short stories). Most sites, however, contain a mixture of the two as well as other material, often including a profile of the site owner, her diary (where she details what she has been reading or doing), a guest slot, where she features the work of a friend, and a BBS, where browsers can comment on the site or offer news or information relating to new publications. Many sites are technically highly accomplished, featuring both music and animation.

That an exclusively female audience[43] is anticipated for this material is made clear on the entrance pages to most sites. The creator of Sadistic,[44] for instance, states: 'I recommend that men and people who do not understand YAOI should proceed no further; I welcome women over the age of 18' (but no age check is given). Generally, only the more sexual sites, such as Sadistic, warn that access is restricted to those over eighteen.

The level of 'sexiness' (ecchi) of the sites varies. The site Yaoi a laboratory[45] usefully grades the stories it reviews on their 'sexiness content' (ecchi arinashi) from one star (not sexy) to four stars (especially sexy). One story on Sadistic, a four-star site, involves a fifteen-year-old boy who seduces his twenty-two-year-old neighbour. Although his family moves away from the area soon after, the boy has been so deeply impressed by his first sexual experience that he is unable to forget the older man, and the writer describes a number of scenes in which the boy masturbates while daydreaming about the touch of his first lover's lips and hands:

As I lay in bed I began to think of Toshiaki and my hand naturally stretched down to my groin. Oh, oh...I can imagine that big, firm hand on my body...imagine him looking at me. Oh, oh, Toshiaki! To be clasped to that breast...to be kissed by those lips is a dream. I love you Toshiaki. To be together with him is to dream. I...love...you. Oh! My sperm should flow along with his...he should hear my cries...With sticky white liquid on my fingers, I stare into space...
As he grows older, he begins to sleep with women in a vain attempt to recreate the intensity of his first sexual encounter. These graphically described sex scenes become increasingly bizarre. At one stage, he is asked by a female partner whether he has ever experienced anal sex (i.e. anally penetrated a woman), in response to which he muses: ‘Is it a lie to say this is my first time when last time it was with a man?’ and although he penetrates the woman and ‘his body convulsing...spat sperm out into a condom’ his thoughts are once more with his first love. Afterwards, he thinks to himself:

today, as always, it wasn't especially pleasant. It feels like all I have done is ejaculated. [I feel] more or less empty...let's face it, it's impossible with anyone but him...

This storyline which mixes heterosexual and homosexual encounters and focuses on unusual sexual acts (for heterosexual women) such as anal intercourse has parallels in commercially produced Japanese 'ladies' comics' (redizu komikkusu), again written by and for women, which emphasise sex. As Schodt says of these comics, they 'would make American and European feminists wince' because they depict scenes such as ‘a woman seducing a son's very young friend, a woman becoming a molester of men on a subway, and women characters who apparently enjoy gang rapes [and] sodomy'. YAOI should therefore not be seen as a separate, much less a 'deviant' part of Japanese women's culture, but has much in common with other genres of women's manga. Indeed, as I have shown elsewhere, women's fantasies about male homosexuals occur throughout women's media in Japan, not just in the manga genre, gay men often being described as women's 'best partners' (besuto paatonaa); cinematic examples were mentioned earlier. *Yaoi a laboratory* plays with this common fantasy on its 'checklist for YAOI fanatics', asking: 'Do you idly daydream about what it would be like if your husband or boyfriend were gay?' And, 'When you meet a guy who's your type, do you find yourself wondering if he is a top or a bottom [in anal sex]?'

Perhaps the most troubling web site illustrations for Western viewers, however, are the *shootakon* scenes depicting pre-teen boys. In one image from *Black Princess' Gallery*, a boy has pulled down his friend's underwear and is masturbating him. The illustrator comments that ‘He's about to have his first ejaculation...for a boy to be in this situation is surely delightful isn't it?’ These characters are drawn as anime (animation) figures and are depicted with the big wide eyes common in that genre and, as such, are not drawn with lascivious intent, but so that the overall effect is one of *kawaisa* (cuteness). Images representing such young children engaged in sexual acts are unusual in print manga, although the sexual precociousness of children can be, and often is, referred to in Japanese manga to an extent unimaginable in Western media. This more relaxed attitude in Japan is reflected in age of consent laws: at thirteen, Japan's age of consent for heterosexual intercourse is one of the lowest in the world and, surprising though it may seem, homosexuality is not mentioned in Japan's criminal code, which means that technically, there is no age of consent for same-sex sexual acts.

As mentioned earlier, sexual imagery is neither segregated nor stigmatised in Japanese popular culture to the extent that it is in Anglophone societies, and YAOI sites in Japanese do not engage with the political rhetoric that characterises many YAOI sites in English. When Japanese sites discuss 'boy love', the emphasis is usually on the fantasy and entertainment value of the stories and illustrations. The following comment from Yoshiko (who self-identifies as a 'housewife') is typical. It is featured on a message board on *Erin’s June Page*:

As far as I'm concerned *June* [here a generic term for boy-love literature] is without a doubt about entertainment...it's just like watching a Spielberg movie and being transported to a play land...through my personal computer I can make lots of like-minded friends so that every day feels like a flower opening...who would have thought there were so many interesting corners in the Internet?

Because of the less politicised space that sexuality occupies in Japanese popular culture, Yoshiko, like her many Japanese friends who use the Internet to share their YAOI dreams and fantasies, is able to enjoy this fantasy world free from the anxiety and the introspection which characterise many of the YAOI sites in English that I shall describe below.

Like their Japanese counterparts, many Western women have had a long-standing interest in male homosexuality. There is an almost exclusively female fan genre known as 'slash fiction' that takes the male leads from popular television dramas and 'slashes' them, making the series' homosocial and at times homoerotic subplots explicitly homosexual. Beginning in the *Star Trek* fandom subculture of the mid 70s, where sexually explicit Kirk/Spock (or K/S) stories were first written, the genre has expanded to include almost any TV series where the bond between male characters is sufficiently intense to permit sexual readings. Starsky/Hutch stories were popular for a time in the late 70s, the male members of the cast of British sci-fi series *Blake's 7* have been slashed since the 80s, and, more recently, *The X-Files* Mulder has found himself slashed with...
YAOI fan writing in English, although it has many similarities to slash, is an independent genre that developed out of the extensive manga and anime fandom that exists among young Western people, particularly in North America. Compared with slash fandom, the membership is much younger, reflecting the popularity of Japanese manga and animation with young people in general. Likewise, the heroes of YAOI fandom are ‘beautiful boys’ and are much younger than the adult characters of Western slash.

Some Japanese dojinshi are in circulation among Western YAOI fans, and are available for purchase via fan networks or directly from distributors such as komiketto. Similarly, some Western fans produce print dojinshi of their own which are marketed on sites like Umbrella Studios. However, the primary medium for YAOI fandom in English so far has been the Internet. One of the most popular web rings is Boys’ Heaven containing 319 links. The English sites follow the structure of the Japanese sites very closely and are made up of fanfiction and illustrations with varying degrees of sexual explicitness, and are dedicated to the same manga and animation characters also popular on Japanese sites. Like the Japanese sites, many of those in English also feature ‘original’ stories and illustrations based upon characters created by the site owner, albeit heavily influenced by both the narrative and illustrative tropes of the ‘beautiful boy’ genre. Although the graphics from Japanese sites can be appreciated and even imitated without any Japanese ability, the Japanese narratives are more difficult to access for non-Japanese speakers. Some English sites do, however, offer translations and synopses of the many commercially available boy-love dojinshi, while some Japanese pages such as Erin’s June Page, mentioned above, feature English sections.

There are now so many YAOI fan art and fan fiction sites dedicated to mainstream Japanese manga and anime characters that some fans who prefer to imagine heterosexual scenarios between manga heroes and heroines feel minoritized. For instance, Kathleen, who runs femme fatales: [sic] version kawaii blue refuses either to accept YAOI fiction for submission to her page or to link to YAOI pages. In doing so, she is careful to explain that she is not anti-YAOI but that YAOI simply isn’t to her taste. To emphasise her point she has created a number of banners that read ‘No Yaoi not Anti-Yaoi’, which feature graphics of beautiful boys with beautiful girls, and can be downloaded and used by other site owners who do not accept YAOI. Kathleen does, however, acknowledge that the resistance of some site owners to featuring YAOI is homophobic, commenting:

We have sites out there that are not just non-yaoi, they’re anti-yaoi. They state that yaoi is a disgusting thing that should be banished from the light of a computer screen. Sites like www.nohentai.com...say that any sort of sexual...situation in a story is wrong. Mind you, www.nohentai.com has changed their official mission statement to say that they only wish to represent the ‘family friendly’ sites out there. But make no mistake; their first mission statement was downright bigoted and ignorant.

It is clear from this site and others like it that YAOI is a controversial genre even within manga fandom. For this reason, one striking difference between Japanese and English sites is the attempt the latter make to explain YAOI to an audience that is assumed to be both ignorant of the genre and potentially hostile. In fact, the ring mistress of the YAOI Fanworks Webring makes it a rule of inclusion that all webpages must contain a ‘warning’ alerting the casual browser to the nature of YAOI fanfiction and art, as if it were somehow dangerous.

Some women make very serious attempts not only to describe YAOI, its background and meaning, but also go to great lengths to justify their interest in the genre, whereas other women are obviously irritated at having to explain themselves to those unfamiliar with YAOI conventions. The tone of many warnings can be confrontational; one of the banners for the Boys’ Heaven webring 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 homophobic, a bitchy queen that hates girl-written smut, or just generally PMSing...Here’s your ticket out.
That women judged to be ‘under-age’ do access YAOI sites seems clear; Rei for instance, admits...
that yes, I am under 18...I don't want any emails lecturing me about how I'm too young to be viewing yaoi...there are worse things I could be doing...like looking up REAL porn.

However, despite the fact that Rei draws a distinction between YAOI and 'real' porn, other sites do identify YAOI as a pornographic genre. For example, Aestheticism[72] contains pages detailing 'Legal FAQ for Yaoi online' which spell out some of the problems that YAOI writers may encounter with regulatory authorities. The site brings up the question, central to this discussion, 'Is yaoi just art with fantasy morals that does not agree with real-life Western values?' answering that 'Like it or not, yaoi IS a form of pornography. By the standards of certain states or countries, it's borderline illegal or already can be considered illegal'. Having defined yaoi as 'pornography', the author of the guidelines launches into a discourse in which familiar arguments and counter-arguments from the (American) pornography debate are rehearsed: particularly censorship versus First Amendment rights, and the rights of 'adults' to access sexual material versus the rights of 'minors' to be 'protected' from sexual material. The author of the pages argues that YAOI writers have a social responsibility to 'protect' the unsuspecting casual browser who might stumble upon the page while looking for more mainstream sites on anime or manga, by providing warnings and adult checks. As the author says:

It may be years before a level of alert on availability of text yaoi is reached but by the time you know it is, it could be too late. This is not a matter of how much you can get away with for the time being, it's a matter of having integrity and responsible [sic] for your own actions.

In order to gain access to the restricted areas of the Aestheticism site, it is necessary to become a member by providing proof that one is over eighteen years of age. Similarly, attendance at the first YAOI convention to be held in the US[73] which is partly organised by members of Aestheticism, is restricted to those over eighteen, presumably to avoid charges of making pornography available to minors. It is important to realise that the same kinds of images that the Aestheticism organisers are so keen to keep away from those under eighteen are available for sale to schoolgirls in high street malls throughout Japan.

The anxiety displayed by many Western YAOI fans, not only about their own motivations and mental health, but also about their precarious legal position, troubles much of the utopian discussion characteristic of English-language scholarship on the Web. In many discussions of the Internet, there is still the assumption that each person logs on as a discrete, individual 'citizen of the world', unencumbered by real-life concerns such as nationality, race, age, class, gender or sexuality. However, I have suggested that the narratives and illustrations of 'boy love' that developed in Japanese women's culture of the 1970s and have recently expanded into a global Internet fandom, are received very differently by Japanese and English-speaking fans. Although YAOI fandom may seem a clear example of the global trade in cultural forms (this time from East to West), very local meanings still attach to these representations, even though they are situated in a supposedly 'global' space. Cyberspace only exists as an abstraction: in reality, the Internet is accessed by actual people in very specific geographical locations. There are different legal restrictions affecting what kind of information can be accessed via the Internet in different societies. Yet more restrictions apply depending on where the actual computer used to access the Internet is located: whether that be in the office, the schoolroom, the library or the home[74].

As outlined above, YAOI in Japan is best viewed in relation to the widespread interest in gender bending and ambiguous sexuality that is apparent throughout Japanese popular culture. Perhaps because it is not endorsed as a lifestyle choice or a political 'identity', homosexuality does not occasion the same degree of anxiety in Japanese society as in the West[75]. Difficult though it may be to comprehend in Western terms, the homosexual narratives of Japanese women's comics and anime are less likely to generate offence than the heterosexual versions in boys' manga, because of the sharp distinction drawn in Japanese culture between 'fantasy' and 'reality'. As Schodt argues, Japanese women's obsession with male homosexual love stories is 'the best illustration of the Japanese tolerance of fantasy and of the unique dichotomy between fantasy and reality'.[76] So far, sexual images in Japan have not become caught up in the debate over the politics of representation that has, in the American context, been described as a 'sex panic'.[77]

However, through choosing to explore their erotic fantasies in the context of male homosexual relationships between 'beautiful boys', Western YAOI writers and illustrators have necessarily been drawn into the pornography debate because of the extremely troubled positions that both homosexuality and sex between children occupy in current Anglo-American sexual regimes. It is this discourse about 'The Why of YAOI' as opposed to differences in the sites' illustrations or fictions that separates English YAOI sites from their Japanese counterparts.
The Internet is often presented as a mechanism for globalisation and indeed, in the case of Japanese YAOI fandom, it has enabled the transmission of images, ideas and a certain sensibility from Japan to the West. Yet, as Appadurai has pointed out, ‘globalization is not the story of homogenization...every similarity hides more than one difference’. In both Japan and the West, Internet technology has provided a large group of women with a safe space from which to publicly declare their dissent from heteronormative and hegemonising sexual discourses which previously restricted their ability to create worlds of sexual fantasy in community with other women. However, despite the similarity of the fantasies described on both Japanese and English YAOI sites, the rhetorical space that they occupy in terms of their respective cultures could not be more different.

Notes
[2] According to Global Reach Internet statistics, at: http://www.glreach.com/globstats/index.php3, in April 2001, 47.5% of the world’s online population was using English, 9% was using Chinese and 8.6% was using Japanese. Apart from German (6.1%) all other European languages were less than 5%.
[10] In Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age (New York: Routledge, 2000), Frederick Lane comments: 'Without question, pornography has been the World Wide Web's major economic success' (p.34). In 1998, one out of six Web surfers visited adult sites and of this number, 20% were women.
[11] Andrea Dworkin tends to see pornography everywhere, commenting: 'It's very hard to look at a picture of a woman's body and not see it with the perception that her body is being exploited.' (Cited in N. Strossen, Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights. New York: Scribner, 1995, p.23.)
[14] 'Sex in Asia: Dispatches from the Front Lines of a Revolution' in Time, vol.157, no.11, 18 March 2001, p.31. The image of the 'floating world' derives from the Japanese term ukiyo that was used to refer to the brothel districts in the Tokugawa period (1603-1867). The modern-day sex industry is known by another water metaphor: mizu shoobai or 'water trade', referring to its instability.
[19] Time International, vol.153, issue 15, 19 April 1999, p.34. For further examples, see The Guardian, 8 October 1991, p.12, which states that 'a dirty mac is not required' when purchasing manga full of 'smutty images' in Japan; The Guardian, 15 January


[22] Children’s animation shows such as Crayon Shin-Chan, which, while I was resident in Japan from 1990 to 1994, aired at 7.00 p.m., can contain references to children’s precocious sexuality. The theme song for this show about a five-year-old kindergarten child contains the lines: ‘Come on baby, come on baby (sung in English)...stop staring at me, you make me think about Mr. Elephant...’. The latter refers to Shin-Chan’s penis which, when he pulls down his pants, is represented by an elephant’s head with trunk. The show also contains scatological references that are more characteristic of the adult animation South Park than of The Simpsons.


[25] A note on romanisation: Japanese has two long vowel sounds, a long ‘o’ (sounds like 'slow') and a long ‘u’ (sounds like 'shoe'). In the indigenous hiragana script, the long ‘o’ is actually written with the characters ‘ou’, although the ‘u’ sound is not vocalised. The preferred way to romanise this sound in most academic texts is either with a macron or as ‘oo’. I prefer the latter. However, most English YAOI sites choose to write the sound ‘oo’ as ‘ou’; hence it is common to see shoutakon, bishounen, etc., or to see these terms written without the long ‘o’ sound, as in shotakon or bishonen.

[26] Shootaro is the name of the boy hero (who is always dressed in short pants) of a popular 1960s animation show entitled Tetsujin 28-go. The title refers to ‘Iron Man no. 28’, a powerful robot controlled by the boy in his fight against crime. It was screened in the US under the title Gigantor where the young boy was christened Jimmy Sparks.

[27] There is also a less prevalent subgenre of lesbian images and fiction known as yuri that imagines sexual scenarios between ‘beautiful girls’ (bishoojo).

[28] See for example Anime Web Turnpike, at: http://www.anipike.com/. For the sexually explicit sites, click on the ‘hentai’ (perverted) or ‘ecchi’ (sexy) links.


[34] Directed by Murata Takehiro (1992).


[43] Most sites state that they are intended for women only. Whether the sites are, in fact, created and maintained by women is, given the scope for gender performativity on the Internet, difficult to prove. However, Sharon Kinsella, during her fieldwork among women fans at koniketto in the early 1990s, indicated that the large majority of fans attending these markets were indeed women (at their peak only 35 per cent were men). She does, however, point to a broadening fan base for girls' comics among young men. See S. Kinsella, Adult Manga, pp.111-112. With regard to Western fans of YAOI, preliminary registration figures for the San Francisco YAOI conference (see: http://www.yaoicon.com/) showed that as of 11 May, 2001, 82.5 % of fans registered were female.


[46] F. Schodt, Dreamland Japan, p.120.


[48] I have not cited this url since the illustrations depict not just pre-teen but pre-school boys.

[49] Age of consent laws in the US vary between 16 and 18. In some states, homosexual sex is still technically illegal, although nowadays seldom prosecuted when practised in private by those over 18. See my discussion of laws relating to homosexuality in Japan in M. McLelland, Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan, pp.37-40. Recent concern over 'compensated dating', where school girls have been selling sex to businessmen in return for money and luxury brand items, has resulted in a number of prefectures in Japan passing local by-laws forbidding the 'seduction' of girls under the age of 18. On teen prostitution in Japan and government attempts to control it, see A. Morrison, 'Teen Prostitution in Japan: Regulation of Telephone Clubs' in Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law, vol.31, no.2, March 1998, pp.457-497.


[51] According to fieldwork done on offline slash fandom by researchers such as Henry Jenkins (Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture, New York: Routledge, 1992), it is an almost exclusively female genre. Personal contacts in the online slash community have informed me that male participation is not very common, although there are some gay and straight men writing slash. However, as mentioned in note 43, establishing the identity of members of online communities is problematic. The actual gender of YAOI or slash fans does not affect my argument here since fantasising about homosexual interaction among male children would be even more problematic for Western men than it is for Western women. Fantasising about homosexual sex with male children is less of a problem for men in Japan, where popular stereotypes tend to represent gay men as transvestites, not paedophiles. See my paper 'No Climax, No Point, No Meaning? Japanese Women's "Boy-Love" Sites on the Internet' in Journal of Communication Inquiry, vol.24, no.3, July 2000, pp.274-291, for a discussion of how 'boy love' stories in Japan's gay press differ from those written by women YAOI fans.

[52] For an introduction to slash fandom on the Net, see K. Nicholas, 'Fan Fiction on the Net: Slash', at: http://members.aol.com/KNicholas/fanfic/slash.html. It should be noted that there is also a small but growing fandom dedicated to lesbian narratives, primarily centring on Star Trek Voyager's Captain Janeway.

[53] That is, if online profiles are to be believed. I have not been compiling statistics but a large number of the owners of YAOI sites in English self-identify as high school or university students, or mention that their interest in the genre began while they were students.

[54] On the age difference between YAOI and slash heroes, I received this comment from a woman active in the Blake's 7 slash fandom: 'Could be the difference in the age of consent. Nothing much phases the folk on our B7 list (Freedom City) except that - go under about 15 and it gets iffy - I have to admit it even does for me. A lot of us are parents, as well as depraved on the side...'


[57] A number of Western fans seem to have been stealing images from Japanese sites. The Creative Girls' Home Web ring includes the following warning in (slightly strange) English: 'The Works exhibited in our member sites are, both literary and graphical, under protection of the copyright law. Not otherwise specified, you cannot freely use, copy, reprint, reproduce, hyperlink to, borrow or steal the works of our member sites, without written permissions of the authors. Reproduction is strongly forbidden. When we discover such doings, be warned that we might take some actions against the pirate(s).'


Note that Vixen has completely reorganised her site since this was written. The original warning was last accessed by me on 2 May 2000. I keep the reference here since I think the link to Fred Nile's page is so witty.


See: http://sakurazukamori.net/bishounen/intro.html.

See: http://home.flash.net/~madamblu/.

This page seems to have disappeared from the site, at: http://members.tripod.com/~MissNightfall/. The date when this passage was excerpted was 3 May 2000.

See: http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Fountain/2314/me.html.


Frederick Lane points out in Obscene Profits: ‘In addition to the unequivocal bar against using nude models under the age of 18, federal law also prohibits the sale or distribution of images of adult women who are pretending to be under the age of 18, as well as computer generated images of child pornography’ (p.126).


F. Lane, Obscene Profits, pp.126-7.


For instance, it was necessary for the Director of my Centre, in liaison with the University lawyers, to provide me with written permission exempting me from a University of Queensland regulation forbidding the downloading of pornographic images on University computers, in order for me to complete the research for this paper.


F. Schodt, Manga! Manga! p.137.

N. Strossen, Defending Pornography, p.20.

A. Appadurai, Modernity at Large, p.11.

Mark McLelland is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland. He is the author of Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities, Richmond: Curzon Press (2000), and the co-founder of AsiaPacificQueer, an ongoing collaboration between Australian, New Zealand and other scholars who are researching queer cultures and communities in the Asia/Pacific region. He has published widely on homosexuality and the interface between sexuality, gender and new technologies in Japan, in journals such as Convergence, The Journal of Communication Inquiry, Continuum, Intensities and Intersections. His current research involves investigating the use of the Internet by Japan's sexual minorities and he is compiling a volume entitled Japanese Cybercultures (with Nanette Gottlieb, forthcoming from Routledge in 2002). More information about the author can be found at: http://www.arts.uq.edu.au/cccs/personnel/#postdoc.